Ten times outta nine, I'm a hand grenade

by twobettafish

Summary

Though neither remembered that night, it turns out that Tony Stark and Stephen Strange had first encountered each other years earlier.

Unfortunately, that might end up destroying the universe.

Notes

Title comes from "Timebomb" by Walk the Moon.

I'm finding that tackling smaller stories helps to keep my writing flowing. So, as I finish up A Bend in the Universe (almost done!), I'm going to be dipping my toes into the pool of this smaller, lighter piece for ongoing updates, as well.

(Expect the timeline to get a *lot* more fractured than what's presented here.)
The first sign that something was wrong was when Tony Stark choked on his coffee.

He'd prepared it like always, in the same machine that had fueled his workshop efforts for years. The same blend, the same amount of sugar, the same settings on the touchpad. A call had come in just after he set it down, involving a major stakeholder with a forthcoming clean energy research lab in New Mexico. By the end his throat was parched and the coffee would be only pleasantly warm, so he'd tipped the mug back to get all the liquid caffeine his body demanded.

And then he choked on his coffee, because it was as bitter as chewing on dry grounds.

At least he hadn't spat it all over his expensive electronics, but swallowing was a challenge. "Okay," he noted as he reached for the sugar, which he apparently hadn't added before the call. "Got off my rhythm."

The second sign came a few hours later, from the same stakeholder who'd called him that morning. Dr. Varela didn't mean to be pushy, but the documents he'd promised her hadn't arrived in her inbox. Would he mind resending? The submission deadline to the state office was that evening.

"I sent that," Tony insisted to himself as he saw that his last email to varelaf@unm.edu was four days prior. He remembered searching for the right files, realizing at the last second that he'd missed the fifth in the folder, and grabbing that last document before he sent them off. And yet there was nothing. All the evidence countered what his brain told him.

It was probably stress, he decided as he pushed himself back from his work bench. This wasn't a sign of anything serious. If he did have certain... medical... memory... problems, they wouldn't have debuted with this rapid one-two punch.

"I'll take a break," Tony abruptly decided. Most people took time off for lunch. Perhaps he should also force himself to step out of his lab and let some of that stress ease.

"Hey, boss," Happy idly said without looking up from his computer. It appeared to be delicate work, as he made sure every spreadsheet cell was populated before really acknowledging Tony. His smile ebbed as soon as he did. "Everything okay?"

"I'm going out for lunch," Tony announced. "Might be a hot dog stand, might be Le Bernardin. But I'm going out."

"Oh? Oh!" Happy jolted to his feet and hurried for a closet, then turned with a sports coat in hand. "Dress code," he explained at Tony's blank look.

Tony blinked, then shook his head. "Never mind. I'll definitely do the hot dog stand." Anywhere with a dress code wouldn't help him relax, and since he clearly needed to decompress—

"Hey, boss," Happy idly said without looking up from his computer.

Slack-jawed, Tony slowly turned to stare at the computer where Happy once again sat. "What the hell?"

When Happy looked up from his computer, his concern was greater than before. "Everything okay?"

"I'm going out," Tony snapped without explaining his plans for lunch again.
"Boss?" Happy called after him. It barely slipped through closing doors.

Though Tony's hand naturally gravitated toward his favorite roadster in the building's basement, he pulled back before making contact. Still in a daze, he turned instead toward a SUV that was outfitted with nearly invisible sensors in its bumpers and self-driving technology in its dashboard. Whatever was going on, he shouldn't try to drive until it was fixed.

After he'd input the target destination and Manhattan began to stream by him, Tony ran over the day in his mind. This morning, he would have poured the sugar he always put into his coffee; he knew for a fact he'd sent that email; he'd actually seen Happy reset across the room. There was only one explanation: something was wrong with the flow of time, which had kept skittering backwards a few seconds. The interaction with Happy had taken long enough to make a reversion noticeable, but it had obviously been happening all day.

Yes, that had to be it. And that was why he had known what address to input: a townhouse in Greenwich Village, with someone who had better not be gallivanting off in some alien dimension.

Tony leapt out of the SUV when it pulled up to the curb, ignored the AI steering away in search of an empty parking spot, and bolted for the entrance. "Open up," he yelled as his fist pounded the Sanctum's door. Being teleported inside was disorienting but he barely let it stop him. After spinning to locate Stephen Strange in this new room, Tony stormed over to him and demanded, "Stop messing with my timeline."

Stephen blinked, then groaned. "Oh, I was really hoping this was localized."

"What!" He'd tried to shout his question but it came out more like a squeak.

Sighing, Stephen angled his hands into the symbols needed to interact with the Eye of Agamotto, then opened it with a deliberate gesture. Inside, the Time Stone glowed softly... only to flash like it was being actively used. "It acted up a few times after everything, but had calmed down again until today."

"Time has already looped on me three times." Tony held up three fingers. "Three. Already."

"Yes, I heard you."

"Fix it!"

"That's obviously what I'm working on." The Time Stone flashed again and Stephen grumbled down at it. "It's acting like... it has the hiccups, basically. I'm trying to find the mechanism to settle it." He poked one side of the golden amulet, careful to keep his finger away from the exposed Stone. "What's your equivalent to a phrenic nerve?"

Now that Tony knew for sure what was causing this, at least some of his stress eased. Though it was obviously dangerous to have one of the most powerful objects in the universe malfunctioning, a diagnosis was a first step toward a solution. "You could have mentioned that it was having problems."

"It only happened a couple of times. It's completely normal for there to be some ripple effects from something as enormous as it only happened a couple of times. It's completely normal—" Stephen closed his eyes. "Did I just repeat myself?"

"Mmmhmm."

Stephen sighed.
"Fix it."

"I am working on that," Stephen snapped, "and you're distracting me."

"You didn't even know that the problem was happening outside of the Sanctum! Seriously, you need to get this fixed ASAP, Doc." Tony snapped his fingers a few times to emphasize the need for haste. "Because I was able to take a self-driving car, but if these rewind effects start hitting other drivers... especially at rush hour..." Spreading his hands in front of him, Tony lifted his eyebrows and let his expression add, I'm just saying.

"And what exactly do you suggest?" Stephen wondered. The Time Stone flashed green again, and again. He glowered down at it, closed the amulet, and continued, "With all of your expertise?"

"Cut the sarcasm. You know I've learned things about Infinity Stones."

"Yeah, well, I've used this one a lot more than you have. Possibly, more than anyone has in the history of the universe." Stephen opened his mouth to keep arguing, but then trailed off with a speculative look.

"Oh, don't look so impressed with yourself," Tony demanded. Was there anyone who could top this man's ego, Tony wondered as green flashed again through the cracks in the Eye. "Oh, don't look so impressed with yourself." He groaned. "Dammit, Strange, fix this! Because if you don't, I'm going to —"

Another green surge consumed his vision. Disorientation struck like he'd stood up too fast. That mild dizziness worsened as emerald faded into hunter, then into black nothing. His whole body tingled like nerves were waking up, even as oblivion still held him. It felt like eternity, yet when reality returned he somehow knew it'd been seconds.

As soon as darkness faded, someone's elbow impacted his chest. He stumbled backward, trying to regain his balance.

A void opened under his heels and Tony tumbled down a staircase that shouldn't be there. "Ow," he mumbled. Fortunately it'd been a short staircase before a broad landing, but his frantic grab for a banister had cracked his skull into the wall. Oh God. Time hiccups. When had he ended up? And why did it have to hurt?

"Is he okay?"

"Dude! You hit Stark!"

"Oh! Oh God. Mr. Stark! I'm so sorry!"

Tony, squinting through the pain, waved off whatever drunken man was apologizing for gesturing too broadly. Was this a party? It looked like a party. He thought. Maybe. It was hard to focus. Okay, things were going black, that wasn't good.

"He hit really hard, someone should call 911..."

"I'm fine," Tony mumbled. Seriously, when had this been? He didn't remember this party. Had this been to announce the new energy research center?

"I'm fine," Tony insisted as people steered him to a sitting position on the stairs.

"I'm fine," Tony told the paramedics as he was directed into an ambulance.
Okay, he admitted through his pounding headache. He wasn't fine. Inside the ambulance, his eyes fell closed and he grimaced each time they hit a rough patch in the road. Every bump echoed inside his skull. He definitely, one hundred percent was not fine, he thought again as the paramedics directed him into the emergency room.

"Mr. Stark?" asked the doctor leaning over him. "You're in the hospital. I'm Dr. Bhatt. You bumped your head pretty hard. Do you remember that?"

"Nhgh. Yeah." Lights were bright even through his eyelids.

"I want to check your pupils, all right?"

Tony tried to comply with the request, but opening his eyes sent spikes of pain through him. He groaned. As the doctor made the request again, promising to move slowly, Tony mumbled assent and let one set of lids be pried open, then the other.

"They're reactive and even, so that's a good sign." Bhatt's voice had a slight accent, which was a good distraction to focus upon. He seemed confident and competent, too. As the doctor explained what steps lie ahead, Tony found himself agreeing to whatever was suggested. When someone came with paperwork he signed it blindly.

He apparently had clear signs of concussion, but the length he'd tumbled down the staircase coupled with his headache and light sensitivity also indicated a CT scan. "Sure," Tony sighed as he let himself be rolled down the hall. The ER had sounded busy and he suspected that fame was earning him priority treatment. If not for how much pain he was in, he might feel a little bad about that.

By the time he was in a private room—they were definitely giving him the VIP experience—his headache had improved. Tony was able to slit his eyes open without (much) pain and his vision was barely blurry. Nurses came to take his pulse, draw blood, and attach monitors, and he allowed all without complaint.

Whenever he figured out what party guest had sent him tumbling, he was going to start crafting an epic guilt trip.

Why wasn't his phone frantically ringing? Tony struggled back to full awareness as he considered the question. It seemed like Happy should be checking on him.

Oh, they'd changed him into a hospital gown. His phone was... somewhere, then. He'd need to get it back to start answering the worried texts. And Happy would tell Pepper, and then she'd start texting him, and they might tell Rhodey, and... actually, maybe he'd enjoy this little vacation from people fretting over him. His headache wasn't totally gone, after all.

Some time later, Dr. Bhatt woke him from shallow sleep. Tony opened his eyes and took in the man's appearance: well past sixty, white-haired, and balding. He didn't know what a bald voice sounded like, but he'd expected more hair. "So what's my deal, Doc?"

"It appears that we're well past cause for immediate concern," Dr. Bhatt said with a smile. "It seems like the pain is improving already?"

Tony nodded, very carefully.

"Good, good. There's no internal bleeding. Our on-site radiologist looked at your results and I had someone in neurology sign off on them as well, just to be sure."

Tony smirked faintly. Yeah, they were giving the billionaire the VIP treatment.
"Now that I've addressed that pressing issue, I'd like to further measure the extent of any concussion." That took a while. Bhatt took Tony through what was probably a standard sequence of questions to measure his memory, concentration, and recall. All answers seemed satisfactory and he frequently punctuated the exam with nods and approving murmurs. "Very well, Mr. Stark. You appear lucky, for I don't think you suffered much harm from the fall. Still, I'd like you to stay here overnight for observation, just to be sure. Is this room all right?"

VIP treatment, baby. "Sure," Tony tiredly agreed. "Hey, can I get my stuff back? And oh, leave my chart. My people will probably have some specific questions."

"Certainly." Bhatt handed him his file. "Please call a nurse when you're done with that. I'll go to the station and request that they bring your belongings to this room."

Nice guy, Tony thought as he flipped open his file and was pleased to note that all blurriness had resolved. It was hard to remember the party itself, though, or the moment of impact. Head trauma must have removed that from his memory banks, which explained why he couldn't recall the time loop landing pad he'd ended up (literally) falling into. Given that the previous Time Stone hiccups had been a matter of seconds, it was no wonder that a stronger surge had sent him back a few... days? Months?

It was a little weird that it had landed on this particular night, though. Previous hiccups had been inconsequential, yet here he'd managed to loop back to exactly the moment before he experienced a painful injury for (apparently) the second time. "I hate Infinity Stones," Tony sighed as he flipped through more of his chart, making mental notes on the explanations he'd need to give to worried callers.

A moment later, he flipped back.

"Nah," Tony decided and turned to the next page.

A few seconds after that, he flipped back again.

Okay, that radiologist's signature meant nothing, but Tony thought he could make out something familiar in the typically casual doctor's signature below. "Sturng," Tony slowly said as he squinted his way through the hastily scrawled letters.

Doctor Sturng.

Whose first initial was an S.

Nah. No way. Nuh uh. ...Although it would explain why he'd landed on this moment. Right? No, it wouldn't. Because they hadn't ever met before that Central Park encounter. He thought. Probably. Yeah? Hmm.

After groaning in uncertainty for a few seconds more, Tony smacked the call button.

"I'd like to talk to the neurologist who signed off on my scans," Tony explained when a nurse arrived. "I have a few questions to ask." If this hospital did actually have a Dr. Samuel or Scott or Simon Sturng on staff, then he could certainly come up with some medical cover story if that stranger appeared.

"Of course, Mr. Stark," the nurse promised with a smile, only for it to drop away after she flipped to the appropriate page in his chart. "Um, did you have a specific question for the doctor? I might be able to answer it."
"I'd really like to talk to him," Tony insisted.

Her smile plastered back in place. "Of course. Let me see what I can do." As she turned, the smile vanished as quickly as it'd reappeared. Resignation filled her gaze and her stride out the door was that of someone who didn't want to talk to whoever was at the end of that hunt.

"It's him," Tony hissed the second he was left alone. He'd been sent back in time to intersect with Dr. Sturng, who showed signs of being a huge prick.

Oh, it was him. It was so him.

It took a few minutes, but rapid footsteps eventually clicked against the floor. As the sound approached his room and stopped outside his door, Tony raised his hand to point accusingly at the man who'd been messing with time. "I knew—"

Stephen stepped into his room, wearing a lab coat, scrubs, and at least ten fewer years on his face.

A thin, strangled noise escaped Tony's throat. His finger continued to point uselessly at who he'd expected, and yet who was impossible to see. How was he even old enough to wear those scrubs?

"I understand you want to question my diagnosis?" Stephen asked with a tone that was barely on the proper side of professional.

At his side, the nurse from earlier slipped past him, quietly put Tony's belongings on the bedside table, and then slipped back out before the conversation could continue.

"What?" Tony weakly asked as he stared at the ancient technology that was sitting in place of his actual cell phone. "What the hell?"

"Mr. Stark?" Stephen asked with a slight frown and a significantly less confrontational tone.

Ignoring him, Tony twisted toward a nearby scanner unit to eye his reflection. It was difficult to make out specifics in the stainless steel, but his hair seemed uniformly dark from temples to crown. He retracted his hand from pointing at Stephen and soon yelped at how youthful its skin looked.

"What year is this?" he demanded.

Stephen eyed him sidelong, then said nothing as he stormed over and snatched Tony's chart off the side table. "Gurdeep," he snapped as he slammed the file closed, shoved it into a holder on the wall, and turned for the door.

"No, wait!" They needed to figure this out, dammit!

Stephen did not wait. As he rounded the corner and disappeared down the hall, Tony heard him yell, "Gurdeep, what sort of incompetent concussion screening was that?"

Tony tried to stand, only to nearly tangle himself in the wires attached to his many monitors. Did the VIP treatment have to involve this much attention, he wondered as he started ripping off the small, circular pads that dotted his head. Machines started to beep with each removed wire. All were ignored.

"Mr. Stark, we really do want to keep you here for observation," another nurse pleaded as he rushed in and tried to direct Tony back to his bed.

A ringtone sounded. Its harsh, synthetic sound was a jolt of unwelcome technologic nostalgia. Tony grabbed for his ancient cell while simultaneously trying to bat away his worried nurse.
"Sir, you're really not supposed to use one of those in a hospital—"

Holding his hand up, Tony ignored him and answered the call.

"Oh my gosh, Tony! I heard you were in the hospital? I knew I shouldn't have stayed here. It's already been days longer than you said you'd need, and—"

"Wait, wait, wait." Tony closed his eyes hard and tried to focus on this familiar voice. "Where are you?"

Pepper paused. "I'm still out in L.A. Like you told me to."

His eyes closed harder. "Pepper, I need you to answer this question and not hesitate. Don't ask me any questions in return. Just answer it." He inhaled, then asked, "What year is it?"

"You don't know what year it is? That's it, I'm flying out—"

"Year! Tell!"

She swallowed loud enough to hear over the phone line. "I mean. All right. It's September 15, 2007."

"Shit!"

"Tony?!"

"Stay in L.A.," he groaned. "Or wait, no, fly out here. I need to pick your brain on something. No, wait! Stay in L.A." Timeline! If he'd been sent back in time, he couldn't impact the timeline. As much as he wanted to, he couldn't ask Pepper for help. 2007 Pepper couldn't ever know that she was talking to a Tony from more than a decade later.

"Tony, I am flying out."

"Stay in Los Angeles!" Dizziness swept him at the full scope of what this date meant, and Tony added, "That's... that is an order from your boss."

She sighed. "Promise me you'll come back soon. You were already supposed to be be back last Tuesday."

"Sure. Yeah, you've got it. I, uh, may call you to verify a few more things?"

Another sigh. "All right. Happy's been losing his mind trying to get in to your room. He called Obadiah to try to make them cooperate, and Obadiah called me... what's wrong? I heard a noise. I heard a bad noise."

Just biting my tongue, Tony thought and tried to fight back a hysterical giggle with the same force he'd used to block any suggestions of what Pepper and Happy should do with that goddamned traitor. "Nothing. I'm good. I'm great! Don't worry about me, I should turn off the phone and get some rest."

The nurse, who'd never stopped his pleading gesture to turn off the cell phone that hospitals apparently distrusted in 2007, nodded frantically.

"I. Okay. Fine. I'll tell this to Happy and Obi, all right? Wait, I heard a weird noise again."

Tony thumped his fist in useless frustration against the bed. "Nothing!" he promised when he'd
regained control of his voice. (Fucking Obadiah.) "Bye!"

"I can't wreck the timeline," he hissed to himself after ending the call and ordering out the nurse. "Can't, can't, can't." He literally could not warn anyone about Obadiah, because that would prevent Tony from being kidnapped and needing to make his first Iron Man suit, and that cascading sequence of dominoes would prevent him from ever standing in the Sanctum to yell about a malfunctioning Time Stone, and that paradox could rip apart reality itself. His one and only hope was that some of Stephen's consciousness had also been sent back, but based on his behavior before that wasn't looking good. So if Tony couldn't—

—Suddenly find himself consumed by green light again, which soon retreated to show the Sanctum around him.

"I'm back?" Tony asked blankly. A second later he whipped out his cell phone—modern!—and turned on its portrait camera, and actually laughed in delight as he saw himself looking like he should. "Oh, thank God. I actually wasn't sure how to solve that one."

Oh.

Oh, no.

"Stephen?" Tony hesitantly asked the man opposite him when he saw him warily eying the Cloak's pointed red collar, barely visible in the corner of his vision.

"What," Stephen hissed, "is that. Where am I. And who the hell are... Stark?!" Stumbling backward a few steps, Stephen looked Tony over with a look of open disbelief.

Yeah, Tony thought with sick resignation. If the last time you'd seen him was only a few minutes earlier in 2007, this would be quite a change. "Calm down. There's a... slight situation and we're going to need to think through this." At another flash of green coming from the re-opened Eye, Tony winced and added, "And you're kinda wearing one of the most powerful objects in the universe, so —"

"What?!

"So try not to jerk around too much."

"What?!"

Well, he'd better have learned some things about the Infinity Stones, Tony concluded as he watched 2007-Stephen spiral toward a panic attack in modern-Stephen's body. Because clearly, this guy wasn't going to be any help.
After a short pause, Tony narrowed his eyes at Stephen and demanded, "Who the hell are you?"

A few seconds earlier they'd been arguing over the Time Stone's hiccups. The latest green flare had been bright enough to interrupt their conversation, but after Stephen opened his eyes he was pleased to see that nothing looked different. He was still in the Sanctum, Tony was standing opposite him, and reality did not appear to be under imminent threat of crumbling.

And then Tony asked him who the hell he was.

Super.

After a short pause, Stephen replied, "Tony, tell me the date." If the Time Stone was malfunctioning, then there was one obvious explanation for why Tony didn't know him. That possibility was terrible to contemplate but it was important to know the truth.

"You don't give me orders, Zoltar," Tony snapped.

"You're calling me the fortune-telling robot from Big," Stephen dryly clarified. (Actually, that insult wasn't half bad.) "Duly noted. But we have a lot to address. To handle it properly, I need you to state the current date."

Tony still didn't answer him, of course; he clearly wasn't in that kind of mood. "Something got slipped into my drink, didn't it? I got abducted from my own party and I'm being ransomed by some..." He paused to look Stephen over. "Seriously flamboyant cult." His wary gaze moved around the room. It lingered on old-fashioned armchairs and interesting sculptures. "Am I still in America? Or did you manage to get me how the fuck is your outfit moving?!"

Stephen sighed, then murmured to the Cloak, "Keep still until I've figured this out, he clearly hasn't met us bef—" A second later, he grimaced and admitted, "Okay. Good decision override, there."

Across the room, Tony mmrmphed uselessly from behind the gag the Cloak had made around his head and shoulders. It had also stopped him from bolting through the door, after which he certainly would have fled onto the streets of New York and disappeared forever into the crowds.

"Let's try this again," Stephen said as he strode toward Tony, whose eyes looked uncharacteristically terrified over the material covering his lower face. "Tony. You are not in any danger. But I have to ask: do you plan to cooperate?"

A tiny nod was all that Tony could manage while bound.

"Good. Move further onto his shoulders and chest, please. Let's free up his mouth." After making the request to the Cloak, Stephen tried to maintain an implacable expression in the face of the reaction he knew was coming.

As expected, Tony yelled for help as soon as his mouth emerged. And yelled, and yelled, and yelled, and yelled. He called for his security detail, the police, anyone in audible distance who could throw a good punch and wanted to make some quick cash. Frustration painted him as no one responded, then intensified as he had to fight back tears in the face of acknowledging his hopeless situation.

"Absolutely no one can hear you outside of this building," Stephen informed him during a break in the noise. "This is all pointless. And... annoying."
"What do you want?" Tony eventually asked. His face and eyes were red, as much from fear as his yelling. "Money? I got lots of money."

"What I want," Stephen calmly replied, "is for you tell me the date."

Tony swallowed. He looked like the mouse in some cat's game, wondering when the final swipe would come. "September 15, 2007."

*Shit,* Stephen thought, though he kept the reaction off his face. "Thank you." 2007? He didn't have Tony Stark's biography memorized, but he thought that date was before the Iron Man debut. That meant that the Tony in front of him had never become a hero himself, never joined the Avengers, and worst of all, never met anyone with powers. No wonder he looked ready to wet himself. "I'm not here to hurt you, Tony."

Swallowing again, Tony demanded, "Then what do you want? And why do you keep saying my name like you know me?"

What he revealed had to be carefully chosen, for this younger Tony's consciousness had somehow been projected forward in time. When he returned to 2007, he couldn't carry knowledge back with him. "I'm with the government," Stephen lied after a moment had passed.

Tony looked him up and down again, then raised an eyebrow.

"I am currently undercover with—like you guessed—a cult." Tony clearly still disbelieved that, and so Stephen tried to stick close enough to the truth to sound plausible while still hiding everything else. "Inside this cult, an extremist group is planning strikes on New York, London, and Hong Kong. They're all obsessed with the occult. I have to blend in."

"So what's with the flying carpet?" Tony wondered after a few tense seconds. His arms were still bound to his sides by the Cloak's tight grip, but under that his hands twitched in nervous anticipation.

Stephen shrugged. "You want to show some freaks in a mystical death cult that you're the real deal, you make them believe that there's actual magic."

Tony looked away for a moment to consider that. "Right. So how's it work?"

"Uh." Stephen blinked until any answer came to mind. "Drones."

"Drones?" Tony repeated.

"Yeah. Of course. Drones. What else would it be? Drones."

"Drone technology is nowhere near small or precise enough to be integrated into... wait, is this why you grabbed me?" Tony's disbelief intensified. "You seriously grabbed me from my own party to work on your cult infiltration tech?"

"Yes," Stephen intoned after a short pause. "That is exactly what I did, because everything is very urgent. So, what was that party for? That wasn't in my files." Maybe knowing about some organization in attendance or technology on display would help explain just why September 15, 2007 had served as an anchor in time for Tony's awareness.

"Before I tell you anything, this thing lets me go. Got it?"

Nodding reluctantly, Stephen prepared to block another escape attempt. It would be bad for Tony to see magical bonds being used, but that was a far better option than letting him run out into a modern
city surrounding him. He clearly suspected Stephen's explanation but didn't yet have a better option than believing him. Actually seeing New York wouldn't get that leeway. "Let him go."

Tony did take a few immediate steps backwards when the Cloak freed him, but remained in place after that. "Okay, then. That's better."

Confident that he wasn't going to run, Stephen let his hand relax.

"It's a party to celebrate our new development contract with the D.O.D.," Tony warily began. His fingers brushed against his belt, which Stephen ignored. Unaware of which body he inhabited, Tony probably thought he was calling for help with a panic button and had decided to play nice with his kidnapper in the meantime. "Huge contract. Within two years, we've promised them a minimum of four new ballistic proposals to use in their active theaters. I've already got a couple of great ideas."

Keeping his disappointment hidden was a real challenge. Yes, Stephen's initial guess was correct: this was before Iron Man, and so he was dealing with a Tony Stark who'd never been anything more than a weapons manufacturer. This was a man who was spectacularly unprepared to deal with the situation. "Well, I'm very sorry for interrupting your party, but this is unbelievably urgent."

"You can't afford my consulting fees."

"I promise you, everything will be appropriately handled. We recognize that this situation is unusual."

With a sidelong look at the Cloak still hovering next to him, Tony wondered, "So...?"

"Stephen." Probably shouldn't have said his real name. Oh well.

"Stephen, why don't you tell me what department you work with?"

Which government department would handle things as bizarre as supposed death cults? And if he guessed wrong, would Tony know about it? He'd done a hell of a lot more federal work than Stephen ever had, after all. "S.H.I.E.L.D.," Stephen decided. He knew very little about them, but they did seem to oversee the weird shit.


"Well, they're real. We're real. Why don't you inspect my prop—" Stephen shot the Cloak an apologetic look for the label. "To see if you can identify where we've embedded the drones, and meanwhile I can ask you about—"

"Where did this phone come from?" Tony marveled as he extracted his hand from his pocket.

"Aw, hell," Stephen groaned. He should have taken the chance to remove any suspiciously modern technology from Tony's suspiciously modern body while the Cloak had him locked down. Well, so much for the cover story he'd been trying to write on the fly. He'd try to grab the phone from Tony's hands, but facial recognition was already unlocking it. And that meant...

"Wait. Wait, no," Tony said in an increasingly panicked voice as his phone cheerfully announced an upcoming appointment that was most definitely not in 2007. "What... why..."

The second Tony turned toward the door again, obviously planning to inspect the city outside, Stephen flung his hand forward and encased Tony in a mirror dimension dome like locking a baby in a playpen. "Stay," he ordered, then sighed loudly at the Cloak as it settled back on his shoulders. "Well, this is a clusterfuck, isn't it?" Its collar tilted at him. "Oh, like you could come up with a better
With arms folded, Stephen walked unhappily toward the dome. Something very dangerous had happened thanks to the malfunctioning Stone: this old version of Tony could now potentially alter the past with the knowledge he brought back. Messing with Tony's mind to try to remove this experience was out of the question, however. That was an imprecise process and the world couldn't afford to lose what this Tony would capably perform in the next year or two.

But he did need to figure some way out of this.

Sighing, Stephen re-opened the Eye and looked down at the Time Stone. It still flashed in irregular patterns but there were no clear energy streams that offered any sort of direction. "Come back from Kamar-Taj any time, Wong," he muttered, though Wong was specifically there to find any other books that spoke of the Time Stone. "I could use some advice."

Well, he couldn't just keep standing around there, letting his captive's adrenaline levels continue to rise. Since lying to Tony had flopped, perhaps an edited version of the actual truth would be more successful. Unfortunately, Tony certainly wouldn't be in the mood to talk after coming out of that dome.

Tony was not. "I'm calling the police," he hissed and gestured to the phone in his hand. As the mirrored walls fell it re-established its cellular connection.

They couldn't have that, Stephen thought as he brushed his hand to the side, watched an echo of the energy swat Tony's hand, and nodded in satisfaction as the Cloak caught the phone after it was sent flying. "So, yeah, sorry: I'm not actually with the government."

"No shit!" Tony's eyes darted back and forth, seeking an exit.

"Your consciousness has been projected forward in time. I was trying to come up with a cover story that wouldn't cause a paradox." Stephen sighed and accepted Tony's phone from the Cloak as it settled back onto him. "That obviously didn't work. I do really know you, Tony, but I'm afraid that I can't share anything that would guide your future down an improper path."

Every line in Tony's body was still tense. Behind his eyes, though, Stephen could see Tony's thoughts firing like a high-powered engine. He did seem to appreciate hearing a real explanation. These words must ring true to him like the earlier ones hadn't.

"A time paradox would be a more dangerous weapon than anything you've ever made," Stephen added, hoping that this would be in Tony's language of choice. "I imagine you heard about your father once working on energy manipulation with a peculiar cube?" As Tony's eyes widened in recognition, relief swept Stephen and he added, "This is on that level."

Though Tony would have no idea that an Infinity Stone actually lay at the heart of the Tesseract, even vague rumors of his father's old work would be confidential enough to give Stephen some desperately needed credibility. It was, however, just a first step. "If you know me personally," Tony said after a long pause, "prove it."

Oh God, what could he talk about that wouldn't destroy the future and would actually mean something to 2007 Tony? "You know a woman named Pepper Potts," Stephen eventually settled on, but the annoyed look from Tony suggested that he'd chosen something far too well-known. "All right, then, uh... you're trying to improve your arc reactor technology."

That seemed to do it. Tony straightened, frowned, and mused after a few seconds of contemplation,
"So, I get it commercially viable?"

"You do. You're able to significantly shrink the size, as well." This had to be safe enough to share, Stephen reassured himself. The technology already existed and just needed to be improved, he hadn't given Tony any direction on how to make those improvements, and he certainly hadn't mentioned the stressful context in which he adapted it.

"Hm." Folding his arms, Tony grimaced, then said mostly to himself, "Yeah, that was an issue. And we haven't really talked about it to people."

"I've seen it in the news for years. Circular layout, blue-tinged light when it's active. Environmentally friendly," he added to top things off. Tony was proud of that part.

"Okay," Tony said and slowly nodded. More stress seeped out of him by the second. "Okay. So... assuming I believe you... assuming eventual commercial success is how you know about the arc reactor... then some weird time technology sent me into the future. Okay. Okay. This is ridiculous, but..."

"Just your consciousness," Stephen clarified. "You're standing here in your modern body. But I'm sure the Tony I know is taking excellent care of yours in the meantime." As the mood in the room calmed, he actually found himself smiling. "I have to say, I am relieved that you're accepting this."

"Yeah, well, I didn't want to," Tony retorted as he began a slow inspection of the Sanctum. Though Stephen instinctively wanted to stop his trek, lest he see something he shouldn't, it was probably best to keep him calm. "And that stupid cult story you came up with wasn't a good foundation for our relationship. Wanna give me that phone back? I'm not gonna call anyone, but I don't like you having my stuff."

After considering Tony's mood—and knowing that he could knock the phone away again if needed—Stephen did hand it over as an expression of trust. As he did, he added with a slight smirk, "Oh, like you'd do any better with a cover story."

"I've known you for five minutes," Tony countered, "and I know I can do it better than you."

"Uh huh," Stephen dryly replied.

"I'd pretty much bet on me for anything. I mean, our clothes alone..." Tony began, then trailed off to look down at his modern body. "Good, I've still got it. And... hey." He tugged up the hem of his shirt and studied his torso with open approval. "Not bad. How old am I?"

Stephen sighed as the inspection of Tony's abdomen continued. "Do you mind?"

Tony did drop the bottom of his shirt, but only so he could start feeling his face. "Did I get any work done? Tell me no. I don't want to be another Joan Rivers. Or is she dead by now?" Next he tried flexing, then wondered, "When is now?"

"You really do seem to be taking this better than earlier."

"Well. The way I figure it, you are clearly not any sort of scientist," Tony replied. "I mean." His hand gestured the length of Stephen's body. "Look at you."

All right, this was getting annoying. "I actually hold a M.D. and Ph.D., which is more than you can claim."

"You hold the role of 'best Jafar costume.' M.D.? I'm sure the kids love you down at the hospital."
Tony grinned at Stephen's glower, then continued, "I don't know much about that cube thing from the forties or fifties, but you shouldn't know anything about my dad's work. No company's ever made a phone like the one you stole from me. And the guy who is definitely not a scientist has no reason to know about my arc reactor... unless it took off big-time in the marketplace."

Stephen sighed. Modern Tony was often abrasive but a bedrock in a crisis. This Tony put one hundred percent of his energy toward 'abrasive,' apparently. "So, you've accepted that you've been projected to the future?"

"A future where my arc reactor tech is known to everyone, apparently." Tony slowly spun where he stood, taking in the sight of the Sanctum. "Even you. You over-styled liar."

"Yeah, maybe I should have just let you run out into traffic," Stephen drawled. "Well, I'm glad to hear that you've accepted the reality of this situation, but we do need to—"

Flash.

"I understand that you think you know all best possible practices at a hospital," said Doctor Gurdeep Bhatt in his characteristically melodious tones, "but may I remind you that you have been an attending here for less than one year."

Still disoriented, Stephen blinked until his dizziness passed. Gurdeep? But Gurdeep had retired, and then Frank took over the ER, and when those employees revolted against Frank's unbelievable incompetence they collectively elevated Christine as their new department head.

Gurdeep had retired... in 2011.

Oh, great.

"And yes," Gurdeep continued in what had apparently been a prolonged argument between them, "I asked you to analyze those scans. It is ten at night, no neurologists were available, and I would hope that as a neurosurgeon you are capable of such analysis. Even if you do not get to cut anyone." His normally gentle gaze flattened. "Is there anything else, Doctor?"

Stephen blinked a few more times. His limbs were leaden and he had no idea what expression he was wearing. "I believe that I have made my point," he replied after a long, silent pause.

"Mmmhmm," Gurdeep said before striding off.

The second Gurdeep rounded the corner, Stephen let his panic show. "Shit!" he hissed, spun to take in the hospital that surrounded him, and looked down to survey the scrubs and lab jacket he now wore. The floor was the old color they'd replaced when renovating after the Battle of New York. These clothes marked a time that he had forever left behind. For there had been no going back, not after...

One hand slowly raised for study. Its back was smooth and unmarked. When he held its fingers still, they followed orders.

Though the hand began trembling a second later, it was only from emotion. "Right," Stephen said, exhaled harshly enough to force down the mingled awe and regret that had overcome him, and focused on the time paradox that threatened to consume reality. His hand lowered and was ignored after that. "I need to find Tony."

How, though? Assuming that 2007 Tony had returned to his own present, it was vital to verify that he didn't plan to share anything. However, 2007 Tony had said that he'd been "abducted from his
own party." Presumably, that party was to where his mind had returned. What party? Where? How would Stephen ever get inside? Stephen Strange had been medically respected in 2007, but hadn't yet pulled off the spectacular surgeries that had been covered in the media.

As he mused on that while walking, Stephen turned a corner before he processed what he'd just heard from a nurse. Oh, no way. He'd say this was too convenient, but any supposed 'convenience' might be the source of this bizarre timeline behavior. "Excuse me," he asked the two nurses at the station as he returned to it. "Did you mention Tony Stark?"

Alex sighed. "Yeah, he was trying to leave, use his cell phone... guy did not want to follow regulations. I got him to hang up, at least."

Tony was actually here? Why? "What room is he in?"

Madeleine blinked before replying. "He's still in 318, Doctor."

Still? So they'd already spoken, though it had been the other two versions of them holding that conversation. That didn't seem possible, for hardly any time had passed in the Sanctum between the two flashes of the Time Stone. Perhaps that meant that time was progressing asymmetrically on the two sides. What a mess. The more unpredictable this became, the harder it would be to fix.


If he was here in 2007... then the Stephen Strange who'd never done anything outside of medicine had just woken up with an Infinity Stone around his neck.

If there was any luck to spare in the universe, modern Tony's consciousness had been sent hurtling back to the present when Stephen was sent into the past. Even if the Time Stone weren't malfunctioning, they'd still need to babysit any clueless person wearing it. There was an excellent chance that Stephen's past self might unwittingly touch the gem. That action would disperse Stephen's past self into an infinite number of points through the universe's lifespan, which would mean that he'd effectively die before he ever got the chance to wield the Time Stone, which would prevent him from ever touching the Stone to be killed, which...

Ugh. Temporal paradoxes. At the memory of arguments over the dangers of threatening natural law, Stephen muttered "Shut up, Karl," and sped his pace.

It didn't stop there, though. The threat of a paradox from 2007 Stephen actually touching the Stone was terrible enough. With it hiccuping like this? 2007 Stephen might be able to set it off simply by sneezing. Oh, his Tony really, really needed to be standing inside the Sanctum right now to babysit newly hired Dr. Stephen Strange.

"Please tell me," Stephen said after he'd located the right room, stepped inside, and closed the door behind him, "that you think it's supposed to be 2007."

"You work here?" Tony demanded from the hospital bed. His patient gown was pushed and pulled around his body; he'd clearly been inspecting himself, trying to figure out why he was in this room.

"Are you 2007 Tony or not?"

Tony exhaled in annoyance. "Yeah. But I have no idea why I'm in this bed." He rubbed the side of his head, grimaced, and added, "I mean, sudden headache, sure. But I was just at my party."

"I noticed the same thing. Time must be moving at irregular rates across the two streams, and—"
"You should really grow a beard again, it's a better look."

Stephen ignored him. "The fact that you wound up in my hospital tonight at least gives us some plausible explanation for why time has been anchored on this date." Seeing Tony's chart in a holder on the wall, he plucked it free and began reading. "You were apparently knocked down a staircase. Head impacted a wall... no external bleeding but—"

"But a killer bruise," Tony added, then poked it with a grimace.

"There were concerns over concussion, obviously, and possible internal bleeding." In shock, Stephen stared at his own signature. Sure enough, he'd looked over the results of the CT scan to verify that the radiologist's judgment was correct. "And... and I was the one who signed off."

This coincidence wasn't impossible. Metro was the major hospital serving a particularly corporate part of Midtown. This would have been in his first year as an attending, too, which was when he'd been at his hungriest to cut. Flush with the fresh power of being lead surgeon in any operating room, Stephen had essentially made the hospital his home so that he could always leap in to the rescue (and steal surgeries away from other neurosurgeons).

He'd gotten that urge out of his system quickly enough and became far choosier about his operations, but on this particular date... yes. Stephen would have just have been waiting around the hospital for any exciting operations. Therefore, he would have been a convenient second opinion on Tony's scans. And apparently, he actually had been that second opinion.

"And you didn't remember that you'd looked at my scans?" Tony wondered. He actually sounded offended. "The name Tony Stark didn't stick in your mind?"

"I would have been presented with your scans like 'male, 37.'" Stephen's mumbled argument lacked energy, for his mind was busy churning on what he'd just learned. "Tony, I may have figured out exactly why this happened." He looked up. "You know that you can't tell anyone anything about the future, right?"

"Seriously? You know what caused this? I—" At his flat expression, Tony rolled his eyes. "I understand about the paradox, whatever, fine. I won't say anything. And your little grey wingy things were a bit much." He raised a hand and gestured toward the hair on his temple. "But seriously: beard."

Again, Stephen ignored him. "I'm not telling you anything about what caused our problem," Stephen said and returned the chart to its holder on the wall. (By now it was very slightly easier to ignore the sight of his scar-free hand.) "You can't know the context of any of this. Just remember the paradox, avoid it, and keep the universe intact."

As Stephen turned to leave, Tony called after him, "So how did you get from this hospital to... there?"

"Can't tell you that, either!" Stephen said as he walked out of Tony's room, shut the door, and headed for the bridge to the adjoining building in this medical complex.

Each step made his head swim more. He'd walked these halls for very nearly a decade, and so even after years away from this hospital he clearly remembered this path to his personal office. Pulling someone back from near-certain death, sharing his success with their overwhelmed family, and then walking into this office space to see the renewed admiration of his fellow surgeons: that had been his daily existence. He controlled life and death, so it was no wonder he'd viewed himself as a god on Earth.
By now he knew that he was important, yes, but only because every life was. In return, he was also an utterly insignificant speck that must learn to flow with the universe rather than control it. Accepting one's strengths and weaknesses within the structure of that enormous universe would let a person flourish wherever life took them.

Ultimately, he'd learned that his greatest strength was not to be found while holding a surgeon's scalpel. A lead surgeon took control of everything. The others in the room simply did as directed. Now, in the new life waiting for him many years in the future, he needed someone's help to get this problem solved.

As Stephen walked into the office he'd once used for writing papers and consulting with patients, it was now easy to ignore his unmarked hands. He didn't know how long he had before he once again hiccuped into the future. The right resources would hopefully be waiting for him when he did. Once he returned to his own time, he'd need to move efficiently.

The resolution on his computer monitor seemed terribly low and he'd forgotten what the old Google logo looked like. Stephen ignored those tiny oddities as firmly as he did his precise fingers on the keyboard. Oh, hell. Google hadn't introduced their seller ratings yet, so he had no idea which place to call. It was difficult to see which locations would be open at this time of night, too. Well. Better start hunting, then.

"Thank God you're still open," Stephen said nearly an hour later.

"The city doesn't sleep, and neither do we!" cheerfully replied the employee on the other end.

*I'm so sorry your job makes you say that,* Stephen very nearly said out loud. "Weird question: how many years has your business been in operation?"

"Uh. Not sure? Sorry. Um, well, my boss took it over from his dad, so probably a long time. I could ask someo—"

"Great, okay." He needed a place with a good track record. "Do you think it'll still be open in, say, ten years? Roughly?" The pause he got confirmed that yes, the question he'd thought was odd was very odd indeed. "I ask this," Stephen clarified, "because what I'm asking shouldn't be done tonight."

"Yeah?" the employee asked again after a long pause.

"You are a courier service," Stephen said with gravitas, hoping that it would convince the employee to take him seriously. "who promises to get a document to its target exactly when promised. Well, I would like you to deliver a note to a certain address, on a certain date, at a certain time."

"...In ten years?"

"Little longer, actually. But yeah."

"Are you serious?"

"One hundred percent. Please calculate my bill and let me provide the message. I don't know how much longer I can stay on the phone." Stephen leaned over to the drawer he remembered keeping his wallet in and retrieved a credit card with a 2009 expiry date. It felt like he was getting away with some sort of fraud. "You'll be delivering my message to 177a Bleecker Street in Greenwich Village. If you knock on the door at the precise date and time I provide to you, Tony Stark will answer the door. Yes, that Tony Stark."

"Oh my God. Am I in a movie or something?" The courier sounded excited, even if that laughter
didn't suggest he was taking this wholly seriously.

"This is far more important." Stephen inhaled. "All right. Here's the information."
"What is happening?" demanded the Stephen from 2007, but the question didn't appear to be directed at Tony. It might be directed at the antiquated decor around him, the high ceiling that did not belong to the hospital halls he'd abruptly left, or the red Cloak collar that shouldn't be in his peripheral vision. No matter the target, he seemed equally incapable of processing any sort of answer.

"Calm down," Tony pleaded. "I can explain everything." A pause. "No, wrong. I can explain a very few select things."

"Where am I?" Stephen asked again in a voice growing tight and strained with fear. He looked down to Tony. "Why are you old?"

"Older," Tony corrected emphatically.

"And what am I—" As Stephen began to ask 'wearing,' a hand moved uncertainly toward the heavy amulet hanging from his neck. If his fingers reached it, they would rest directly against the exposed Time Stone.

Instinct took over. Tony's arm jerked forward. From what appeared to be a watch around his left wrist, a blob of nanotech material emerged and leapt toward Stephen as a rounded, harmless projectile. It batted away Stephen's hand before it could make deadly contact. "No," he said like correcting a disobedient puppy.

Stephen stared at him, hollow-eyed. Then he looked down at the nano projectile that had landed near his feet, just in time to see it dissolve back into a formless mass and slither back toward Tony, up his leg, and back into the storage watch. His mind appeared to be on the verge of total collapse.

As Tony opened his mouth to try to salvage this catastrophe, a bell chimed, then again. It took him until the third pealing until he realized that it was the Sanctum's doorbell and that someone was trying to get in. Bad timing, whoever that was. "You absolutely cannot touch that necklace," Tony said emphatically. Man, that person was not shutting up at the door. "Hey, cape thing. You know how I was a confused younger me just now? Now he's a younger him. Keep his hands where they should be."

The Cloak's collar stood up straight with surprise. It then wrapped its fabric around both of Stephen's hands, locking them safely at his sides. That earned a startled, strangled noise that Tony really should have recorded; it would have made for a hilarious text alert sound.

Letting himself indulge in one pitiful whimper over the current crisis, Tony rubbed his nose and tried to ignore the stimulus overload of the past few hours (and eleven-odd years). Hopefully that person hammering on the door would go away soon, because if he was going to think this out, then he'd need—

"Hey, is Tony Stark really in there?"

Startled, Tony turned. Curiosity soon overcame him. After confirming that the Cloak had Stephen, who was nearly hyperventilating but not (yet) collapsing from a heart attack, Tony hurried for the front door and cautiously opened it.

Whoever was standing there promptly took a selfie with him. "Dude!" laughed the man as Tony blinked in utter confusion. "You just won me a hundred bucks! I can't believe you were actually
"What?" Tony blankly asked.

"Oh, right." The man handed over a yellowed envelope. "We've been holding onto that. We were supposed to deliver it right here, right now, but I was the only one who actually believed you'd be here." He lifted his phone again to capture both of them in frame. This time he recorded a short video. "You owe me, dickwad!" he gloated toward whatever recipient would get the triumphant message.

Stephen must have sent this letter from the past, Tony realized as his brain abruptly clicked back into gear. "Thanks," he said and slammed the door shut behind him.

"Tip?" the man yelled through it.

Tony ignored him as he ripped open the envelope. "Tony," he recited. "Don't let me touch the Stone." He gave himself a thumbs-up and continued. "The object in the display room that looks like a wind chime will let you contact Wong. Can you identify a quantum effect with the Stone energy? I'm in my office. Password Emerson211."

That was it. Wait, that was it? Stephen had one message to cover a decade, and that was all it was?

As his thoughts echoed, Tony slowly lowered the letter. That courier company had apparently been waiting to deliver this message since 2007. If the envelope existed in all these interim years, and if his Stephen had arranged its delivery during his ejection into the past, then... had the same version of him also existed since then? Were their minds existing in self-contained time bubbles, or were they actually creating, living, and destroying new timelines each time they hiccuped?

"That's what he means by a quantum effect," Tony realized. The Stone might be trying to make sense of numerous, simultaneous possible timelines. (Clearly, it was doing a terrible job of it.) Tony was inside a timeline where he'd hopped to 2007 and back. Until this latest swap, though, he'd been inside a timeline that was set up to make him repeat the next eleven-plus years.

Repeating years? With an even sicker feeling, Tony raised his phone and googled Stephen's name. Results came quickly: that had apparently been one brutal accident. The only way to make the images on his screen worse was to wonder if Stephen, with full awareness, really had made himself live it a second time just to keep the timeline intact.

Yeah, they needed to fix things. Now. This whole process was almost certainly generating fragmentary timelines and each one would confuse the malfunctioning Stone more. If things got too bad, everything might collapse, shatter... or simply lock up where they were. No more time skips. Whoever was caught in the past really would have to live the previous decade again and there would be no undo button to save them.

Fortunately, after everything needed to deal with Thanos, Tony had become an expert with quantum energy. Exhaling, he re-read the letter and recited the provided password until it was lodged in his memory. "How you doing?" he then asked Stephen and started placing a scanner array around him and the Stone.

"I've realized what's happening," Stephen said in a surprisingly calm voice. "I'm obviously suffering a massive psychotic break."

Tony hesitated. It was important to clarify that he wouldn't confirm some supposed larger issue that could drive Stephen away from medicine. "Meaning?"
Stephen nodded vacantly. His unfocused gaze roamed around the room and his hands no longer struggled against the Cloak's bonds. "Likely due to prolonged stress and lack of sleep, I'm receiving sensory input with no actual ties to reality. This is a temporary episode of psychosis. All right. I understand, now."

"Great!" Tony enthused and ran up the stairs. Thanks for coming up with your own perfect excuse, Strange, he thought merrily as he began hunting for the wind chimes. Aha, there they were. "How do I use you," he mused as he studied their slender, engraved forms. Well, might as well try the obvious. Tony lightly brushed his fingers against the metal and sent the tubes swinging into a gentle sequence of notes.

To his surprise, a portal opened a few seconds later. "Stark," Wong said from its other side, clearly confused. A library sat behind him, darker and seemingly larger than the Sanctum's. "The chimes here rang. Did you call?"

"The Time Stone is malfunctioning, which you probably already know. Stephen and I are having our brains pinballed through time. I got sent back to 2007 and met the him from back then, and now we've swapped places. So I'm here, but I've got a doctor wrapped up in the main hall who doesn't know not to touch the Time Stone. And—" He looked down at the scanner results streaming into his watch's display. "There is in fact a quantum uncertainty effect happening with the Stone, so you should probably look for books about resolving multiple uncertain timelines."

Wong stared back at him.

"I am unfortunately serious."

Wong blinked.

"Yes, really."

Shaking his head, Wong forced himself to focus. "How long do we have before you and Stephen change time positions again?"

"No clue. But I imagine he wants your books waiting here for him when he arrives, so he can start working—" Tony cut off as another portal opened, just above a nearby table and parallel to it. One book fell through its sparks to thud gently against the wood. "You are efficient."

"Leave a note for Stephen so he'll know where to look for the books when his mind returns," Wong said with a short nod. "I need to go deeper into the stacks for others." Without a farewell, he turned off his portal.

Man, that guy was cool in a crisis. Feeling significantly better about their chances, Tony jogged down the stairs. Stephen's letter now had all relevant elements checked off: he'd kept Clueless Stephen from touching the Time Stone, he'd verified a quantum effect, and he'd passed on the necessary information to Wong. Since "I'm in my office" was useless for now and he'd already memorized its password, he had a chance to catch his breath by refining his energy readings.

"None of this is happening," Tony reassured Stephen as he began tweaking the quantum scanners. They hadn't exactly had the best start together, but by now things seemed blessedly calm. "In fact, you're in your office. No one is seeing you like this, don't worry."

"None of this is happening," Stephen promised himself as he closed his eyes. "I've worked ninety hours for the past five weeks. No. Six. Sleep deprivation can be a key contributing factor toward psychosis. West, et al. 1962. Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences."
"Yeah, there you go," Tony replied with distracted encouragement as he etched an unmissable *books on table near wind chimes* note into the floor. "You just need to get more sleep, lay off the caffeine a little, and you'll be fine." With another tweak to his scanners, the energy readings clarified. He grinned and focused further on understanding the flow readings. Words tumbled out of him like afterthoughts. "You are standing in a hospital right now, not the Sanctum." Tweak. "Definitely never started wearing that magic cape." More tweaks, more words. More tweaks, more words.

Oh man. Once he made these adjustments, a quantum resonance became so clear around the Time Stone. It was clearly trying to process multiple timelines at once and protect reality from potential associated paradoxes. Like he'd acknowledged before, a diagnosis was a first step to a solution. After just one time swap, they'd figured out what was happening on a fundamental level and how to explain it. After even one more full round of this, they might manage to get this all hammered out.

When faced with a challenge, the greater world often disappeared from Tony's awareness. There was only him, the problem, and any distance between them that needed to be resolved. He might not have ever operated on someone, but Tony was sure that he was able to display as much focus as Stephen ever could.

Of course, that focus did mean that he sometimes lost sight of the big picture.

"Time Stone," Stephen said dully. "Unimaginative name. I'm clearly hallucinating all of this."

He'd mentioned the Time Stone to him? He'd mentioned the Time Stone. Oh, great. Tony shouldn't have said that specific name, but he hadn't even been aware of anything said while working. He'd just been trying to keep Stephen calm with a stream of reassuring sounds like murmuring soothing nonsense to a fussy baby. What else had he said?

"I'll be right back," he decided and stepped away. Clearly, he needed a break, and it would be smart to leave his findings detailed next to those books. (By now, Wong's stack had three.)

Only half of the scanner readings were written out when green light consumed his vision. "Well, better than nothing," Tony sighed as he woke up in his hospital room. "And Strange, you were apparently deposited in your office for safe collection." Time to go make sure that Stephen hadn't completely lost it during his short visit to the future.

"Hey," Tony said with a broad smile after changing back into his normal clothes and leaving in search of a nurse. A headache still throbbed, but he ignored it.

The female nurse who'd earlier retrieved his belongings winced at the sight of him, then cheerfully said, "Um, hi, Mr. Stark! You really shouldn't be walking around yet. We'd like to—"

"I'm impressed with the operation of this hospital."

"That's very nice, but—"

"Put me on the phone with whoever's in charge."

She blinked owlishly. "The... the head of the ER? Dr. Bhatt? Certainly, I can get him back in person."

Tony smiled at the flamboyant level he remembered from his pre-Iron Man days. Those moves weren't quite instinctive any more, but if he overcompensated, well... the world was used to Tony Stark putting on a show. "No. Whoever's in charge of the whole shebang. We're talking the biggest, highest corner office."
The nurse swallowed. "I. Oh. I can't really do that?"

"I would like to make a significant donation. Me. Tony Stark. Get the guy on the phone pronto."

After going pale, the nurse weakly replied, "Let me see what I can do," before running off.

"Any time, now," Tony murmured as he was left alone. He needed to track down Stephen's office and be granted open permission to nose around, and he didn't have forever to do so. His foot tapped an impatient rhythm.

"Hey, Chuck," he cheerfully said to the hospital's administrator only three minutes later. "Sorry I pulled you away from your daughter's reception, I'm sure she's a beautiful bride." (Oops.) "Yeah, this is Tony Stark. I had to make a visit to your ER this evening and I was impressed. Specifically, I want a private meeting with a doctor who looked at my scans. Stephen Strange. We chatted."

"Mr. Stark, I am so glad that we were able to be there for you in your hour of need—"

"Tell some nice nurse to show me to Strange's office. Right now. I'm a busy man."

"I, ah. I cannot guarantee where any of our physicians are at this—"

"Tell him to be there. Oh, and again, thanks for all the help tonight. What do you want?"

"Pardon?"

"New MRI machine, kids' wing, what?" Outright bribery of a hospital wouldn't cause a time paradox, right? Well, fingers crossed. "Seriously. Tell me what you want as a thank-you present... and then set up my immediate meeting with Strange in his office."

The long, significant pause said that Chuck had absolutely recognized Tony's words as the open bribe that they were. He also wanted to take full advantage. "Well, Mr. Stark, there are some new surgical robots that we would be able to put to excellent use. Given the technology, your name on the operating theatre would be a very appropriate honor. I can certainly page Dr. Strange and direct him to his office."

"Sounds fun, let's do it. Call a tour guide to walk me over and then you can send me an invoice."

Hopefully, the old him wouldn't mind making this donation. Oh well, he had money to spare. As a nurse finished walking Tony across a bridge and into an adjacent building, he paused his steps and turned on the charm. "I would hate to keep your very pretty face away from any more patients who desperately need to be cheered up." He knew this younger body of his was a constant source of gossip, but a billionaire playboy reputation was a far more intense aphrodisiac.

She laughed, but she also blushed. "Mr. Stark, I do have a boyfriend."

"Good girl." (Oh God, he'd been so annoying, hadn't he?) "All that pure, open honesty, why... it almost makes me want to give you a reward. What sort of reward could I give," he mused with a dramatically put-on sigh, "in this hospital building full of empty beds?"

Her blush intensified. "Ah, well, the neuro offices are right here. And, um..."

"I think I see the nameplate I need." Tony winked at her. "You better get back. Call that boyfriend of yours."

She did as suggested, and as she walked away he could see that even the back of her neck had gone
pink under her ponytail. "Sorry about that," Tony mumbled and idly brushed his thumb against the base of his empty ring finger. He was still getting used to wearing a wedding band, but it was already odd to feel bare skin there.

However, that relentless flirting had chased the nurse back to the main patient building. Mission accomplished. In the dim, quiet office area, Tony hurried toward the door he saw labeled with Dr. Stephen Strange and found it unlocked, as expected.

Seeing Stephen asleep on a leather couch inside the office did take him by surprise, but only until he realized what a clever idea it was. By dozing off before the swap, he'd apparently ensured that his younger self would return into a sleeping state. That would let Tony easily track him down. And better, he would first be able to review whatever had been left for him in this room in absolute peace.

"I'm guessing you've got something for me," he whispered to the computer and jostled the mouse to wake the screensaver. At the password prompt, he quickly typed _emerson211_. After one heart-stopping moment when it was rejected, he corrected to _Emerson211_ and settled into the heavy desk chair.

ForTony.doc was waiting for him on the meticulously ordered desktop. Good, good, he mused as he waited for Word to load. This could serve as the real back-and-forth conversation they desperately needed.

Tony,

_Assuming you are able to confirm my quantum uncertainty suspicion, I know why this happened. I once needed to use the first minute we met as a reference anchor in time, since it was before Thanos' assault on Earth. However, by now we both know that's not the first time our paths crossed. The Time Stone saw that it could use either that day in Central Park as intended, or that night in the hospital."

"But we didn't even see each other," Tony murmured. "That doesn't count."

Stephen had anticipated that argument. _Normally that faint shadow of uncertainty would be ignored. But I think the universe has effectively been immunocompromised after the trauma it suffered. It's vulnerable and so a tiny problem has successfully bloomed into a massive infection. If we can clear out the problem's effects, the immune system can recover itself. Otherwise, I fear the patient will go into shock._

_Yes, I mean the universe._

"I got that, thanks," Tony muttered.

_It's going to be key to avoid changing anything in our history. The Time Stone can hold back some paradoxes, but the more we give it to fight, the more overwhelmed it'll become. I fear what'll happen if it reaches its limits, especially on anything important._

Gifting a surgical robot to Metro probably wasn't important. Unless... Stephen had needed to leave medicine after that crash Tony had read about, hadn't he? Presumably, they hadn't been able to fix him. Imagine if he were brought back to this hospital, and they _were_ able to repair whatever had been broken thanks to their newly precise surgical robot, and...

With a sigh, Tony inserted a page break and began typing his response. The best solution was just to fix everything and let the universe's immune system get back to full strength.

Stephen,
Quantum uncertainty is definitely happening, but by the time you read this document again you'll probably have seen my notes and talked to Wong. I've still got my scanners running and will analyze their findings when I get back. This'd be a whole lot easier if we could hammer this out together, obviously, but I have some ideas. While I'm not there, find a way to get Janet van Dyne on the phone. She'll be able to tell you what the scanner numbers mean in a way that'll make sense for your magic. Hank'll be an ass when you say it's my data. Ignore him.

So, my current freakout is that you actually might have made yourself live through your accident again to get that envelope to me. Except that now I'm the one in the past, so I'd be the one who needs to live through Obadiah fucking me over. Please confirm that is not actually a possibility, okay? Okay. Just put my mind at ease. Lie if you have to, I need to focus.

Past you thinks he's having a psychotic episode, by the way. Is that fine? It seems to give an excuse for everything he saw. Let me know if I should do something to calm him down. Your letter distracted me and he'd really panic-spiraled by the time I got back to him. Things just kind of fell apart more from there.

Remembering what Stephen had said as he lost control, Tony looked around the room. It was a beautiful, expansive space, with a window overlooking the darkened city and expensive leather furniture for him and visiting patients, but in one corner a wardrobe door stood casually open. Additional pairs of scrubs lay folded on its bottom shelf, some normal clothes hung above, and a small bag held toiletries like he was visiting a hotel. This apparently wasn't the only time he'd slept in this office. No wonder he'd managed to pull off ninety-hour work weeks.

I hope you learned that just because you wear pajamas to work doesn't mean you need to sleep there, by the way, Tony finished, saved the document, and closed it.

"There," he softly murmured. Exhaling, he leaned back against the chair. Okay. It was likely that the person in the future was going to be the one doing the heavy lifting to fix things, while the person in the past was primarily tasked with keeping the flow of history steady. With that in mind, Tony steeled his nerves and then checked his cell phone.

Yep: as expected, there were many concerned texts from Obadiah.

It would be best not to disturb Stephen. Ideally, the next time he woke up in 2007 would be after the timeline had been fixed. He'd assume everything was nothing more than a ridiculous dream, and his life would proceed exactly as he expected (up until the day when his Lamborghini turned into a highway piñata).

Perfect, okay. Everyone had a plan, Tony told himself as he moused into the corner to reactivate the screensaver and then quietly let himself out of the office. Once outside, he needed a while to pace. Fooling that nurse had been one thing, but Obadiah knew him. He'd be harder to fool and this would be a much harder act to make. As Tony felt himself only getting tenser with each passing second of his pep talk, he leaned against the receptionist's desk and forced himself to reach into his pocket.

"Tony!" exclaimed Obadiah as soon as he picked up the phone.

The hand not holding his cell clenched into a tight fist. Responding as 2007 Tony would have was a true challenge. "Hey, Obadiah. Note to self: no more parties with staircases."

"How're you doing?"

Tony's mouth twisted into a sneer. His voice wobbled on the first word. "Well, I've got a headache, but I landed in a good hospital."
Obadiah chuckled. "I guess the night had at least one good landing, then."

Tony flipped off his phone.

"Do you want me to fly out?"

"No," Tony said immediately. After a pause, he added, "Stay there, do all the boring CEO stuff you know I hate. I have concussion privileges. Do we know who knocked me down, yet? I wanna stay out here and guilt trip him for a while."

"Nate Humphrey. Remember him?"

"No," Tony admitted.

Obadiah chuckled again. "I swear I keep this business chugging along all by myself, some days." As he had no idea of the furious expression Tony was making toward the phone, Obadiah continued in the same jovial tone, "Son of Vic Humphrey. That Virginia Congressman who retired to become the top defense lobbyist. We can either play up your injury in the media... or promise that family we can make everything go away."

"You almost sound happy that I got concussed," Tony dryly noted.

"Why Tony, that hurts me. I am really and truly hurt." Obadiah paused, then admitted, "But if it was gonna happen anyway, you picked a hell of a guy to have smack you down the stairs. Anyway, want me to start applying some pressure? You threw a party for this last D.O.D. contract, but it'd be nothing compared to the one we could get next."

Tony closed his eyes. It was difficult not to sigh, but he knew exactly what the old him would have said. "Maybe this'll teach Nate to look at where he's swinging around those big arms, huh?"

A triumphant chortle came across the line. "That's my boy! Take care of yourself, you hear me?"

"Will do," Tony confirmed, then shivered as he hung up. Ugh. He felt positively dirty. The queasy sensation lasted until green light once again consumed him.

"Hey," he said tiredly to Stephen, who at least looked less terrified as he blinked into awareness. He'd wobbled when he arrived, perhaps because he was waking up. "Welcome back."

"So." Stephen eyed him warily. The Cloak locked his hands in place again, even though the modern Stephen had apparently closed the amulet to remove the immediate danger of the Time Stone. "You're still here, Stark. Is this really a hallucination due to psychosis, or am I the subject of one of your..." His mouth twisted into a sneer. "Weapons experiments?"

Right, right: doctor, weapons manufacturer. Not exactly a match made in heaven. "You're making most of this up," Tony settled on for a response. Keeping the psychotic episode explanation in his back pocket seemed like a smart move, for it would allow Stephen to excuse anything too impossible. Perhaps this go-around could be very slightly less frantic, however. For both of them. "But there is a... a time ripple effect. That's why you're feeling dizzy on top of getting seriously overloaded from work."

"Explain it," Stephen demanded.

"In the future, I experiment with faster-than-light travel," Tony lied. "But my warp field trial collapsed. A time dilation effect lingered, causing time oddities that sometimes pop up around me. You got caught up in one when my past self went to your hospital. Sorry. I wasn't sure how to

"Right. You're in your present, but you're seeing how I look when I do the warp field trial in the future." Tony shrugged hugely. "Oops. Sorry. It'll resolve soon."

"I see," Stephen said, who absolutely did not sound to trust Tony any more than he had before. "Then am I in a hospital bed right now? In psychiatric restraints?"

Why would he assume... oh, the Cloak. "Let him go," Tony decided. With the amulet closed, Stephen couldn't do himself any damage like had nearly happened before, and it was best to keep him calm. Letting him think that he'd been locked down into a psych hold was probably the opposite of calm.

"Apparently not," Stephen concluded as his hands were released. "All right."

"Are you gonna be okay to stay down here?" Tony wondered. He needed to return to the wind chime table to see what notes had been left for him.

Stephen stared at him with such a clear, sharp gaze that it was easy to forget that he wasn't actually the trained mystic he appeared to be. "I assume your cell phone is set up for high-level security protocols. Give it to me."

"Excuse me?" Tony sputtered.

"There's a VPN I can access for patient records."

"Yeah, and?" There was no way in absolute hell that he was giving anything with a web search function to Stephen. One short glance at Wikipedia's front page would probably destroy reality in a temporal paradox, let alone searching for his own name. Tony knew just how easy it was to find information on the crash that had taken Stephen Strange out of medicine. A single visit to Google would definitely end the world.

"You said you were the cause of this with that time dilation effect. I want to bring up your scans from the hospital database and remind myself of where the damage was. I can't remember just how they looked, but the location might tie into the warp field you talked about. Since it centers on you, after all, and presumably your perception of time."

Well, it obviously wouldn't, since Tony had lied through his teeth, but this was an interesting theory that Stephen was developing. It might keep him curious, engaged, and—most important of all—busy and distracted. Stephen's burgeoning career couldn't be derailed at its beginning by a meltdown stemming from this experience, and so easing his stress was probably more important than Tony had first acknowledged.

"All right," Tony said after a long pause and locked down every online function except for whatever VPN Stephen would access. Tony looked over his shoulder as Stephen directed the phone to the proper site, then snatched it back before he could input his credentials. It wouldn't do for him to see them be rejected since he was no longer an employee there.

"Why did you do that?" Stephen wondered as Tony returned the phone. An outdated security system like that had been easy to breach.

"Better for your bosses to wonder about a stranger's hack than to wonder why you're not just logging in from your own computer, right?"
"Ah," Stephen said after another long pause, then began typing Tony's name into the system. The results came up quickly and his attention was consumed by the CT scans in front of him. Just as expected, his stress appeared to significantly ease when he focused on his professional curiosity rather than the impossible situation.

Okay, good. Tony had at least five uninterrupted minutes to focus on whatever the modern Stephen had left for him. Bolting up the stairs, he grinned when he saw four books spread across the table. Bookmarks were scattered through each.

"You got some serious work done," he murmured in approval as he flipped through the first one and located a marked page. Apparently, their world existed as one timeline branch of a multiverse of infinite possibilities. "So the whole space-time continuum is hiccuping," Tony said, nodding gratefully as he began to understand what was happening in greater detail. That would have sounded more frightening to most people, but it relieved him. A physical dimension was comprehensible in a way that the raw flow of time was not.

He flipped to the next mark. Quantum alignment. If they could make two points in alternate conflicting realities exactly aligned with each other, then it would relieve stress on both timeline-dimensions. So, if either the two Tonys or two Stephens could have their... some sort of energy smoothed out, it'd help to calm things down? Or even fix things? Hmm, he'd need to muse on that. This might be a solution, but there had to be a better one. Maybe. Possibly?

Tony brushed his hands idly against the chimes and waited for the portal to open. "Hey, Wong. It's me again."

Wong sighed.

"Happy to see you, too. Can you look for books on ways to perfectly match energy for the same person in two different dimensions? Might work, might not, but Stephen's going to need it."

"Very well," Wong said and closed the portal.

"What was that?"

Wide-eyed, Tony turned.

Stephen was at the top of the stairs. His expression was absolutely frozen as he took in the fading portal, and then all of the arcane objects around him.

"Hallucination," Tony quickly reminded him.

"Stark," Stephen continued like he hadn't said anything. The direction of his gaze roamed as vacantly as it had for his very first arrival in the Sanctum, but now his eyes were in sharp focus. "Tell me something. Have aliens attacked Earth?"

"Excuse me?" Tony sputtered, then forced a laugh. "Well, you have entered a classic hallucination phase, buddy."

Stephen looked tight, like a rubber band stretched too far. "Then I wonder how you'll react if I say the name... Thanos."

Shock numbed Tony's knees. He stumbled backward into the wind chimes. This time, they were a cacophony. "How. How do you know that name."

Stephen said nothing as his expression grew slowly furious. Despite the pause, Tony had nothing to
say before Stephen spoke again. "You're lying about everything. A time dilation effect has nothing to
do with time travel, but you apparently assumed I didn't know that. And..." His eyes narrowed. "You
assumed that I was actually asleep when you came into my office. Surgeons don't sleep through
pagers."

_Oh, fuck_, Tony thought with fear like he'd seldom felt.

"In 2007, everyone thinks you and Obadiah Stane are wonderful business partners," Stephen
continued with a voice increasingly tinged with madness. "I had absolutely no reason to think
otherwise until tonight. But after you left, I read how you said he was going to 'fuck you over' if you
needed to relive your life. Then I saw you talking to him." One strained laugh. "I saw you flip off
your phone."

"I can explain," Tony promised desperately, just as Wong's portal opened.

"Stark, I found a possibility... for..." Seeing who else was standing there, Wong trailed off.

Hysteric laughter began to pour from Stephen at the inexplicable sight of the mystical portal. It
should have been the most disturbing possible thing to hear, but a deep rumbling under their feet
instead held Tony's attention. It sounded like the earth itself was growling.

Adrenaline surged as Tony ordered, "Wong, shut your portal." He did. "Stephen, you are in the
middle of the biggest psychotic break in history, and—"

"The Time Stone was mentioned in that letter. By me, apparently." Stephen laughed again. It was an
unhinged noise. "Do you remember mentioning that to me? Before the letter? Because I remember it.
I remember everything. Like your scans. I never needed to look at your scans again, I know exactly
what they look like, but I wanted to see my scans."

"Stephen, stop," Tony pleaded. "We need to fix the universe and it is not gonna work if I have to
knock you the fuck out."

"Would that hurt me more than this?" Stephen hissed and lifted one damaged hand. Despite the open
fury that left every other line in his body rigid, his hand spasmed to an off-kilter, uncontrollable beat.
"This is the accident you want me to relive?"

He'd read the entire goddamn letter, because his boss' page was an alarm and Tony's phone call was
a chance to wake his computer and find whatever he'd been looking at. And then he'd come back to
the Sanctum, accessed the full rundown of exactly how his life had changed, and then seen magic
being demonstrated in front of him. This would never be explained away as a hallucination.


There was no way out of this. As the earth groaned painfully like a thick piece of metal being bent
past its limits, something inside Tony snapped. "Yeah. That's it. Sorry, we've both got problems
ahead."

"Never. Happening."

A black line cracked its way across the floor like a shattering mirror. The room jolted.

"That magic you saw," Tony explained as his heart hammered in his chest, "is what you're going to
be able to do. It's a bigger deal for saving people than anything you could ever do with a scalpel and
you are going to help save the entire _universe_, so—"
"You're a murderer, Stark," Stephen replied. His voice dripped rage. "A piece of shit who makes money off of every brain you splatter across the dirt, and I'm the person who cleans up the damage that monsters like you use to make your billions. Every bullet in a brain, in a spine, every last person who's paralyzed or dead is because of demons like you who wanted to make just one dollar more."

He was beyond reason. "That's it," Tony announced. "Gotta say night night, Doc."

And he would have, if not for more black lines breaking apart the floor. It was the purest void he'd ever seen. Absolute nothing was creeping into their existence like spreading roots. Tony couldn't get to Stephen. He didn't have his suit any more, and although he could try something with the basic controllable nanos, making a projectile like before would run the very real risk of knocking Stephen into that absolute void. Panic replaced his anger and filled his voice when he screamed, "Stop! God, just calm down, let me explain this!"

"There is nothing to explain, Stark." Stephen spat his name like a curse. He didn't even appear to notice the cracks. While Tony's gaze moved desperately around the crumbling room, his was rigid. Unblinking. "You're a killer. You're trying to get me to turn away from my life's destined work into your utter lunacy." He held up Tony's phone to show the patient scans it displayed.

They weren't of Tony's skull. They were of Stephen's hands, riddled with metal. A moment later, he opened his trembling fingers and let the phone fall into one of the cracks in reality. It disappeared instantly.

"We need to talk!" Tony begged. "Please!"

When Stephen spoke next, his voice was absolutely calm and certain. "That accident is never going to happen."

A hellish scream tore through the room like glass shards scraping and shattering on metal. Glacial winds froze them; molten heat boiled. And then, after a few last frantic emerald flickers, reality broke.
Chapter 4

Twelve minutes and eighteen seconds into the latest time swap, an unearthly shrieking filled Stephen's ears. He pushed himself back from his office computer and instinctively clutched his head, but that didn't block anything. It was something more fundamental than simple sound: reality itself screamed. A horrifying crescendo swept over him and threatened to scour his very sanity into nothing.

Then it stopped.

Blinking, he slowly retracted his hands from his head and looked around his office. Nothing had changed. His breaths still came fast, but only from the fading memory of whatever that had been.

"Tony?" he then said with concern and headed into the reception area. After discovering the cell phone in Tony's hand upon the swap, they'd agreed that it would be wise for him to follow up on the worried messages he'd received after the accident. The modern Tony had called Obadiah Stane, going by the call history, but a few others in his normal circle had yet to be reassured. While Stephen safely added to the letter document in his private office, 2007 Tony had been handling those calls out here.

"Tony," he repeated as he saw the man seated on one of the reception couches. "Is everything all right? Did you hear something just now?"

"I..." Blinking, Tony looked around. He exhaled and smiled. "Wow, I am actually really happy to see this hospital. It felt like the whole universe was ending. But apparently not."

"Welcome to the risks of a time paradox," Stephen confirmed. As Tony blinked, then frowned, he continued, "Just like I've been telling you, the risks of such a paradox are dire. We cannot—"


The interruption caught Stephen off guard. When he realized Tony's deeper meaning he slowly replied, "No. Are you the Tony from 2007?"

Tony's widening eyes told him the horrifying answer.

"Why are we both here at the same time?" Stephen hissed. "That means they're both in the future right now, totally unprotected from seeing anything we can't afford for them to see!"

"Little late for that!" Tony hissed in the same quiet, tight tone. "You fucked up reality, Strange!"

"What?!"

"You lied to me, got into a patient database, and saw your own scans! The scans for your..." He lifted one hand and wiggled its fingers.

"What?! And you let him do that? Oh my God, Stark, you useless imbecile! Did you not process one fraction of the danger we face? That the entire universe faces? Do you think this is some sort of joke? Why didn't you keep him in line?"

"Me? No: you. This is all on you," Tony snarled. With each word that Stephen spat at him, his face had darkened. In return his index finger jabbed Stephen in the chest hard enough to hurt. "You are the one who lied to me and got into those scans. A younger you, but you. I trusted you, and—"
"We are the people who know what's happening! So we're responsible! I kept your younger self out of danger but you apparently couldn't manage to do the same for me."

"You distracted me with your letter," Tony countered. "And when you sent that letter, you could've told me where your office was. You didn't. Otherwise, I never would have gotten your boss involved and pajama scrubs Strange never would have woken up to see the file you started writing."

"My boss? You pulled other people into this?" Stephen asked with mounting horror.

"I had to because you didn't give me the information I needed! I had no idea where your office is but you still gave me a password to pick up something from it. Did you think that through at all?"

"There are hospital directories!"

"It's past midnight! In a different building where I'm not supposed to be! Where I don't know where any of the numbers are because I don't work here! They'd chase me out while I was trying to look!"

"Who? Who would chase you out? The place is empty and I knew that!"

"The nurses who..." Trailing off, Tony sighed. His outrage deflated in an instant. "This is getting us nowhere."

Anger also fled Stephen, leaving him hollow and tired. "No, it's not. Well." His hand gestured broadly around them. "Reality still exists, even if we're not where we're supposed to be."

"When."

"Both, actually."

Tony rolled his eyes, but it was half-hearted. "Fine."

Stephen folded his arms across his chest. It'd taken months at Kamar-Taj to strengthen his body, and so he'd barely noticed those changes as they happened, but now he felt insubstantial. Nor did Tony look like the heroic figure who could be counted on to save... anything, really. "Like I was saying, reality still exists, just not like we want it to. If it hasn't unraveled entirely, then there's still a chance of salvaging everything."

"Okay." Tony nodded. "Good. How?"

"I'm going to need a while to think that out," Stephen admitted. "I wonder how long we'll have here. When we jump back to our time, it'll be important that we both go to work right away and make efficient use of our resources."

"It'll probably be easier when we do," Tony reluctantly added. "And faster. It'll be better to work simultaneously than in this back-and-forth. I'm sure we can come up with some plan before the next hiccup."

"Yeah." The back of his neck had begun to ache with stress, and Stephen rubbed it as he sighed. "We obviously can't afford to keep chasing each other around this hospital. The condo I had in 2007 isn't too far away. We should keep these bodies in a contained space while we try to work through this."

"Better idea: I've got a pied-à-terre near the park. Wouldn't be much further."

"Why is that a better idea?"
"Because I'll have better computers with more research functionality. Plus, my home A.I. will be able to babysit the kids whenever they hiccup back here. J.A.R.V.I.S. can keep them locked inside with an explanation but without any lines of communication."

Well, he had locked 2007 Tony into a mirror dimension playpen. This would just be a technological equivalent. "Fair enough," Stephen allowed. "Head down that hall to the elevator, I'll be there in a second."

He soon joined Tony, wearing street clothes instead of scrubs and carrying the small bag from his office. Along with toiletries, it now held another tightly-folded set of clothing. Hopefully they wouldn't need any longer than that to set things right. "You said you confirmed the quantum effect at the Sanctum?" Stephen asked after Tony leaned over to press the elevator's button. Something to that effect had been in Tony's written response.

"Yep. Crystal clear quantum confusion. There were multiple potential timelines happening and the Stone was trying to juggle all of them."

"Mmm." Stephen nodded in thought. "Challenging, but at least we know what's happening."

Nodding, Tony grumbled, "I wish we had those books Wong sent us. We could plan our attack better while we're waiting to swap back."

"It's fine," Stephen said as the elevator arrived, dinged, and opened. "I read the relevant sections, so I'm good. I just need to think things through." Those words were lodged in his mind as surely as any organic chemistry textbook or journal article he'd ever scanned.

Tony eyed him, clearly disbelieving that he was already confident with the material, but then shrugged and nodded. His finger tapped the starred button for the ground floor. "So," he began as the elevator descended. "What's Emerson211?"

Stephen stared dully at the floor display ticking downward. "Hall and room for a genetics class I liked."

"Oh." Sighing, Tony slumped against the wall. "After today, I deserve a way more entertaining explanation."

"Sorry to disappoint." With his adrenaline now trickling away, Stephen was exhausted. Not only were his mind and spirit overloaded, but he was in a body that had been pushing itself to its limits as he established his career. Tony had experienced the same spiritual swaps, and even if his body was better-rested, today's injury surely lingered. They both looked wrung out.

"Hmph. Well, you should be sorry." The door dinged again and Tony gestured them onward. His movements were slow with the fatigue that Stephen had expected. "Come on, I've got my guy waiting with the car."

"Involving more people again? And here, this way." Most patient wings and this medical office tower all shared the same driveway loop for drop-offs and pick-ups, and presumably it'd be to there that Tony's driver had been summoned.

"Well," Tony said as they walked into a central patient area, which was mostly quiet and empty at the late hour, "my security guy would actually think it's weird if I didn't call him for this. Getting injured, then leaving from the hospital against doctor's recommendations. He'd expect to be involved."

"Hmm. Fair enough, then."
"Yep. Oh, and a word of warning." Tony's face lit abruptly up as his hand gripped the bar on one of the double entrance doors. All exhaustion vanished. "Smile."

"Smile?" Stephen repeated just as Tony pushed the glass door open and they stepped into the brisk September night.

Flashbulbs went immediately off. Though Stephen jolted in surprise, Tony strode through what Stephen now saw was a crowd of journalists with a smug smile and outstretched hands. "I hate to disappoint America's enemies," he said toward them, "but you're not getting rid of me that easily." His slow, deliberate turn was clearly intended to give them the chance to verify his good health.

"There were reports that you'd suffered a serious injury earlier," replied a reporter whose microphone bore a CBS logo.

"Well, look at me. Which I know you love to do, by the way. But seriously, get in touch with Obadiah Stane, he can clarify and verify the extent of everything," Tony replied as he began to maneuver his way through the crowd. Stephen belatedly realized that he should follow in Tony's wake, but that only seemed to alert the reporters that they were together.

"Is there any chance that this injury was deliberately caused?" wondered Fox News.

"I'm not the person to ask," Tony answered as he got up on his toes to scan over the top of the group, then smiled like he'd seen their target. "Seriously, Stane can tell you everything. He's got the official company statement."

"Mr. Stark, why are you leaving with a neurosurgeon?" asked someone else. "Are you concerned about your head injury?"

Startled, Stephen turned toward who he now saw was a local reporter. Oh, right. Someone from New York City might have covered the press conference he attended after the deputy mayor's supratentorial ependymoma had been successfully removed. It was the only thing he'd done by September, 2007 that had earned attention beyond other surgeons. It must have been a recent operation, for few remembered the press conference even two months after it happened.

The question was tantalizing. All cameras turned on Stephen, then returned to Tony to await the answer of whether he was hiding a deeper, more dangerous injury behind his bright facade.

"I'm leaving with a neurosurgeon for personal matters," Tony replied with a wink. "Now if you'll excuse me, my chariot approaches."

"Personal matters?" Stephen repeated as a dark-haired driver guided him into the back seat of a town car. "Personal matters?" he demanded again as Tony took the other seat and they were closed inside. "Oh great. Oh great! Now it's going to be national journalistic record that I'm screwing Tony Stark."

Tony snorted. "You wish."

"You winked!" Stephen protested as the driver returned.

"I wink a lot." Grinning, Tony waved up at the man staring blankly at the two of them in the rearview mirror. "This is my driver and head of security, by the way. Say hi, Happy."
"Hi," Happy hesitantly said.

"Take me home," Tony requested, then settled against the seat and let out an extended, indulgent sigh. "Well, this was one long night. Thanks for checking on me, by the way. I saw your messages."

"Of course, of course, I was so upset I didn't stop that guy in the first place."

Tony shrugged as he watched the city’s lights stream past their windows. "Freaky accident, not your fault. Shit happens."

Being excused of any guilt appeared to remove a heavy load from Happy's shoulders. He nodded in relief. "Thanks. Oh, ah, your... passenger. Where should I drop you off?"

Though Stephen opened his mouth to try to come up with some sort of actual explanation, unlike that suggestive mess Tony had made in front of the reporters, Tony beat him to it. "I said to take me home, Hap. He's with me tonight."

"I am literally going to murder you with a scalpel," Stephen threatened in a nearly inaudible growl.


Stephen continued in a deadly monotone, almost too soft to hear, "I will strip out every nerve in your spine and braid them."

Smiling, Tony leaned back against the town car's plush leather. His arms slouched grandly across the passenger space, which spilled past Stephen's personal boundaries. "And Happy... put the screen up."

"Uh. Sure," Happy said blankly. A second later the divider between the two of them and their driver rose, sealing them into complete privacy.

Horrified, Stephen turned to Tony.

"I had to flirt with a nurse to get to your office earlier. It reminded me of how I was going after everyone who crossed my path," Tony said, like that actually excused anything.

A garbled noise of protest was all Stephen could make.

"It's the most unremarkable 2007 Stark thing possible. It's the one thing we can say that won't draw any attention. No one's gonna question this."

"I will!" Oh God, he was going to be a doctor with a reputation of screwing his patients. This was what Tony Stark had made of him. As he felt his phone buzz, Stephen groaned and checked to see who'd just witnessed the total corruption of his character on the news.


Tony hesitated, seemingly taking this level of timeline corruption seriously. But then he snapped his fingers and said, "Tell him we're still talking about surgical robots. I had to leave but I wanted your input on the hospital's needs."

Well, that did make a far better excuse than what the news had implied, and so Stephen dutifully typed it in. The response came surprisingly quickly and in bright spirits. "I'm supposed to 'keep you happy,'" Stephen recited. Okay, maybe it was the same perspective as the news. "And give you
whatever you need.' I legitimately think my boss might be whoring me out, I'm unprepared to deal with this."

Laughing, Tony shook his head. "I said I'd donate some robots if he got me to your office for a follow-up meeting. But I don't know what surgeons need in the OR, so you came along to give those specifications." With a sudden frown, he added, "That guy should really stop thinking about my donation and get back to his kid's wedding."

"Please stop making random charitable donations, we're trying to keep the timeline intact," Stephen said as he typed, but at least there was an established cover story. Actually, he saw from the rapid reply, this would work incredibly well. "I'm supposed to consult with you for as long as possible on anything the hospital might need, and keep pushing you for a bigger gift. No need to come in until I've wrung your checkbook dry."

"Well, that worked out."

"I'm glad one thing did," Stephen agreed as he confirmed that he'd consult with Tony Stark for as long as possible to maximize the size and efficiency of Metro's donation, and then tucked away his phone. "I assume you can also stay in that condo until we get this mess figured out?"

"You had to get your boss' permission. I am the boss."

"Ah. Right."

Traffic was light at this time of night, even on a Saturday, and they soon arrived at the far southwest corner of Central Park. The Time Warner Center towers loomed above, speckled with bright windows like distant stars. As Stephen looked up at them, he couldn't help but feel mildly impressed. He'd seen a listing in this building before settling on the loft he'd upgraded to in a few years. He knew the price ranges.

"Thanks, Happy," Tony said as he retracted the privacy screen and leaned forward to clap his employee on his shoulder. Happy still looked befuddled over whatever was happening. "If Obi calls, handle it. Same with..." His voice wavered momentarily. "Ms. Potts."

"Sure thing, boss." Happy's eyes met Stephen's in the rearview mirror again, filled with equal parts confusion and suspicion, before he put the car into park and moved to help them out.

"Well," Stephen noted when they were again alone in an elevator, ascending toward the 72nd floor. "You certainly perked up again once you stepped in front of those cameras. Not sure where that energy came from. Although I suppose you also horrified some adrenaline back into my system, so that..."

Trailing off, he took in Tony's suddenly weary stance. Circles under his eyes were as dark as bruises and made the rest of his skin look all the paler in comparison. "So I guess you're done putting on a show, now," Stephen corrected. It really had seemed like Tony had forgotten all of the exhaustion he'd displayed in the hospital elevator. Apparently not.

Tony's smile was lopsided. "If I'd looked like the accident actually did any damage, we'd probably lose five percent off our stock."

And that sort of corporate upheaval wasn't supposed to happen for a while, and it'd be far more dramatic when it did. "Right," Stephen murmured as the elevator deposited them at their destination. Only one door lay ahead of them; apparently, Tony's condo covered the entire floor. This was quite a 'pied-à-terre.'
"Welcome back, Mr. Stark," crooned an oddly familiar voice as they stepped inside. Though Tony's lopsided smile returned when he heard it, Stephen couldn't help but squint in mild confusion at a speaker in the wall.

"Vision," Tony supplied after noticing his inspection.

Stephen snapped his fingers. "Thank you." That red Avenger hadn't spoken on the news all that much, but he'd heard him enough to recognize his voice.

"Grab any guest room you want, there are..." Tony trailed off, then shrugged. "There are guest rooms, I don't remember how many."

Stephen chose the nearest door, dropped his bag on its bed, and returned without giving himself any chance to inspect what was clearly a spectacular penthouse. "So, Tony, we are now faced with a decision: keep strategizing as we discussed, knowing that we'll be able to access the needed resources once we get home, or..."

"Or?" Tony prompted.

Seeing a bed inside that room, even for a few seconds, had weakened Stephen's knees. His body screamed for rest. "Or we pass out for at least a few hours. Then we'll be able to tackle this with slightly fresher minds. For any swaps that happen during that, well... they'll be asleep here and won't cause any more trouble in the meantime."

Exhausted amusement filled Tony's eyes as he suggested, "Sounds like a plan, but turn off your pager this time."

Stephen found it in him to laugh. Slightly. "Good idea. Tell your A.I. to wake us up at... 3:30?"

Having agreed on that, he returned to his chosen bedroom, kicked off his shoes, and collapsed onto the bed's covers. Clothes could wrinkle all they liked. His brain needed sleep.

When the A.I. woke him, just under three hours had seemingly evaporated in seconds. He didn't remember shifting to a modern body in the meantime, but it was hard to think about anything. Yawning, Stephen slowly returned to the living room and found Tony also stumbling there. He looked as dully incoherent as Stephen felt as they climbed out of sleep, and so Stephen took the chance to walk to a broad bank of windows and inspect the dark skyline.

"Hey," he eventually said after struggling to make sense of the outdated view. He wasn't used to this part of town, nor its angle. Though many other towers had been added in the interim years, one particularly prominent building was missing. "Is that why you put it there?"

Tony walked over to join him, saw where Stephen pointed, and laughed. "Yeah. I'd sit in here during my trips to New York and think about how I wanted to put my mark on the skyline. Right about... there." His hand raised, indicating where Stark—later Avengers—Tower had risen. "I could be on the top of my own tower. Not someone else's. The details were a whole lot different by the final version, though."

"Huh." It really was the 2007 skyline and so they really were in a changed world. "This is wild to think about, now that we can catch our breath. All the things that haven't yet happened." Stephen sighed. Something other than Tony's showcase tower now came to mind. "All of the disordered brain cells just starting to replicate. There are a lot of people in this city who are going to ignore some recurring drowsiness or nausea until it's too late."

Tony grimaced, rubbing the bruise from his fall as he struggled toward full lucidity. "Couldn't save
Stephen looked down at the streets far below. From up here, people were invisible. "Didn't even try. No glory in operating on a sure loss."

Tony's light snort said he recognized that for the sorry excuse that it was. Then he offered his own history. "Right now, I'm sleeping my way around the world. And drinking. And gambling. And... anyway." Another snort. "But no one cares about that because I keep coming up with new ideas. I can act however I want, so long as I keep producing what our clients demand." He folded his arms and sighed down at the street. "By now, I'm sure Stane's selling those ideas to anyone who'll write him a check. And he'll do it for years before I find out.

"This is crazy," Tony continued after a contemplative pause. "It'll be years until Afghanistan. Thor's never come to Earth. Steve's still in the ice. Bruce is... not sure if he's done the experiment or not, but he hasn't rampaged. I don't know if Nat's even started working with S.H.I.E.L.D. Wow."

"Has there been anyone?" Stephen wondered as they looked down on a naive city. "I mostly ignored your whole collection of heroes. Until I couldn't."

"Well, I was the one who made the big public debut. Danvers was kept secret. I heard rumors about Hank playing with some ideas, but he also kept them under wraps." Tony frowned. "Wonder if that's how Janet got taken out. Probably."

"Huh." The city looked so quiet from seventy-two floors up. "This world has no idea how complicated it's going to get."

"Ugh." Tony wiped his hands down his face. "Complicated. I really wish you hadn't mentioned Thanos in your letter. Knowing he's coming cannot be good for the timeline."

Stephen winced. "The younger me... he really knew...?"

"Said the name and everything."

"Damn." Unhappily, Stephen added, "And the younger you saw the Time Stone glowing in the opened Eye. It wouldn't make any sense to him without context, but when might he start wondering about it again?"

Sighing, Tony admitted, "Maybe with Loki and the Tesseract, but definitely by the time the Mind Stone went into Vision. Young me would remember another one of those rock things from my hop to the future. Since Vision helped stop Ultron, I'd wonder if we could do something similar with that green version of it I once saw. And I'd start hunting."

"Damn. Again."

"Yeah. Damn."

"Well. Let's get to work, I guess." His brain was still fuzzy, but at least Stephen could plan slightly better. "I'm going to write out those relevant paragraphs so you can also have them to refer to. Is there any possible way you can see how much quantum confusion is happening now? I'm sure it's even worse than before."

"Uh." Tony scratched his head and looked slowly around the condo. "Can I scan for quantum energy behavior with the 2007 tech I have installed at a secondary house. That'll be a firm 'maybe.'"

Stephen chuckled. "Good luck. At least I'll get something done, even if you can't." As expected, the
dark look that earned suggested that Tony had taken it as a competition that he didn't intend to lose. By the time Stephen had the third remembered section written out, Tony was modifying a dish that he normally used to monitor military satellites.

"Any progress?" Stephen wondered after another paragraph. In this one, the book had talked about how timelines, if disturbed too much, could abruptly find ruts to follow like wagon wheels on an overused road. That might explain why they'd been wrenched back and forth: mistakes in reality had sent them onto an uneven path that jolted between tracks.

"I am... not sure," Tony admitted. Instead of the high-tech fabrication facilities Stark Industries was famous for, in this luxury apartment he was working with tools as humble as a soldering iron. Even for him, this as a challenge. "What topic are you up to?"

Stephen set that page aside, retrieved a fresh one, and continued writing from memory. "About how unsustainable timelines will collapse in on themselves. It's supposed to be an intrusion of absolute nothingness into a failing reality."

"Yeah." Tony swallowed. A shiver ran through him that he failed to hide. "That's how it looked."

Grimacing, Stephen looked over to him. "Well. I'm glad you made it out of there, then."

"So am I," Tony admitted. "It really didn't seem like I would."

They continued working for another hour or more. Through the windows, the very edge of the visible horizon began its lazy creep into indigo. "This isn't working," Tony eventually groaned and fell into an armchair. He pressed one hand over his eyes like a sleeping mask, sighed, and went limp. "With this old tech I need a better workshop to make something happen. I thought I was scanning for quantum possibilities but I can't get it to pick up anything."

Stephen said nothing. He'd written each paragraph out on its own page, then spent the last thirty minutes or so moving them around to see if he could tell a coherent story with the collective mystical understanding of the Time Stone. Even now, his hands still moved some apparently irrelevant sections out of the way while shifting others into a priority spot.

Aligning the energy of the same person across two dimensions would relieve the stress on both. What would happen if it moved in the other way, though? If energy diverged? If their two existences became irreconcilable?

"There is zero chance," Stephen murmured to himself, "that the old me would ever think that there is anything more important than surgery." Waking up in a disabled body that could no longer operate, surrounded by bizarre artifacts that went against every scientific belief he held? That would never be acceptable to him. Never. Ever. No wonder reality had broken.

"Hey, Tony," Stephen mused as he shifted a few pages this way and that. "The younger me. How'd he react when reality collapsed?"

"Huh? Oh." Tony slumped further into his chair. "He didn't. It was weird, actually. He'd been flipping out so much that he assumed he was in the middle of a psychotic break, but then he just... ignored the complete end of the universe."

"Hmm. It must have looked different to him than it did to you." Stephen frowned at the greater knowledge he was sure was locked inside these paragraphs. "Probably because he was staying right when he was, while you were the one getting ripped into the past."

"Yeah, but we've both swapped before and it was never like that. Why wasn't it just a green light
"Oh. Good point." Ugh, he wanted coffee. They'd burned through what energy they'd gotten from that short time asleep. Through a yawn, Stephen continued, "It was odd for me, too, even though I didn't swap. I didn't see anything crumble like you did, but I heard a horrifying sound like... like reality was screaming. But then everything's been completely fine ever since."

Everything had been fine.

Ever since they arrived.

More than four hours ago.

Without a hiccup.

A tiny seed of concern began to germinate. Again, Stephen started shuffling papers. He'd been looking for a way for these ideas to present them with a solution. Perhaps they told a different tale.

If the same person in two possibilities became irreconcilable, it could increase the stress on multiple timelines. If timeline behavior swung too wildly, it might overcorrect. Reality could be forced into whatever worked simply to keep existence functioning.

His hands moved faster, shoving away ideas that now clearly didn't apply. Even so, the full paragraphs were still too long for his exhausted mind. What if he summarized these core ideas into a single, simple story?

The timeline had become too stressed. Needing to keep history coherent as its events became seemingly impossible, the Time Stone had forced any solution it could. It required people who were aligned with how everything was supposed to play out. Only those people would notice the stress fractures as they were jolted around into a position necessary to keep reality functioning.

Horrified, Stephen looked up.

The swaps had never taken this long. He thought he knew why.

"Tony. This is unbelievably important. With that device, are you not able to track quantum energy at all, or are you just not seeing the quantum confusion effect you saw before?"

His sudden concern sobered Tony. "I... let me double check." After a long pause, he looked up. "It's that. The second one. That's what had me confused. I thought it wasn't working at all because it wasn't giving me all the crazy readings I know it should be."

"No. It shouldn't. Because there's only one timeline, now."

Tony frowned.

"With us. Here. Right now." Stephen's heartbeat echoed in his ears. "My younger self clearly broke history, but even your younger self saw your modern cell phone. He saw magic. An Infinity Stone. And they don't appreciate the stakes they face. They don't even understand them. There's no longer any way for them to return to 2007 and have the world play out like it needs to."

Tony's expression remained motionless, but the increasing tension in his body suggested that he was working through those horrifying implications.

"If the timeline loses control," Stephen continued explaining, even as panic tried to choke him, "it
might force any possible solution. No matter how hard it has to correct its steering to do so."

"No."

"All of those other, uncertain timelines are gone, now. That's why the confusion has vanished. It's been hours and hours and we've never once returned to our proper time." As he went on, Stephen's pace sped. "You and I felt reality make that adjustment but no one else did. Think of all those journalists. None of them heard the world scream or saw a void rip apart the ground. They wouldn't have acted like that if they had."

Tony shook his head and said nothing.

"But we experienced that tension because we've been forced somewhere we don't belong. Hard."

Tony's head kept shaking.

"If there is zero chance for our younger selves to live out history in a way that keeps reality intact, then the Stone will go for the only other solution out there. It doesn't care about anything beyond maintaining the flow of time in the universe. It cares nothing for the people in that flow."

"No," Tony repeated and swallowed hard. Sweat beaded on his upper lip.

"Us," Stephen finished in quiet agony. "The only way to have our contributions to history happen... is to have them done by people who do accept what must occur."

"No," Tony begged for a third time. "No, no, no. I can't..." He trailed off, gasped, and continued, "When you sent that letter, I wondered if you'd needed to live all of those years. I can't do that. I can't. I..." Trailing off, he balled his fists and closed his eyes.

They opened suddenly and focused on his scanner once more. As Tony frantically adjusted its readings, trying to find any flicker of an uncertain quantum echo that might get them out of here, Stephen looked down at his hands and said nothing. They were as reliably steady as the timeline to which they'd been condemned.

"There's nothing," Tony eventually choked. "No other possibilities. This is all there is. There's nothing else to jump to. It's all resolved."

Their earlier exhaustion was nothing compared to this. Entire years stretched out in Stephen's mind: arguments over relationships he knew were doomed, rejecting patients he could have saved, and unspeakable pain suffered in other dimensions or on other planets.

It all had to happen.

Again.

Tony's seemingly imminent crying jag collapsed before it began. Instead he lay as a wounded heap in his chair, staring hollowly off at nothing. After nearly a silent minute he stood and walked mechanically across the room. When he returned he set down a heavy glass tumbler in front of Stephen, placed its twin nearby, and then poured two fingers of scotch apiece. Without a word, he tipped back his first drink.

Stephen leaned toward his own glass. As he did, he saw his fingers reach for it and flashed to the sight of them suspended, mutilated with surgical incisions and metal pins. Alcohol soon hit his stomach like fire, burning all the way down.
They didn't look at each other as they nursed their cups. Memories fought to be recognized through the deepening liquor haze. So very many memories, stretching for so many years.

Outside, the world slowly brightened. Indigo twilight moved toward dawn.

September 16, 2007 looked to be a beautiful day.
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

Note: I'm using the MCU timeline that the studio released in Marvel Studios: The First 10 Years, which puts the events of Iron Man in 2010. So if you wonder why I'm saying that things will happen then instead of in 2008, blame them. :)

As he woke, Tony realized almost immediately that he was about to vomit. He lunged for the nearest drain, which ended up being the wet bar, and slumped over its countertop after he'd seemingly expelled his entire existence into the sink. The polished stone was cool against his cheek. Nice. Steady. Reliable.

"Mr. Stark," whispered J.A.R.V.I.S. "Appropriate supplies are available in the mini-fridge under the bar."

Despite the soft volume, Tony's head pounded. His brain sloshed around his sinuses. Groaning—and then groaning again at how the noise seemed to echo inside his skull—he shakily opened the under-counter door and reached for whatever was inside.

Ah. Non-hangover him had apparently seen this sort of situation coming. The fridge door held small bottles of Gatorade. Red. His favorite. Good.

It took five minutes of minuscule sips before fruit punch replaced the awful combination of flavors that had resulted from... however much scotch he'd downed. He then set the Gatorade aside, because even that much hitting his stomach threatened another round of sickness. Squinting against the obnoxiously bright late-morning sun filling the room, Tony tried to make sense of wherever he was. New York? This was New York. Yeah. This was his old place in New York. The park was visible through the wall of windows. Okay. Good. But who else was that?

Nothing made sense from across the room. He weaved his way back toward the couch and leaned over the unfamiliar body there. Tony didn't recognize this outfit, nor the side of the guy's head, and so he dazedly pried the stranger's face free of where it'd come to rest in the junction of armrest and back. Even then, it took him a few blank seconds to understand who he saw and what that meant.

Stephen slit his eyes open and then immediately cringed against the light entering them. His hiss of pain soon morphed into something deeper.

"Come on," Tony said as he began to recall the condo's layout, then pulled Stephen to his feet. Though that was clearly against the man's will, Tony knew what was coming. "Bathroom's this way."

A few minutes later, during which Tony retrieved his Gatorade bottle and attempted a few more sips, Stephen wobbled out of a guest bathroom. The collar of his shirt was wet with the water he'd splashed on his face. "It really happened," he unhappily concluded as he saw Tony approach and offer a bottle of his own.

"Yeah."
Stephen tried to wipe down his damp face and only succeeded in shoving the heel of his hand into his eye. "How much did we drink?"

It felt like Tony's head was out of his control when it turned, like driving over an oil patch. He found the bottle on the table and guessed, "About ten thousand dollars."

"Nngh." Stephen unscrewed the cap to his Gatorade—it took him a few tries—and reluctantly sipped. Aware of the fuzzy sensation coating his tongue, Tony resumed his own efforts to get more fluids into his system. Behind them, the sink in the wet bar turned on as J.A.R.V.I.S. presumably tried to clean up the mess he'd made.

After those sips, Stephen wondered, "Can you turn." He tried again. "Can you turn." His head shook. Without explanation, Stephen stepped back into the bathroom and shut the door. Tony kept sipping until he exited, looking mildly less ill, and tried his question a third time. "Can you turn off the lights?"

"The lights?" Tony echoed in confusion.

The hand not holding Stephen's drink gestured at the wall of windows.

"Turn off the sun?" Tony clarified.

"Curtains," Stephen announced while visibly struggling through his headache. "Vision. Can you do curtains?"

Huh? Oh. "He means you, J.A.R.V.I.S.," Tony said. "Make the room darker." Relief swept over both of them when the electrochromic film on the windows activated, taking the room from midday to dusk.

"Thanks," Stephen mumbled before returning to the couch and collapsing into an only slightly less awkward position than before. Sleep soon reclaimed him.

Since 2007 Tony's body was clearly more of a drinker than 2007 Stephen, Tony was able to push through his hangover and attend to a few key matters before also falling back asleep. "J.A.R.V.I.S.," he said as he visited the master suite's bathroom and winced at the mess staring back from the mirror. "Make sure no one calls today. But tell them I'm fine. Just don't want to be disturbed."

"Of course, sir."

"Oh. Right. Except for... uh. The guy I called last night. Chuck?"

"There is a Charles Findlay in your call history from last night. He appears to be the Chief Executive Officer of Metro-General Hospital in New York City."

"Yeah. Him. Get him on the phone. Not a video call." Tony took another, deeper drink of his Gatorade as he heard the dialing noise and then smacked his lips a few times in the hopes of sounding normal. "Hey, Chuck," he said once the man picked up. " Wanted to follow up." Ugh. Talking still hurt.

"I'm so happy to hear from you, Mr. Stark. I've tried to get in touch with Metro's representative and wanted to make sure everything was still progressing smoothly."

Yeah, he'd figured old Chuck'd be checking in on how his donation was coming... and how his employee was behaving. That was why this was the only phone call that needed to be made today. "If you want your money, then I'm going to need to." Words were hard. "Need to keep him for a
while." After another sip of Gatorade, Tony finished, "To consult. On so much money."

There was a pause long enough that Tony wondered if his hangover was evident across the phone line. Probably. This might be the most drunk he'd ever let himself become. "Of course, Mr. Stark. I won't interrupt you and Dr. Strange in your discussion." Chuck's last word sounded simply fraught with meaning.

Had Tony just confirmed something? Oh well, he could get yelled at later. "Great. Gotta go," Tony said and hung up without waiting for a reply. Chuck was clearly letting him get away without typical social graces and he might as well lean into those billionaire's privileges.

That was his immediate checklist covered, and so Tony shoved down his pants, left the bathroom, and collapsed onto his bed in his boxers and t-shirt. More sleep came quickly, with plentiful snoring. By the time he stumbled back out into the living room the clock said it was nearly rush hour. "So, our first day was pretty much a waste," Tony announced as he turned a corner and saw Stephen sitting up, still working on what now had to be a room temperature bottle of Gatorade.

"I am never drinking again."

"Imagine if we'd had the cheap stuff," Tony said and plucked the scotch bottle off the coffee table. Neither of them would want to have that remaining sliver of poison sitting in front of them. Turning back from the bar, he saw Stephen eying him oddly and looked down to see that he hadn't pulled his pants back on. Whatever. It was his house.

"I can't believe this happened," Stephen murmured after Tony slouched in the most comfortable nearby chair. "I thought we were done with the Stones."

Tony slumped further. "Yeah."

They sat for a while in mutual silent misery. As the scope of everything that had happened sunk in anew, the room soon felt funereal. Eventually Stephen's head shook. "An emergency gets a death count right away. But a few more names always trickle in. Even after the danger's passed. People who don't quite pull through." His shoulders sagged. "Guess we're them. The very last victims of Thanos."

Thanos' gauntlet had made a deep wound in the universe. The infection it'd introduced to the Time Stone was apparently the last, lingering damage after the crisis had seemingly passed. This emergency's final aftermath had taken months instead of weeks, but two last lives had been claimed all the same. No one would mourn them, though. No one would ever know to.

Being locked inside a terrorist's cave had felt so much less lonely than this.

A sudden knock at the door drew both their attention, but wariness morphed into confusion after they heard, "Room service."

"I didn't call anyone," Tony clarified before raising his voice and asking, "J.A.R.V.I.S.? Is it really room service?" One reason why he'd chosen this condo had been the services offered from the hotel elsewhere in the building. But those were requested.

"It is, sir. Shall I unlock the door?"

"Uh, sure?" As both men turned to look over their shoulders, a server with a professionally neutral expression carried in a tray laden with two bowls and several plates. "You can set that down on the... yeah. Right beside you," Tony said and gestured to a console table.
"Of course, sir," said the man. His gaze flicked around just enough to verify the clear aftereffects of liquor, plus Tony's missing pants, but his expression remained pleasant. He'd surely seen much worse from the other residents of this tower. "May I get anything else for you?"

"Are there fries on that tray? Or onion rings? A cheese burger. I want—"

"No, you don't," Stephen announced.

"Get me like... a pound of french fries and a really greasy burger," Tony said and ignored him. "With everything. Same for him."

"Of course, sir. I'll bring them up as soon as they're ready." With a distant smile, the server bowed slightly and left them alone.

"Tip him," Tony ordered J.A.R.V.I.S. as he stumbled across the room and inspected the tray that had somehow been ordered for them. The bowls were filled with simple, hearty chicken soup and small loaves of freshly baked bread were kept warm inside thick napkins. He'd recovered enough for it all to smell delicious.

"Huh," Stephen said as he unsteadily managed to join him. "Now this is actually a smart choice. Fluids, protein, salts. Is your A.I. looking out for you?"

As Tony ripped off a piece of a small French loaf and buttered it, he realized that he felt suddenly famished. The worst of the hangover had worked through his system by now and this body probably hadn't eaten anything in a day. "Mmph. Good," he mumbled through his enormous mouthful of bread and butter, then carried a bowl back to his chair.

Stephen tackled his own meal with slightly more caution, but he too was clearly hungry. Quiet reigned for a few minutes as they ate. Only when the worst of Tony's hunger was gone did he finally answer. "I don't think I programmed this into him, but it's been a while. J.A.R.V.I.S., did you order the soup?"

"No, sir, I simply tracked your movement in the bed to note when you were likely to wake. The menu was selected by Ms. Potts."

Tony's spoon froze on the way to his mouth. He just managed to get it back into the bowl before the broth spilled. "Oh."

"She has requested an update on your status. What shall I tell her?"

"I'm... I'm fine," Tony replied with a leaden heart. "Nothing to worry about."

"I shall pass that along."

In the long silence that followed, Tony eventually noticed the sympathetic look that Stephen was giving him. "We're supposed to be coming up on our four-month anniversary," Tony mumbled. Needing to relive his life was terrible enough, but Pepper was the deepest loss that had driven his final, desperate scanner attempts the night before. And he still couldn't wholly process this, like how a wound needed a while for its full pain to arrive. Now, new pain was indeed emerging. "We'd been trying for a kid."

Stephen's sympathy deepened.

Words that Tony didn't want kept spilling out of him. "And maybe it'd be hard, maybe we waited too long, but there are clinics. Little... icicle babies."
Instead, Pepper Potts now was Tony Stark's assistant and only his assistant. It wouldn't be until 2010 that they had a first dance that ended up being a slow, complicated launch into so very much more. In 2007, she was probably still maintaining many of the professional boundaries that she hadn’t yet decided were easier—or necessary—to ignore.

Her role in Tony's life certainly wasn’t as partner or wife. As his assistant, she would deal with things like travel, parties, medical concerns... and would also keep the rest of his life running after he took a latest conquest to bed. Apparently, she'd believed herself to be faced with all of those tasks. She'd done her job without complaint. Because that was what an assistant did when they’d never, ever been in love with the person they worked for.

Something very dark began to swell inside him. It grew like mushrooms on a rotting log. Anger filled Tony's gaze when he looked back up. "You just had to pick the wrong time anchor, didn't you? You had to pull me in to this."

No response came.

Memories flooded Tony in the silence Stephen offered. The warmth of a kiss on the altar, the heat of slipping inside Pepper, the amazing moment when they'd agreed that yes, let's do it, let's try for a baby. All of it was gone. Forever. Because of that stupid necklace. Because of the guy who'd made a grand entry to interrupt one Central Park morning. "You're the guy who thinks you can accessorize with Infinity Stones. I had nothing to do with this. It should have just been you ending up back here. Just you. Not me."

Stephen took a long, measured time to reply. He'd seemingly run a hundred different responses through his mind before settling on one. "Is this really how you want to kick off the next decade?"

The question was a gut punch in the way anger never would have been. (The next decade. God.) Tony opened his mouth only for his vision to blur. His rage deflated and low, heavy regret took its place. "No," he admitted, sniffled, and wiped at his eye with the back of one hand. "I just. I thought I was done with all of this. I was done. And we were gonna have a kid." He bit his lip and shook his head. "We were really gonna have a..."

"I'm so sorry."

Blaming Stephen for everything would still be easy to do. After all, his actions had caused this, no matter how necessary they’d been and how unintentional these side effects were. He couldn't possibly have known what might happen, though. And either of them would lay down their life for the universe. In the end, that was exactly what had happened. The sacrifice came in an unexpected form, but it was one they'd always been prepared to make.

But that all was a logical argument. Tony was in no state to deal with logic. No, what had really disarmed him was that question about how they wanted to face the next decade. There was only one way to feel even lonelier than dealing with the reality of 2007 Pepper: losing the sole other person in existence who understood what was happening. They couldn't afford anger between them.

"Thanks," Tony said after that long pause, and ripped off an absurdly large chunk of bread to keep himself from saying anything else.

By the time they did come around to speaking again, the server had returned with their second tray. Though he might regret it, the smell was too good to ignore and so Tony rose to retrieve his next meal of the night. "Here," he said as he deposited the other plate in front of Stephen. If he couldn't afford to lose the only other person who knew what was happening, then Tony needed to make an active effort to break any boundaries between them.
Stephen opened his mouth, likely to protest this greasy meal after a hangover, only to pause. Apparently it looked too appetizing for even a doctor to resist.

"Told you," Tony mumbled as they both grabbed a handful of fries.

"So how are we going to do this?" he eventually wondered and licked salt off his fingers. He'd mourn his lost life on countless nights to come. Their new reality still faced them, though, regardless of their emotional state. It had to be dealt with, and God knew that panicked improvisation hadn't served them very well so far. They needed a real plan, made together. "Trying to keep our act going might literally drive me insane. Obadiah Stane? Remember that guy? He's selling our stuff to terrorists. I've just gotta ignore that for years?"

Though Stephen Strange was seldom one to hesitate with an opinion, he hesitated now.

Tony frowned. "What?"

"You don't want me to say this."

"Uh, after that, you'd better."

"All right," Stephen slowly said. "I just don't understand why one type of sale would matter to you more than another. Your military buyers kill civilians, too."

Tony pulled back. "Excuse me?"

Stephen lifted his eyebrows significantly, but said nothing as he grabbed another handful of fries.

"It is different," Tony said emphatically. "The Ten Rings are deliberately targeting civilians and terrorizing the people that they don't just kill outright. My company was helping to provide the tools that stopped bastards like that in their tracks." He hesitated, then sighed, "Is helping." These whole past/present tense issues would take some getting used to.

"Look," Stephen countered, gesturing with a particularly long fry. "I believe you. I believe that groups like that need to be stopped. But we both know that sometimes... someone picks the wrong target and innocent people die. Think of my life's work. I'm never going to agree with that perspective."

"The military has medics," Tony countered. Clearly, doctors could agree with him. Stephen just didn't want to.

"Yeah, well, I didn't enlist." Moving delicately, Stephen continued, "I feel like the gulf between the lives we're reliving will decrease significantly once you start focusing on energy and robotics instead of bombs. That's all I'm saying."

Hmm. Well, that was fair enough, he supposed. Tony still thought that his work had done a lot of good (when Obadiah wasn't corrupting it), but he could see that whole rigid Hippocratic perspective. If he squinted.

After a long, contemplative moment, Tony wondered, "Can I make that move now?" Maybe they didn't need to just regurgitate the past. They knew so much better, now... and besides, he'd realized something.

Stephen blinked. "What? Don't be ridiculous." When he saw that Tony was serious, his voice grew more emphatic. "We know perfectly—and unfortunately—well that we have to let the whole damned history in front of us play out exactly like it did before. You having a crisis of military
conscience three years early is not letting history repeat!"

But apparently, Stephen hadn't yet had the same revelation. Wanting to make that point, Tony continued, "So you're saying that if things don't happen exactly like they did before, then the universe collapses in a time paradox?"

"Yes. That's why the Time Stone stuck us here." Annoyed, Stephen added, "This is not new information, Tony."

Tony nodded slowly, then seemingly changed the subject. "I saw an article about your accident. Looked pretty bad."

Stephen stared levelly back at him. He swallowed. "I know the stakes. I'll suffer that again. It's for a greater cause. Nothing you can say will discourage me from letting history repeat."

"No, seriously, those photos were grim. You must have barely pulled through."

Pulling himself slightly inward in an instinctive protective response, Stephen murmured, "Well. Yeah. They actually kept telling me that in a completely useless attempt to cheer me up. It was apparently a one in a million chance that they were even able... to..."

As Stephen trailed off, Tony raised one eyebrow and got to his point, which Stephen had also clearly just recognized. "That one in a million chance kept you from having your neck snapped, or having a piece of something go straight through you, or... you get the point. Think you'd hit those same lucky odds another time?"

"There's no way to exactly duplicate my accident," Stephen realized. "You're right. I'll have to leave medicine in a different way. Something that'll give the same results without killing me if I'm three inches off."

"Exactly. The same results. That's the key thing. Both of us are lucky as hell to even be sitting here right now." Hesitating, and then sighing, Tony amended, "Except for how 'right now' is being trapped in the wrong version of our bodies, in the wrong year."

After a resigned smile, Stephen wondered, "How easy would it have been for you to die during the..." His finger spun, indicating a circle in the center of his chest.

"Way too easy." Setting his tray back on the table, Tony then folded his arms and leaned back in deep contemplation. "If the timing's off on getting away from the bomb, I bet too much shrapnel would hit me. I have no idea how that desert cave operation didn't cause a crazy infection."

"I did always wonder that," Stephen admitted. Of course he had.

"If the Ten Rings guys glanced in at the wrong second, they could have seen something and gotten too suspicious." Groaning, Tony repeated, "Suspicious. Obi arranged my attack and I had no clue it was coming. There's no way I'm going to be able to fool him for two and a half years. No way! He'll pick up on my mood, get suspicious, and pull something earlier. That new plan will probably just straight-up kill me."

"I get your point, fine. But every single change we make will cause other changes. That's the danger. For example," Stephen began, with a voice that shook before he reined it in, "I only remember a few isolated sensory moments from... that night, but they told me another car was involved. That person had to stop. If I don't crash, then they'll get where they're going without issue."

"Does that actually matter?"
"Who knows? Were they driving home from a family vacation? Or did they have some genius insight and needed to get into their lab? Either way, I bet they forgot whatever they were planning next."

"Ugh." Tony pressed his hands against his face and groaned loudly. It was enough of an outrage to expect them to do this again. It was downright offensive to hand them this challenge when it was actually, straight-up impossible to duplicate what had happened before. "Well, first off: we've gotta change some history, because we're obviously staying in contact."

"Right," Stephen immediately agreed. Even a guardian of the flow of time apparently knew that trying to do this alone would be too huge a burden to bear.

"And. Uh." Tony uncovered his face and smiled broadly. "Hi. So. There's something else."

"...What did you do?"

"You know that funny, funny joke I made about you and me to the reporters?"

Stephen's eyes narrowed. That was apparently a 'yes.'

"I kind of maybe 'confirmed' it to your boss." As Stephen tilted his head back and groaned toward the ceiling, Tony couldn't help but laugh. "It's fine! I'll give him enough money and make everything sound complicated and negotiation-heavy enough. You'll have a perfect excuse for missing as much work as you want."

"Yeah, well, tell that to the generals you're still trying to sell contracts to in a rather different social climate," Stephen retorted. After pausing to consider the cultural distance between his modern, independent energy work and 2007 military contracting, Tony sighed and rolled his eyes. There was possibly a tiny kernel of a point buried in there.

Stephen nodded. "Right. I'm not saying your hilarious joke is automatically a timeline problem, but it's something different. Anything different might be a problem. We just don't know."

"I really don't think this'll be a problem. No one cares. I'm just having some fun with how uptight you are."

"We are really off to a great start together."

"Let's look at this from a different perspective," Tony suggested. "What are the things that have to happen, one hundred percent? The Time Stone put us here and you said it'll try to protect against small paradoxes. Let's not sweat any small stuff, because I don't think we can. We just need to make sure the Stone's not faced with another critical existence failure."

Stephen mused on that for long enough that Tony followed up with, "Am I wrong? Should we be able to change the timeline on minor things so long as time history maintains its key points?"

"I do think you're right," Stephen concluded. "Because you've already changed history, despite your protests, and there don't seem to be any paradox effects."

He had? Oh. Stephen was still grumbling about the 'personal matters' line Tony had given to the reporters. "I haven't actually changed history with that. It was a joke, come on, you're the only person actually taking this seriously."

"Oh really? A.I. with the English accent," Stephen announced. "Please show us the front page of TMZ.com."
As a hologram of TMZ's front page appeared in front of them, showing Tony's face over a headline of *REPORTERS ASK, STARK TELLS?*, Tony frowned and tried to ignore Stephen's smug look. "Oh." Okay, so this joke really wasn't a hypothetical any more. He then paused. "Wait, what is that headline even supposed to be?"

"A play on Don't Ask, Don't Tell, I assume."

"One, that phrasing is tortured and their editor should be ashamed. Two, I had every kind of rumor told about me and so this should barely count as gossip." Still, Tony grumbled. While thinking about superheroes and Infinity Stones and alien invasions, he'd lost perspective on other ways the world had changed in the interim years. Like Stephen had said would happen, a bigger deal had been made of this joke than Tony had anticipated. "Okay, so I've changed a little history."

"But," Stephen allowed, "even so, the world does still look and sound fine to both of us. The timeline is not crumbling, even though my boss and TMZ's readers all think we're..." He sighed. "Intimate."

"The concept does not require that deep of a sigh. And J.A.R.V.I.S., put that screen away." Though he couldn't say what it did for Stephen's mood, a light-hearted argument like this actually helped to keep Tony distracted from everything he'd lost. He needed that distraction during his waking hours.

"Actually," Tony amended a second later, "J.A.R.V.I.S., put up a blank timeline extending into the next decade. Do not record any of this, I don't want it saved in any storage banks."

Clueing in to what he was doing, Stephen leaned forward and narrowed his eyes in thought at the years ahead of them. "Ultimately, everything leads up to Thanos' arrival." He gestured to place that on the timeline. "If we lose—really lose—then the distance between a loss in this rebooted timeline and our previous resolution would definitely be a reality-breaking paradox."

"Can we affect the date at all?"

"No. He only moves when he's got a lead on the Soul Stone. That's out of our control, so that deadline's firm."

Years rushed through Tony's head like a slideshow on fast forward. "What if we get everything except for Soul on Earth before then? We could put together a weapon strong enough to take Thanos out from the first second he steps on our home turf. A win's a win, right?" The concept grew to fill him until even his fingertips tingled with excitement. "We don't need to go through that whole nightmare," Tony murmured. "We can win from day one."

Stephen said nothing, and so Tony looked away from the timeline to study him. He looked very slightly tempted before reining himself in and saying, "We can't."

"Counterargument: actually, we could."

"Tony, I am ready to deal with all of those failed timelines again. Dissolve again. Because we know it works. And this has to work or the universe permanently breaks."

"You know, it wasn't fun for me, either. I had more pain waiting ahead that you never had to deal with." That earned a flat look in reply, and so Tony rolled his eyes and admitted, "Okay, fine. I didn't lose fourteen million times and then dissolve. But why can't we—"

"Because if that five-Stone weapon doesn't work, we'll have just gathered all of them for incredibly easy collection. Hardly any moving parts will be left in play to stage a counter-offensive." Stephen smiled in thin apology. "Sorry. Gotta..." He gestured to himself. "Dissolve." He gestured at Tony.
"Aftermath. We know it works."

Whatever. Fine. It seemed impossible that Thanos outfitted with only the Soul Stone could overcome their unified, well-planned attack, but so much else of what had happened also seemed impossible. And to acquire Reality, and likely Power, they'd probably need to work with Asgard. And then Asgard would hopefully agree to turn them both over to a bunch of humans. And then...

All right. Perhaps Tony's plan had been too ambitious, as much as he hated to admit it. This was another reason that they needed to keep working together: they'd be an important sounding board on any ideas for the timeline. This was a conversation they couldn't have with anyone else.

Nodding reluctantly, Tony turned his attention away from that looming deadline and looked toward the years before it. "All right, then let's talk about the more immediate future. Loki's going to arrive with the Mind Stone." Tony gestured to another spot on the timeline. "This sounds weird to ask about a friend, but do you think Vision actually needs to happen? Because I would love it if we could avoid Sokovia."

As soon as he asked the question, Tony sighed and answered it himself. "We need Wanda, and without Sokovia she doesn't join up with the Avengers. Ugh. Okay." He stood, preparing to interact with the timeline more directly. Stephen followed his cue and joined from the other side of the hologram. "Let's figure this out."

Every last assumption was questioned as they determined the bare-bones framework of what would keep reality functioning. Ultimately, Earth didn't specifically need Wanda... just someone who could also wield enough power to delay Thanos. That would almost certainly be Wanda, but it didn't strictly have to be.

In terms of universe-protecting requirements from the Time Stone's perspective, there were fewer failure points in history than expected. (At least, when it came to Earth-bound ones that they needed to worry about.) They had to stop Loki's invasion with the Chitauri. Collect the Mind and Space Stones from that assault. Have enough heroes on call to meet Thanos' attack. Keep the two of them alive so that Tony could meet up with Stephen, who had accidentally linked them both with the Time Stone.

If all those things happened, then reality should progress as normal and the Time Stone wouldn't rip apart the universe from an insurmountable paradox. "It's a little funny to see the two of us listed next to those gigantic battles," mused Tony, who hadn't suggested the last addition.

"We're needed to help patch over this fundamental hole in reality," Stephen countered, who had. "The Time Stone's the one that might destroy existence. If it expects us to be available, we've gotta keep it happy."

God forbid they not keep the Time Stone happy. Stephen needed a different pet in that house. "Okay. So... that's it. That's all we need to worry about. Win battles, recruit heroes, stay alive, and you eventually get your hands on the Time Stone."

As his own words sank in, Tony straightened and smiled beatifically. It seemed like all hope had left him earlier, but now it dawned on him again like clouds moving clear of the sun. It was such an easy, obvious solution that they'd overlooked. They could fix this. He could get home. To Pepper.

"No, I already thought of that," Stephen instantly said. "The timeline is already holding on by a thread and that Stone is inherently dangerous to use. I cannot start messing with the Time Stone from 2007. Reality would absolutely unravel."
Hope crashed as quickly as it came.

"Sorry," Stephen added after realizing how optimistic Tony had become.

"Yeah. It's okay." It wasn't okay. Tony apparently wasn't as far into 'acceptance' as he'd assumed, going by how much that sudden hope had lifted his spirits. It had been a high place from which to fall.

"Eventually we'll get used to this," Stephen added after a long pause, during which he apparently recognized Tony's refreshed sadness. "But it's normal to feel absolutely awful right now." His gaze flicked down. "I do."

They weren't very good at admitting weakness to the other. Doing so was a real expression of trust, and so Tony smiled very slightly and asked, "Yeah?"

"Facing this decade ahead, and knowing the act I have to put on and the people I have to hurt..." Stephen's head slowly shook. "The only way I'm going to be able to do it is because I literally have to. I'm only going to do everything because the universe breaks if I don't. Otherwise..."

"Otherwise," Tony echoed. Otherwise they might change more things, not because it made sense to do so but because they couldn't stand it a second time. Accept fewer sacrifices, avoid more pain. Or... otherwise, they might decide that they simply couldn't face this all again. And opt out. Completely. They both clearly recognized that, but would never speak of it.

"We can feel awful," Stephen added, "and still keep moving forward. We managed to do that with our conversation just now."

"It'll be a good idea to avoid arguments, then," Tony added with his faint smile. "Staying close is about the only way we'll make it through this. Especially when things get..." Long memories began to overtake him. "Really hard."

"Oh, I'm sure we'll stay close," Stephen agreed. After a perfectly timed pause, he finished, "Since we're apparently fucking."

"It was a joke!"

"So funny."

Tony chuckled faintly, then sighed and tried not to wonder what sort of explanation he'd need to give to everyone about his supposed latest conquest. Oh well. He was already in it this far. "I assume you want to stay here for a while longer so we can keep strategizing?"

"Well, we did waste today." Stephen frowned in thought, then shrugged and continued, "Whatever, your driver thinks we're a thing already, so: can he run by my place and get me some more clothes?"

"I'm glad you've stopped fighting this."

"Oh, shut up, Stark." The demand lost some of its edge by the smile Stephen couldn't hide. "Speaking of wasting today, I think I'm going to call it a night. I know we slept all day, but I have no idea what news stories I should be familiar with for mid-September, 2007. That'll take me hours."

"Good plan. That'll eventually put us to sleep," Tony agreed. "See you tomorrow."

"And the next," Stephen agreed, then began to walk off toward the guest room. "And the next, and..."
Alone in his room again, Tony propped up a hillside of pillows, climbed under the covers, and started catching up on the news. He really did have no idea of the current context, now that Stephen had pointed that out. His concussion would only give him so much leeway to be confused when people started talking about something he should reasonably know. Political developments, technological advancements, military threats: it was surreal to see all of these old things presented like breaking headlines.

While waiting for a page to load on a slow site, Tony glanced to his side.

That side of the bed was empty. Of course.

Loneliness opened up a canyon in his chest again and in this quiet room there was nothing to distract him from it. This was stupid, but he did it anyway. "Thank you for the soup," he typed to Pepper's number. "It helped."

She responded quickly, of course. She always did, for she was the very model of a personal assistant. "I'm glad to hear that. When will you be coming home?"

"I need to stay in New York for a while, after all. Not for my head." He didn't want her to worry about his health. "I'm doing a neat charity thing with that hospital."

"Of course." He could almost see her smile through the letters of the texts she sent. "And I'm sure that doctor has nothing to do with your delay."

She didn't even care.

The ache in his heart deepened as he waited for the reaction she'd display toward someone else who'd supposedly caught his eye. A reaction. Any reaction. Surely she'd type *something* else if he gave her the chance... but she never did. "Thanks, Pepper," Tony typed after an agonizingly long pause.

"Of course, Mr. Stark."

Not Tony. She'd said his name when she was worried about his concussion, but now he was once again Mr. Stark.

Yeah, this felt so much lonelier than a prison cave in Afghanistan.

Well, Tony sadly thought as he returned his attention to a discussion of warning signs in the home mortgage market. At least he had one person to talk to.
Becoming familiar with their new (old) world took more than a single night. There were countless landmines that could make them seem oddly unaware if someone mentioned something that they should reasonably know. The Air Force had just accidentally flown six nuclear warheads across the country; Tony didn't remember that after so long, but of course it'd be a hot topic of discussion at Stark Industries. Meanwhile Stephen's fantastic memory only remembered the things he'd actually paid attention to, and in this first year as an attending he'd used essentially all of his mental bandwidth for work.

(That was probably why he couldn't remember that the top-selling album was currently the soundtrack to High School Musical 2. Horrifying.)

"Hey," Tony said on the evening of their first full day of studying. He'd retreated to the kitchen to get himself a drink, but instead returned carrying a white cardboard box. "So, do you actually want any of these, or should I just throw them out?"

As the top of the box opened to reveal an arrangement of chocolate-covered strawberries, Stephen stared blankly until he remembered that Happy had been tasked with ordering it on that first night. "You know... why not." After selecting one, he inspected its enormous size and said, "I can't believe your driver actually ordered the stupid strawberry plate." It was delicious, though.

Tony selected a strawberry of his own and bit down. "Mmmph. Good." Once his first bite was swallowed, he added, "There's also a bottle of champagne in there."

"As in: alcohol." Even saying the word threatened to give Stephen another crashing headache. All of that distaste came through in his voice.

"Yeah, that was pretty much my reaction," Tony drawled, set down the box, and returned to the kitchen to retrieve some non-alcoholic drinks.

By the end of their second study day they worked their way through the entire strawberry platter. They were occasional interruptions between room service orders, which were also delicious. If the two of them were trapped in temporal hell, they might as well appreciate what pleasures they could.

"You're seriously all right with committing this much to the hospital?" Stephen wondered the day after that as he looked at Tony's detailed donation proposal. They'd hammered its framework out over breakfast and worked from there. With each new idea the donation total had swelled, and it had been a long day.

"You tell me," Tony countered. "Do you think this'd change the timeline too much?"

"I can't imagine how it would impact any of the required events," Stephen murmured, though he did still try to picture how each new dollar might go horribly wrong. But really, the only failure state that this donation could introduce would be improved surgical capabilities somehow keeping him in medicine. Although he could still walk away in perfect health, he doubted he'd be accepted into Kamar-Taj—and be able to access the Time Stone—without a convincing story. He'd just have to make sure a fix wasn't remotely possible, no matter how advanced Metro's nerve reattachment procedures became.

He looked up. "I could cut off a hand," Stephen realized.

Tony blinked, then blinked again when he realized Stephen was serious. "Gonna veto that plan,
Luke Skywalker. This is not part of my donation deal."

"It's perfect! Simple, easy to implement, doesn't put the rest of my body at risk, and I've seen someone at Kamar-Taj overcome that exact challenge. But it'd definitely end a surgical career."

"You are not cutting off your hand," Tony demanded and snatched back his donation breakdown.

"Fine," Stephen grumbled and extended his hand to recover the paper. (He still thought it was a good idea.) Though Tony remained suspicious, he returned the notes and Stephen was able to resume inspecting their writeup. From the Stark Industries coffers, Tony was donating a multi-room surgical suite that would hold the best robots currently on the market. From his own accounts, he was establishing a significant research endowment—overseen by Stephen—to further study on the development and use of medical technology. Stark Industries would also stay involved in that, and would offer further opportunities in many areas.

"Are you going to get any pushback on this?" Stephen wondered after looking back up. "From Stane?" So far 2007 had brought few bumps, and those were mostly related to hangovers and celebrity gossip. But that was because they'd hidden safely in a condo with only a subservient A.I. for company. Things would soon change.

"Probably," Tony admitted. "Because the two of us managed to land in the middle of a rapidly cratering economy. So Obadiah won't want to take financial risks and there's always safe money in war."

"And you're going to counter that argument with..."

"I'm thinking 'corporate diversification.' You can only sell so many missiles, but getting into the medical side of things would also let us start handling logistical concerns." Seeing Stephen's hesitation, Tony rolled his eyes and clarified, "It's just my cover story, we're not gonna use your research to kill anyone." His voice dropped to a low, mocking mutter. "Not even the bad guys."

Stephen ignored that. "Well, I'll trust you to pull everything off in California." It was already the 19th and Tony's original plans apparently had him returning to Los Angeles ten days ago. He'd already surprised his people by staying for the party that landed him in the hospital, and of course his injury and their planning had pushed that further back. Soon any additional delay would become a genuine continuity problem. As little as they wanted to return to their current lives, they needed to. Now.

Sighing, Tony looked out at Central Park. This penthouse was fantastically spacious, but had generic, blocky architecture under its neutral colors. Surely he couldn't be too attached to the rather soulless condo itself... but the city beyond its windows appeared to be a different story. The idea of leaving for Pacific Time visibly pained him. "California's gonna be hard."

"Yeah?"

"I'll be spending every day playing nice with a guy who's planning to kill me." That wasn't the true depth of what pain Stephen had heard in Tony's voice, and he confirmed that next. "Plus, my wife thinks it's her job to help get me laid. With other people. And she doesn't even care." Tony's whole body sagged like a broken branch. "But if I don't act like that, my behavior would just make Obi pay more attention to me. He'd think I was finally getting serious and focused in ways he doesn't want. No matter what explanation I give him, even our donation might make Obi wonder a little... if..."

After a long pause, Tony looked back up.

"What?" Stephen asked with sudden suspicion.
"I have an idea," Tony said and sat down on the edge of the coffee table, so close that their legs nearly touched.

"Uh huh," Stephen replied warily.

"I don't want to sleep with randoms any more. That's not who I am now, but no one would ever believe that in 2007. And the more I think about it, the more I might need to be a little less clever about this 'corporate diversification.' Otherwise, Obi'll clue in that I'm actually paying attention to things. So," Tony said with an increasingly broad smile, and leaned in. "I'll tell Obi that I'm doing this for our stock prices, but I'll obviously mean that I'm doing this medical donation to keep you happy." He punctuated the last 'you' by poking Stephen just under his collarbone.

Stephen stared back at him in blank horror. "You can't mean..."

"One," Tony began, and ticked points off on his fingers. "I'm throwing funds away on a research endowment instead of jewelry, but it's still just me wasting money on someone. Obi'll never think twice about that kind of move from me. Two: I really can't make myself bed randoms any more. So I've gotta have an excuse for that."

"Oh my God," Stephen sighed, and lowered his head into his hands as he realized that Tony was serious.

"Three: we need a reason to be in contact all of the time. All of the time, even while I'm in California, and you managing my research endowment is not gonna cover enough contact hours. But it would," Tony brightly concluded, "if the world thinks we're full-on dating."

"Oh, no. You actually said it."

"Then tell me what I'm wrong about." Tony cleared his throat. "Unless you also want a bunch of failed romances where you're lying through your teeth the entire time? About your entire existence?" He waited. "Sound fun?" Again, he waited. "Because if I am being totally honest, it sounds very un-fun to me."

Yet again, Tony waited for any response from Stephen. When he didn't get one, he continued, "This plan will keep us from spending time with other people who might catch on to something. We'll always have an excuse to talk whenever there's a problem. That'll make it way easier for us to hit the critical junctions in reality. And that makes it seem like a very easy decision." He shrugged.

"I cannot believe," Stephen said mournfully, "that the entire planet is going to think I'm with you." It was a justifiable plan. It'd help them. It'd help the universe. Every single point that Tony had made was fair. And he hated it.

Tony let out a crow of victory. "Baby, I'm gonna treat you so good."

"Ugh, stop talking."

"Promise me you'll stop living in your office. After all..." Tony clasped Stephen's shoulder and put on a look of deep concern. "I care about you." Stephen's affected, outraged eyeroll earned a peal of laughter from Tony and he added, "I'll have a great excuse to keep coming back to New York. All we'll have to do is put on a little show when I do. We'll talk about the research progress, eat dinner somewhere where the tabloid photographers can get a fresh shot, I buy you something nice—"

This was rapidly becoming intolerable. "I don't need your money. Very, very soon I'm going to be earning over a million per year."
Tony's eyes crinkled from his broadening smile. "A million. With an M. That's so cute."

"Oh, shut up." Stephen folded his arms and leaned back against the couch. "2016 arrives. I'm cutting off my hand and you can't stop me. Is this the final proposal? I'll take it in tomorrow. To keep history smooth I really need to get back to work."

"We will talk about your hands," Tony harrumphed. "But yeah. You can tell Chuck that it's my official commitment, assuming he wants it." His stance slumped again as humor trickled away. "If you're going back in tomorrow, then... I guess I'll fly back out west. I'll see Obi." His gaze dropped to his feet. "And Pepper."

Gentle sympathy re-entered Stephen, like when Tony had talked about his and Pepper's plan for a child. "Will you be able to reach me with a totally secure line?"

Tony hesitated. "Give me your phone, then yes." After Stephen did, Tony began fiddling with it. "Good. Call me whenever you need to and I'll do the same. This is going to be so much harder with a continent between us, but we can make it through your California years. Eventually, re-living our lives will just become old habit." Stephen paused. "Except for how TMZ will now be discussing me on a regular basis. Why did I agree to this?"

The next day at work, he got his answer: because everyone had assumed it, anyway.

Though he was distracted by the departure of the only other person who knew the truth, Stephen tried to focus on the building around him. There was every unpleasant aspect of working in a major metropolitan hospital to concern himself with: desperate family members, security alerts, biohazard spills. Whenever he tried to concentrate on Metro, though, Tony Stark came right back to the forefront of his mind.

Because no one would stop asking about him.

Nurses. Other surgeons. Lab technicians. None asked Stephen about the media rumors directly, but they all tried to casually verify whether Tony Stark had really left against the hospital's recommendation and with Stephen. It wasn't like he could deny either of those facts, but their knowing looks at each confirmation he gave became rapidly irritating.

"Strange," said Gurdeep Bhatt when Stephen veered near the emergency room. "After you harangued me about not diagnosing a patient with a severe enough head injury for your taste, I would not expect you to soon privately leave with that patient. You are full of surprises." A bland smile accompanied the last bit.

"Yes, I am full of surprises," Stephen agreed after a considering pause. "Now if you'll excuse me, I have a meeting with Findlay in ten minutes. I've secured an exceedingly large donation for this hospital."

"Ah." A knowing, judgmental look entered Gurdeep's eyes. "I am sure you have." Gurdeep was actually a very nice man, going by Stephen's memories. With his white hair and broad smile, he was like the Santa Claus of the ER. He got along with essentially everyone... except for Stephen himself. How harshly had Stephen torn into him during that argument he'd hiccuped into? Living like this again wouldn't be fun.

Normally he'd hated this long, quiet elevator ride up to the administrative offices; it always felt like wasted time not spent on patients or research. Now, he was just glad to be away from all of those gossiping co-workers and the occasional curious patient. "I'm hearing very good things about your
donation efforts with Stark," said Charles Findlay when Stephen reached his spacious corner office and its expansive view of Midtown. "I'm so pleased that you were proactive about approaching him."

Hesitating, Stephen waited to see if Charles really meant that. Charles was well into his sixties and seemed to live his entire life in a three-piece suit, and so he'd been expecting to hear at least some judgment about a supposed relationship with a patient. A male patient, no less, in 2007. But no, Charles only seemed to care about the money. In this one moment, Stephen was grateful for that profit-driven Harvard MBA that seemed to guide all of their CEO's decisions. "Here's what we've worked out," he said after that pause and handed over the writeup. "But there's still flexibility for future expansion."

As Charles read through it, he grew genuinely speechless. The skin on his bald head flushed progressively more pink and his eyes widened with each line. Eventually, he concluded, "Assuming we actually secure all of these funds, this will be the largest charitable donation in Metro's history. I see that he's put you down as the coordinator for the research endowment. Are you fine with that role?"

"I'll need assistants," Stephen instantly said. He refused to be trapped in grant allocation paperwork hell. "But yes, us getting that endowment is contingent on Tony being able to contact me directly."

"Say no more. Determine how many assistants you need and it'll be handled." Charles re-read the writeup, his eyes flashing in delight, and then looked back up with a broad smile. "I knew you were a good hire, Stephen. You've got that real hunger. This is how careers are made."

"This is just extra credit," Stephen said. (For this, he barely had to put on an act of his old self.) "I'll make my career in the operating room."

Charles chuckled. "I see why you want assistants to take care of the red tape for you. Well, good. Let me emphasize how pleased I am with your accomplishment, and thank you for the good work you've done for the hospital. I won't keep you. And... Stephen." He looked suddenly 50 years younger. "When Mr. Stark comes by again, could you introduce me?"

Oh, Stephen had just turned himself into such a teacher's pet. "Of course," Stephen agreed, with a hidden surge of relief that his boss hadn't cared about rumors. Now he could get back into the elevator, return to his office, and think about his real job.

His real job, Stephen thought again halfway to his office, and stopped for a few stunned seconds. A nurse had to dodge around him. He'd been so concerned about making the future happen properly that he hadn't focused on what that future would be.

"I'm going to operate," Stephen murmured to himself. "I'm going to go operate." Unable to control his sudden glee, he sped his pace to see what was on today's docket.

Okay. Right. He'd agreed to work on a woman with a tumor presenting on the temporal horn of the lateral ventricle. Since he hadn't called in yesterday to extend his absence, she was in the hospital right now, in the last hours of her fasting. In roughly three hours she would be wheeled into the operating room, and the anesthesiologist would put her under.

"I'd better review her file, then," Stephen said with increasing delight and got to work. As he did, he kept glancing at his hands and smiling like a fool over how still they were.

Three hours later, he was glad for the surgical mask he needed to wear. It wouldn't do for everyone to see him grinning down at the anesthetized patient whose shaved skull he was about to cut open.
As he lifted the bone saw and tested its familiar metallic scream, Stephen noticed two residents watching him and realized they expected an explanation of what he intended. He'd forgotten this part; after his fame grew great enough, Stephen had stopped bothering himself with teaching. "I will now perform a craniotomy," he began and laid out the specific coordinates. "The goal is to form an opening large enough to serve the endoscopic arm, and no larger."

"You're taking an endoscopic approach?" asked one of the residents in clear surprise. (Mariam, he believed. Satisfactory performance, as he recalled, but nothing special.) "It seemed like anterior temporal lobectomy was indicated for this patient."

Anterior temporal lobectomy? Simply removing part of the temporal lobe? "That's barbaric," Stephen bit off, "and we're not butchers."

Mariam looked appropriately cowed over her surgical mask.

"We just hadn't heard of it being common to approach endoscopically in a situation like this," cut in the other resident, Priya. She was a better fit as a researcher than a surgeon; she didn't have the courage to make the tough calls on an opened patient. Bravery couldn't be taught and no one became a legendary doctor by playing it safe.

Still, he remembered that Priya was incredibly dutiful about keeping up on all of the latest research. Her surprise at this approach made Stephen review his mental files more closely. Now he was glad again for his surgical mask, because it hid his reaction when he realized he'd automatically adjusted his planned approach based on a technique that wouldn't be published until 2014. Oops. "Then perhaps you should learn something beyond a journal article today," Stephen said with all the arrogance he could muster, and got to work.

His hands followed every last order. The endoscopic arm slid through her brain with precision he'd thought forever taken from him. In what felt like a bare handful of minutes to his overwhelmed spirit, Stephen neatly dissected the tumor, stitched the damage, and stepped back from his patient. "Dr. Schweitzer," he said in a rigidly controlled voice. "Affix the flap into place. Dr. Gairola, assist her."

As the two residents leapt into action to replace and repair the patient's skull flap, Stephen let himself shakily exhale. His vision blurred until he blinked twice, hard. If not for the knowledge that he couldn't wipe his face with his bloody gloves, actual tears might have snuck through.

His mystical work was more important than surgery. He saved more people than a doctor ever could, against foes far more deadly than any scalpel could fight. Still... God, he'd missed this.

"What medication is indicated for post-surgical follow-up?" he asked once the two residents had completed their assigned task. By then his voice had steadied.

Though the two other doctors snapped to attention, the nurses exchanged a surprised glance. Apparently, they weren't used to Stephen involving his residents any more than he absolutely had to. "Levetiracetam is recommended," Priya immediately said. "Phenytoin has a higher risk of drug interactions."

"I hadn't heard that," Mariam said.

"You're right," Stephen confirmed, even though he knew the specific papers proving that wouldn't start arriving for years. At this point, doctors would still be running on their gut when it came to choosing one prescription or the other. "You might just have better instincts than I thought. Keep that up." A bashful mixture of pride filled Priya as renewed surprise came from the nurses; they especially weren't used to Stephen actually complimenting the residents.
But why wouldn't he? Stephen was in a wonderful mood and now he appreciated what a gift this life was. Yes, he had to suffer through a lot ahead... once nearly a decade had passed. Until that fateful day arrived, though, he had so many amazing surgeries ahead of him.

"I operated," he enthused into his phone an hour later in the privacy of his office. "I cut someone open, removed the tumor, all of it. It was like being able to breathe again. I know you don't care about this but there's no one else I can tell, so—"

"So I will be excited for you," Tony obligingly replied.

"God, I love using a craniotome," Stephen continued, referencing the tool that opened up a patient's skull for his procedures. "There is absolutely nothing like that very first moment of seeing a living, glistening brain and knowing that you are the only one who's able to save it. Nothing in the world."

"I will take your word for that," Tony replied, bemused.

"I accidentally used an approach that's too modern, but it's fine."

Tony's tone sobered. "You're sure that's fine? What if you save someone you're not supposed to?"

"Nothing to worry about there," Stephen snorted as he recalled his prized perfect record. He'd remember any potential patient's scans when presented with them, and thus who he'd agreed to see, and every single one of those people would live. That slight check on his spirits did help to calm him down, though, and he realized he should check how Tony's re-entry into 2007 was progressing. "So how was your day?"

"Well," Tony began.

The picture he painted was less spectacular than Stephen's. After they'd decided the previous evening that he'd return to Los Angeles, that decision had been passed on. When Happy pulled Tony's car onto the tarmac of a private airport in New Jersey, a Stark Industries private jet had been waiting for him. And Pepper Potts was inside it.

For all the hours it took to cross the U.S., Happy tried to grill him about Stephen, Tony's injury and who'd caused it, and anything else Happy could potentially worry about. Pepper tried to hide her surprise over Tony getting visibly involved with a man, but also found it almost... sweet that he'd fallen hard and fast enough to want to start this research endowment to keep Stephen happy. "But other than that," Tony miserably added, "she just doesn't care."

Sympathy could only do so much, and there was a more pressing concern. After some appropriately apologetic noises for Pepper's reaction, Stephen asked, "And Stane? How'd he take everything?"

"As expected, he thinks my idea is full of shit. His buyers probably don't want medical supplies as much as bombs," Tony grumbled. "But I explained that I'll still do weapons development and he calmed down. You may get a call from him to check you out, but he's probably just going to hire a P.I. to make sure that you're not scamming us."

Stephen frowned. "Well, that's concerning. How do I handle this?"

"Act like a surgeon spectacular enough to justify my huge investment."

Like that needed actual effort. "Already done."

"Of course that's your answer, I'm not sure why I bothered saying anything." Tony paused, then amended, "Oh, and don't even go out to dinner with anyone. A P.I. would catch you doing that and
Obi would think that you're just playing me for my bank account."

"You know I'd never cheat on you," Stephen said dryly.

Tony's smirk came through in his voice. "Wouldn't expect anything different, babe. But FYI, expect your office to be bugged pretty soon, so only drop the act inside your home. After a couple of months he'll see what he needs to. Obi'll be convinced and he'll call off the investigation."

"I'm not going to lie," Stephen admitted after looking around his office, which he'd never viewed as anything but a sanctuary. "The picture you've painted of this man is intimidating."

"I've painted the right picture, then."

Frowning, Stephen rose from his desk and walked over to the window. Late-day sun slanted through Midtown, but shadows were rapidly deepening. "Are you going to be all right?"

"I'm good. I mean, I'm miserable every single time I see Pepper and I think Happy's about to blow a fuse, but I'm good."

"Tony. Seriously. You have me worried about Stane. And if I can remind you, there's not a single piece of Iron Man tech yet in existence. You don't have any way to defend against him if he makes a move." The steady hands that Stephen had been so thrilled about an hour earlier now flexed in concern around his phone. Emphatically, he repeated, "Are you going to be all right?"

There was a long pause. "Don't give him any reason to suspect that you're not legit."

"I won't," Stephen promised.

"And if he ever seems to think that I'm being too serious, I'll blow off my work and fly back to New York."

"Any time I'm not supposed to be opening a patient, we can be putting on a show to convince Stane's investigator." At Tony's silence, Stephen rolled his eyes and added, "We are still trying to minimize disruptions to history. I need to save the same people I saved before."

"No, no, I wasn't surprised at you saying you need to do your operations, even if I show up. I'm just amazed that you decided to go along with the whole act, otherwise."

"Well." Stephen's reflection was ghostly against the sunlight outside. He could barely see it smile. "Both of us need to stay alive, remember. That is one of the critical requirements for the universe to not break."

"Right. Good reason." Tony paused. "So when I start buying you expensive stuff for our 'dates,' would it be in poor taste to get you a car?"

Stephen rolled his eyes. "Incredibly poor taste, yes." Besides, he'd taken a cab to Metro that morning, so he didn't yet know how it'd feel to sit behind the wheel again. Probably not great.

"Hmm. Figured. I'll find something else, then." Another smirk came through Tony's voice. "Like a really nice bottle of wine."

Stephen laughed. "Don't you dare."

Tony laughed, too. He sounded like he was genuinely smiling when he said, "I know this all is... terrible, but it really is great that you get to operate again."
"Thanks." Stephen looked around his office, which still appeared as a temporary home during the height of his career obsession, and added, "Whenever you need to get away from L.A., head on out." He'd find time away from the hospital when needed.

"You are my official Obi safety net, got it."

"For physical concerns," Stephen confirmed, but also added, "or other ones."

Realizing that Stephen was also offering to be a distraction from the worst of the emotional pain of California, Tony paused before adding, "Thanks."

Pepper wasn't Stephen's fault... but if not for his decision about an anchor moment, she and Tony would be imagining themselves as parents. Tony had let that blame slip away quickly, all things considered. In return, Stephen felt obligated to at least try to make up for inadvertently ruining their happy marriage. "Of course."

"I should go. Keep on the lookout for an investigator, but don't look like you're on the lookout."

"Right."

"And have fun slicing up more brains."

"Oh, I will."

Tony snorted. "Weirdo."

"Rude. This is why I keep saying we need a relationship counselor."

Laughing, Tony hung up. They could do this, Stephen decided, and returned to his desk. He ignored the plentiful emails with gossipy questions and instead focused on the latest potential cases that their assistant had forwarded. It was time to select his next round of patients.

Because, at least for a while, he was going to operate.
"Tony!" said Obadiah with a jovial tone and jogged down the stairs into his Malibu basement workshop. "I'm in the mood to hear something good about those mini-rockets." His broad grin looked like it belonged to a totally trustworthy man. His voice sounded like a dear family friend.

Even so, it had been more than three weeks back in Los Angeles and Tony still hadn't overcome his kneejerk flinch every time he saw the man who would arrange his attempted murder. He'd told J.A.R.V.I.S. to quietly announce Obadiah's entrances. Whenever one came he buried his face in a project until he got himself under control. So, like usual, Tony made a show of finishing what he was working on before looking up. "Dunno, Obi. There's nothing too exciting about your mini-rockets idea."

"Tony."

"I mean, they make such a little 'boom.'"

"Tony."

"Full-sized rockets, now, they're more fun. Louder. And they cost a lot more. Which our accountants really like."

"Tony," Obadiah said and clapped him on the shoulder. It was difficult not to throw off his hand. "There is a growing market for guerilla ballistics—" Like my terrorist buyers, he didn't add. "—And we want to capture that segment before someone else does. We've got a good line-up of full-sized missiles. We need these individual ones for now."

"And since they're not exciting and make such a small boom," Tony said with a bright smile and sick heart, "it was so boring to stabilize their wimpy little vectors. You've gotta hand me a bigger challenge next time."

After studying him for a few seconds to confirm that he'd truly made the fix, Obadiah chuckled and squeezed Tony's shoulder. "You just love to torture me, don't you?"

Tony's smile grew as broad as Obadiah's. "Think there's a little from both ends, there."

Obadiah clucked his tongue. "I'm offended. Truly. That description doesn't sound like someone who's looking out for you." He got the blank look he was clearly aiming for, and so Obadiah bent down, retrieved a can of Diet Coke from the workshop mini-fridge, and explained, "What I mean is that I don't want you to be taken advantage of. We need to talk about that... person."

Schooling his expression to absolute neutrality, Tony leaned down and retrieved a drink of his own. "That person?" Counsel agreed that he can talk tech to Rhodey for up to fifteen minutes without needing to send the Air Force a consulting invoice. I've held to that. I mean, obviously not when we were at that Kings game, but—"

"You're always a chatterbox," Obadiah snorted.

"—But it was a heartbreaker anyway, and so we really had to distract ourselves."

"Are you gonna let me finish? Hmm? Good." Obadiah leaned against the nearest counter, studied Tony, and took a deliberate sip of his Coke before continuing. "So. A doctor, huh?"
Tony leaned back, too, and also made a show of opening his Coke can. "Yep, after I landed in the hospital. It's a pretty classic meet cute. I think they call it Florence Nightingale syndrome."

"I've heard of that," Obadiah dryly said. "A nurse takes care of her patient and feelings eventually develop. That seems a little different from you driving off with a doctor who wasn't even in charge of your case. After an hour."

Tony shrugged. "I always go after what I want. You know that."

"I have seen that," Obadiah agreed with a nod. "I've seen it with many, many women." He hit the last word hard.

"Why, Obadiah," Tony said and smiled blandly. "Are you not living up to our corporate diversity policy?"

Chuckling, Obadiah shook his head and made a show of sprawling even more comfortably against the counter. "If you were fine with all this, you wouldn't be acting so squirrelly when I'm just trying to talk to you. Come on, level with me. This came out of nowhere."

"Not nowhere," Tony countered. His infamous playboy exploits had mostly involved women, but not all of them. "There are embarrassing photos on some MySpace accounts, I'm pretty sure. Alcohol was involved. I'm lucky the press hasn't found them."

"He came out of nowhere," Obadiah repeated. "And then you signed a plan for giving tens of millions to his hospital, right after you suffered a head injury." His gaze sharpened, though his suspicion clearly wasn't directed at Tony. "With him in control of the accounts. And maybe you pulled some drunken moves with a guy in Ibiza once, that's your business, but you don't date men. None of this adds up."

Tony shrugged again. "Sometimes, you just click."

"If I realized that an impulsive, disoriented billionaire with a concussion was my patient, I could probably find a way to 'click,' too."

"You don't trust Stephen." Fighting back any strain in his voice was challenging. It was important for Tony to not seem worried about what actions Obadiah might take. Hopefully he could manage that; they were supposedly friends.

Obadiah didn't hesitate to shake his head. "No, I don't trust him."

By now Stephen's office was bugged. He hadn't simply guessed that, but had noticed that a potential patient had touched things around his office in a show of supposed nervousness. After that patient left, Stephen carefully inspected his path and found a tiny audio device hidden inside a three-ring binder. Tony had deleted that warning text as soon as he'd read it, and for a week and a half they'd been sure to put on a show for Obi's investigator.

"He's mercenary," Obadiah continued. "I've heard rumors that he'll turn down a patient who he could fit right into his schedule, but wouldn't be a big surgery." Rumors, huh? Obadiah had surely heard that straight from Stephen talking to his receptionist.

Tony forced down most of his concern before he gave the game away, though he did allow himself to hold on to a little. That remaining tension made him sound defensive for Stephen's sake. "For where he is, he's years ahead of schedule. Normally a M.D./Ph.D. takes six years; he did it in four. Neuro residency can be eight years. He needed six."
"And graduated summa cum laude with his B.A. in three," Obadiah agreed with his same sharp smile. "I can find out things too, y'know. But Tony... you telling me about how hard he goes after something he wants isn't putting my mind at ease about that money you signed over."

"He wants to be changing the world, and knew that hanging around school on other people's schedules wasn't going to make that happen." Tony took a swig of his Coke, raised one eyebrow, and asked with a gesture toward himself, "Remind you of anyone?"

Obadiah pursed his lips and said nothing.

"So yeah, he'll focus on the surgeries that no one else can do. I'm sure any halfway decent doctor could operate on that patient he said 'no' to. And like I said, Obadiah, he and I just clicked. He..." Tony exhaled and let himself tell a conveniently masked truth. It'd been nearly a lonely month by now and he didn't know how much longer he could stand being isolated in Los Angeles. "He feels like the only person in the whole world who understands what it's like to live my life."

That explanation landed differently in Obadiah's ears, of course, and he rolled his eyes at what sounded like puppy love instead of protecting the universe. But then he blinked. His shoulders straightened, his chin raised, and his gaze shifted to the right.

As Tony realized that Obadiah was looking at someone, he turned to see Pepper standing on the other side of the glass wall. A stack of paperwork was clutched to her chest. Apparently she'd been waiting for a break in their conversation, and so he gestured her in.

"Wow," Pepper said as soon as she stepped into his workshop.

"Wow?" Tony repeated, and swallowed. He still felt a slight 'wow' every time he saw her. Although Pepper had aged beautifully, he hadn't processed that they'd been through this many years together until he saw her 2007 face. He was growing used to the sight, though. Her professional distance hurt a tiny bit less with each passing day.

Eventually, he'd get used to their old dynamic again. The harsh wound of everything he'd lost would scar over.

Eventually.

"Wow," Pepper confirmed, oblivious to his pain. She nodded at Obi. "Wow."

"Wow?" Obadiah frowned in good-natured confusion at Tony, who could only shrug at whatever had set Pepper into a feedback loop.

"I have never heard you talk about someone like that," Pepper then explained. "Ever."

Tony couldn't hold back a painfully hard swallow. He remembered how beautiful Pepper had looked in her wedding gown and the way she'd laughed when he placed one tiny smear of cake frosting on her nose. On their honeymoon yacht, sunset turned her hair crimson and moonlight painted it platinum. With each new minute he'd known he was the luckiest man in the world.

Then all those memories of Pepper ripped apart into an infinite black void. In his mind, the cracks that had shattered the Sanctum ran across her face. That was what would happen if he ruined the timeline. As much as these five feet (that felt like light years) between them pained Tony, he had to keep up his act. "Yeah. I'm not one to commit," he agreed after his awkward pause.

Fortunately, neither of them appeared to pick up on the hidden regret in his voice. "Until now, apparently," Pepper countered. Amazed, she turned to Obadiah. "Have you ever heard him talk
about someone like this? Seriously, I never have."

"I have not," Obadiah slowly answered after studying Tony. "You've seen our boy in these sorts of situations a lot more than I have, Pepper. What's your big take on things now?"

"In my opinion?" Pepper shrugged and extended the paperwork she'd brought to Obadiah, who signed it. "Legitimately smitten. Which I always thought was kind of a cute word."

"Well. It sounds like 'kittens,'" Tony offered (and deflected). He loved it when his work was discussed, but his emotions shouldn't be other people's gossip.

"That is probably why it's cute, yes," Pepper agreed. "But you really are: you're smitten. You're always on the phone with him, you keep checking the weather forecast for New York, you're even learning about all sorts of medical tech in between working on your mini-rockets." She handed over another stack of paperwork, which he saw were the requested specs for surgical robots. "I've never seen you keep thinking about one person for this long."

Tony didn't argue, but he did turn his unsteady expression away from Pepper. It still felt like he was cheating on her. Yeah, well, you try getting locked into a time paradox with only one other person in the universe for honest company. It was no wonder he'd instinctively kept thinking about Stephen. Not only did both of them need to stay alive to keep the universe functioning, but... it was lonely on his own.

Frowning, Obadiah looked between the two of them. Then he sighed. "You're right, Pepper. You always are. Now that you point all of that out, he's not just a little distracted. He's actually acting...

Tony cleared his throat. "Like I'm standing right here in the room? Listening to the two of you?"

"We're flying out to New York," Obadiah abruptly announced.

Eyes wide, Tony repeated, "We?" Ice slid down his spine.

"We. I need to meet with Nate and Vic Humphrey about the fallout of your accident. Now that I've heard Pepper's input, there's no way that I'm not also going to meet your guy when I head back East. We'll fly into New York. After your doctor and I have a little chat, then I'll head down to Arlington."

Stephen was already on Obadiah's radar. Tony was desperate to not let him get a cleaner view of his target. Stane becoming dangerously protective of the Stark funds pledged to the hospital could literally destroy the universe. "For the last time, Obi, he's not just trying to get my money."

"Tony," Obadiah said, and once again sounded like a dear family friend. "Forget the money. I've known you since you were little. If Pepper says you're seriously smitten for the first time ever, I want to see if this person is good enough for you. Howard'd do the same if he were here. He'd expect me to fill his shoes."

Oh, what a load of absolute horseshit. Obadiah was just using this as an excuse to intimidate Stephen and clarify whatever his investigator had passed along. Making his arguments about why Tony should cancel the donation would surely follow. But how could Tony call him on any of that? So far as 2007 Tony Stark knew, there was zero reason to distrust Obadiah Stane. "Well," Tony said after a long pause. "So long as you're treating this like it's serious."

"I trust that you're serious, sure," Obadiah promised. "And since you are, I want to know that he feels the same way."

Flying out late tonight, Tony quickly texted on his secure line once he was alone in his workshop.
Obadiah’s coming to meet you. Couldn’t shake him. As soon as he saw that the texts had been read, he deleted them. Sweat slicked his upper lip.

They left late for an overnight journey. The sprawling lights of Los Angeles took forever to fade, especially in this smaller, slower plane, but Tony liked seeing the rigid lines of streets and houses. The eventual dark of the desert below only emphasized how alone he was in this jet.

Though it was equipped with a bed at its tail, sleep still fought Tony there. Obadiah had thought nothing of arranging for Tony's murder. Had he done that with other people? They were in the business of death, after all, and Obi wouldn't hesitate to remove obstacles from his life by force.

When it became clear that he couldn't fall asleep, Tony lifted his cell phone and stared at it in the darkness. A decade advanced through his mind. If Obadiah Stane was able to cause him so much stress, then how was he going to deal with Loki? Ultron? Thanos had been a razor-edge of success already; was it too much to wrangle a second win from him? Knowing what was coming meant anticipating its arrival. It might leave him better prepared to fight, but was far more stressful than being taken unaware.

I'm alone, now, he eventually started typing. They're convinced I'm legit into you but Obi doesn't buy your motives. He thinks you're taking advantage of my concussion.

He waited long enough that his arms began to ache from holding the phone above his head. Unwilling to just keep staring at an unresponsive screen, Tony kept typing. Seriously getting a bad vibe off him. He cares about the donation money more than he's letting on.

Still nothing. Grumbling, Tony glanced at the time: it was coming up on 3 a.m. in New York. That early hour meant nothing, though. He'd learned from the odd hours of Stephen's texts that his working schedule was more unpredictable than anything Tony Stark had ever done, and that was quite a feat. "Come on," he muttered and let his arm fall to his side. He didn't want to delete the texts until Stephen had read them and so he couldn't fall asleep until that happened.

His phone buzzed just after they'd entered Nebraska. "If he's coming, let me show him around the hospital," Tony whispered as he read the screen. "Be at my office by seven. We'll grab lunch afterward. Somewhere nice."

He doesn't trust you, Tony typed emphatically. His lips thinned to a line. He apparently hadn't communicated the precarious situation. And you know that he's dangerous? Right???

I do know that. Yes.

He thinks I care about you, but that you just care about my money. Tony's thumb felt like it was stabbing the screen. Showing off your hospital and going out to fancy lunch = not helping.

Calm down. I'll set his mind at ease.

You are not good with people! At all!!!

Get some sleep, Tony. That was it. Though Tony tried to send more follow-ups, Stephen never read them. After another half-hour Tony gave up and deleted everything, and got what shallow sleep he could before waking from the jolt of landing in New Jersey.

Just to twist the knife, Obadiah had his own driver meet them at the airport. He likely blamed Happy for not chasing Stephen off in the first place, and so had suggested that he'd handle security with his own team before taking them along to Virginia. That only intensified the feeling of being trapped in an isolated, broken universe. Tony's pulse filled his ears and the city outside their windows passed in
unnatural silence.

Maybe Obadiah wouldn't kill Stephen. As much as Stephen hated the tabloid attention they'd gotten, it did put him on the gossip radar. His sudden death wouldn't pass unnoticed and Obadiah wanted to stay comfortably at the head of Stark Industries. To protect the company's money, Obadiah might just... slander Stephen, wreck his good name, run him out of medicine, and indirectly kill every single patient that Stephen was supposed to save for the next eight or so years.

This was absurd. Tony needed to stop worrying, because by this point he was coming up with parodies of worst-case scenarios. Anxiety held his reins right now and it was steering him wrong. 'Catastrophizing,' someone had called it. He'd gotten better about breaking out of panic spirals since the post-nuke years, but old habits occasionally resurfaced.

Obadiah didn't take Tony seriously, and so he probably wouldn't think half as hard about this situation as Tony was. It'd be years until Obadiah tried to kill Tony. 2007 Obadiah Stane wasn't going to target Stephen like he'd nearly wiped Tony off the map. Right?

Still, too much saliva kept flooding Tony's mouth. He was probably swallowing frequently enough to notice. Locked inside this quiet car with a man he hated, it was easy to imagine a bullet ripping through Stephen from a 'random mugger.' The spray of blood that erupted from him darkened and fragmented; the universe broke a second later. Yeah, Tony admitted as the driver dropped them off at the hospital. With the stakes as high as they were, he was trapped in an anxiety spiral and then some.

"You don't look like someone about to meet someone he's smitten with," Obadiah pointed out during the long elevator ride.

Tony smiled abruptly. "Just didn't sleep great. Guess I was too excited. I've been wanted to come back to New York ever since I left."

"Mmmhmm."

Oh, yeah. Tony was definitely dancing along the razor edge of an anxiety attack and it was not a sensation that he'd missed. Damnit, he should have pledged less money to the hospital. And he definitely should have only pledged his private funds. Including a corporate gift had ruffled Obadiah's feathers. It had seemed so important at the time to not give Stephen's boss any reason to doubt them, but the big gesture had just caused more problems. Charles Findlay wasn't someone to worry about; Obadiah Stane was.

"And this doesn't look like a hospital fancy enough for someone you keep saying is one of the best neurosurgeons on the planet," Obadiah drawled once they exited into the doctors' offices.

"It's New York. Everything's great and everything's grimy." And he loved it.

"See how open he'd be to taking a job on Wilshire, instead," Obadiah said with a snort. And yes, the infamously wealthy street in Los Angeles did have endless rows of pristine medical centers... but Obadiah's tone suggested that Tony seriously should make the suggestion. As a test, to see if Stephen cared enough about Tony to take a job closer to him.

"Seems like a bad idea to take one of the top neuro guys away from one of the top neuro hospitals," Tony said as he looked around the office area and located the receptionist's desk where he and Stephen had held their late-night argument. "Otherwise, some prime minister will have an aneurysm at the U.N. and poof, no more Australia."

Obadiah rolled his eyes as Tony led him toward the hub for neurological consulting. It wasn't quite
6:40 a.m. and the area was accordingly quiet, though not quite as dead as it would be at Stark Industries. Some office windows were already lit up as their surgeons prepared for early-morning procedures. Tony recognized one of those offices, and with his nerves tightening with each step, led Obadiah toward it. The sharp rap of his knuckles against the door echoed inside his skull.

A moment after the door opened, Tony let out a mmrph of surprise as he was drawn into a deep, longing kiss. This wasn't some quick show. One of Stephen's hands rested on his cheek while the other splayed across the curve of his back. The former held his head in place; the latter drew his torso even closer. Tony was stunned enough that he let that movement happen. As his jaw instinctively tilted up to meet the kiss their bodies closed any remaining gap. Only his shirt and Stephen's scrubs separated them, and it felt like his wildly beating heart must echo through both thin pieces of fabric.

"God, it's good to see you," Stephen said with a bright smile as they broke apart.

Tony stared back. Shock left him mute. His eyes felt perfectly round, and they wouldn't blink.

"You must be Obadiah Stane," Stephen continued in an uncharacteristically pleasant tone as he looked over Tony's shoulder. Only then did Tony's malfunctioning brain process that he needed to keep up the act that Stephen was clearly putting on. The smile that appeared was even more abrupt than the one he'd given Obadiah in the elevator.

"Doctor," Obadiah said after a long pause, but did extend his hand.

Stephen stepped away from Tony and completed that handshake without hesitation. "I'm glad you both were able to make it in time. I've gotten the patient's permission for you to watch my surgery this morning. I thought you might be interested in seeing firsthand what goes on in the hospital you're so generously funding."

Whether it was from the showy kiss or the complete lack of intimidation, Obadiah did seem knocked very slightly off-balance by Stephen. Whatever he'd expected to happen here hadn't, apparently. "In the actual room?"

"There's a student viewing area behind a window," Stephen clarified. "I won't say that it has the most comfortable seating in the world, but seats are there."

"And."

"And what's the surgery?" His voice sounded weird.

Stephen stepped back to his desk and returned with two sets of paperwork; apparently, both of them needed to sign privacy forms before hearing any patient specifics. With a quick mutual shrug, Obadiah and Tony reached for them and scrawled their signatures. "I'll be operating on a patient with a condition called trigeminal neuralgia. The trigeminal facial nerve becomes pinched near the brain stem. Excruciating pain soon develops."

"Excruciating?" Obadiah repeated. It would sound like an innocent clarification from most people, but Tony remembered Obadiah's dark glee as he'd used that paralysis device on Tony and then slid the arc reactor free of his chest. Obadiah wasn't curious right now; he was sadistic.

"Excruciating," Stephen confirmed. "Before treatment options improved, it was often called the 'suicide disease.'"

This particular surgery wasn't happening because of their visit; it would have been scheduled weeks ago. Still, it couldn't have been better timed to satisfy what Tony knew were some deeply hidden sides to Obadiah's personality. Sure enough, Obadiah nodded in satisfaction. "Sounds like a pretty
serious surgery. Hmm. Well, since we're here... and signing that big check for you." Obadiah leaned over to Tony and murmured, "Let's see what you think is worth spending money on."

"If you'd like to clean up after your flight, there's a bathroom just down that way," Stephen said and gestured down a short hall.

"I can take a hint," Obadiah said, now sounding genuinely good-natured again, and left the two of them alone.

"What was—" Tony began to ask, only for Stephen to shake his head. He took a few steps back and gently touched a three-ring binder's spine. Tony tried to read the words on that binder only to realize that they didn't matter; Stephen was indicating where the listening device had been placed.

Right: the office wasn't a safe place to talk. Nodding, Tony followed him out into the main reception room. Already, the receptionist was settling into her desk and a few patients were arriving for early consultations. By eight this place would become uselessly full of stray chatter, and so it'd be a pointless location for an investigator to bug.

"What was that?" Tony asked in a quiet but insistent whisper once they were isolated against a far wall.

Stephen grinned. "Did he buy it?"

"You sure gave him a hell of a lot to buy!" Tony exhaled sharply. "You could've warned me."

"Warned you?" Stephen repeated dubiously. "This whole romantic farce was your idea. How exactly did you think people would be convinced?"

"Well. I." Not that, Tony didn't say. "Just surprised you totally went for broke before I did, is all," he sheepishly answered. Yes, he supposed that this did have to be part of the act for the tabloids. He hadn't thought through the specific steps of his proposal.

Apparently suspecting Obadiah's imminent return, Stephen surveyed the room while distractedly murmuring, "Look. I've had my limbs ripped off more than once. If doing this protects the universe, I can deal with you just fine."

"I. Thanks? Wait." Limbs getting ripped off? What sort of alternate timeline visions had he experienced? "That didn't really seem like Thanos' style."

"Right, it was someone else. Obadiah!" Stephen said in a louder voice, and smiled as he indicated their position with a wave. Tony blinked in confusion but tried to display a bright smile of his own. "If you're ready, I can show you both to the operating theater."

As Obadiah approached, he blatantly inspected the two of them. The survey was thorough but by its end a perplexed line burrowed between his eyebrows. He still wasn't seeing what he'd expected. Eventually he nodded. "Let's go see the show."
"That's really Tony Stark," whispered Priya as she pulled her surgical mask into place.

"I've got eyes," whispered Kevin, another neuro resident, as he pulled his mask over his nose.

Stephen tried to ignore his residents, but their complete failure to hide their excitement did make his mouth twitch toward a smile. Fortunately, he'd pulled his own mask into place and so it was easy to sell stern displeasure with only his voice. "Do you plan to pay any attention to our actual patient, doctors, or should I send you into that room to watch along with Mr. Stark?"

Again, it was hard not to smile when they snapped to attention and apologized. He still didn't tolerate any foolishness in his operating room, but the simple fact that he was in an operating room again had Stephen in a nearly permanently wonderful mood. Unlike Tony, he hadn't found out that his original life was somehow tainted. Stephen had been able to return to a life he'd wholeheartedly loved, and helped people all over again. It was a second chance after he'd ruined everything for himself.

Nurses had picked up on the changes in his behavior. He'd so far agreed to perform two procedures—including this one—that he knew he'd passed over before. That probably wasn't one hundred percent safe for the timeline, but this condition wasn't fatal and he was confident that someone else could have masterfully performed this surgery. Ellie Peterson being operated on by him this morning instead of three weeks later by someone else wasn't a huge change... and he did have a gap in his schedule.

The shifts didn't stop there. Stephen involved his residents more during surgeries, acted less like they and the nurses were wasting his time with questions, and was basically... happier than they'd known him just one month earlier. Even though his refreshed stint in the operating room had an expiration date, he was better prepared to appreciate it while it lasted. For just over eight years, he'd get to relive something that he'd stupidly thrown away. He was sure he'd be able to move on with complete closure, grace, and maturity when it came time to return to his larger mystical responsibilities.

Of course, the nurses didn't know any of that. So when they noted his better mood, thanks to some overheard gossip he knew that everyone had one shared assumption: Tony Stark was great in bed.

He couldn't help himself from smirking again behind his mask. Whatever. He got to operate. They could gossip about his supposed romance all they liked.

The approach for treating trigeminal neuralgia was well-established, which was why he'd passed over Ms. Peterson the first time, but it was still a fun procedure. For the sake of both his residents and their onlookers in the observation room, Stephen was sure to explain every step he took: opening a hole behind the patient's ear; carefully maneuvering through the tissue underneath; eventually exposing the trigeminal nerve. "Doctors, look at the screen. Do you see where the nerve sheath has been damaged?"

Both looked up to where a display screen showed a magnified version of the surgery, thanks to the lens he wore over one eye. Out of the corner of his vision, Stephen could see Tony and Obadiah also look at the monitor inside the teaching room and try to locate what he was referencing.

"Oh yeah," said Kevin. "Wow, it's so obvious."

Squinting, Tony and Obadiah leaned closer to their monitor.

"Is it that blood vessel causing the damage?" wondered Priya.
"That's right," Stephen murmured as he, with infinite caution, reached in and carefully relocated the misplaced vessel. The groove it'd worn in the nerve's protective sheath was left open, now. There was no longer anything rubbing against the nerve and the damaged sheath would be able to recover.

"Okay. Let's close her up."

After the patient was wheeled away to recovery, Stephen turned to the window. "Head back to my office. Tony, you know the way. I need to debrief the residents."

That was true, but he had another reason for his delay. Obadiah was brutal, but it sounded like there was good in him; that was why his betrayal had shocked Tony so much. Wanting to take best advantage of those slivers meant that Stephen needed to time this all just right. Not only would Tony presumably fawn all over him to Obadiah in the meantime, but the patient's body was also slowly working its way through anesthesia.

"So," he said brightly when he eventually returned to his office. "What'd you think?"

Obadiah looked up from where he'd sprawled on the couch. As expected, he now appeared every the inch the genial, friendly man that everyone had assumed was Howard Stark's true friend and Tony's true mentor. "I think I need to see that clip again of you finding the damage."

"You knew where to look," Tony wryly agreed. "For us, it was a lot of goopy red and white stuff. You went back in before we figured out what we were seeing."

Perfect: they needed to eat up more time. Stephen obligingly logged into the surgical database and brought up the video records from that morning, then advanced to the moment where he'd exposed the damaged part of the nerve sheath. "See right there?" he indicated, touching the screen.

Obadiah and Tony acknowledged where he was pointing, but still looked uncertain. Only when Stephen advanced it past moving the vessel out of the way, then pointed again, did they see the groove on the nerve. "That tiny little spot can make a person want to kill themselves, huh?" Obadiah wondered.

"Imagine the worst pain you've ever felt," Stephen murmured as he traced the damage, "and you didn't know if saying a single word would set it off again. Smiling. Moving your head. You'd walk around constantly worrying about interacting with the world and it'd still find a way to happen. You'd never know whether your next moment of just... existing would drive you to tears." He looked away from the monitor. He'd loved cutting the most, but this part of the job was a close second. "Want to see her wake up?"

A nurse and both residents waited in Ms. Peterson's room, where a variety of monitors showed her nearing consciousness. Obadiah and Tony were instructed to stay in the hall; their privacy releases covered this, but Stephen didn't want to overwhelm his patient as she woke. "Hello, Ellie," he said and smiled as she blearily tried to focus. "We think the operation was a success. Why don't you check?"

She blinked repeatedly as the last of the anesthesia filtered out. It wasn't immediate, and so he repeated his request after she seemed coherent. Once she opened and shut her mouth, surprise filled her eyes. It grew as she smiled, bared her teeth, and moved her jaw back and forth so wildly that it seemed at danger of unhinging. By the time she let her mouth go still again, tears streamed down her face. "It's gone. It's all gone, it's..." Eyes closing, she inhaled a shaky breath. "Thank you, Doctor." She inhaled another wet-sounding breath, and with a chuckle the nurse dabbed a tissue gently against her nostrils.

Stephen smiled. "So the operation was a success?"
Ellie laughed as the nurse patted away more tears. "You just gave me my life back. I. You." She swallowed hard. "Thank you." The words came out high and squeaky.

"So happy to hear it. Doctors Gairola and MacGregor, please follow up with the patient. Call me if needed." After clasping the patient's hands in his and squeezing them once, Stephen turned toward the door.

Obadiah watched with what looked like genuine interest, but Tony... Tony was blinking hard over a tremulous, lopsided smile. Once Stephen stepped out into the hall and closed the door, Tony managed, "It's really great that you get to do that for someone."

Recalling the life in medicine that stretched before him again, at least for a little while, Stephen slowly nodded. "Yeah. It is." Tony's smile gentled as he blinked a few times more, and Stephen allowed himself his own genuine smile as he again appreciated the years he'd been given back.

"So," Obadiah loudly announced, and clapped his hands together. "Are we eating?"

As he shattered the moment, a shared humorous look moved between Tony and Stephen. The latter cleared his throat. "There're two more stops, first. Sorry. Let me swing by my office for a change of clothes, and then I promised that I would introduce you to my boss."

"Fine," Obadiah grumbled, but added, "as soon as we do that, we're eating. I'll make reservations in the meantime."

So here was Stephen's current life, he soon thought: watching his boss from a job he'd left years ago fawn over a man who he thought was an enthusiastic arm of the military-industrial complex and Stephen's romantic partner, while another man looked on without any clue that the two of them were fully aware of his intent to stage a bloody corporate coup.

This rebooted timeline was exceptionally stupid.

"We're planning to get lunch," Stephen eventually cut in when Charles grew a little too excited about surgical robots. Tony was looking increasingly bemused by his enthusiasm. "All I have scheduled later are some consultations, so—"

"Of course, of course, that's just fine. Well, it was very nice to meet you both. Mr. Stark, Mr. Stane." Charles shook both their hands, and on the way out whispered, "Well done, Stephen."

"He was not what I'd expect from a hospital CEO," Obadiah dryly noted as they made their way toward the passenger pick-up zone. "He's... perky."

"Apparently my boss is a bit of a Tony Stark fan, yes." Stephen didn't even need to look over. "Stop preening, Tony."

As Tony smirked, Obadiah eyed the two of them, then snorted. "Yeah, well, a whole lot of people are. Here, this is us." A short ride later, as their driver dropped them off in front of his chosen restaurant, he announced, "I was in the mood for steak. With no salad. California's too big on salad."

The dark, traditional storefront promised huge cuts of meat and no concern for their health.

"That's not good for your heart," Tony noted, then looked to Stephen for backup.

Stephen didn't give it. "He made the reservations, not you. And I'm not a cardiologist."

Chuckling, Obadiah opened the door and gestured them inside. He'd probably thought his murmur to Tony was private, but Stephen was just able to pick it up: "I might actually like him."
Once they'd been seated, Obadiah laced his fingers together, leaned forward on the table, and studied Stephen for a good ten seconds. It was a gaze that had surely made many negotiations tilt his way, but Stephen met it fearlessly. He'd stared down far scarier things than Obadiah Stane. "So. We've promised your hospital an awful lot of money."

"And we appreciate it."

"Don't say that until we've actually cut you the check." Obadiah looked at Tony, who seemed to understand that he should stay quiet for the moment, but when Obadiah turned back his expression was full of consideration. "Tell us what good this'll do."

"For the world," Stephen wondered, "or for Stark Industries?"

Obadiah's slow-growing smirk probably meant that he appreciated that dash of cynicism. "Why not both?"

As expected. "A modernized surgical robotics suite would be the immediate application. Hospitals built in 2008—" Stephen just caught Tony's slight throat clearing. "—Or 2009," he added smoothly, like he hadn't misspoken the current date and had intended to discuss the future, "won't have those observation rooms with glass windows like you two were sitting in. It'd be far more modern, with all sorts of new displays. The interns and residents at the hospital would be able to practice more readily and learn far more. We'd also be able to delve into new areas of microsurgery, down to the correction of fetal abnormalities in utero."

"So there's the benefit to the world," Obadiah noted. He left the other half unsaid.

Stephen studied Obadiah. Tony might have a lot of troublesome emotions tied up with this man, but when Stephen met his gaze from across the table he could only think of one thing: I stared down Thanos. You're nothing. "How many other major defense contractors are there?"

Obadiah shrugged. "Boeing, Lockheed, Raytheon, Northrop, General Dynamics, Airbus... a whole pile of them."

"Right. Do any of them do medical work on the side?"

"Aerospace, transportation, security, stuff like that," Tony cut in to answer. "Lots of different areas. But no, nothing really with medicine. Not as a major functional area, anyway."

"I didn't think so," Stephen said, then took a sip of his mineral water. (He and Tony had both rejected the waiter's offer of wine with their meal orders.) "So I've had this discussion with Tony before, and I'm sure you share his perspective."

"How many lives would you say your advanced weapons systems have saved?"

Obadiah said nothing for a long, contemplative moment. A smile eventually appeared.

"You get it, Obi?" Tony asked as he clued in, though he sounded like he'd known Stephen's plan the whole time and was chiming in as a planned part of the show. "What do I tell every magazine that ever asks me about keeping up Dad's legacy? Stark Industries is about keeping America safe. Saving American lives."

"So what you're arguing," Obadiah said, leaning further in, "is that our military divisions stay in place like always. They're the patriarch setting things right. But then we'll be able to tell America that we've also got a mommy to kiss away their boo-boos. No matter what's trying to hurt you, no one looks out for you like Stark."
What a horrifically sexist way to put it, Stephen did not say. "Exactly."

"We'll keep researching new weapons tech, like your mini-missiles," Tony added. "We'll keep stopping the assholes we always stop. But then I've got my medical grant endowment to make medical advances, too. Every single piece of research funded by us will have to include how Stark Industries paid for a new cure for baby cancer."

As Obadiah sat back in his seat, his smile slowly spread. "That's good. That's... good. Defense is a cold industry. The public's never going to care about who gets what ballistics contract... but they'll care about a company that saved grandma in the hospital. Lobbyists will care. Senators will care." His gaze focused on somewhere far away as he repeated one last time, "That's good."

"So you're okay with the donation?" Tony guessed, grinning.

"No." Though both men blinked, Obadiah immediately chuckled and clarified, "It's not gonna be your own funds doing that research endowment, Tony. That's coming from the company, too. You're not stealing any credit just for yourself."

Laughing with relief, Tony shot a quick look toward Stephen and then continued, "Great. Perfect. So when're we going to announce this? Is this a corporate press conference 'you' thing or a Barbara Walters 'me' thing?"

"Well, it's going to take a little time to set up," Obadiah said. "We've gotta figure out how this fits into the company structure. Are we setting up a whole new division? Who's leading it? We're going to have to find some new person and keep it quiet while we recruit."

The blank stare that Tony gave the table served as a two-second warning. The grin he had when he looked back up was an outright warning klaxon: a Big Idea From Tony Stark was about to be dropped. "Here's an notion, Obi: what if I oversee that civilian tech division? It can be medical stuff to start with, but... robotics, holographic interfaces... maybe playing with clean energy..."

Stephen kicked Tony under the table. Tony didn't flinch.

Obadiah studied him with a furrowed brow. "What, and just leave behind weapons? This is only an expansion. We can't just cut out our cash cow, are you crazy?"

"I can still develop weapons for the original division, but that was your baby for a while after Dad died. You ran it great. And look at what you're doing next: going down to negotiate with lobbyists in D.C. The whole defense industry knows you as well as they do me." Tony shrugged, displaying no concern at all for the sledgehammer he was taking to the timeline. "So why not?"

Stephen kicked Tony again. This time, Tony kicked him back.

"We might," Obadiah said after a long pause, "be able to work something out there."

"Great," Tony said with an enormous grin, then turned it toward Stephen. "Doesn't that all work out, baby?"

At least reality still existed after that Molotov cocktail Tony had abruptly decided to throw. If the universe hadn't collapsed, then Tony was still available to be strangled. "Perfectly. Honey."

"You two should not use pet names," Obadiah noted as he pushed himself up. "Be right back. Want to use the facilities before my porterhouse gets here."

The second Obadiah disappeared from view, Stephen kicked Tony's foot a few more times until
Tony kicked him back, hard. "Look," Tony hissed. "Obadiah staged his coup because he hated having to work under me. If he gets to have his own kingdom again and all the glory from it, he doesn't have my convoy attacked."

"Which means no Iron Man!" Stephen hissed back.

"Which means no 'Tony Stark dies in this go-round because the explosion was a second early,'" Tony countered. "The younger me needed a shock to his system to start making a difference. But I'm not him. I won't need that push." His finger tapped one temple. "I have every schematic locked inside my head. I can build my first armor whenever, and Iron Man makes his big debut right after. And I can still 'discover' Obi's dirty sales right on schedule."

"We need to stop making big timeline changes," Stephen said after a long, frustrated pause. Maybe he really shouldn't have done Ellie's surgery.

"I love hearing you admit that I'm right."

"I never said that."

"You're my one true love. I can read between your lines."

"Oh, shut up," Stephen said. He wished he weren't about to laugh, but this situation they'd landed in was just so deeply, wholly stupid.

"Remember: Round up heroes. Beat Loki and get his Stones. Fix Thanos. And we stay alive. We focus on that list and don't worry about other things changing. It'll be fine."

"It'd better be fine," Stephen whispered, "or—I" A mmph of surprise barely escaped him as Tony leaned over and drew him into a firm and entirely unexpected kiss. It wasn't as showy as the one he'd put on, not with a corner of the table between them, but it was definitely a kiss from someone moving with intention.

"Rein it in," Obadiah grumbled. Ah. That explained it. As they broke apart, he re-took his seat and added, "I'm gonna be heading south in an hour, you know. You can wait that long."

Tony had ended the kiss, but barely leaned back. He favored Obadiah with a sidelong, impish grin before leaning in to whisper, "I saw him coming, but also a tabloid. Two birds, one stone."

Stephen made sure to put on an intrigued expression as he murmured back, "Oh, great."

"Welcome to the big stage."

"Come on," Obadiah grumbled and gestured over his shoulder, where a waiter was arriving. "Boundaries. This is weird."

Once their plates were in front of them, Tony gestured with a forkful of baked potato. "Lay off the judgment, Obi. 'Weird?'"

"This isn't about you two. Not specifically," Obadiah said as he slid a deathly sharp knife through his steak. "But you never bring someone to lunch, Tony. They're there at night and gone in the morning. It's weird. Just lay off the public affection, it'll help keep my lunch down."

Well, neither of them would complain about not staging another kiss. "Sorry," Stephen said, which Tony echoed, and they proceeded through their entirely unremarkable lunch. It appeared that they'd made it through the storm. Only the pleasant background noises of a normal restaurant surrounded
them, and until the waiter collected their plates, it was possible to forget they were sitting with a traitor and would-be murderer.

"Hey, Doc," Obadiah said as they moved to leave. "Let me talk to you for a second. Tony, y'mind heading out and grabbing the driver?"

"Sure," Tony said, but after only a short pause to meet Stephen's eyes and see that it was all right.

Once they were alone, Obadiah led Stephen to the quiet hallway that held the restroom doors, then leaned comfortably against the wall. "I came here prepared to shut down any scam you were running. Just so you know."

"Well, that's blunt."

Obadiah shrugged. "For the amount of money Tony was ready to throw at you... people have come up with scams for a lot less."

"Point taken." Stephen leaned against the wall, too. "What changed your mind?"

"I can see that you're good at your job," Obadiah admitted. "We wouldn't be throwing our money away on you, so that was a start. But honestly? It's been seeing you around Tony." He snorted. "I may have dug into your history a little bit. Turned up some long-term girlfriends. No boyfriends to match."

"So you suspected me," Stephen guessed.

"Maybe you were putting on a show with how you groped him and... whatever, I don't know. But you did something that no scammer would do. You sided with me over Tony." At Stephen's blank stare, he clarified, "About picking the steakhouse. And you told him to stop acting so full of himself."

"And that apparently convinced you of something?"

"Do you know how many yes-men I deal with?" Obadiah snorted. "People act like they're ready to suck me off to get a bigger end-of-year bonus. Every day. They do the same with Tony, but he likes the attention. Everyone on this planet knows what a glory hound Tony Stark is."

"He's got a lot more depth than you think," Stephen said, frowning.

Obadiah did not remotely appear to believe that, but simply held up his hand. "Let me finish. Everyone I see deliberately sucking up to Tony Stark acts in one way, and one way only: like he can do no wrong. Ever. But once you acted like that on the way to the restaurant, I started watching how you treat him. It's like you actually know Tony. You want to spend time with him but you're not gonna take any of his crap while you do."

"Well, that is true," Stephen said wryly, "but you're still not giving Tony enough credit. He's aggravating, absolutely, but he's got a heart to go along with the brain that most people care about."

"Yeah. Right there," Obadiah slowly nodded in consideration. "You're not telling me what I expect to hear. That instantly makes you more trustworthy than every yes-man working for us."

"I am known," Stephen admitted after a long pause, "to be opinionated."

"I'll believe it." Obadiah pursed his lips, nodded again, and pushed himself away from the wall. "If you're taking Tony away from defense to do this new civilian thing, then you'd better whip him into
shape. I don't want to blow fifty million on a failed divisional launch because Tony lost the plot without me looking out for him. Call him on his bullshit."

"That's music to my ears, Mr. Stane."

"Obadiah."


"Just tell me one last thing," Obadiah wondered as he gestured toward the door. "How'd you hit it off so fast? Hogan said he left with you two just hours after Tony hit the hospital, and you..." Trailing off, Obadiah rolled his eyes. "Stayed at his place for. A while."

"Funny story," Stephen said, pitching his voice louder as they stepped outside. Clueing in as he heard him, Tony turned to listen. "We'd actually met before that hospital night. It was in the park, once. That was enough of a connection to get us talking."

"Near the lake," Tony agreed. "Although he mostly just bossed me around."

"Hmm. Good," Obadiah smirked. "I hope he does that some more. Well, I'm off to D.C. We can drop you off somewhere on the way."

Nodding, Stephen slid into the car and said, "I do have to finish up work today, so I'll need to return to the hospital. And—"

"I'll check the place out some more, too," Tony suggested. "Maybe I can start coming up with a plan for that robotics suite." His sudden, chipper smile turned toward Stephen. "And we can head to my place afterward. To. Y'know. Catch up."

"Drive," Obadiah loudly announced. "I need them out of this vehicle before they start messing up the upholstery."

Though Stephen couldn't help but glower at Tony, relief swelled inside him. They really were able to tweak the timeline to benefit them, and that meant they had a much greater chance to pull everything off. This timeline was still stupid, their circumstances were tragic, and so much pain loomed ahead, but despite all of that they still had a chance to save the universe. They just needed to—

"Aww," Tony cooed, and turned his phone to show the blog post featuring the two of them locked into Tony's impromptu kiss. The sight of them together was bizarre, but the knowledge that the world was seeing this was **appalling**. "Your first time on Perez Hilton. You're gonna hate him. I'm catnip to him, FYI, and now he probably thinks he has a chance with me. So it's only going to get worse."

Stephen turned toward Obadiah. "Does this fund stay in place if I dump that man?"

"Hey," Tony protested as Stephen's thumb jerked toward him. Laughing, Obadiah shook his head. "I told you: you've gotta whip him into shape. And I'm not talking anything **fun**, Tony. I'd better see the two of you working together. I do mean **working.**"

"Well," Stephen said, and pictured all of the comparative freedom they'd been handed to plan the universe's salvation. Everything was stupid, yes... but they could make it work. "If we have to."
"I cannot believe we're actually pulling this off," Tony crowed once they were safely inside his Columbus Circle condo.

"Congratulations, sir," J.A.R.V.I.S. dutifully announced. "What success are you celebrating?"

Lord, imagine starting that conversation with an A.I. Hi, J.A.R.V.I.S. I'm actually trapped here after getting booted from the future and I'm trying to keep the universe alive in the meantime. One day you're going to be a walking toaster with an Infinity upgrade, by the way. Anyway, we just successfully placated Obadiah, who now might not try to murder me on the way to accidentally launching the first big superhero of the modern world.

"Too complicated to explain," Tony instead replied.

"Very well, sir. Shall I chill any champagne?"

"No," Stephen loudly announced.

Laughing, Tony rolled his head over one shoulder. "Eventually you'll work up the courage for alcohol again."

"You passed it up at lunch, too," Stephen noted as he walked to join Tony. Once shoulder-to-shoulder, both men studied the sight in front of them. A darkened city sprawled beyond the wall of windows, speckled with countless lights. From New York City to the universe itself, they were going to be able to save all of those lives. This was still a ridiculous, unfair fate to which they'd been condemned, but at least it wasn't an impossible one.

"So we've got the place to ourselves," Tony said after a moment and couldn't stop his smirk from sliding into his voice. "Wanna make out?"

"God," Stephen sighed, but amusement also filtered in. "I guess we've really committed to this."

"Uh, I think you set that 'committed' bar pretty high yourself, mister. You..." Trailing off, Tony raised his eyebrows significantly. His throat cleared and his face warmed with faint embarrassment. He'd kissed people like that before, but never been kissed. "You went for it."

Stephen didn't notice his hesitation; his gaze was still trained on the city. "And convinced Obadiah in the process. He now accepts that I'm..." Another slight sigh escaped. "Stark-flexible."

"Well. I am tempting, yeah." Tony hesitated as he contemplated the day's fallout. He'd grown up used to having the world's attention trained on him, whether he was best known as an engineering wunderkind or superhero. Stephen had lived in a medical niche before committing to a group that worked in the shadows. "Oh, and FYI on any tabloid stuff, now that we're both in the big time: don't read the comments. Never read the comments."
"Trust me, I am not reading any comments." Stephen snorted once, shook his head, and asked, "You know what the most irritating part of everything is?"

Even though this whole fake romance had been Tony's idea, he'd expected to chafe under it. But while it was all weird—very, very weird—he couldn't really complain. He was putting on this act with the only other person in existence who understood what he was going through. Plus, by now they got along more than they argued, and the arguments were (usually) fun.

Yes, fine: getting used to kissing Stephen Strange was definitely, *definitely* weird. But really, at this stage in his life, Tony had been engaging in far weirder things on a weekly basis. And when it came to the messed-up lives ahead of them, a few faked kisses were nothing in comparison.

Apparently, though, Stephen felt differently. He'd catalogued enough irritations about their fake romance to have a 'most' label to stick on one of them. "What's the most irritating part?" Tony gamely asked.

"I like how the beard looks on me and want it back," Stephen grumbled, "but now the entire world would think I'm copying you."

Tony waited a second to see if he was serious, and started laughing when he realized that yes, Stephen was. "That's what you're most irritated about?"

Stephen folded his arms and shrugged.

"Seriously? Perez Hilton is shit-talking you to the world while we're trapped in 2007 with like... nine different apocalypses we know are ready to hit, and you're whining about my beard? That's..." Tony paused, tilted his head, and wondered, "So *did* you copy me?"

"You did not invent goatees, Stark."

"Okay, but I am definitely the most famous one out there."

"Mine is *normal*. It doesn't have all of your..." One of Stephen's hands snaked free and gestured out a few vague lines in the air. "Overdone angles."

"Stylish."

"Overdone."

"Whatever. Just say you lost a bet with me and a goatee was how I called it in. Then you can end up liking it despite yourself, and keep it."

"Hmm," Stephen replied, noncommittally.

Tony said nothing that night, nor by the time he flew back to California. It was rare to argue Stephen into submission. After successfully making that change with the civilian tech division, he doubted he'd win a second argument in one trip.

"Welcome home, Mr. Stark," Pepper said when he walked into his Malibu home. "So, I hear you've managed to completely upend the company in about... two? Two days? I think it was two days."

Seeing her sent another pang of regret through Tony, but as he'd expected, each time hurt a little less. At first he'd only been able to focus on how much he'd lost or on how much pain loomed ahead. But even if Pepper should be wearing his ring... even if he had to dive back into responsibilities he'd assumed were over... he'd already changed the world for the better. Obadiah would feel more ties to
the company, now, and his resentment toward Tony would wither. He'd probably sell far fewer goods to the black market. Maybe, just maybe, he'd stop completely.

In this rebooted timeline, fewer innocents would die.

Maybe Pepper Potts would currently laugh at the idea of marrying Tony Stark... but maybe Ho Yinsen would never lose his wife in an attack on Gulmira.

That helped.

"Well," Tony answered after that pause, "you know my motto: if you're gonna make a splash, make it a big one."

"Is that your motto? Because I feel like you come up with a new motto every week or so, and I don't think I've heard that one yet." With an impish smile, Pepper began walking toward the office she kept in the house. Tony obligingly followed. "I had our lawyers pull up the article of incorporation, Board procedures, and anything else we'll need to worry about with a new divisional launch. I do think you're going to get some real pushback, though."

"Yeah?"

"Well, it's a huge change in company strategy." Pepper tapped a pen in thought against the clipboard she carried. "Is there any way you could get some really exciting piece of technology ready before the pitch?"

Tony considered that as they reached her office and she retrieved a terrifyingly large stack of papers. "Well. Maybe. Probably. And... wait, wait, I am done with school, don't give me homework." He hadn't realized that entire stack was for him.

Pepper stood there for a few seconds, then nodded and retrieved the paperwork from his arms. "I just wanted to give you some hands-on experience with what I will be reading."

"Oh?"

"So I will be busy, I'm afraid," she clarified with a smile.

"Oh. Gotcha. Don't ask you to pick up my dry cleaning any time soon." Tony nodded once. "Well, thank you, Ms. Potts. You're a lifesaver and I may just have a piece of tech I can impress the Board with."

Two weeks later, once enough time had passed for supposed inspiration to strike his inventor's brain, Tony breathed in the crisp evening air of Manhattan. His view over the Pacific was beautiful—he'd forgotten just how beautiful in the years since California—but he did miss real seasons. It wasn't yet cold enough for his breath to steam, but when the door buzzed he was glad to get inside.

"I know," Stephen immediately said when he opened the door and Tony saw his home for the first time. The sleek, open-air condo behind him had the feeling of an expensive loft, but a small one. It looked like a starter place for a doctor who'd scored a gigantic salary but still had to pay off a decade-plus of student loans. "It's not your penthouse, but I upgrade soon."

"That's not why I'm smirking." And oh, yes: Tony was smirking.

"Shut up," Stephen laughed and reflexively brushed a hand against the beard he was growing out.

"There is nothing I love more," Tony began as Stephen gestured him inside and closed the door,
"than being right. Nothing!"

"Shut up," Stephen repeated as he detoured to one side. Two teacups sat on the marble-topped kitchen island; steam still wafted off them. "Here, I put it on when you texted. I assumed you'd be cold."

Coming from Stephen, that was unexpectedly thoughtful. Warmth seeped through Tony's hands as he cradled what smelled like a rich chai blend. As he took a seat on the couch and took his first sip of deliciously spiced tea, the world truly felt like fall. Time was rolling dutifully along. One day they'd get back home. "Thanks."

"Since you've obviously lost any edge you had for the cold," Stephen noted as he took a seat in a nearby chair, "with a body that's been living out there in California."

"Oh please," Tony snorted.

"Your cheeks were red when you came in," Stephen noted, "and it's not even below freezing, yet."

Had they been? Well... okay, maybe this 2007 body was accustomed to Pacific-adjacent weather, and maybe he was wearing a sweater but was still considering asking for a blanket, but... Tony had been going somewhere with this argument.

"There is nothing I love more than being right." Smiling, Stephen took another drink.

Despite his best efforts to pretend otherwise, Tony had missed this. He'd missed the *them* that was the only honest 'them' his life could currently offer. "Whatever. I need to brainstorm with you."

"The place is safe, by the way."

Tony blinked.

Seeing his confusion, Stephen added, "In my office, I did a passive check for energy fields. That let me understand what the listening device felt like. I didn't think having someone break in here was a big risk, not with how Stane trusts me now, but I did sweep my condo for the same energy. There's nothing. We can talk about anything in here."

He'd 'checked the energy fields?' In 2007? Oh, Tony realized a second later. Right. That made perfect sense. Tony's ability to fight the world's worst foes came from inside his brain, as did Stephen's. But what Tony brought into the past was the knowledge of how to eventually *build* the Iron Man armor. Although it'd be irrelevant until his accident—or its hand-chopping rebooted equivalent—Stephen's knowledge would let him directly *do* magic.

Tony hadn't recognized Stephen's power availability until just now, which showed just how accepting Stephen was of their situation. Unless it'd been to check for a listening device that could give away their temporal game—and thus break the universe—Stephen appeared content to act like absolutely, positively nothing more than a surgeon.

He must really, really love cutting heads open.

"Well, good thing you double-checked. Anyway," Tony then continued, "I need to brainstorm with you. To get Board approval, Pepper thinks I need to show them some civilian tech that'll wow them. Something that'll definitely sell."

Stephen frowned. "They won't want to wait until the medical research turns something up?"
Tony's head shook. "That's not her read on them, no. So. My thought: I move up the arc reactor fix."

Though Stephen said nothing, he did lift his teacup again to cover his silent grimace.

"It'd sell," Tony protested. "Clean, safe energy? I show them that prototype and they won't even blink before setting up a new division!"

"That's right," Stephen agreed, "but that reactor was a big deal when it happened. For you, for the company, for the world. Once we get things flowing smoothly—which we have—let's not try to sand off even more rough edges, all right? Eventually we'd just lose the whole shape of how things should look."

"Do you have a better idea?" Tony asked defiantly.

Stephen paused, let his gaze go unfocused toward the coffee table, then looked back up. "What about a simplified version of your home A.I.? That sort of thing is coming from lots of companies, but it's not here yet. Plenty of consumers will want it, but it's not a big deal for the world."

"Huh. A consumer version of J.A.R.V.I.S.?" Tony mused. Through several sips of tea, he pictured how this pitch might play out in the boardroom. "Yeah. Okay, that could work for a step one. I'll tell them I realized that the company can market some of the things I designed to make my own life easier. Bigger stuff can come later, along with your medical discoveries."

"That's solved, then. What do you want for dinner? I'll call delivery."

"Something unhealthy," Tony immediately said. A problem had been solved and he wanted to celebrate. At the look that got, he crooned, "You're not a cardiologist."

Stephen almost succeeded in looking completely annoyed. Almost.

"You know you love me, baby," Tony laughed.

The next evening, as he walked back into his Malibu home, Pepper was waiting with a smoothie that had been Tony's reliable go-to during any exceptionally high stress. "Thanks?" Tony said, bemused, as he accepted it and dutifully sipped. He wasn't mad about feeling all those delicious vitamins pouring in, but he hadn't requested this.

"Oh. Was that the wrong call?" Pepper wondered. "Because it seemed like you'd be in a bad mood."

Tony's eyes narrowed. Had Obadiah found out something, after all? "Why am I in a bad mood? Or supposed to be in a bad mood? Why am I... moody?"

Sighing, Pepper tried to retrieve the drink from him. Tony held onto it; he was thirsty. After relenting and stepping back, Pepper explained, "I saw online that you left Stephen's condo alone and stayed in yours. And J.A.R.V.I.S. confirmed that it was only you inside."

Great. Tony hadn't noticed a tabloid photographer getting a shot of him leaving the building. They weren't an A-list couple; both people needed to be celebrities for that. But the ridiculous, tawdry gossip of what guy turned Tony Stark gay? after a head injury? was apparently a big enough deal to earn constant attention from the paparazzi that covered Manhattan nearly as well as L.A.

"Are we going to have to report every migraine to TMZ?" Tony grumbled. "No, no, we're fine. He just had a stress headache after work and I had the Board meeting tomorrow to prepare for."

"Oh, that's good," Pepper said with what appeared to be genuine relief.
"Yeah?" Tony asked after a slight pause. (How could Pepper be so happy that he was with someone else?) Her obvious hesitation had a likely explanation, and so Tony added, "Whatever you've noticed about me, spill it. I want to know. I won't be mad."

"Well—"

"Probably." He sipped his smoothie again. "No, I promise, I won't be mad."

Pepper smiled. "You just seem... steady since you've met him." It sounded like 'steady' was a careful mask for many other potential words, some less flattering than others. "It's been quite a change. A good one. So I'm glad that you two are all right."

Tony smiled lopsidedly around his straw and sipped again. *I did need someone to help steady me out, Ms. Potts, and you wouldn't believe who that was if I told you.* He swallowed down his last mouthful of smoothie and announced, "Well, then, guess I'm heading right back to New York after the Board meeting. I don't want the press making up rumors. That'd really give Stephen a headache."

He turned to go, hesitated, and turned back. "Actually, Ms. Potts. Once you're done prepping for the meeting tomorrow, can I ask you for something else?"

Some of the Stark Industries Board had yet to meet J.A.R.V.I.S. in person. Tony debuted him at that meeting the next day, along with a presentation on what a home version could do. As envisioned, the home system could send security alerts no matter where the owner was. Track anyone who stole packages off front porches. Pre-heat ovens, help children practice vocabulary, even tire out kittens with an automated laser toy. This system could do whatever a family needed of it... so long as they bought the appropriate modular upgrades.

That wasn't a big enough product to wow the Board, but it was big enough to convince them to do a soft divisional launch. Once Stark Industries had a few successful civilian products on the market, they could make the new division official to the employees, press, and Wall Street. Good enough, Tony thought as his convertible sped toward the airfield. Good enough.

"Why are you here?" Stephen wondered, then rubbed at his eyes.

"So happy to see you, too," Tony cooed, affectionately stroked down Stephen's cheek, and pushed his way into the condo. "I'm taking the couch, don't worry."

Stephen squinted at the oven clock: 3:19 a.m. He rubbed his eyes a second time, yawned, and repeated, "Why are you here? Again?"

"For the tabloids. I need to look like I'm sleeping over now and then. I'll work here tomorrow while you go to the hospital. Do I need to know a code to buzz up someone for delivery?"

With another tired, annoyed glance, Stephen turned off the lights, pointed in the darkness toward the couch, and walked toward his room. A few seconds later, a pillow and blanket sailed through the door, which then closed.

"I think I woke him up," Tony sing-songed as he moved to prepare his 'bed.'

Stephen was in a far better mood when he got home the next day; performing a lumbar discectomy procedure was apparently relaxing. Accordingly, Tony jumped right in with his plans over dinner. "We need to go out places where we'll be seen. If I'm in New York and I don't do appearances with you, that apparently means we're on the rocks. That means the Board will assume this medical thing is about to fall apart. That wrecks the new division they're already iffy on." Tony raised his drink like a toast. "Logic."
"Why," Stephen wondered in a long-suffering tone, "did you ever tell those reporters we were together?"

"I didn't tell the reporters," Tony corrected. "I implied. Come on, you've gotta remember that, don't try to rewrite history on me." He paused. "That came out before I realized what a painfully ironic phrasing choice it was. Please ignore."

Stephen smiled faintly, but said, "I do have a photographic memory, but if I don't see it it's not perfect."

A 'photographic memory' was a good bragging term, but it wasn't a real, actual, true thing. And they both knew that. "Well, I assume you don't want to go taunt the tabloids at some nightclub," Tony guessed. A loud, amorphous flow of people might be his speed, but it clearly wasn't Stephen's.

"I absolutely do not."

"Great. So since we're in New York, let's go see a show." One corner of Tony's mouth quirked. "What's playing now?"

Stephen smiled back. The titles came rapid-fire. "Wicked, Jersey Boys, The Lion King, Mary Poppins, Mamma Mia, The Color Purple, Spamalot—"

Whatever. "All right, all right, calm down, you've seen some bus ads, I believe you."

"I'm actually listing them in ranked order of total grosses for the year."

Tony paused for long enough that it became awkward, then pulled out his phone. One Internet search later, his gaze raised back to Stephen. Annoyed disbelief filled him. "Do 2006."

"Wicked, The Lion King—"

"Start at number, uh, ten. Get some different names in there."

After hesitating, then rolling his eyes toward the ceiling as he presumably counted down the list, Stephen continued, "The Drowsy Chaperone—"

"Why in the hell do you know this?!"

Stephen's casual shrug in response was ruined a little by the smug look that accompanied it. "That's the sort of end-of-year report that makes the Times' culture section. I apparently read it." Off Tony's continued, astounded stare, Stephen laughed and asked, "Remember when we landed here and I wrote out several pages from those books? Did you just assume I was... what, paraphrasing?"

"Yes!" With a sharp exhalation, Tony demanded, "What is your middle name?"

Stephen blinked. "Can you please pick one topic and stay on it?"

"Name!"

"Vincent, why?"

"I'll tell you later. I need to fly back to California tomorrow, but we're doing a show this Saturday. FYI."

"You are exhausting," Stephen told him as he resumed eating dinner.
In this rebooted timeline, Tony was becoming far too familiar with the interior of this private jet. Perhaps, he thought on his way back to New York on Saturday afternoon, he needed to headquarter the new civilian tech division in Manhattan. His younger body was more resilient than what he was used to, but jet lag would eventually catch up with him.

"Jersey Boys," Tony announced as he held up the tickets. "Out of the options, I figured that was what we'd both like the most."

"Good call," Stephen agreed as he adjusted his tie. They were both in suits, though Tony had relented and draped a scarf over his shoulders. By the time they moved from a New York November evening into a New York November night, it'd be genuinely cold. "Although, given our initial reaction to being stuck together, you might find some of the lyrics in Wicked a little amusing."

"I'll trust you on that. So, I have two things to tell you. I'm trying to decide which order would be funnier."

Stephen paused in needlessly running over his suit with a lint roller, sighed, and turned to Tony. "Just tell me."

"Okay, I'll go with this for the first item on the agenda. Look through these listings Pepper found. Pick one."

"Listings?" Stephen repeated as Tony retrieved a stack of papers from his suitcase. Looking down at them as they were handed over, his eyes widened. "These are condos."

"Right. You said you were going to upgrade 'soon,' but that's not good enough. I'm not sleeping on your couch any more. So either you start showing up at my place every time and let the tabloids photograph you on the way in, or I need my own room."

"I am not going to let you buy me a multi-million dollar condominium, Tony! That's—" Stephen paused on the next page he flipped to. "Two blocks from work."

Tony grinned.

"No!" Stephen insisted, remembering himself, but his gaze wandered back down to the listing's printout. "No," he said, less emphatically.

Tony leaned over far enough to note which listing had caught Stephen's eye and made a mental note to text Pepper with the address. "And for item two on the agenda," Tony continued as Stephen continued to study that same listing, "the Board likes my early concept for the home system."

The condo still distracted Stephen. He was doing a terrible job of seeming uninterested. "Well, that's good. Glad they like it."

Tony grinned, then stayed quiet until Stephen looked back up. "Product name: Vincent." Off Stephen's disbelieving stare, Tony laughed and added, "No matter what useless piece of information someone asks for, the system will be able to find it out for them."

"Your system has a name! J.A.R.V.I.S.!

"That's my version. This is different. Besides, the marketing guys don't want an acronym. Half the people would bother with the periods, half the people wouldn't." Oh, he really did enjoy poking this man with a stick. Some people gave in and went along with the circus surrounding Tony Stark, but Stephen seemed to retain permanent surprise toward Tony's antics. It was honestly delightful. "Come on. We need to head out or we'll be late."
"You've seriously used my name with the Board?!

"Interrupting the start of the show would be so rude," Tony said gravely.

"Tony."

"Unforgivably rude. I'd hate to do it." A quick flash of a smile. "Better go, honey."

"That was good," Stephen relented at the show's end. As Tony had expected, a few hours had given Stephen's outrage enough time to fade. He'd put on a good face while walking inside, but his hackles went right back up when the lights dimmed. By intermission he'd relaxed, though, and the second act further calmed him.

"It was good," Tony agreed, "and... oh, sure, here you go." Someone had just pushed a pen toward him and requested an autograph. He'd reflexively done so.

That apparently cued others to notice him. Even in Manhattan, people were excited to meet the world-famous billionaire, and so it took him a few minutes to extract himself from the autograph and selfie-hungry crowd. "Everyone," Tony eventually announced, "I hate to disappoint you, but I need to head out. I know I'm way more exciting than that show you just saw, but—"

"Please excuse him," Stephen said as he reached over, grabbed the ends of the scarf Tony had draped over his shoulders, and pulled him closer. "The show was great," he reassured an usher waiting beside one set of doors, then proceeded to steer Tony toward the exit.

"I think I saw someone filming that," Tony laughed. (Apparently, the first iPhone had launched by now.) "Wonder if they'll upload it somewhere. Wouldn't it be wild if they thought you were the 'polite' one?"

"I am incredibly polite," Stephen said as he grasped Tony's shoulders and directed him to stand closer. "To everyone who deserves it."

"Uh huh," Tony said wryly, only to look down with surprise. With deft motions, Stephen was wrapping the scarf into a secure but comfortable arrangement around Tony's neck. "Are you strangling me by proxy, or...?"

"You're pathetic in the cold," Stephen replied shortly, then turned him toward the doors. "And you were ready to walk outside still using your scarf as just a fashion accessory. Come on."

"Oh," Tony said, and touched the scarf where it'd been wrapped. "Thanks."

The crowd outside was crushing; across the street, Hairspray was also letting out. Both audiences impacted as a mass of humanity. Clueless tourists tried to determine which way to go, setting themselves up as obstacles for irritated locals to veer around. Tony found himself pressing close to Stephen so they wouldn't be separated.

It was barely below freezng, but Malibu never even approached that and it'd been years and years since living in Boston for school. Tony's body would become far more sturdy than it currently was. He was in good shape... for a media hound in Los Angeles. Tony Stark had no reason to be tough yet, though. No combat training, no environmental simulations, none of it. Stephen hadn't trained his body either, yet, but at least it was used to walking through actual winters.

"Next time," Tony admitted as they escaped the worst of the crowd, "I put a coat over my suit."

"You'd better," Stephen noted. "We're not even into real winter, yet. Things are going to get so much
worse." Then, to Tony's jolting surprise, he draped his arm over Tony's shoulders and pulled him in close again. Despite himself and his sharp confusion, Tony appreciated the renewed warmth.

A few steps later, Tony saw what Stephen's greater height had already revealed to him: another tabloid photographer. Aha. That explained it. Anyone in the area certainly would have seen discussion of him being at the show that night.

"You're getting used to this," Tony noted, leaning further in.

"Well, you've already sent my reputation into shambles." Though he couldn't see Stephen's expression as they walked, from his voice he guessed that it was full of amused resignation. "By now, there's really no choice but just letting it happen."

"Wait until I buy you a new place. We'll get all the people talking."

Stephen did not let him put a bid on that condo, no matter how much he loved it. All though the month of November, he turned down every approach Tony made about the potential new home. No, he didn't want Ms. Potts to contact the owner. No, he didn't want to visit it. No, he didn't care that the deepening recession meant that they'd jump at any bid. No. No. No!

Tony wore him down by December. He visited each week, with a variety of public appearances. The city's hottest restaurants. Picking out a few winter wardrobe pieces for Tony at Barney's. Even the suggestion of a museum charity gala, loaded with photographers for all the other celebrities in attendance, didn't raise Stephen's hackles. He really had resigned himself to this new, visible fate.

By now, the show they were putting on felt completely unremarkable. Just as Stephen was growing used to their physical contact in public, he'd stopped protesting so much about the grand ideas that Tony raised. As he pulled back from the kiss they'd 'stolen' in a quiet corner of the museum (while ignoring the photographers who thought they'd hidden themselves), Stephen wondered, "So... is that condo still listed for sale?"

Laughing, Tony leaned back in. Out of the very corner of his eye, he could just see the reflected gleam of a camera lens moving. "I love being right." Their lips met again; it was good to give the paparazzi a variety of potential shots. After tilting his head just right, one of Tony's hands raised to thread itself through Stephen's hair. He'd tried that once, was pleased at how natural it felt, and often used it in their showboating kisses in the days since then.

As his fingers moved, his thumb brushed against Stephen's temple. Though dark now, that hair would eventually lighten. Eventually.

Eventually. "We never talked about how long we're going to do this," Tony murmured as they broke apart again. He made sure to keep close to Stephen so that any onlooker couldn't make out his words.

It took Stephen a considering moment to reply. "We haven't. You're right. I suppose we can keep reassessing as situations change?"

Tony looked up. He was used to staring into a pale set of eyes, though not these eyes. Still, it was easy enough to feel comfortable with the situation, as weird as it was. Three months spent in 2007 was enough to show both of them how isolated they otherwise were. "You're sure?" He was the showy one, after all; his boundaries were like the lines painted on the bottom of a swimming pool. They changed from second to second. Stephen, on the other hand, was an introverted brick wall.

"This is working. Your company's happy. Stane's happy. The hospital's happy. We're handed all the
freedom we need for everything we need to do."

"Huh. And you didn't even balance that out by complaining about how terrible I am," Tony said with a smirk.

"Well." Stephen looked away, breaking their gaze, and gave a smirk of his own. "You are buying me a new place."

Tony loved being right.

"This is seriously how you want to spend your Christmas Eve?" Stephen wondered two weeks later. Happy was driving them—and receiving a big bonus for following Tony to New York for Christmas—but the privacy partition was shut. "When you said we'd stay in the city, I thought you had plans to... I don't know. Rent out Tavern on the Green."

"Boy, you thought I was spending a lot of money on you tonight," Tony said. "I already bought you a condo."

Stephen brightened. "They accepted the offer?"

"It's all yours as soon as it closes. Two blocks from work, a guest bedroom and a home office, and your very first doorman. Who, of course, will learn immediately to never question my appearances."

"Well. Thank you." Stephen's excitement was barely contained, despite his formal words. "I liked my old 'new place,' but I won't complain about not waiting four years to upgrade."

"Welcome." Tony leaned back. "And I'm glad you finally stopped whining and let me spend money on you."

"You are getting into the habit of signing big checks, recently," Stephen noted as Happy pulled to a stop in Metro-General's passenger drop-off zone. "Keep this up and they'll start calling you Santa Claus."

Tony grinned as he stepped out of the car. "That's exactly the idea." He tapped the window and waved to Happy once they were both out, then turned to Stephen. "The Board is warming up to the idea that I've turned over a new, philanthropic leaf. Thanks," he added as Stephen adjusted his scarf against the bitter wind. "They're starting to like the concept of focusing on the corporate goodwill side of things."

"Which is convenient for us," Stephen added, "since..." Trailing off after Tony squeezed his hand in warning, he looked confused until he saw who was waiting for them near the entrance. One reporter stood there with her cameraman and equipment; the logo on its side read CNN. "You invited the news?"

"I invited one news." Tony paused. "Station." Off Stephen's dubious look, he continued, "Angie Lewis is in their business division and she covers us a lot. Thanks to her, we're going to have a glowing puff piece airing on Christmas Day. That'll keep the Board really, really happy and make them fall in love with your hospital."

Stephen still looked wary. "You can't film inside—"

"According to your boss, I super can." After waving to their personal reporter, Tony grinned, reached his arm across Stephen's back, and directed them toward the entrance. "I just told Ol' Chuck I wanted to show up to spend more money, and he made it happen."
"Fine. Fine!" Stephen laughed and let himself be guided. "I still don't think this is a good idea, but you've apparently covered all the bases."

"Why," Tony wondered once they'd set the ground rules with CNN, and began walking toward Metro-General's emergency room, "wouldn't this be a good idea?"

"Not sure," Stephen admitted after a pause.

"Not sure?" Tony echoed.

Once they stepped inside and the journalists moved away to finalize their filming arrangements with administration, Tony looked again at Stephen. While an ER was never a cheery place, especially for people who'd unhappily wound up inside it on a Christmas Eve, the concern in his eyes had only sharpened.

" Seriously," Tony murmured too quietly for any of the patients to hear. He needed to be cautious; by now they'd were the center of attention. "Is something wrong?"

"Nothing I can remember," Stephen said a second later. Frustration filled his voice, though he worked to maintain a steady expression.

"So, nothing you saw at the hospital," Tony noted. "Is something happening somewhere else? Is this the night when someone steals an artifact that causes trouble years later, or...?"

"It's really nothing I can remember," Stephen concluded after a few more seconds. "Sorry. Maybe it'll come to me."

Tony waited to confirm that, then put on his brightest smile as he saw an old friend approach. "Hey, Doc. Remember me?"

Dr. Bhatt walked slowly in, followed by the CNN camera. Bemused, he said, "Hello again, Mr. Stark. Mr. Findlay told me to make sure that I was here tonight. I did not expect to be part of your... whatever is happening."

"First off," Tony announced to the room, drawing in everyone's attention, "FYI, everyone in this place right now? You're sending any hospital bills to Tony Stark. I know this doesn't feel like Christmas..." Trailing off, he grimaced at someone holding a wad of sterile bandages against their eye. "But maybe I can help with that a little."

Off their surprised, grateful murmurs, Tony grinned and added, "You're welcome. Now, Doc, why don't we talk about some presents I can give you? You were nice enough to help me out, after all."

Once Gurdeep realized that Tony—and Stark Industries—was serious about also investing money outside of their fancy new surgical suite and research endowment, his calm mood began to bubble like a hot spring. This was a man who really cared about his patients, Tony noted as Bhatt discussed a particular limitation in some rapid blood testing equipment. Given Stephen's personality reputation at the time, and how he was mostly trying to live up to it, it was no wonder that Gurdeep was leaving him out of the conversation.

Or, perhaps he was doing that because Stephen still seemed unhappily distracted. "You're not exactly putting on a good show for the cameras," Tony murmured in a quiet moment when CNN was focused on Gurdeep and his explanation of the challenges of overseeing an emergency room. "If it's not important enough to remember yet, then let it go for now."

"Today is important," Stephen said in an increasingly dark mood. "Christmas Eve, 2007. I can't
remember what, but something happened." He swallowed. "Tony, we should leave."

"Leave?" Tony echoed. "We called in CNN, Stephen! And you can't even remember what you're worrying about."

"I'm serious."

"That's..." Tony sighed. This didn't need an argument, it needed a compromise. "Probably about twenty more minutes will give them enough footage to edit. It's not a huge segment. Okay? They got the shot of me paying everyone's bills and Bhatt's giving them the boring explanations to frame things with. A few more shots of me looking interested in front of some medical equipment and we'll be done."


Twenty minutes later, absolutely nothing bad had happened. "Thanks for hosting us," Tony told Dr. Bhatt and shook his hand. They'd finished their cycle through the ER's back rooms, where he'd made some nerdy kid's Christmas. (Breaking his leg on an icy front stoop was apparently fair payment for meeting Tony Stark.) It was exactly the short, impressive burst of charitable attention he'd intended. Everything had gone according to plan.

With that in mind, Stephen continuing to act like a spooked cat was getting a little tiresome. "All right, honey," Tony said pointedly. "Let's go." They were back in the main waiting room again, visible to everyone, and so it'd help if Stephen stopped looking so paranoid.

"Yeah." Stephen's sharp gaze tracked across the room. "Let's—"

One patient rose from his spot in the corner, where he'd been huddled as a quiet lump. His grey hoodie was darkly spotted. With blood, Tony realized a second later. "Tony Stark." It didn't come out like a question.

Tony swallowed. Everyone in the room had gone suddenly still. Though the man just stood there, weaving slightly, a sense of danger suddenly filled the room. "Yeah?"

"You gave people money."

"What? Oh." Tony exhaled, extended his hands, and steadily lowered them like he was encouraging the man to re-take his seat. "I'm paying everyone's bills tonight, and that includes yours."

"Bills?"

"Yeah. Their bills," Tony repeated slowly. The man wasn't sitting down, as he'd suggested; instead, he was walking closer. One arm clutched his gut like he was suffering a painful stomachache.

"Christmas Eve, 2007," Stephen hissed just loud enough for Tony to hear. "Damnit. Right. Someone came into the ER completely strung out and had to be subdued by security. It's what made Gurdeep consider retiring for the first time."

"And you didn't remember that?" Tony pointedly asked. Now that Stephen had described his memory, even from this far away Tony could see that the man in the hoodie had pupils dilated wide under the bright fluorescents.

"I don't work in the ER. I just heard about it."
"Sir," said Dr. Bhatt, and began to approach the man in the hoodie with a broad smile and absolutely no sense of threat. "Please sit down. Have you taken a number, yet? We'll get to you as soon as possible."

"Doc," Tony said cautiously as he watched Gurdeep approach. Every honed instinct he had was beginning to scream warning. Gurdeep Bhatt was a rather rounded, gentle man in his sixties who trained only in helping people; in other words, he was vulnerable. And he apparently didn't recognize the increasing tension coiling inside this fit, twenty-something man whose behavior was under the control of whatever substance currently filled his veins. "I wouldn't do that. Call someone."

"I have," Gurdeep promised, "but it's better to keep everyone calm in the meantime." He took another step forward. "Sir, please take a seat. We'll help you soon."

"Help," the man in the hoodie echoed. "Help." Grimacing, he dragged his fingernails across a deep scab near one eye and itched it furiously. "I don't need..."

Tony's mind screamed at him: **everyone in this room is in danger.** He didn't know why, exactly, but after so many years spent fighting he'd learned to recognize countless warning signs. Something about that man's behavior meant that he was a bigger risk than he seemed. People needed to leave. People needed to—

"Hi, you called for security?" a man's voice said from a far hallway. The tense, uncertain room collectively turned to look at him.

When the man in the hoodie saw the security officer in full uniform, he pulled a gun from his waistband. Screams echoed around them.

"Doc!" Tony shouted as he realized that gun was being aimed at the man who'd tended his head injury... and the man who'd called for security. Moving only on instinct, he slammed his wrist hard and ran forward with that hand raised. This punk with a cheap gun was an easy take-down, but he needed to get close if he didn't want his hand blaster to take out a radius of people around him, so—

He had no hand blaster, Tony realized in a heart-thumping daze as the gun instead pointed toward him.

It was 2007. There were no Iron Man hand blasters. But he'd still rushed a guy with a gun. Because he couldn't watch Bhatt die. And now he was going to get shot at point-blank range, instead, and he was going to bleed out on the ER floor, and then the universe was going to end.

All of that ran through his mind in a fraction of a second. His instincts had just ended the universe.

It was 2007. The world didn't have Iron Man. Tony didn't have Iron Man. And he was going to die.

"Tony!" he heard screamed as the gun fired. That sharp, cracking boom sounded like it shattered existence. Adrenaline had his brain moving at triple speed, and it was already imagining what that hot lead would feel like burrowing into his flesh.

But the bullet never reached him. It rebounded off a glowing golden shield that sprang up between Tony and the weapon, then impacted the man who'd fired it. As he sank to the ground, groaning, no one else dared to move. Only their heads turned, very slowly, to stare at Stephen.

Stephen's hands were still raised. Glowing lacework circles still spun in front of them. His face, though, had gone entirely motionless and deathly pale. He didn't even blink. Every person there stared uncomprehending at the sight of Stephen wielding magic in a Manhattan emergency room, except for Tony. His heart hammered painfully in his chest and seemed to throb inside his eyeballs.
"Stephen?" asked Dr. Bhatt in the bewildered silence.

Stephen said nothing. There was no explanation he could give for the golden sigils that levitated lazily before his palms. None. He was a rigid, inexplicable statue in the center of a stunned crowd, unable to offer any logic behind what he'd just shown them.

But the CNN camera kept filming him, anyway.
Chapter 10

What did I just do?
What did I just do?
What did I just do?
What did I just do?

Stephen's heartbeat pounded through his skull. The world appeared frozen around him. When a woman blinked hard to clear her vision, it was in slow motion. Gurdeep asking him something came out as a nonsensical drawl. The edges of Tony's wide-eyed head were backlit, for Stephen's shield still hung behind him like a Renaissance halo.

Stephen's shield. He'd put up a shield. Tony was going to die, and the universe was going to shatter, so Stephen had put up a shield. A magic shield.

In 2007.

His tongue flicked nervously out and he tried to swallow, but it was like there wasn't an ounce of moisture left in his body. His breathing sped. Shock began to tingle through him like electricity and soon it felt like his head was somehow detached from his body. Maybe it was. His brain clearly was not functioning.

"Are you getting this?"

With his hands still illuminated, Stephen slowly turned toward the CNN team. The journalist stood out of frame, trying not to block any of what her cameraman could capture. He'd certainly gotten a clear shot on everything.

*It's not live,* an unhinged, hysterical part of Stephen's mind argued. *They're doing an edited piece. Destroy the camera and they've got no proof. It's 2007. It's not being uploaded to any cloud. Break it. Break it. You can stop everyone here from leaving. Alter people's minds somehow. You can do something. Figure it out. Figure it out. Figure it out.*

But as soon as he came up with the idea of destroying the CNN camera, he noticed smartphones being raised around the room. One emitted a characteristic *click.* Three flashes followed from three different angles.

While CNN probably needed to return to their news van to do anything, he knew all those phone photos had just been uploaded.

There was no stopping this.

It was out.

The more Stephen was on camera, the more damage he did to reality. A second longer spent inside this ER might end existence. Dropping his hands and letting the spells vanish, Stephen bolted through the doorway and into the night. "Shit," he whispered as he pushed past a paramedic opening the back of an ambulance. "Shit, shit, shit, shitshitshitshit."

His feet pounded as he followed the broad curve of the passenger drop-off driveway, but it still felt
like people had him on camera. He dodged into the road, nearly getting hit in the process, and set a more direct path away from the hospital lights.

At the next intersection, he took whatever direction was open on the crosswalk. "Hey!" someone protested as he elbowed them aside.

"Merry Christmas," someone yelled sarcastically after him.

Stephen ignored them. Their protests vanished in his ears as he tore his way down the nearly-empty sidewalks. Most storefronts were dark by now, but he saw a few with televisions facing the street. He knew what would be on those televisions very, very soon. Stephen Strange had to be off the streets by the time the news hit. Otherwise, people would have questions for which he had absolutely zero answers, and every bad answer would further batter existence.

A nearly invisible patch of dark ice on the sidewalk sent him stumbling. On instinct, a magical disc bloomed under one hand as he pitched forward, helping him regain his balance. A young couple gasped in the darkness and jumped back from the golden glow.

I need to stop, Stephen ordered himself, even as his feet still moved. I need to think. His greatest strength was never reacting on instinct, it was thinking. Around the next corner there was a construction walkway framed in plywood. That was a good enough hiding place for the moment, and so he ducked into it and gasped for breath.

The universe still existed. Whatever the ultimate fallout from his ER move would be, it hadn't introduced a no-win condition. Okay. Good. Even if the world had seen Stephen toss up some kind of magical shield in 2007, the necessary events could still happen.

"It's not a magical shield," Stephen said with sudden certainty. "Because magic obviously doesn't exist. Tony outfitted me with repulsor technology. He's convinced I'm going to get mugged. His California perspective thinks that New York City is a death trap. But then why did I run?" he asked himself as soon as he'd suggested his explanation. His fingers snapped. "Because it's experimental tech and I just ruined its big debut. I thought he'd be furious at me. Okay. Okay. I have an explanation. I—"

Just out a very unimpressive noise, Stephen thought as put a hand to his chest. Someone had just yelled his name, but they were probably calling for a different Stephen. Certainly, the news hadn't found him already.

"Stephen! Where are you?"

He stood up straighter and peered over the plywood barrier. "Tony?"

From inside Happy's car, Tony gestured him frantically toward the back seat. "Get in!" Stephen took that escape gladly, and the car jolted forward as soon as the door shut. "I tracked your phone," Tony explained.

"Oh." Stephen nodded shortly. "Good plan."

"What did you do?"

"I..." Any explanation died in his throat and Stephen instead demanded, "Why did you run toward a gun?"

Tony sighed, "It was stupid, okay, fine—"
"You nearly got killed!"

"I wasn't thinking! I moved on instinct! I just..." Frustrated, Tony trailed off. "I couldn't let anyone die in front of me."

"And I couldn't let you die!" Covering his eyes with one hand, Stephen let a few city blocks pass in silence. "So. What I'm thinking is that I was wearing experimental repulsor technology, designed by you. All I did on camera just now were my force shields. No dimensional warping, reality manipulation, none of it. Repulsor tech can explain what people saw. Right?"

Tony exhaled. "Well, that technology doesn't exist yet, but—"

This had to work. "Right?!"

"Right," Tony said in helpless tones. "Uh. Sure. Yeah. I know how it would be built, so I can whip up something to back up your story. Apparently my repulsor tech is going to look like your energy doilies in this timeline, but I guess I just have to roll with that."

Stephen's hand still rested as a blindfold, like it could block out his suddenly horrifying existence. "I can only imagine Happy's face right now."

"He... look, we'll just bring him up to speed later. He does what I tell him to." A familiar ringtone emerged from Tony's phone. Stephen hesitantly lifted his hand and looked over as Tony answered it with a high, strained voice. "Hi, Pepper. Yeah. Yeah. That was us." A pause. "I know he had a gun. I know—look, I have to call you back." Hanging up, Tony turned to Stephen. "CNN's live with the story."

Stephen's eyes closed again. He exhaled. "Okay."

"We're almost to the building. We'll pull into the garage and take the elevator straight up."

"Okay."

"Okay." Sighing, Tony softly repeated, "Okay."

Unlike when Happy had dropped them off in front of the building's grand entrance, this time they snuck in through its bowels. There were only a few other drivers navigating the underground parking garage and none of them recognized Tony Stark's car on sight. "Get somewhere secure," Tony instructed Happy when they stepped out of the town car, right near the elevator. "I don't want to see you talking to a single journalist."

Rolling down his window a little more, Happy leaned out of the car and stared at Stephen. "Boss, seriously, what's going on?"

"I'll explain it all later. We need to get into my condo, and you need to get somewhere that no one associates with Stark Industries. Okay? Okay." Happy did not like Stephen, he concluded as Happy shot one last, suspicious look their way, then proceeded toward the garage exit. However, Happy Hogan was about number three hundred on their list of topics to worry about, and he filed it away accordingly.

They made it into Tony's penthouse without being seen. At least the night gave them that one lucky roll of the dice after an endless series of snake eyes. "J.A.R.V.I.S.," Tony announced as the door locked. "Find every current media story about Stephen Strange. And make the windows opaque."

One entire wall of the living room was actually a display that could light up with movies, schematics,
or whatever Tony most needed at the moment. Because of its size, they'd be able to see the full scope of media coverage. First came the CNN story. Nothing in it was a surprise, though Stephen still cringed to see himself pulling out those spells in the mundane world of Metro-General's ER. (That hospital/magic overlap wasn't supposed to happen for years.)

Other stations had apparently gotten CNN's permission to share their footage. Though the CNN logo stayed in miniature, it now appeared next to ABC News' logo. CBS. NBC. Fox. MSNBC. CNBC. Local New York Stations. The BBC... wait, the BBC? "It's international?" Stephen whispered in horror. "Already?"

Tony swallowed as stations from other countries began to filter in. "Looks like it."

"Are we going to sell all of these stations on the idea that I was using your repulsor technology?" Stephen asked shakily as one station zoomed in to a close-up of his hands and the spell shields they wielded. Right now, he would gladly accept his normal, scarred fingers in exchange for not being trapped inside this ridiculous, nightmare absurdity of a world.

Tony swallowed again. "Dunno."

Stations were muted by default, but tapping a screen cued its audio feed. Since they'd started this whole disaster, Stephen tapped CNN first.

"Doctor Stephen Strange, a neurosurgeon at the hospital where this occurred—"

NBC. "The situation escalated once famous billionaire Tony Stark was threatened. The two men are romantically involved—"

A local station. "Metro-General hospital has no comment—"

Fox. "—Reached out to Stark Industries—"

ABC. "After Tony Stark rushed the gunman, Doctor Stephen Strange performed this display—"

CTV. "—Whatever the energy's origins, it was able to deflect a bullet at point-blank range."

CBS. "—Seen anything like that type of energy before?" "Never."

BBC. "These extraordinary abilities demonstrated by Doctor Strange—"

"I am not that fascinating," Stephen snapped as he spun to face Tony. Behind him, an entire wall of television broadcasts ran his accidental power display on repeat. Screens occasionally shrank to make room for a new story that J.A.R.V.I.S. had located.

That one minute inside a Manhattan emergency room was really not fascinating. Remotely. This worldwide attention was ridiculous. Just because an incredibly famous billionaire had nearly sacrificed himself bloodily on-camera, only to be saved at the last half-second by his supposed true love who pulled out magical powers unlike anything this 2007 world had ever seen—

Oh God, he was beyond screwed.

"So what do I do?" Stephen asked hollowly after turning back to stare at the media mosaic of him. A few silent seconds later, he added, "Tony, I'm seriously asking you this. What do I do?"

"Well." Tony walked up next to him. "Going by my experience... you call a press conference."

A press conference? Like the one that had confirmed Tony's role as Iron Man? The first, famous and
infamous superhero of the modern age? Oh God, this could not be happening. Stephen Strange was not Tony Stark. He didn't want the entire world's attention relentlessly on his every move, he did not want to play up anything for any cameras, and he definitely didn't want to see yearbook photos of himself on Fox News.

"You'll do great," Tony said, unconvincingly.

"I always wanted to be famous," Stephen said blankly as a few screens flickered over to Gurdeep being interviewed, "for my talent."

"Technically... that is happening."

"At surgery. And not TMZ and Entertainment Tonight famous, but journal famous. I wanted to be a neurological god among children. Not an Us Magazine article."

Tony stared at the wall for a few seconds more, then turned to Stephen. "Look. You have to deal with this. Sorry. I don't have a better answer. It's happened, it's going to keep happening, and if we don't make a public statement then other people will decide on it for us."

Normally, Stephen loathed admitting weakness. Feeling out of control of a situation was a cue for him to lash out, not ask for help. And yes, some part of him did desperately want to yell at Tony for running toward the gun.

But if there was one person who knew what it was like to manage media obsession toward the modern world's first superhero, it was Tony Stark. And if Stephen didn't manage things properly, then the universe might still break. "Okay," he said after a long, calming breath. His face still tingled with stress, but at least anxiety had loosened its icy grip on his heart. "What's step one for coming up with a public statement?"

"Can I call Pepper back? I'll have to explain... at least some things, but she's much better at crisis PR than I am. And we want to grab her ear before Obadiah does."

Obadiah? Great. Now they had to worry about Obadiah again. "Fine," Stephen said. "Tell her whatever you have to. We need to get things under control. If she can help... let her help."

It felt like he was in Hong Kong again. On that day, he'd been a novice in the field left staring up at some horror beyond imagination. When it came to being a public superhero, he was a novice. Further losing control of this situation might end reality as surely as Dormammu could.

Yes. He'd accept whatever help he could get. From anyone. Nodding, Tony retrieved his phone and disappeared into an office.

"Well. I guess I'm giving up surgery again," Stephen murmured with a heavy heart. As he watched Gurdeep speak on muted stations, he tried to imagine what Charles Findlay would say. Stephen couldn't. Any reaction was impossible to predict, for not a single person in 2007 had any context for this. No one had seen the skies open above New York. No odd portals had aligned themselves over London while an Asgardian god fought to save the world. No one had even readjusted their thinking to consider that Tony Stark, infamous weapons manufacturer, might personally protect people rather than arm others.

Stephen might be able to come out of this with some semblance of his life intact, but it'd never be a life that involved surgery. No one would trust the man with the flashy magic show to perform a perfectly precise operation. "I thought I'd have years." He was going to be ready to give up surgery again... after years.
Sighing, he raised his hand and studied it. He really was destined to give up the operating room, then. "I always wind up with you," Stephen said as he flicked his fingers and watched an intricate energy shield bloom into existence above them. Its glow ebbed and flowed like a river under sunlight, and he let his mind go blank for a few meditative seconds.

When a silent attack nearly impacted his skull, Stephen brought up that shield just in time. As energy fizzled against his left hand's shield, his empty right hand arced forward. A long, glowing coil emerged from it and whipped toward whoever had ambushed him.

The strike landed true, but when he instinctively pulled back to knock his attacker off balance, nothing happened. Surprise cut through his adrenaline. Stephen blinked away the blur of lights and tried to focus on whoever had attacked.

His surprise at the answer nearly let another strike get through. Instincts again moved his left hand's shield just in time, against what he now saw was an energy blast designed not to kill, but to incapacitate. With his eyes adjusted, Stephen was clearly able to see who stood before him. It was a tall, slender figure, confident in her stance, wreathed in energy around both hands, and without a single strand of hair on her skull.

For all her steely determination, the Ancient One appeared entirely taken aback when Stephen's reaction to her was to smile.

"Tony," Stephen said with utter relief as he gestured to the yellow-clad woman. At some point Tony had emerged from his office to stare in shock at the new arrival and the noisy damage the two mystics had caused. "Look!"

"I am looking at the Last Airbender in my living room, yeah," Tony said warily. "Should I be looking? Or is this a 'call 911' thing?"

"No, it's..." Exhaling, Stephen opened both his hands wide, released the energy they'd wielded, and walked toward the Ancient One. Her shields didn't drop, but she seemed nothing but warily bemused at his behavior. "You don't know me yet, but I know you."

"I am very curious as to how that might be," the Ancient One replied. "Standing before me, I see someone who has brought the teachings of our order into public view and yet was unknown to everyone at Kamar-Taj. You have taken secrets that have protected the world for millennia." Her gaze flicked to the wall of channels. "And put them on E! News."

"Long story," Stephen said, "but I come from—"

"Hey," Tony cut in, still frowning. "Boundaries." The word carried the weight of all reality. If Stephen said too much, Tony clearly feared, he could collapse the paradox.

"Trust me, Tony. If Pepper can help with a public statement... the Ancient One can help with everything else." Her eyebrows raised at his casual use of her name, but Stephen continued, "Call Pepper back, keep working on PR. The Ancient One and I are going to talk." Tony still hesitated.

"This is the luckiest break we could have gotten. Trust me, Tony."

"All right," he eventually said and retreated to his office. The door clicked shut.

"Mr. Strange," the Ancient One said in arch tones once they were alone. "You're acting very familiar with me. I cannot understand why."

After a considering moment, Stephen angled his fingers into a familiar position, then moved his hands deliberately across his chest like he was opening the Eye of Agamotto. "Because I do know
you. Eventually."

Real surprise bloomed in her eyes. Understanding followed a moment later. "I see." Nodding slowly, the Ancient One strode around Tony's living room. She ignored the damage their spells had accidentally done to a few unlucky pieces of furniture, but did watch the wall of news coverage with an unshakably calm expression. "I believe we should talk," she abruptly said, and turned back to him.

"I'll get us some drinks."

He should have expected this, but 2007 Tony did not keep tea stocked in his condo. Their options were water, hangover Gatorade, liquor, or coffee. There were some lemons to squeeze into the water, at least. "There was a temporal disturbance," Stephen summarized as they settled themselves into a pair of armchairs. "To resolve a paradox, it sent Tony Stark and myself—or rather, our awareness—more than a decade into the past. We've been forced to relive our lives to avoid that paradox collapsing and taking reality with it."

The Ancient One took a sip of water as she considered that. "In the time from which you left... I'm dead. Aren't I?" His hesitation made her smile. "Do you fear that I would reject my inevitable future?"

"I have to fear any change," Stephen admitted. "Right now, I'm a lynchpin for the Time Stone." No matter what metaphor was used—house of cards, Jenga tower, anything—it was all too easy to imagine making one wrong move that finally brought existence toppling down.

Her head tilted slightly. He'd grown used to her tiny, deliberate movements, and so knew that this was the equivalent of someone else's open disbelief. "Knowing me, do you fear that I. She emphasized the pronoun and gestured to herself. "Would reject whatever fate lies before me? If that too would protect the Time Stone?"

Stephen took a drink. Consideration lined his forehead when he looked back to her. "I want to say something to you. If we can have this first discussion, then we can talk about anything you want to after that. I was your student, but in this I need you to see me as your equal. I've experienced things no one could have taught me and have come from the far side of things you've never seen."

Her face creased with a broader smile. It was not of total respect. Stephen could say he wished to be the Ancient One's equal all he liked, but that was an awful lot to ask of someone who'd just torpedoed millennia of mystical secrecy via CNN and then immediately demanded to be treated on par with the Sorcerer Supreme. "And what is that, Mr. Strange?"

"Your longevity and power is fueled by rituals contained within the Book of Cagliostro."

The Ancient One said nothing, and did not move.

"You draw upon energies within the Dark Dimension, the home of Dormammu."

A very slight smile returned to her face, but she remained silent.

"I'm not saying this to judge you, blackmail you, or anything of the sort. I understand why you did it." Stephen leaned closer. "I let half of the universe die in a bet that they could ultimately be saved. I won that bet. You're doing what you're doing for a reason, too."

Her smile remained in place, but it was like a statue's. With eyes gleaming, the Ancient One repeated deliberately, "In the time in which you belong, I'm dead. Aren't I?"
This time, Stephen didn't hesitate. "Yes."

"Am I speaking with my successor as Sorcerer Supreme, then?"

"Can't say that it's on my business cards, no."

"But I imagine that it will be."

Had that actually been a compliment? "A madman named Thanos successfully collected all six
Infinity Stones and used them to wipe out half of all life in the universe, myself included. The
solution to that nightmare introduced an infection of sorts to the Time Stone, which ultimately led to
the paradox that marooned the two of us in 2007."

"Since you 'let' half of all life be wiped out, in your own words, then I presume you allowed this
Thanos to collect the Time Stone."

"Yes. I used the Stone to visit possible futures and found that one possible solution. It was our only
path toward victory, as narrow as it was. So again," Stephen said emphatically, "you being fueled by
Dormammu? I have zero room to judge that decision. We both have needed to make some trade-offs
to do what must be done. What must be done."

She nodded slowly. As Stephen had known would happen, this was the one other person in the
world who could understand and accept the full scope of what they faced. Since he didn't have a
way to easily get to Nepal, visiting Kamar-Taj to consult with her had never crossed his mind. It
should have, though. "The thought of someone collecting all six Stones is... unfortunate. Is that how
I die?"

"No," Stephen admitted. "You die..." He sighed. "You die saving me against someone else, well
before Thanos arrives."

"Also unfortunate," the Ancient One murmured. "Thanos was able to pursue the Stones without any
Sorcerer Supreme in place to protect them. The world was left so vulnerable."

"I was the master of the New York Sanctum," Stephen added, and sounded very slightly defensive
despite himself.

"I'm sure you helped."

Grumbling, Stephen leaned back and automatically turned his gaze toward the wall of windows.
He'd forgotten that Tony had made them opaque, and so only a blank grey curve greeted him instead
of the lights of early Christmas morning. It felt like they were hermetically sealed against the world
outside. Isolation couldn't last forever. "Thanos doesn't happen for many years to come, so that
discussion can happen later. What we need to decide now are my immediate next actions."

Hearing the door open behind him again, and realizing that Tony had rejoined them, Stephen turned
away from the windows. "One move I could make is moving immediately to Kamar-Taj. In Nepal," he
clarified to Tony. "The central home for the masters of the mystic arts."

"I guess you could do that," Tony said after a significant pause. An odd, unhappy weight filled his
voice.

"Although that would be incredibly unfair to you," Stephen sighed a second later. "Leaving you to
face all of these questions alone while I go into hiding."

"You cannot come to Kamar-Taj," the Ancient One immediately said.
"Oh. Well. That answers that, then, and thanks so much."

Gesturing Tony to drag a third seat into the cluster, the Ancient One waited for him to join them before asking, "What is your intention with letting your known future play out?"

"Work with her, Tony," Stephen encouraged when Tony still hesitated. "We can tell her anything. It's all right."

"Okay," Tony relented. "The original plan was that we keep things going smoothly until I become Iron Man in 2010—"

"Iron Man," the Ancient One repeated. "I sense a heavy burden from that name, but so much promise."

"Uh. Yeah." Tony shot a disbelieving look toward Stephen, but Stephen met it with a chilly one in return. He’d tolerate Tony's disrespect toward himself, but he needed to give the Ancient One her dues. "I save the world a few times, along with some teammates who also save the world, then I meet this guy—" His thumb jerked toward Stephen. "And half the universe dies. Then it comes back. That's what we lived through and we'll do exactly what happened before, or as close to it as we can manage. We know it works."

"I see." The Ancient One nodded slowly. "If you carry out your plan as intended, you will inevitably end all existence and collapse our universe into a frozen singularity."

Both men hesitated, their mouths slightly open and eyebrows slightly furrowed, and said nothing.

"The first time this sequence of events played out, an infection was introduced to the Time Stone. If you let it play out in the same way, that infection will reoccur. The paradox it creates will send you back to this point in time." She leaned forward slightly and her voice grew more emphatic. "If you allow for the Stones to be collected as they were before, then you are damning yourselves to be forever caught in this repeating loop. Eventually the stress will become too much and the paradox will fracture."

Stephen had assumed that they *had* to let Thanos triumph and then be defeated in the same way as before, because that was the only way the Stone had shown him to win. But the Ancient One was right, of course. The way he'd seen had saved everyone else, but months later it sent the two of them into this time paradox loop. Another repeat playback of history would just make them relive their lives a third time, and then a fourth, until it all became too much for the Stone to handle and time ceased to exist in their universe.

"So we do have to stop him," Tony said with a far-off stare. He'd apparently come to the same conclusion. "But how?"

"With preparation, and research, and the world's cooperation." The Ancient One turned her gaze sharply on Stephen. "Such a threat is exactly the sort of foe I'm sworn to protect against. As is every master of the mystic arts, including yourself."

Stephen nodded once, and didn't argue. She was clearly going somewhere with this.

"Now that the world is aware of our existence, we have two paths before us. One: retreat behind our walls. As we bolster our forces against Thanos' inevitable arrival, we lock out the rest of the world and train more intently than ever before. Or," she continued with that faint smile of hers, "two, we do not make the rest of the world our enemy. Retreating behind our walls is easier, but thanks to your actions tonight, it would make the world our foe as surely as Thanos.
"Mr. Stark," the Ancient One continued in the silence. "What were you discussing in your office?"

Being the center of her attention caught Tony by surprise. "Uh. Well, I was talking with my personal assistant about what PR statement to make. Whether I should do a press conference, basically."

"No," Stephen realized. His path was unfortunately clear, as little as he liked to see it stretch ahead of him. "You shouldn't. Have Potts arrange a conference... for me."

"You're serious," Tony said after studying him. "You're really going to do it."

"I have to. The world won't be able to accept magic. Not in 2007. They're going to hunt down any information about us, because there's nothing else to hold their attention." Exhaling, Stephen nodded slowly. He'd accepted his inevitable deaths while walking up to Dormammu and Thanos. He could do this. "If we acknowledge things, we can be the revealed protectors who've historically operated from the shadows. But if we try to stay hidden, we'll look like some threat straight out of a bad conspiracy theory.

"It's like you said," Stephen finished, nodding again. "If you don't make a statement, the world decides on one for you. Arrange the conference."

"Okay," Tony hesitantly said. When Stephen remained silent, he said again, "Okay. I'll go make the call."

"You wish this story had never gotten out. You're not seeking glory," the Ancient One noted.

"Not this glory." Stephen smiled slightly as he heard Tony's office door click. She'd love this story. "After you died, Dormammu came to consume Earth."

"Really," she said. Her eyebrows rose in faint surprise. "And how did you handle that?"

"Set up a loop with the Time Stone upon entering the Dark Dimension. Every time he killed me, it reset back to that point."

The Ancient One paused for a moment to consider that, then actually chuckled. "He must have become quite frustrated. Time is outside of his comprehension."

"Oh yeah, he was really pissed."

"Clever, on your part. Very well done."

"Thanks." He'd resisted the guidance of his medical mentors all through med school, his internship, and residency. No one was given much respect until they proved themselves to Stephen, which earned him a talking-to more than once. If not for his outstanding performance, he was sure in retrospect that he would have been dropped from the programs due to his sheer, unrelenting arrogance.

After rummaging through those years in his mind, Stephen wryly added, "And thanks for kicking me around a lot when I first came to Kamar-Taj. It helped."

She didn't chuckle, but actually laughed outright. "Did I?"

"Your true calling is at a boot camp. A mean one." Smiling ruefully, Stephen shook his head and added, "I was with you when you died. You told me something that I desperately needed to hear and it changed my life from that point on out. I owe you everything."
His phone buzzed. Only then did Stephen realize that Tony had silenced it remotely; its notification screen was filled with bewildered texts from co-workers, distant relatives, and old classmates. All of them had arrived silently. Tony's own text, though, alerted itself. *She's got a space reserved in the building lobby. Give me another okay and she'll call the press.*

Stephen studied that notification. His life was about to change even more than it had between Metro-General and Kamar-Taj. "I learned not to fear failure," he continued to the Ancient One without looking up, "and that there are greater concerns than me, and what I personally want."

His fingers moved. **Call the press.**

"We will need to work together to come up with a plan against Thanos," the Ancient One added after his stress had swelled, then ebbed. "But I believe you will be... busy for the immediate future."

"I'm sure I will be," Stephen sighed. He blinked, straightened, and added, "I don't have a sling ring here. Do you have an extra—" He snagged the ring out of the air. "Thanks. And. Weird question."

"There's little you could say that would surprise me, by this point," the Ancient One replied wryly.

"The Cloak of Levitation picked me in the 'real' timeline and honestly, I miss it. Could I get into the New York Sanctum to see if it... I don't know, recognizes me somehow?"

She wasn't surprised, per say, but hadn't expected him to mention the Cloak, or even know what it was. "I'm certain we can come to some sort of arrangement. I note that you're not asking about the Time Stone, however."

Snorting, Stephen shook his head. "That thing was coughing and sneezing all over me. So to speak. I prescribe it some significant bed rest. Maybe by the time we get back to the date it paradoxed out on us, it'll calm down."

"I see," the Ancient One said slowly, and nodded. "I see. Well. I should give you a moment to prepare yourself. You're about to embark on an unexplored path." Smiling—and actually seeming to mean it—she stood and rested one of her hands on Stephen's before journeying back to Kamar-Taj through a shower of sparks.

"I can do this," Stephen whispered to himself once he was alone. "I really can."

"They're on their way," Tony said a few seconds later as he walked back into the living room. Pausing, he looked around him. "She left?"

"She left." Stephen held up the ring. "You won't need to take your jets between L.A. and New York any more. I can portal you, now."

"Well, that makes my life significantly easier," Tony admitted. After hesitating, he bit his lip, studied Stephen, and then walked slowly toward him. "Are you ready? I know this big stage isn't for you, but..."

"But it's got to happen. It's all right. I can help introduce the masters of the mystic arts—"

"You have got to get a shorter name."

Stephen smiled. Honestly, Tony wasn't wrong. "Introduce them to the world. An entire order of protectors, trained and ready to go. In 2007. It's a faster, bigger start than in the last timeline. Maybe this'll stop Thanos."
Tony smiled, too, but his was sad and lopsided. With his characteristic lack of concern for personal boundaries, he sat on Stephen's armrest and looked down at him. "Sorry I ran for the gun. It was a lot... a whole lot of muscle memory. Even after I retired, I still wore that armband with my construction nanos. I just assumed I'd be able to do something to stop him."

"It's okay."

"Yeah?" Tony's eyebrows slightly rose. "You sure?"

"It's okay," Stephen repeated. "If I'd been more logical, I could have... I don't know. Done something with his feet to knock him over. Something less visible, and less obviously tied to me. But..." He shrugged. "You were going to die. Didn't think of anything else. Muscle memory."

Accepting that, Tony nodded slowly. At the next line, his hand rested on Stephen's shoulder. "And I'm sorry that you probably don't get to operate any more. Really, really sorry."

This one did hurt. A lot. "I definitely don't get to." Stephen's hand rose to rest on Tony's. Normally they wouldn't act like this without a camera trained on them, but they could both use a bit of honest human comfort from the only honest companion in their 2007 life. "But thanks."

"Why don't I move to New York?" Tony suggested. As Stephen looked up at him, he continued, "Then my default can be being here and going there only when they need me, instead of vice versa. I mean... I assume you could use the help."

" Seriously?"

"Yeah, seriously. We just met your mentor for the magic stuff." Tony chuckled slightly. "I get to be your mentor for the hero stuff."

"You think you're going to be my mentor?" Stephen echoed, but his voice remained light. The two of them were so far away from where they'd started, before the universe ended.

"I do. Because what's kicking off tonight is a billion times more important than my company. We're starting the fight earlier than expected. Nothing matters more than the fight. You're going to need help, and not just with logistics and research and magic." Tony's gaze dropped. "It gets hard."

It'd been easy enough to live alone in the past when he had surgery to fill his life, but now... "I'd really appreciate that, Tony. Truly." With a wry smile, Stephen added, "Do you think you could move up your suit a little?"

Grinning, Tony added, "You mean: and take some of the attention off you? I can probably manage something. And... you know, I won't even need a cave to inspire it. I just won't be able to stand knowing that my boyfriend's going into danger alone."

"God," Stephen laughed, only to realize that he'd never moved his hand off Tony's comforting grip. "Between my save tonight and you doing that, the public's going to think we've got quite a love story going on."

"We'll call People Magazine. They'd kill for an exclusive."

"Don't you dare." Exhaling, Stephen asked, "So. Is the press ready?"

Tony slid his hand out from under Stephen's, checked his phone, and nodded. "They're ready. All the major stations are down in the lobby. We can take the elevator and I can hang back in it, or come with you, or... whatever you're most comfortable with."
"We could do that," Stephen slowly said. "We could play it very conservatively and manage their response as best as we can." He glanced up at where Tony stood above his chair. "Is that how you made your debut?"

After a considering moment, a smile slowly spread on Tony's face. "You know damn well that it wasn't."

"Right." The modern age of superheroes, that launched the world toward accepting powers and foes previously unheard of, had started with a bang. It'd worked pretty well that time. "Call security, get things prepared."

Two minutes later, an empty space in the Time-Warner Center lobby had been cleared of all but a cluster of journalists' microphones. The journalists themselves lingered in a confused half-circle around the spot, occasionally glancing at the elevator and wondering when it would arrive with their promised interview.

Stephen watched that feed through the security camera that Tony had hacked, then looked over to Tony. "Ready?"

"You're asking me this?" Tony laughed. "Yeah." He reached over and adjusted a stray lock of Stephen's hair that'd probably been mussed by his frantic escape from the ER. "Ready."

Ready, Stephen told himself. Ready. After one more deep breath, he raised his hand.

In the lobby, journalists blinked in surprise at what looked like stray sparks from a welder's torch, then looked up to see if someone was working on ceiling struts above them. They soon looked uncertainly back down. As the sparks expanded from a single point into a swirling circle, the group took a collective, hesitant step back. Their camera operators were well-trained, though; this was all on film.

When Stephen stepped through the portal to his spot in front of the microphones, they gasped. Behind him, seen through the portal, Tony watched with a small, satisfied smile.

"Hello, everyone," Stephen said simply after a moment's pause. He didn't need to showboat any more; that portal had been enough. He could see the gleam of his magic reflected in the camera lenses trained on him. Through them, all of Earth was watching. "I'm Doctor Stephen Strange, and this world is far bigger than you think."
"He's really doing it," Tony murmured from inside his condo. A portal still swirled in front of him, and through it he could see both Stephen and the crowd of reporters. The portal had stunned them so much that they hardly knew what to ask. Softball after softball had been lobbed Stephen's way.

How long had he been doing this? "For years, though I caught on quickly."

Were there others like him? "Yes. There are many others who have protected our world from the shadows. You'll meet them soon enough."

Why was he presenting himself as a doctor? "Because I am a doctor. Check my history, call some references. This is just another way to save lives."

Why had he revealed himself now?

Smiling, Stephen looked over his shoulder toward Tony and shrugged. It was 'come on' and 'why not?' rolled up into one expression, and Tony dutifully stepped forward into the building lobby. When the crowd inhaled sharply at the transition between 'we can see Stark through that thing' and 'oh my God, he actually just appeared here, the same way Strange did,' it was hard not to laugh. Boy. The world really had been naive back in the pre-Iron Man days. (And pre-Thor, and pre-Chitauri, and...)

With Tony at his side, Stephen turned back to answer the question. "Tony was in danger. It was an easy decision."

Boggling, a reporter asked, "Mr. Stark, did you know about this before tonight?"

There was an obvious answer: 'no.' If Tony said 'no,' then tonight would be quite the romantic tale. Tony would have fallen for someone with a hidden double life, whose spectacular secret appeared at the last possible second to save him. And conversely, saying 'yes' instead would mean that Tony Stark had also been hiding things. He'd be picked apart, grilled by Obadiah and the board, and dissected in every media outlet from the Enquirer to the Wall Street Journal. It'd be so much easier to say 'no.'

But. But. Saying 'yes' would mean that Tony could help shoulder some of the burden from Stephen. As Stephen clearly wanted—based on his request to move up the suit's debut—some of the world's attention could instead focus on Tony. The media's attention would be slightly less maddening and they could face it as a unified front.

Tony could handle Obadiah and the board. He could handle suspicion from the news. The answer was 'yes.'

"I surprised the hell out of him," Stephen said at the end of Tony's consideration, before he could actually say anything. "As you saw in the hospital. No, I didn't tell Tony anything before tonight."

Tony blinked at Stephen before he remembered to control his expression, then turned to the journalists and shrugged. "Merry Christmas to me, I guess. My magic guy saved my life." Okay, they'd need to talk about that one later.

"Mr. Stark," a local reporter practically sputtered. She appeared to be on the verge of short-circuiting. "You are known for your technological innovation. Your scientific applications."
"That doesn't sound like an actual question, but not gonna lie, I think I'm a fan of press conferences where you guys just stand there and say nice things about me."

"How can you be talking about magic?" she demanded. The word dripped equally with disdain and disbelief. It was apparently a sentiment shared by the people there, and they all waited expectantly for Tony's response.

For an answer, Tony turned and gestured at the portal still swirling behind them. "Well," Tony then said. "I've got eyes."

"I will be answering more questions soon," Stephen cut in, "but considering I nearly watched Tony get shot tonight, I hope you'll understand that—"

"What are you doing next?"

"—I'll only take one more question for now," Stephen finished wryly. "What I'm going to next is to get some sleep and then have a relaxing and very merry Christmas. If you want to follow up after that—"

"Call my people," Tony interrupted. "Don't call his hospital. They're busy saving lives." The journalists began to clamor again for attention, and so Tony raised his voice and said emphatically, "No more questions for now."

He was used to having more questions shouted at him, regardless, and so Tony gathered his energy for shutting down other requests. Instead, Stephen guided him back a few steps though the portal, then let it shut in front of them. Oh, right. That was a much better way to make an exit.

"So that went pretty well," Tony immediately concluded.

"Pretty well?"

"You answered the key questions and seemed confident, which is huge. You didn't act like you'd been caught at something. But," Tony added, "I'm not totally sure of the narrative that'll come out of your magic. It could still be a little 'conspiracy theory.'" Off Stephen's uncertainty, Tony added, "I think we should lean in hard to how you saved my life. You adore me so much, were willing to throw away all secrecy because of it, blah blah true love. Gooey emotions play really well."

"Sounds like a plan. How do we—"

"Pepper writes a press release, ASAP."

"All right." Stephen exhaled. Though he'd made it through to the far side of that press conference, the process had clearly overwhelmed him. 'Overwhelmed Stephen' wasn't a sight that Tony was used to seeing, even after their ejection into the past. "Whatever you say. Put me up against an incursion of Maltorvian eye demons and I'm fine, but I have no idea how to deal with the mass media like this."

Tony paused before responding. Yeah, he couldn't just let this question pass; his brain would keep circling back to demand an answer. "I've gotta know: are those demons a walking grape bunch of eyeballs, or one big Monsters, Inc. eyeball?"

"They actually infect someone's eye and then..." Stephen raised a fist in front of one of his eyes and then spread it, like his fingers were an opening mouth full of teeth.

"That is disgusting and do not mention anything that weird in interviews." Nodding, Tony
continued, "Sparkling, pretty Disney princess magic like your portal? Fine."

"Disney princess?" Stephen echoed dubiously.

"Badass Lord of the Rings magic, fine. But steer clear of any Cronenberg special effects, all right? We've gotta establish your reputation first, and people like Elsa and Gandalf way more than The Fly." Tony hesitated. "Elsa doesn't exist yet and I have got to tell my broker to buy some stock."

"Tony," Stephen said with an equal mixture of impatience and poorly-hidden amusement, "press release?"

"Right. Right. Sorry, I just enjoy the hell out of this side of things." Tony began to back into his bedroom's hallway, pointing at Stephen as he did. "Get some sleep! Stay here tonight! I'll handle this." He really did love the public side of heroics, and doing it for someone else was also weirdly enjoyable. Over the years he'd learned what the public responded to, for good and ill, and he intended to put those lessons to excellent use.

"Did you watch?" Tony asked with a grin as Pepper appeared at the far end of the video call he'd just placed.

"I watched," Pepper confirmed. She sounded tired. Tony's good mood deflated slightly. "So you saw how great it went?" he prompted. Why wasn't she into this?

"It went good. Right up until when you told the press to let me handle all of their questions."

Laughing weakly, Pepper tucked a loose strand of hair behind one ear. "Mr. Stark, before I answer anyone's questions, I need to ask some questions."

"Sure," Tony said hesitantly, "but remember, you said that you like Stephen. Not that you were going to say otherwise, but I just wanted to remind you of that conversation: you like how I've been acting around Stephen. Those were your own words. I'm holding you to them. Okay, go."

She gave him that thin-lipped smile that asked are you done? "To be fair, when I said that, I didn't know he'd been lying to you about... about whatever it is that he does. I thought you were dating a doctor."

"I am dating a doctor. I even watched him operate."

"But did he tell you about what else he does? The crazy, crazy things he does?" Pepper shook her head slowly, then sighed. "Now I feel a little weird for saying all those nice things about him."

This was not going well. "You shouldn't."

"Tony. Please just let me say this." Pepper looked slightly to the side, breaking their eye contact. "I did recognize how you've changed ever since you met Stephen that night, but I figured it was all good. Excuse me for saying this, but you just seemed more... responsible. Now that I see him doing that 'magic' stuff, though, everything looks different."

Tony's frown deepened. "Different how?"

Concern lined Pepper's face. "Well. Another word I could use instead of 'more responsible' is... controlled. You've been acting controlled."

Tony seriously did not like where this was going. This was like Obadiah's suspicion over their
supposed romance, but was a hundred times more painful to hear out of that face that he'd always trusted. "Pepper, come on. This is getting ridiculous."

"You had me putting in an offer for a three million dollar condo, after you'd already signed the papers for his new surgical suite and research endowment? And once the condo offer was in, you threw yourself in front of a bullet?" Pepper swallowed hard. Words came out thick and choked. "I nearly watched you die tonight, Tony. You stood in front of a gun when you have never, ever taken a risk like that before."

Whatever reaction he'd expected, it was not this. Stephen saving Tony's life was supposed to look romantic, not like he'd successfully extracted everything he needed from Tony's wallet and could end the scam he'd been running. "What, have you been talking to Obadiah and Happy? You don't need to be suspicious of Stephen. He saved me. You saw the footage."

"I saw the footage of you running toward a gunman!" Pepper protested. "For no reason! With no vest, weapon of your own, anything! And then Stephen even admitted that you had no idea he could do anything... weird." Pepper knuckled away one frustrated tear. "Maybe I did talk to Obadiah and Happy and Rhodey, Tony. Maybe the people who know you the best have reason to be worried about you trying to commit suicide live on CNN."

"I was working on repulsor tech," Tony said after a long, painful pause. Stephen had already come up with this potential lie earlier; he might as well make use of it.

Pepper paused, then asked in confused frustration, "What?"

"I thought I had a force blast that could knock that guy down, so he wouldn't hurt Dr. Bhatt. That's the guy who helped me after my concussion." God, he hated lying to Pepper. "It's something I've been working on to pitch to the civilian tech division, for individual self-defense. But it bugged out. Stephen saved me, Pepper. He had nothing to do with me running toward that gun. He actually yelled at me about it. A lot."

"But." She sighed. "Would you even know if he was doing something to your mind? You did start dating him after a head injury. And he specializes in brains."

"I don't even know what I can tell you at this point," Tony groaned. "Stephen's okay, he's not controlling my mind, and he was just as pissed as you are that I ran toward the gun. If you don't believe me, ask Happy. The partition was up inside the car, but he still could have heard some yelling. If Stephen had meant for me to do that, he wouldn't have yelled. I just wanted to use my repulsor tech. That's all."

"Okay," Pepper accepted after a long pause. "I can tell that to Obi so he calms down a little." Right. Obi. Great. Tony was going to have to show off his supposed repulsor tech, because Obadiah would certainly want to see it. "But can you please just look at this from my perspective? Our perspective?"

With a heavy heart, Tony tried to do so. He then acknowledged that Pepper did have a point: if you were someone who'd never experienced a year beyond 2007, none of this looked great. Tony had handed Stephen millions of dollars out of nowhere, just like Obadiah had complained about. Tony had acted madly in love with someone completely outside of his normal type, just like Happy was suspicious over. Tony had run directly toward a loaded gun just before that possibly-suspicious boyfriend of his revealed magical powers, as Pepper had described.

Even if they'd batted down earlier objections from the people who belonged in this timeline, eventually the problems piled up too high. And unfortunately, Tony couldn't tell them the truth of it all. Not even Pepper. "I promise you. I swear to you. On my life, you can trust me with this:
Stephen's not a threat to me or anyone else, he is a good guy, and I'm in this with both eyes wide open."

"Okay," Pepper sighed after an even longer pause. "Please just promise me that I won't have to ever see you face down a gun again?"

"I promise," Tony immediately said, but felt regret fill him at the lie. How long would it be before building his first suit? Months, maybe. It'd only be months until he betrayed this pledge to Pepper. Soon, Tony would face down far worse things than a Saturday night special.

Maybe some day he could tell her about Thanos, being ejected back into time, and even their future wedding. Maybe. But in the meantime, he shouldn't have been surprised at these reactions. Pepper had always hated seeing Tony rush into danger. He should have respected that instead of diving in with his fully-aware enthusiasm and assuming she'd equal his excitement. "I'm sorry I just assumed that you'd handle the press stuff," Tony added. "It's just that neither of us are as good at it as you are."

"Flattery will get you—"

"Everywhere?" Tony interrupted with a smile.

"Well." Pepper considered that. "Halfway there." Then, blessedly, she managed a small smile of her own. "Do you want to do any follow-up to tonight? Before the morning news stories come in?"

"Yeah. I really want to emphasize that Stephen did not expect to be revealing any of those powers. He only did it because I was in danger." Sighing, Tony added, "He knows he'll probably have to give up surgery, which he loves. That's totally my fault. But don't make it sound that sad in the press release, obviously. Make it all happy and romantic."

"What can he do, exactly?" Pepper wondered. "Not to include any of this in the press release, but just for me."

"I think energy manipulation? Basically?" That seemed to be the connective thread between all of the extremely odd and varied shit he'd seen Stephen pull off. "Dimensions and stuff."

"Wow. Okay." Exhaling, Pepper ran a hand roughly through her hair. "Right. We'll play up the romance angle. He changed his whole life to save yours? Yeah. That actually works, I'll run with that phrasing. Are you two going to be available for questions tomorrow? I might need to verify some things before I respond to the press."

"You've got it." Tony's small smile mostly masked the heartache he felt. He'd lied to Pepper about everything by this point, and it was only going to get worse. He couldn't even imagine how she'd react when he deliberately threw himself back into the line of fire. It was going to be one circuitous path back to where the two of them were supposed to be, wasn't it? "We'll stay here tomorrow. And Merry Christmas, Pepper. Buy yourself something nice. On me."

"Not quite Christmas in California, yet. But I will take that under advisement." As her smile faded, Pepper said more seriously, "Take care of yourself, Tony. I don't want to see you on the news like that again."

"I'll do my very best." Until I build my suit. Then all bets are off.

As the call ended, Tony again concluded that Stephen really shouldn't have said that Tony was in the dark about his magic. With how it'd played out, Stephen was an outsider who'd pulled one over on Tony. Now Pepper, Happy, Obadiah, and Rhodey apparently all held some level of suspicion
toward Stephen.

Well, they had fought off worse things than a little suspicion, Tony reassured himself as he swapped into something more comfortable, then climbed into bed. Surely, they could handle this. "J.A.R.V.I.S.," Tony called once he was cocooned inside his blankets. "Find the weirdest stories being run about Stephen and me."

A few seconds later, Tony scowled at the screen. "J.A.R.V.I.S., file a complaint with the building's hotel." The waiter who'd delivered their hangover meals had apparently called in to some tawdy gossip show. Now the entire world knew that Tony Stark accepted his room service without any pants on. "Tell them I don't want anyone chatty coming up the next time I order something."

The rest of the stories were more what he'd expected: reliably over-the-top, like they'd stumbled into a row of supermarket tabloids. One show dissected Tony's expressions in the hospital frame-by-frame to see if he truly looked surprised. Another speculated on the weapons technology that Stark Technologies was probably trying to develop in the guise of those portals. Some ultra-niche channel talked about how Stephen's 'magic' was actually a sign of the demonic gay agenda.

"Save that last one. It'll be funny to show him." They'd have enough to clean up after Christmas, Tony yawned, and closed his eyes. At least he now had Pepper on board.

"J.A.R.V.I.S.," Tony wondered as he woke up the following morning. It took him a few bleary blinks to confirm that an odd display of lights surrounded him. It was like an idyllic disco ball was slowly turning, but he couldn't see the source of any of the gently drifting illumination. "Did you do a hologram in here, or... or something?" It was pretty, but why was it there?

"No, sir, but I've been told to request your presence in the living room when you've woken."

Huh. Tony obligingly slid out of bed, swapped into some workout sweats perfect for a lazy day, and brushed his teeth and hair before walking into the condo's central areas. As he did, a smile spread.

"I didn't know how long it'd last," Stephen said as he gestured to the sight through the picture windows. "I didn't want to actually wake you up, but didn't want you to miss it once you had."

Outside, Central Park was being blanketed by fat snowflakes that drifted lazily past their windows. Few cars needed to be anywhere on Christmas morning, and even fewer wanted to drive through the storm. The world outside looked as peaceful as he'd ever seen New York City. They'd been given a blessed, beautiful chance to catch their breath.

"I do miss weather in California," Tony said after a long, satisfied stretch of watching their own personal white Christmas. Noticing the nearly-empty mug in Stephen's hands, Tony asked, "Top you off? And J.A.R.V.I.S., can you do something... festive?"

"Oh, thanks." Stephen passed over his mug. As he did, cheery white specks appeared like J.A.R.V.I.S. had stretched Christmas tree strands along the ceiling’s edge. "Black, no sugar."

"That's disgusting, but it's on its way." The kitchen also had broad windows, and Tony's smile stayed in place as he watched the snow through them. Something about this perfect sight seemed like a message written just for them: it's all going to work out. Things are going like they should. There's a happy ending at the end of all this.

"Here is your gross coffee," Tony said as he returned to the living room and handed it over, then curled up comfortably at the other end of the couch from Stephen. Though he'd often tried to put on a good show with this 2007 body's cold tolerance, today he didn't hesitate to pull a blanket over
himself. It was Christmas. He was going to be unashamedly cozy.

"You know," Tony eventually continued after a few sips. "Coffee was my very first sign that I'd run into a time skip. It reverted to just the right point so that I hadn't put in any sugar."

"And three and a half months later," Stephen said wryly, "timeline changes have moved from 'Tony accidentally drinks the wrong coffee' to 'my magic is the biggest topic on Good Morning America.'" He sighed into his mug, then sipped again. "It's a good thing I've just accepted my fate, by now."

"Huh. You're actually cool with everything?" Tony wondered. It hardly seemed possible, but Stephen... well, he at least seemed resigned to his fate, if not accepting of it.

"I tossed and turned a lot last night," Stephen admitted. "Until I remembered something that the Ancient One said when I was struggling with opening my first portal. There are some things that I can't simply control. I have to surrender to them, and only then can I begin to guide their energy." The hand not holding his cup gestured to Good Morning America. "After all the romantic shows we've put on for the tabloids, the press conference last night, and the press release that Potts added to the mix... we're a honest-to-God fairy tale love story."

Tony sat up straighter. "Yeah?"


Intrigued, Tony turned to watch the show segment. Just as Stephen had promised, the press had taken the exact angle they'd hoped for. Between the shock on Tony's face and the panic on Stephen's, anyone could see that Stephen hadn't intended to reveal the Magic of Manhattan. "It's slightly catchy," Tony decided when a second journalist said the phrase and he realized they were trying to make it into a real thing. It was no 'Iron Man,' but it wasn't terrible.

Tony being there with Stephen for the press conference, handling follow-up questions himself, and the subsequently fawning press release had convinced the media that nothing threatening was being revealed. Instead, the two of them were a real a Once Upon a Time for the modern day. A warmonger's chance encounter with a doctor had opened his heart and his charitable pocketbook, and then that romance turned out to be literal magic. (Warmonger?)

"I am apparently getting all of the credit for your recent responsible, charitable streak," Stephen said with poorly concealed satisfaction. "I have single-handedly tamed the playboy and turned you into an upstanding member of society."

Tony frowned at the video wall. "Hrm."

"Because I'm magic," Stephen added, then chuckled into his mug of coffee.

"Yeah, you're taking this well," Tony said dryly as the television displayed the archival photograph of them leaving their Broadway show a few weeks earlier. Tony hadn't seen that particular photo when it was posted, and so he hadn't seen how cold he looked, nor how completely he'd melted into Stephen's side. They did look convincing.


"I'm so happy for you," Tony said dryly as he watched the television personalities speculate on this romantic 'redemption story' for Tony Stark. He hadn't needed to be outright redeemed. Heroism was simply a course correction after he'd discovered a shaky foundation. And he certainly didn't owe anything to Stephen Strange, except for having that bullet blocked. "You know—"
Stephen looked down as his phone rang. When his face paled a moment later, Tony's voice fell away and he muted the television. Stephen's hand shook again as he raised the phone to his ear. "Hi, Charles." Stephen swallowed. "I assume you saw the news."

Tony grimaced. He knew that the destruction of Stephen's surgical career was ultimately his fault, thanks to those over-active heroic instincts of his. Hearing even one side of this conversation would hurt, but it'd be nothing compared to what Stephen was going through. He stayed where he was and tried not to move. Even his breathing slowed.


"What?" Tony mouthed, only to blankly accept the phone when it was passed to him. "Hi, Chuck?"

"Hello, Mr. Stark," said Charles Findlay in the most serious tones he'd ever heard from the man. "First off, please accept my apologies for that terrible situation that happened last night. We've been considering metal detectors for years. They will happen, now."

"It's fine," Tony said impatiently. That short tone apparently worried Findlay, for his next words were more carefully chosen. "I hope you don't take that event as representative of Metro-General's normal operations. I would hate for you to see any previous discussions in a different light."

*He wants to make sure I'm still giving him the money,* Tony realized. Glancing at Stephen, Tony began to realize something he'd never expected after that magic display: Findlay hadn't fired Stephen. Not yet. "Well," Tony eventually continued, "that depends."

"May I ask on what?"

"I told you who the contact person had to be for that research endowment." Looking over, Tony took in Stephen's razor-edged nerves and idly ran a comforting hand down his arm. "That hasn't changed."

"I. Well." Findlay cleared his throat. "There is a slight problem regarding that."

There was a chance—a chance—that Tony's instincts hadn't ruined Stephen's renewed joy in the operating room. "Yeah? And?"

"The level of media commotion is likely to be... intense. Until it dies down, Dr. Strange is probably not going to be able to work here to do the hands-on grant decisions that your gift requires." Findlay swallowed hard enough to be heard over the line. "I hope you can accept that delay."

That wasn't a firing. Tony's hand tightened around Stephen's wrist. "I guess so," he said in the most breezy tones he could manage. (They were distinctly un-breezy.)

"Oh, good. Well. This is a discussion that can continue later, but I know you'll be busy with questions soon. I'll stop interrupting your Christmas. Please let Stephen know to contact my assistant after the first of the year to discuss a possible timeline."

"Right. Will do." Tony slowly moved the phone away from his ear, ended the call, and exhaled.

"What did he say?" Stephen asked warily, and Tony realized that with hearing only Tony's dialogue, he had no idea whether his surgical career had just ended.
After turning back to him, Tony opened his mouth. No words came. Memories of sitting in that observation room filled him, and then of seeing a woman crying over being handed back her full, healthy life. No matter how many suit rescues Tony had personally made, that neurosurgery patient's relief had been one of the best things he'd ever, ever seen.

His body again moved on instinct. This time, it was to pull Stephen into a fierce hug. "Call the hospital after New Year's," Tony then managed. "You and Chuck can work out a schedule."

"Wait. Wait." Stephen was stunned enough that he didn't resist Tony's grip. "Am I not fired?"

"You're not fired!" Tony laughed against him. "You get magic and medicine!"

"I. That's." Stephen let out a halting laugh. "Charles made sure that I'd never, ever used magic in the operating room. But I thought he was just worried about liability lawsuits pouring in after he fired me." He slumped backward out of Tony's grip to fall more completely against the couch. "I'm really not fired?"

"That guy only cares about money for the hospital," Tony said, and leaned back in to close the gap. "There might be a lot of patients who'd avoid you now, sure, but I bet there are some people who'd pay ten times as much for you to pull off a surgery other doctors say is impossible. If you're not on staff, you can't be that specialist."

"I mean." Stephen exhaled. "The mystic arts are more important. They have to be the priority." His head slowly turned toward the city beyond the wall of windows. "But... to even be able to go in occasionally..."

For all they hell they'd suffered, this timeline did have its advantages. Tony knew to look out for Obadiah, would never suffer his shrapnel injury, would never be poisoned by a poorly-designed arc reactor. Stephen had all the magical competence he'd developed in his first trip through life, but hadn't needed to be violently ripped away from medicine to do so. "So, aren't you glad," Tony laughed, "that you didn't cut off a hand?"

Stephen blinked at him for the moment needed to recall his bright idea for covering his departure to Kamar-Taj, then also laughed. "I am never cutting off a hand," he confirmed and held one up to Tony. It was as steady as ever.

Gripping it, Tony squeezed. "Merry Christmas."

"Merry Christmas," Stephen echoed in joyous disbelief.

"Pick out what you want for lunch, I'll order a huge spread," Tony added. "We are going to celebrate. You are still a surgeon and the world hasn't freaked—too much—over magic." Who knew that things could work so comfortably in their favor? Even with their cheat code of historical knowledge, this was a best-case scenario.

As soon as he'd placed the room service order, Tony sat back against the couch cushions, flipped the edge of his blanket over Stephen, and turned the volume back up. This was Stephen's day, and so he couldn't even find it in him to complain about the media's ongoing discussion of whether Tony Stark would really find it in him to live up to his boyfriend's heroic example.

Tony did turn at the end of that segment, though, and grinned at Stephen. "So, you'll inspire me to join you after... say, three months? Then I can debut the suit to help you out?"

"Hmm. Little faster than that." Stephen smirked back. "Your suit's red. Shoot for Valentine's Day."
That was such an over-the-top idea that it was hard to believe that Tony hadn't been the one to say it. It was a perfect touch, though, and he could easily design and fabricate his early-model suits by then. "Whatever you say, honey."

There really was something special about a white Christmas.
The media's attention for Stephen wasn't limitless, especially not on Christmas Day. Just as the focus began to wander away from the world's debut of magic, and instead landed on an adorable family of stray holiday kittens that now frolicked under a Christmas tree, someone knocked at the door.


A moment later, Obadiah Stane walked into the room. "Cute kittens," he noted after studying the television.

Stephen and Tony both froze, and looked unfortunately guilty as they did. Obadiah apparently used that as confirmation of what had drawn him to New York. He strode further in, then took a seat without waiting for an invitation. "So. You two haven't been entirely honest with me."

"I haven't," Stephen immediately corrected. His heart jackhammered. Though they'd known they'd need to deal with Obadiah's renewed suspicion, neither of them had expected him to fly out just a few short hours after the story broke. "Tony was in the dark about me as much as you were, Obadiah."

The thin smile he got in return suggested that Obadiah no longer wanted Stephen to use his first name. "Pepper did tell me that Tony was clueless about the Great and Powerful Strange," Obadiah then acknowledged. "She called me on the way from the airport to say that she'd talked to you, and to explain why we were making the press release that we were. I thanked her. I hung up. And then I brought up the minutes from our last few board meetings."

Stephen looked warily toward Tony. He'd seen before that Obadiah's observational acumen was far sharper than expected. What truth had Tony accidentally spilled to the other leadership of Stark Industries?

"Your middle name is Vincent," Obadiah then said. "Tony wants to name his home A.I. after you. Which just seemed like silly boyfriend crap until I went back and re-read those minutes." Slumping more comfortably to one side, Obadiah tilted his head and broadened his smile toward Tony. "It can organize your life... like magic."

Thankfully, Tony's eyeroll seemed entirely convincing. "That's a pretty common phrase to build a conspiracy on, Obi."

"It is common," Obadiah acknowledged. "Don't know if it's common enough for you to describe Vincent as 'magic' nineteen times, though." His smile fell away. "You knew. Don't bullshit me. I'm the one person you've never been able to fool for long."

Great. Well, Stephen could make up something about the power of suggestion to explain Tony's
verbal tic in that meeting. This would run the risk of appearing to control Tony's mind, yes, but they could at least come up with some cover story for why Tony had apparently repeated 'magic' like a broken toy. That would give Tony the wiggle room he needed as he tried to peacefully deal with the next few years of—

"Fuck it," Tony announced toward the ceiling, then looked down, shoved his blanket aside, and stood. "Obi, I know you've been personally dealing our weapons, and if you're not already selling to the Ten Rings organization, you're eying them."

"Oh, Christ," Stephen said and covered his face with his hands.

"Excuse me?" Obadiah asked after a significant pause.

"You fucking hate me, I get it, you're tired of working under me, fine. That's why I tried to patch up your ego by letting you run the weapons division. But you just couldn't let this go." As Stephen began to groan loudly toward him, Tony turned and said emphatically, "Hey! You torpedoed last night, I get to torpedo today."

"I blocked the bullet you ran for! Don't blame me for last night."

"Just tell me, Stane," Tony demanded as he turned back to him. "Have you decided to just kill me yet, or does that come later? And have you started dealing in Eastern Europe yet? Or could I shut that down before dead Maximoffs happen?"

After a long pause, Obadiah demanded, "What in the absolute hell is going on?"

"Tony, stop." Stephen also shoved away the blanket and stood. "We might have more flexibility than we initially thought, but we can't just lob grenades for the hell of it!"

"What in the hell," Obadiah repeated in a roar, "is going on?" Even though he was barely taller than Stephen, when he stood and moved toward them, he seemed to have both of their untrained 2007 bulk put together.

"You're using my company to deal weapons on the black market," Tony summarized. "And yeah, Obi: my company, not yours. It's not Stane Industries, it's Stark Industries, and I don't think I want to tiptoe around your bullshit a second time."

"Tony!" Stephen protested.

"We're changing things! It's fine!" Tony pointed at the television, where they were once again running a silent clip of the Magic of Manhattan, then gestured grandly at Central Park behind them. "The world's still here! And—" As Obadiah's fist struck the side of Tony's skull with a dull thud, he went down hard.

The man moved more easily than his bulk would suggest, but magic was faster still. "Bad idea," Stephen snapped as his hand whipped forward. Two crackling energy strands streamed from his palm and sought Obadiah's wrists. After both of Obadiah's arms were bound, Stephen slammed his hand against the carpet. The bands constricted and yanked Obadiah flat.

"Are you all right?" he then asked Tony, and gently pressed a hand just under his collarbone when Tony instinctively tried to stand. "I've got Obadiah locked down. Let me see if you're hurt."

"I rebounded off the sofa," Tony reassured Stephen as he checked Tony's pupils, then began delicately probing various points around his skull to see if any made him flinch. "It was a soft landing. Stephen, I'm fine, let me up."
"What is this?" Obadiah demanded once their attention returned to their captive. As they stood over him, his face was red with physical strain and all his knuckles were white, but he couldn't stretch his magical bonds more than an inch.

"Look," Tony snapped and knelt low enough to meet Obadiah's gaze. "I have been trying to play nice to keep the world running smoothly, but both of us are way, way beyond worrying about people like you. You should have let this slide. Because now I'm gonna have to get you out of the way, and I know you're not going to like how that plays out."

"I'm not killing him," Stephen instantly said. At hearing 'kill,' Obadiah's struggles intensified.

"I know. I wouldn't ask you to." Tony didn't even sound disappointed, let alone surprised. "But I am going to ask you for something else."

Ten minutes later, after they'd both stepped back from Obadiah Stane, he fell through a portal into swirling twilight nothing. "How long do you think he has?" Tony mused as the circle closed.

Stephen sighed at the floor where his portal had opened. On its other end had been what Tony thought was a perfectly ironic location: deep within the isolated mountain valleys of Afghanistan. "Probably about fifteen minutes until frostbite begins to set in." It might not be the summit of Mount Everest, but Obadiah had been dressed for winter in Manhattan, not the foothills of the Hindu Kush mountain range. He wouldn't last long in the cold.

"Then I'll get right to work," Tony noted and replaced the media wall's television display with an intricate network of Stark Industries data monitors. "Oh, look at all those panic signals he's trying to send," Tony soon chuckled, and tapped a few more buttons. The signal alert faded. "Obviously, none of those are getting through to anyone."

Ten minutes later, Stephen returned from the kitchen with a thermos in one hand, and raised the other to open a portal. Just in time, he brought that hand back down. The room service attendant gawked at him, regardless; if he'd actually done magic in front of the woman, she probably would have fainted. It would be a real challenge to have the world recognize him on sight.

Once they were left alone again, he did open another, smaller portal. "Stane," Stephen called through the basketball-sized circle. Halfway around the world, it was night. The wind was apparently quiet there and moonlight gleamed off the rounded curves snow had made of the landscape.

That darkness meant that his magic's appearance over Obadiah's head was obvious. The portal's counterpart in Afghanistan was fifteen feet above the ground, but Obadiah still looked immediately up toward its light. He had no chance of reaching that escape, nor of fitting through it if he could. Frost peppered his beard and his hands were jammed securely under his armpits. "You're gonna pay for this," Obadiah promised. "Both of you!"

Stephen wiggled the thermos halfway through the portal. "Hot coffee. Want it or not?" Obadiah refused to give him the satisfaction of a 'yes,' but he assumed the silent, burning glare meant as much. Once the thermos had slipped from his grip to fall into Afghanistan, he let the portal close. "It'll keep his core temperature up," Stephen explained. "Another five minutes, I'll check back."

"Sure," Tony agreed as he worked through whatever encryption Obadiah had used to hide his black market dealings. It had surely been top-notch security for 2007, but after only ten minutes Tony had already found actual cached video files of someone he said he recognized. (Claw, or something.) Without looking away from the wall, Tony extended one hand. "Can I get some food before it cools down?"
"Sure," Stephen said wryly, and then—to his faint surprise—prepared Tony a lunch plate so that he wouldn't need to stop his work. "I'm not actually holding this for you," he added, and with a put-upon sigh Tony accepted the plate with one hand and his fork with the other. "How much longer? At this point, I'm starting to worry about Stane."

Tony looked flatly at him.

"I know he tried to kill you, but how is it going to look if we kill him via a kidnapping of our own?" Stephen countered. (Also, he just didn't want to kill anyone.) "This is a brand new timeline. So far as everyone else knows, Obadiah Stane's never done a thing wrong toward you. I want to go to the mountains and keep him alive." As concern flickered across Tony's face, Stephen reminded him, "Do you really think that Obadiah Stane poses the slightest threat to me? Now that we're being open about what I can do? I'm just going to go make sure he stays in decent health while you finish your data collection."

"Fine," Tony allowed. "But if you go, there's something you should do before you come back."

Shortly, Stephen walked through his portal and into the Hindu Kush mountains. "Don't try anything," he informed Obadiah as the portal shut behind him. "I see you reach for something and you're suddenly going to feel a lot colder." Obadiah did not appear ready to try anything. By now he'd collapsed into a tight, shivering knot of a man. Even if he did have a gun on him, he probably wouldn't risk pulling his hands out from under his arms. And if he did somehow work up that courage, his fingers were likely too tight with the cold to pull a trigger. "Your life is over," he promised through chattering teeth.

"Who the fuck are you?" Obadiah demanded after a wary minute, during which the worst of his shivering eased as warmth expanded to the edges of the dome.

"Stephen Strange, M.D. Top of my medical class, first-pick hire by one of the top neuro hospitals in the world, and the man whose office you bugged shortly after you became aware of my existence. But you knew all of that already."

Obadiah stared, then actually began to laugh. Some of the frost on his beard warmed enough to slide free and splat against his chest.

"Yeah. I'm glad we got that out in the open. It has been driving me nuts to not be able to talk to Tony about whatever I wanted. Except for in my own home, of course. Which I know you didn't bug, because I swept it."

"Swept it. With your magic?" Obadiah spat.

"Yes." Flicking his hand, Stephen studied the intricate glowing shield that bloomed from it, then turned to Obadiah and considered him. "Catch," he announced, just before tossing it toward Obadiah's torso like a flaming buzzsaw.

It vanished just before impact. The fear that rippled through Obadiah's eyes as it approached was gratifying to see.
"Let's get one thing straight, Stane," Stephen continued. "Tony and I have known what you're up to all this time. We've been trying to figure out how to best deal with you without causing disruption to the company, but you showing up this morning means that we just need to deal with you. Completely. And since Tony is currently harvesting every single supposedly encrypted record of the black market deals you've been making, I'm going to handle the other side of things."

"Really," Obadiah said, and pressed a hand against his belt buckle. "What side would that be?"

"Making sure that you don't talk about me. Or Tony." Stephen smiled slightly, and added, "The alert you just tried to send to your satellites is useless, by the way, as are all the other ones you've sent. Tony can keep retrieving all of your data without anyone knowing." He remembered that gesture from when 2007 Tony had tried to call for help. The belt buckle was a popular place to stick a panic signal, apparently.

"All right. Look here, David Copperfield," Obadiah began. "I don't know who you think you are—"

"We already established that I'm one of the best surgeons on the planet, but please continue."

"But you've got balls for brains if you think it's a smart move to pick a fight with me." Obadiah took a step forward, then another. His greater bulk again became vaguely worrisome, particularly with the dark fury filling his eyes. "I've put more men in the ground than you've ever saved, and as soon as we're done here, you and Tony are gonna join them. You've already been messing with me, and now you're fucking with me, and no one makes a fool out of—"

With the precise flair Stephen remembered from the Ancient One's first demonstration, he slammed his hand forward and knocked Obadiah's soul clear of his body.

"Oh, look," Stephen sighed as Obadiah's body impacted the ground. "Now you're all covered with snow, again." The moment needed a bit longer for proper dramatic weight, and only then did he look up at Obadiah's stranded, panicked spirit. "Hi."

Obadiah's spirit looked down frantically at his abandoned body, then looked back up to Stephen in horror.

"I know, I know, this is far beyond anything you ever expected to involve yourself in. You just wanted to deal under the table with terrorists, get Tony out of the way via arranged murder, and contribute to the brutal deaths of countless innocents in your pursuit of ever-greater wealth. Hmm. Actually," Stephen said with affected regret, "when I put it that way, it sounds absolutely terrible."

"Who are you?" mouthed Obadiah's terrified spirit.

Stephen glanced over his shoulder in what he thought was the general direction of Nepal, and smiled. Thanks for the inspiration. "Your travel guide," he then answered, and sent Obadiah's spirit into motion.

Twenty-two minutes later, he rolled his eyes and gestured a portal into existence. Tony had asked him to mess with Obadiah's mind before returning, but the extent of the experience was getting a little ridiculous. "Tony," he said impatiently. "Are you done by now? I'm not sure how much is even left of Obadiah to—what's wrong?"

"What's wrong?" Tony repeated tightly. Poorly contained fear filled his eyes. "What's wrong? I've been trying to call you for the past ten minutes!"

"Call me? I doubt they have cellular towers in these mountains."
"I've totally overhauled your phone, I should have been able to get in contact with you via a satellite signal! I thought he'd..." Trailing off, Tony admitted, "I thought he'd done something to you."

"Ah," Stephen realized, then smiled apologetically. "Right. We've been inside the Mirror Dimension to keep his body warm."

"Oh." Tony grumbled. "And that'd block my satellites?"

"Unless your satellites are used to communicating between different dimensions, yes. Anyway," Stephen continued when Tony's impatience became more obvious, "have you gathered the evidence you need? Because really, I don't know how much more Obadiah's mind can take before he becomes completely irretrievable."

"Yeah. Ten minutes ago. Bring him..." Tony trailed off as he leaned through the portal, and blinked in surprise at the completely limp form of Obadiah Stane. Stephen had migrated the heat source near him so he hadn't succumbed to the cold, but he still looked completely lifeless from any distance. "Um, seriously, is he dead?"

"No, but come through the portal," Stephen suggested and widened it. "It might actually be for the best if he sees a familiar face when he wakes up. Even yours." He didn't know how long his body had spent idle while the Ancient One sent his spirit on its dimensional tour, but he suspected it was far shorter than the trip he'd just sent Obadiah on. Once five minutes had passed, he'd significantly toned down how terrifying his dimensional selections were. Still, this would be a strain on anyone.

"Wake up," Tony demanded of Obadiah as the man blinked. "I've got all the data I need, it's being packaged and uploaded to every relevant target as we speak, and... and... and Stephen, I think you broke Obi."

"I didn't know you were done ten minutes ago," Stephen sighed as he knelt down in front of the dazed, shaking man. "Stane. You're back in your body, all right?"

"Who are you?" Obadiah whispered again. His eyes remained unfocused and he didn't bother to wipe off the snow that again clung to his beard.

"I'm Stephen Strange," Stephen reminded him. Stane would probably need an hour or two before his brain started functioning on all cylinders again. At least he remembered how to speak English. That was a good sign.

"No." When Obadiah turned to look at Tony, he did so in a jerky, halting arc. "Who are you? You're not Tony. I know Tony. He's not..."

Tony stared back at him, glanced at Stephen, then looked back once he'd apparently gotten the confirmation he needed. "Maybe not, but I will be."

Though Obadiah's eyes remained unfocused, after a few moments to consider that, he began to laugh. The sound was oddly hollow.

"Obadiah," Stephen said insistently and leaned closer to him. Obadiah flinched away. "Tony's collected all the data he needs to put you away for life in prison. A human prison. With concrete walls. Do you want to go there..." When he leaned in close again, he put a shield behind Obadiah so that he couldn't flinch away. "Or do I chose where you're imprisoned?"

"Normal Stark shipments leave from Long Beach," Obadiah began to recite. He'd only needed seconds to consider that offer. "I used Port of Los Angeles, instead. Bill of ladings were under Lodestone, LLC. You can request them all from the port office. I went through Mitch Baker there."
"Bribes went into his Wells Fargo account."

"Stephen... where exactly did you send him?" Tony wondered as Obadiah continued to rattle off the evidence that would help lock him securely into a normal cell, with human guards and four concrete walls.

"Well. Here and there." With a pleased smile, Stephen added, "I actually took my inspiration from the Ancient One."

"That woman who's going to come up with a new plan against the Grape Ape? She's who set this tone for dealing with Obi?" Considering that, Tony nodded slowly, then listened to Obadiah's last, fitful efforts to land himself in prison instead of seemingly eternal spiritual torture. In front of them, the man who'd been the villainous equal to the first modern superhero seemed small, even pitiful. "I suddenly feel better about our chances."

"Oh, you should. She really doesn't mess around. And you know how I'm stronger than you? She's stronger than me."

Folding his arms, Tony turned to look at Stephen. "I do not know that, no."

Stephen gave him a tolerant smile.

After a moment of silence, Tony replied, "I will have a suit ready by Valentine's. Come on, portal us all back to—thanks," he added as the portal swept across them all, and they were deposited in his Manhattan penthouse. He then glanced down at his phone, which was free to receive signals now that they were out of the Mirror Dimension, and noted, "Looks like the C.I.A. called me. I'll go return this. Watch Obi."

"I trusted you," Obadiah eventually said in the silence. Stephen had again bound his wrists with magical energy, though it clearly wasn't necessary. All his fight was gone.

"Yeah, well." Stephen sat comfortably back on the couch and flipped the blanket over his legs. Their room service was probably cool by now. It wouldn't taste as good reheated. "Tony trusted you, and we know how you wanted that to turn out. Although, I suppose you deciding to show up here today did end up giving Tony a pretty great Christmas present."

"Just tell me: who are you? Really?"

Stephen gestured grandly to the television screen that had replaced Tony's data work. The news stations were done talking about kittens by now, and so there he was again. "I already told you: Stephen Strange, M.D. And that's Tony Stark in there."

"Are you controlling him?"

"No, and I really doubt that I could, even if I wanted to." Chuckling, Stephen added, "That is one stubborn man." (Although, he was one to talk.) "And Obadiah?"

Obadiah looked up.

"If I can portal us into Afghanistan at a moment's notice, I can portal into any prison cell they put you in." Stephen sprawled more comfortably against the couch's backrest. "Consider any statements you make to the officials or the media very, very carefully. The next time I knock your soul out of your body, I don't have to bring it back."

Obadiah said nothing, but when Stephen leaned forward and extended one arm, he flinched back
and confirmed, "Got it."

"Good. Because I guarantee that Tony will collect data on every single statement you ever make. That your attorneys make. Facebook comments left by your old frat brothers, anything. And then he'll find out exactly where you are, he'll tell me, and then I'll pay you a little visit." Hearing footsteps approach, Stephen looked up and sweetly asked, "Isn't that right, baby?"

"Oh, absolutely." Tony noisily kissed the air in Stephen's direction and then followed up with a wicked grin. "C.I.A.'s on its way, Obi. They are extremely interested in how you've been outfitting foreign terror groups, including the actual video logs I provided of some pretty famous black market dealers. And it just so happens that they don't have to deal with any street traffic to slow them down today."

"You're supposed to be useless," Obadiah eventually said, sounding more defeated than ever. "Only good for making weapons."

"Yeah, well, I was only good for cutting apart brains," Stephen countered, "until I wasn't."

"Definitely wasn't good at driving," Tony noted.

"Hey."

"Sorry," Tony laughed and walked over to the wall of windows. Disgruntled, Stephen joined him, though he kept Obadiah's bonds firmly in place. "So, the world still exists," Tony murmured at a softer volume. The snow was just now tapering off, leaving Central Park as a perfect snowglobe scene. There was no damage to reality that either of them could see, nor could Stephen feel any negative energy from the timeline shifts they'd made. (And, most encouragingly, the Ancient One hadn't stopped by again to chastise them.)

"The world still exists," Stephen confirmed. "Obadiah's had his plans cut off at the knees, the entire planet knows about my magic... and the world still exists."

"You never have to go through your accident."

"Your convoy's never attacked."

"Magic and medicine."

"The only thing your arc reactor will ever have to do is power a suit."

"And the world still exists."

"And the world still exists," Stephen confirmed.

Tony looked away from the winter scene before them, and grinned. "Can't wait to see what happens next year." Despite himself, Stephen started laughing. He truly had no hope whatsoever of fighting this energy, and so there was no choice but to enjoy the ride. "Well, then. Let's try to make it fun."
Chapter 13

"Hi, Pepper," Tony said to another video call. "I'm really hoping I got to you before the news did."

Fresh horror dawned in her eyes. "Tony, what's happening now?"

"Well," Tony began, hesitated, and tried again. "Well. Well. Okay. It turns out that Obadiah was planning to kill me, he's been dealing our weapons under the table to terrorist groups, and a bunch of uniforms just hauled him off. Yikes. So I know that it's Christmas, but I'm really hoping that you've got another press release in you today."

She stared blankly back.

"I know," Tony said with dramatic apology. "Buy yourself two nice things for the holidays."

"Are you serious?" Pepper demanded. "Oh my God!"

"I am unfortunately serious. Look," Tony added and turned so that she could see one side of his head clearly. The skin along that temple was sore, and he could see in the small preview window of himself that it was beginning to darken. "Here's where he punched me when I found out."

"Oh my God!"

"Yeah."

"Oh my God!"

"I know."

"Are you okay?"

"I'm okay," Tony confirmed. "As soon as Obi did that, Stephen took him down. Hey J.A.R.V.I.S., do you have the footage of Obadiah going after me? Start right when he hit—yeah, perfect." As expected, the sight of Stephen instantly leaping into action to protect Tony, then carefully checking him for injury, made Pepper gasp and place a hand lightly against her collarbone. Tony then cut the feed, not wanting to reach any lines that might give away the temporal game.

"How did..." Pepper trailed off, shook her head, and tried again. "How did you find out? How did you know Obadiah was doing this?"

"Magic," Tony said with a shrug. It wasn't even a lie, if one counted the Time Stone itself. "I'm sure the board will want to meet with me, but I'm kinda headachy today. Can you—"

"Of course, of course." Pepper looked even more overwhelmed than she had when asking about Stephen's magic. "Can you send me the files? Any files I should have. But not so many files that I can't read through them in time, because we've got to get out ahead of the news."

"Will do," Tony promised.

"As soon as I schedule the board meeting, I'll let you know when to be at the airport. I'll shoot for tomorrow, but I know Marcia was spending Christmas in Fiji, so it might be Thursday by when she gets back and settled."

Tony waved that suggestion off. "Don't worry about a plane. I'll just take a portal. Way less jetlag."
"Portals," Pepper said helplessly. "Right. You can take portals, now. Because your magical boyfriend makes portals, when he's not stopping Obadiah from trying to kill you. Can we turn back the clock about twenty-four hours, to when everything made sense?"

Oh, there were so many jokes he could make about turning back the clock, and she wouldn't understand a single one. "Thank you, Ms. Potts," Tony said with deep sincerity. "Seriously. Buy yourself something very, very nice. Or... hey! Pick out one of my cars from the garage."

Pepper blinked.

"I'm serious. You know where the keys are. Pick one. It's fine. Merry Christmas. You want the Saleen? Take the Saleen."

"That car costs half a million dollars," Pepper very nearly squeaked.

"And it's all yours, if you want it. Seriously, do you want it?"

"I. Um." Pepper swallowed. "I actually like the R8?"

Ah, his favorite everyday Audi. A very practical pick. "Then that's all yours. J.A.R.V.I.S., make a note of that and bring up all the title paperwork for Ms. Potts. Merry Christmas, and thank you so much for all of these press releases over the holidays. I'll make sure I don't ask for more than... a couple more."

Laughing weakly, Pepper nodded and ended the call.

"Let's order more room service," Tony decided as he walked back into the living room. "Our first attempt got interrupted a little."

"A little," Stephen echoed. By now he looked worn; the agents and NYPD officers who'd collected Obadiah had also questioned Stephen more than was strictly warranted. He wasn't under any official suspicion, but they'd made it clear that he was now on the agency's radar for any spectacular feats he later pursued. "That's an understatement."

"I will handle the room service," Tony corrected after a short pause. Government attention was never fun.

Their earlier food attempt had felt more like a breakfast spread; for this one, he ordered from the dinner menu. "I also got snacks for later," Tony eventually announced as he set one tray aside, "but here, this is for you."

From his place on the couch, Stephen looked down with faint surprise as Tony passed over a plate. "This smells good, thanks." The kitchen's signature salmon dish was elegantly plated next to some rice and roasted vegetables, and it did look good. Not as spectacular as Tony's Wagyu filet, but good.

"I figured that was the right call," Tony said as he settled in with his own meal. "I just guessed on the side dishes, but you've already ordered salmon three times during our tabloid dinners." Stephen blinked at him but said nothing, and Tony raised the remote to cue the movie he'd earlier requested that J.A.R.V.I.S. load into the system. I Am Legend had only just opened in theatres, but what Tony Stark wanted, Tony Stark got.

"I'm not watching any more virus movies with you," Tony complained twenty minutes later.

Stephen gestured in frustration toward the screen. "That's just not how any of this works!" Over Tony's protests that he was an unfun, stick-in-the-mud buzzkill, Stephen raised his voice and

"Why are you—" Tony cut off and rolled his eyes. "Is this for that scene where they hack an alien mothership with a Macintosh?"

"Sure is."

Annoyance made Tony's entire body twitch. "Such bullshit." Fine: the point was made, not that he'd ever admit it out loud. "Okay. You know what? Die Hard. It's Christmas, we're doing Die Hard. End of story."

Though Stephen had surely been expecting more media attention the next day, Obadiah Stane's traitorous behavior instead consumed the news. Stephen was mentioned in the context of helping to uncover Stane's treachery, and protecting Tony Stark in the violent aftermath, but the twenty-four hour news cycle mostly zeroed in on the repercussions to Stark Industries.

"Did you give Pepper permission to share that?" Stephen wondered as NBC News played the security camera clip of him magically taking down Obadiah.

"Not explicitly," Tony acknowledged, "but it helps prove our innocence as much as the data records do. It's a smart move." Despite that, Stephen did look a little discomfited while watching his delicate assessment of Tony's health.

Stark's stock price dipped, naturally, but their freely-shared records completely exonerated Tony. The narrative settled comfortably on the idea that Obadiah Stane had been a lone wolf, a rogue operator. Obadiah had video logs with known criminals, which he'd kept behind fierce encryption protocols as blackmail material. If someone wasn't working with a decade's worth of additional technical knowledge and had reason to suspect Obadiah, those locked-down files would have remained forever hidden.

"This is the perfect time to officially expand into civilian stuff," Tony decided as he watched the media's assessment of Stark's position. "I'm utterly shaken by this betrayal. I want to start focusing on areas that won't hurt people if someone goes behind my back again."

The board agreed with Tony when he presented that argument the next day. All of them had gotten along with Obadiah; better than they did with Tony, in fact, which was why they'd been so open to Obadiah's corporate coup in the original timeline. Because of that closeness, Obadiah's dirty dealings were a shock that rocked the company's very foundations. As soon as he made it, Tony's proposal to turn the civilian division's "soft launch" into something official was approved. Stark Industries needed to change the public conversation, and fast.

"I can't believe how well you're taking this," Pepper marveled after the meeting ended. The board had filed out, leaving them alone in the conference room.

Tony shrugged. "You should have seen me right afterward."

"I did!" Oh, right, he'd videocalled her. "Even then, you were so calm under pressure."

"Well, you know." Tony couldn't help but needle her. He needled everyone. "I'm so... controlled, now."

"Ha, ha," Pepper drawled, then sobered. "I'm sorry for those things I said about Stephen. The way he checked on you... it's everything that you promised he was. I was wrong."

"You're telling me that you're wrong?" Tony repeated in amazement. "Has that ever happened
"Don't get used to it," Pepper laughed. "Does he like sushi? I thought you might want to celebrate the meeting going so smoothly. I got reservations at that beachside place you like in Santa Monica. They had an opening in forty minutes."

"In Santa Monica?" Tony repeated.

"Right," Pepper said after a short pause. "Because he can portal himself here, too. Can't he? And I... well, I was hoping I could finally meet him. Especially after everything that's happened."

"Oh." It'd been so comfortable to keep these two worlds separate: his actual romantic future here in California, and his faked romance in New York. But eventually those streams would have to cross, and with instantaneous travel now on the table, it was impossible to justify Pepper and Stephen not meeting. "Good point. I'll call him."

After Tony led Pepper down to the open, empty area of his garage workshop and texted Stephen to follow up on that call, a spark soon appeared. It spun itself into an explosion of brilliant light, as spectacular as any fireworks. Her open wonder as the portal expanded actually made him laugh. Studying her with a grin, Tony wondered, "Looks different in person, huh?"

Pepper nodded slowly. She glowed under the sparks' radiance, each line of her face highlighted and her eyes alit. "Yeah. Wow." As soon as Stephen came through it, Pepper walked forward and surveyed him in open amazement. "You can really just step across the country, can't you? Oh. Where are my manners? Pepper Potts," she added, and extended her hand.

"Stephen Strange," he replied as he shook it. "And thank you so much for finding that condo listing. It's perfect."

"The paperwork's officially going through. I forgot to pass that along, with the whole mess about..."

"Me?" Stephen wryly suggested.

"Everything," Pepper corrected. "With three bedrooms, you'll both be able to have your own offices. That way, you can banish Tony to his little workshop whenever he starts threatening your television set for parts."

"I can hear you," Tony announced. Their mirrored smiles were far too sharp, and far too amused. "Hey, Stephen. Are you up for sushi? We've got." He glanced at his watch. "Thirty-seven minutes to make our reservations, if you want to keep them."

"I could probably go for sushi," Stephen allowed.

"Then I will let you both go. Thank you so much for keeping him safe with Obadiah," Pepper added with a bright, sincere smile before heading for the staircase and leaving them alone in the garage.

"You've totally won her over," Tony announced and walked further into the cavernous space. His old array of cars lined his path. A few had safely migrated to the old Stark Tower build, but many had been lost in the Malibu attack. He'd have to protect his collection, this time. "One hundred percent. Thank you for that, because it makes my life so much easier." His hand automatically gravitated toward his normal ride—the R8—before remembering that he'd promised it to Pepper. Oh, he realized, and a smile spread. A different ride would be better tonight, anyway.

"Get in," he suggested and pointed toward a pick further down the line. The Saleen's butterfly doors gleamed as they tilted out and up, and Tony trailed his fingertips in satisfaction over the car's bold
orange curves before settling into its driver’s seat. This was one of the most special of the world’s speciality cars, and although it was more than a little uncomfortable to drive, it was worth showing off to a fellow supercar enthusiast.

Stephen's pace slowed as he approached the passenger seat. His feet eventually stilled. When Tony looked over, he was simply standing there instead of actually getting in.

"You coming?" Tony eventually prompted. "This thing hauls, but you don't know what traffic on the PCH is like. We're actually going to need that half hour to get to the restaurant."

"Yeah, right." Stephen needed another few seconds to move. As his hand reached inside to steady himself as he directed his body into the dark, compact interior, that hand shook.

This was the interior of a supercar, Tony realized as he watched Stephen stiffly force himself into the passenger's seat. He knew what other expensive cars looked like—he'd taken many for a test drive—and this car's streamlined interior was a close cousin to a Huracán's. Most importantly, the flat, broad span of the windshield in front of them was a nearly identical view.

Though Tony didn't dare to look openly at Stephen, even a quick glance toward him showed the rigid set to his jaw, the pale tone to his skin. His tight, shallow breathing was louder than it should be.

So. This was what the onset of an anxiety attack was like... from the outside.

"Shit," Tony announced and gestured at his watch. "There's an accident in Pacific Palisades. It's already backing things up for miles." Stephen said nothing until Tony leaned over and asked, "Sorry, can you just portal us, instead? We'll miss the reservations, otherwise."

"Sure," Stephen immediately said and got out.

Though it took Stephen more than a minute to actually raise his hand to summon the portal, Tony said nothing until he did. He'd joked about Stephen's driving before, and the two of them had frequently ridden in the back of Happy's towncar or a taxicab. But none of those experiences, Tony now realized, were the sudden sensory overload of having a windshield right in front of him. Anxiety attacks really were a damn bitch.

Tony should have seen this coming. Any supercar fan wanted an excuse to be behind the wheel, and yet he'd overlooked the key attribute that had decided Stephen’s new condo for him: easy walking distance to work. No one would bother taking any car out for a commute of just two short blocks, and especially not a sportscar. By the time you accelerated, the ride was over.

"Got the address?" Stephen eventually asked, and sent them into a Santa Monica alley once Tony provided it.

Tony remained silent as they walked toward the street. The night was typically filled with the drifting sounds of laughter, traffic, and the low, distant roar of the Pacific. Front faces of clean, modern architecture emerged once they were free of the back alley and walking along a main road's sidewalk. Illuminated globes stretched over the avenue's width made even temperate California seem festive, although the light-wrapped palm trees that lined the sidewalks couldn't compare to snowy Central Park.

"Going to say anything?" Stephen eventually demanded.

"Nope." Tony walked a few more steps, then noted that Stephen was positively seething by now. "Unless you want me to. I could say things. Like... how I fried a few circuits after the Battle of New
York and started making suit after suit after suit, against an enemy that no one else seemed to see.”

His hands dove into his pockets. "God, this one panic attack that hit me when I was in the middle of a
restaurant? So embarrassing. The weirdest things would set me off. It's probably easier if you can predict what'll do it."

Stephen still looked angry, but that anger seemed to be turning inward.

"I probably should have predicted... that," Tony began to add with apology, and Stephen's anger surged toward him again. But it faded a moment later like a punctured balloon. Instead of glaring at Tony, Stephen couldn't seem to meet his eyes. Clearly, he was embarrassed by what he'd probably label as a personal failing.

Tony knew what it was like to be imprisoned by memories, but he also knew that he couldn't make Stephen believe that. Words wouldn't help; at least, they couldn't be the first step. Sometimes, the only option was contact. Plus, by now they were getting into city blocks that would start to have real pedestrian traffic. It'd help if they weren't stalking next to each other like strangers. Tony linked his arm around Stephen's and said nothing until they reached the next crosswalk. "So. That car in your building's garage. Need me to take it out for a spin? You know you can't let a car sit idle for too long."

They crossed the street before Stephen responded. "I tried to drive to work," he said in a quiet, tight voice. He sounded ashamed that the man who could face down the end of the world couldn't handle a sportscar. "I got a block away from my building. I saw something out of the corner of my eye, and slammed on the brakes. The person behind nearly rear-ended me." His voice quieted further. "It was a newspaper page. There was wind."

"Seems responsible to park it, then," Tony said neutrally. "You know, when I was driving to the Sanctum, I didn't trust myself to drive because of those time hiccups. So I used a self-driving car. That'd be a killer tech to debut for the civilian division, huh?"

"Don't patronize me, Tony."

"I'm not. I'm trying to help you." That didn't earn a response, negative or positive, and so Tony continued, "When Obi punched me, I tried to brush you away, but you still checked me over. Even though I complained. You get me?"

"I don't need you to drive my car," Stephen eventually replied. "I'll just sell it. A car is pointless when I have portals again."

"Fair call." Tony squeezed Stephen's arm where he held it. Some of the tension had fled, at least, and so Tony left well enough alone and allowed the pleasant city to further ease their mood. Occasional gusts brought the smell of the ocean and rustled still-green leaves above them. A busker's smooth voice was wasted on John Mayer, but Tony could at least appreciate the mild irony of hearing Waiting On The World To Change.

Tony set a circuitous route through Santa Monica's beachside blocks, which Stephen eventually noticed. "Since you took us straight here, there is still a while before our reservations." Off Stephen's nod, Tony hesitated before adding, "I hate to tell you this, but you've gotta put on a perky face. Someone just noticed us. By which I mean: you."

"What?" Stephen asked, confused, then jolted as a woman extended a business card and a pen. He'd instinctively accepted both, but now looked down in confusion at what he held.

"You're that magic man, aren't you?" she giggled. Petite and a bit overly-groomed, she glanced at
Tony like he was nothing more than confirmation of Stephen's identity. Hmm. That wasn't a fun feeling. "Doctor Strange?"

"I." Stephen blinked. "Yes."

"I googled you. I can't believe that's your real name! It's so perfect."

"I..." Noticing Tony's vague amusement, Stephen's anxiety-driven bad mood began to fracture, very slightly. The situation was apparently too absurd. "You wanted me to sign something?"

"I just have my business cards on me, so could you sign the back?" Her hopeful smile lasted until Stephen, sighing faintly, extracted his arm from Tony's and leaned down to the flat top of a newspaper dispenser. According to what Tony saw of her card as it was flipped, she did something with office supplies. No wonder magic seemed exciting.

"I'm Rosa," she cut in when the pen tip touched the card.

"To Rosa," Stephen gamely repeated as he scrawled the note, then signed below. "Here you go, Rosa."

"Thanks," she said gleefully and tucked the card into her purse. "How did you learn that stuff? Can anyone?"

Stephen looked ready to dismiss her like a useless distraction. Of course he did. "It's extremely..." Trailing off, Stephen paused. His shoulders squared. Tony tilted his head in curiosity for whatever he'd say next. "Actually. Rosa, I learned my skills in a place called Kamar-Taj."

Oh, well, all right, then. They really were just detonating the timeline.

"Kamar-Taj," she repeated, awed. "How do you spell that? Or... no, that's okay. I'll just google again."

"Oh, it's not a place you google. But if you're truly interested in pursuing the mystic arts, you'll find it, regardless." Stephen actually smiled. "That's lesson one. It's pass/fail."

As Rosa realized that he was serious, her eyes widened and her expression turned very solemn. "How long would I be there?"

"You'd give up your lease. Quit your job. All of them would be irrelevant, afterward. You don't have to go if you don't want to," he added in her uncertain silence. "It's not for everyone. Kamar-Taj," he reminded her, and nudged Tony back into motion. "If you're meant to be there, you'll find it."

"Look at you, the salesman," Tony noted as they left Rosa behind. She watched them go, silent, then looked back down at where she'd tucked away her business card. "I really did not expect that."

Especially with the dark mood Stephen had just been in.

"One of the benefits of the mystic arts being known to the world," Stephen replied, "is that we can recruit more fighters to wield them. We can't lower our standards, but more good people can only help. Who knows? She might be good." After another few steps, though, he added, "Are people going to just shove random things at me, now?"

"Yep. It's always annoying. But you smile and sign, anyway, because people aren't going to believe in heroes who were dickheads in person."

"People believed in you, though," Stephen said after a smug pause.
"Hey, you're really in a better mood!" Tony laughed and wrapped his arm back around Stephen's. "Good."

After another long pause, Stephen replied, "Thanks, Tony. It's been... quite a few days. It's usually a lot harder to get me off my game."

Tony had seen that typically unshakeable demeanor before, yes. After being battered around Manhattan, abducted, and tortured, Stephen had popped right back to his feet and proceeded to argue with Tony like having crystal needles pierce through him was nothing but a slight annoyance. Their current reality had less physical pain, but it held its own unique challenges. "For the last few days, we've felt out of control. Just like when the time hiccups were happening." After a few silent steps, Tony added, "I can't stand being out of control. I bet you're even worse."

"I do really hate being out of control," Stephen admitted.

"And that's totally fair, but look at you by now. You might hate being the first hero, but you're already using it to make a stronger plan for rallying some troops. And—no shame—you can't do cars. Okay. You're accepting that, and selling yours. Progress. It's all good." Tony elbowed him when he didn't reply. "It's all good."

Stephen needed a while to respond. Even then, it was more like he felt that he had to say something, and was only speaking for that reason. "I'm not used to having you act like this. Or... remember my restaurant orders." He frowned at the sidewalk ahead of them. "That was weird."

"Hey, I'm just relieved. Obadiah's out of the way and so I am in a fantastic mood. I want to spread the emotional wealth. Besides," Tony added and squeezed Stephen's arm again, "my big strong man came to my rescue. I'm swooning."

Stephen eyed him, but laughed. "You're becoming way too comfortable with this."

"You told me: when you've got to, go with the flow. I'm at maximum flow."

Their restaurant had seats available a bit before their reservation, fortunately; they could only circle the block so many times. It was as clean and airy as the expensive parts of the city they'd wandered, and they were given a table in a blessedly private corner. After settling in and ordering drinks, Stephen steepled his fingers and studied Tony. His earlier bad mood seemed entirely gone, but deep concern instead replaced it. It appeared he felt that he owed a debt to Tony for what he'd done, and he didn't intend to let that kindness build any interest. "Now that I've met Pepper—again—can I ask you something?"

"Huh?" Tony blinked. "Sure, what?"

Stephen dropped his voice low enough that no one could possibly listen in. "How exactly are you planning to get back together with her?"

Tony frowned, uncertain of the answer Stephen expected. "She seems pretty damn taken with the idea of the two of us," Stephen pointed out, and gestured between them.

"We'll eventually have an amicable break-up," Tony shrugged in the same quiet tones. "But I'll still be heartbroken. I'll need consoling."

"Is she going to be ready to do that?" Off Tony's confusion, Stephen amended, "You're moving to New York. Is she coming with you?"
"Company's headquartered in L.A., so..." Tony trailed off. All right. Fair point. He'd been so focused on the greater fight, and the support Stephen would need to successfully launch it, that he'd forgotten some of the personal logistics. He couldn't just abandon Pepper in Los Angeles. "Well, I said that I'd headquarter the civilian division in New York. She can move over when that really launches."

"Which'll be how long?"

Tony shrugged. "I'll start doing inventions now. Oh, but I'll need a workshop," he added, musing. "I don't have room for a decent one in that penthouse, so I'll need to rent a warehouse and overhaul it. Few months for that, few months to develop products, few more to put them into production—"

"That's a lot of 'few months.'"

"She is always there for me," Tony countered. The idea that Pepper would simply... what? Wander away if Tony was in New York for a few months was absurd. She'd waited faithfully for him to come back from Afghanistan, and she had no idea if he was still alive, then. In this timeline, his East Coast 'absence' included videochats and frequent visits out west. "The biggest challenge is going to be figuring out a way to tell her as much of the truth as I can. It'd be weird to do anything, otherwise, but you and I can decide how many specifics I can share."

Stephen still looked uncertain. "I just..." He sighed. "The two of you were trying to have a kid. I'd prefer not to screw that up again. And—"

"Are you Doctor Strange?" asked the wispy man in his forties who'd come up to their table.

Smiling, and almost looking to mean it, Stephen accepted the receipt he was handed and flipped to its blank back. "I am, and what's your name?" Once they were alone again, he confirmed, "Yeah, it is annoying to just sign random things."

"Mmmhmm."

"I'm just saying, Tony. Meeting Pepper tonight made your potential future very real. The last few days have been a madhouse of moving chess pieces around a board for the fight, but hopefully there can be a life beyond that."

"What's your life going to be?" Tony asked after a pause.

Stephen blinked. "What?"

"Is there a... someone?"

"No. It's fine, my work is far more important." Tony offered a dubious look in reply, and Stephen continued, "There were a few potential 'someones.' In retrospect, I ruined all of them. That happened most spectacularly with the biggest 'potential,' but..." He sighed. "But it's irrelevant. Because I'll barely be working at that hospital, now. Charles still might fire me if the attention turns sour. They won't do a job posting until Gurdeep officially moves onto the retirement track, and so I might not even have a chance to meet Christine."

Well. Now Tony felt bad, too. "If you know she's there, you could make an effort to reach out." His smile was lopsided. "You know... throw some magic around. Impress her."

"Me assuming I should impress Christine 24/7 was why we broke up," Stephen wryly said. "No. It's fine. I was alone when you and I first met, so that's the plan. It's all good, Tony," he added in the uncertain silence. "The only thing I would need to be concerned about is how Christine stopped me
from bleeding out, but this time I won't be speared through the heart. So... it's fine."

"We have really got to catch up on some of our less famous exploits," Tony remarked after a long pause. (Speared through the heart?) "Well, um... what about the Ancient One? Is she available?"

Stephen stared back with a look of bemused horror.

"You two had an interesting chemistry. It could work."

"Moving on," Stephen prompted.

"Wong? Hey, you like Wong?"

"Moving on," Stephen repeated with a laugh.

"Nah, Wong's too good for you," Tony added. "Never mind, bad idea." The joke was softened by his sidelong smile.

"Are you Doctor Stephen Strange?" asked another voice, deeper than the man who'd interrupted them before. Though Stephen instinctively looked up with a strained, polite smile, Tony's stare was blatantly shameless.

Oh.

Oh, right.

He should have expected this.

The imposing man didn't extend anything to be autographed. Of course he didn't. "I'm Colonel Nick Fury," Fury announced. "And if you don't mind, Doctor, I need to interrupt your dinner date."
"Colonel," Stephen said after a significant pause, during which Tony shot him a weighty look. "Please pull up a seat."

"You ordered yet?" Fury asked as he settled himself on an empty side of the table.

"Just drinks."

"Good. I've never been able to find spicy tuna rolls as good as this one restaurant in Oceanside, but I'll give this place a chance." With that said, Fury leaned back in his chair, studied Stephen, and smiled. Tony might as well be invisible. "You've done some very interesting things recently."

"I have," Stephen admitted. "Tony just had a literal traitor hauled out of his company and I'm who people wanted to talk to on the sidewalks tonight."

"Well, we are in Santa Monica," Tony pointed out with instinctive ego. "More of the celebrity gossip types around here. Go down into Hawthorne or El Segundo, and Stark Industries is a much bigger deal."

"This sounds like a personal problem the two of you need to work out," Fury suggested, only to be interrupted by the waiter. Once they'd all placed their orders, he continued, "Doctor, I want to get straight to the point. Those interesting things you've been doing? They caught my eye."

Don't say it, Tony, Stephen thought, and maintained a calm expression as he stared levelly at Fury's eyepatch and his single eye.

"I'm here to talk to you about the Avengers Initiative."

After a second, Stephen started laughing. "Oh." It was this. Right, right, this was Fury. Avengers Fury. Got it.

"Oh?" Fury echoed. "Is something funny?" To the side, Tony's expression over Stephen's reaction might be hidden amusement or dismay; it was impossible to tell.

"Sorry," Stephen said, and cleared his throat. "Please. Do continue."

Fury's eye narrowed, but he let that pass. "I'm the director of S.H.I.E.L.D. The way we currently protect the world isn't going to be enough for some of the bigger threats out there. That energy I saw you wield was an extraordinary ability. I am looking for extraordinary abilities, wielded by extraordinary people."

"Sorry, wait," Stephen then said. "Great intro speech, but let me cut you off: I don't want to join your team."

"Wait, how did you even know we were here?" Tony wondered, even as Fury looked at Stephen with measured offense. "I know you didn't hack his phone while I called him."

"I'm assuming you protected that line?" Fury guessed, and smiled. It wasn't a pleasant expression. "You didn't protect your assistant's line when she called to make these reservations."

"...Ah. An oversight," Tony admitted.

"I don't want to join your team," Stephen repeated. "And I won't. I operate under the oversight of the
masters of the mystic arts, not S.H.I.E.L.D."

"Let's talk about those 'masters,'" Fury said. "Doctor, I've seen you block weapons that no kevlar could stop. Watched you take a single step that left you up inside a skyscraper penthouse. So far as my people knew today, you were in Manhattan until about an hour ago, and then suddenly I got word that Stark's assistant was making reservations for you here in L.A. Those portals of yours aren't just extraordinary; they're a security threat." Fury leaned forward on the table. "Which term would you prefer for me to use in my report? For you? And for those 'masters?'"

"Don't threaten him," Tony ordered.

"I'm not talking to you, Stark."

"Yeah, well." Tony's eyebrows popped defiantly. "You will be."

"Tony." Stephen laid his hand on Tony's, then returned his attention to Fury. "I'd prefer it if you didn't talk about me at all," he then noted, "but I doubt that'll happen."

Fury nodded. "Good guess."

"So, let me get this straight, Colonel. You view my abilities as a big enough security risk that I either work under your oversight by choice... or you make my life a big enough hell that I agree, anyway, so that you'll call off your government dogs." Stephen shrugged. "Accurate summary?"

"I tend to use friendlier language," Fury said.

"Somehow, I doubt that." Both men smiled thinly at each other over the impasse they'd built.

"What if he shows that he's not a security threat?" Tony wondered in the tense silence. "And that S.H.I.E.L.D.'s got nothing to worry about from Stephen? Would you let him do his own thing, then?"

"If you could somehow prove that," Fury countered, "then we'd only just watch him." Instead of direct him, he didn't add.

"Comforting," Stephen wryly said, then turned to Tony. He wasn't sure quite what Tony had in mind, but it did sound like he had a specific plan.

"Colonel," Tony said, leaned in very close, and then waited for the server to set down their sushi rolls. Once they were alone again, he continued. "Earlier this week, Stephen helped me expose a traitor within Stark Industries. We've found other threats. Along those lines, you just might want to check on S.H.I.E.L.D. itself."

Oh. Oh. The Hydra infiltration that had blanketed the news, after they'd nearly put their global plan into effect in Washington. At this stage, at the end of 2007, Hydra had yet to reach the height of their power. They'd still be dangerous, but it was a far better time to strike and root them out.

This plan could work. Or, it might get Fury killed once he started digging, but... well, Tony had already kicked that stone, so they might as well follow it down the hill.

"Really," Fury then said, and smiled. His one eye was half-lidded.

"Hydra's infiltrated every inch of your organization," Stephen agreed, nodding. "I can sense it, like feeling numbness seep out from an injection site." (Magic was a great cover for bullshitting any knowledge he shouldn't yet have in this timeline.)
"You want me to believe that you're serious," Fury eventually said. "You want me to believe that you, Doctor, have somehow discovered a massive conspiracy in an organization that you've barely even heard of. And that conspiracy is run by a different organization that died decades ago."

"If you don't believe us," Tony said in a tighter tone, "then I suggest that you launch a very careful, extremely offline search. Start looking for people in your spy club who have even the faintest, tiniest connection to the night my parents died. Tug on those threads."

"You're really not kidding," Fury realized.

"One hundred percent," Stephen said, and popped a cucumber roll into his mouth.

"You're trying to bring Stephen under S.H.I.E.L.D. control? Think about what that means, with what we just told you. You seriously think that one of the strongest people on the planet's gonna take orders from Hydra?" Tony snorted, and popped in a cucumber roll of his own.

As they chewed, Fury met their gazes with increasing unease. "I'm willing to pick up this conversation at a later date, Doctor. I hope you understand, but we're still going to need to keep an eye on you in the meantime."

Stephen swallowed his food. "I suppose I appreciate you actually admitting that," he replied dryly. God, there were going to be audio devices hidden through his whole life, weren't there? "Let us know what you turn up. And if you find what we told you you'd find inside your organization... then you never touch the masters of the mystic arts."

"I don't remember making that bargain," Fury countered. "But we can talk again later." Then he stood, and carried off the spicy tuna rolls he'd ordered.

"I don't think he's supposed to take that plate outside," Tony said. "But I hope he likes the rolls."

"One of the strongest people on the planet?" Stephen then asked Tony, and smiled at the description.

"Oh, shut up." Tony's eyes rolled. "You know you are. I should have warned you that Fury was coming eventually, sorry. But I do think it'll help if we can keep S.H.I.E.L.D. functioning, so I'm glad tonight happened. Picturing Hydra with that much power during the lead-up is..." He shivered dramatically.

"Well, now I know Fury'll keep bothering me," Stephen said idly as he chose another roll. "I'm assuming he'll bother you, too."

"Probably." Tony rolled his eyes and took a sip of sake. He'd worked up the courage for alcohol again; Stephen had not.

The next day, Tony re-joined Stephen in New York. Pepper's messages followed him there and indicated that yes, he was also already on S.H.I.E.L.D.'s radar. "They're gonna have a collective heart attack when I launch my first suit," Tony smirked as they walked down the Greenwich Village sidewalk, next to Stephen. "I'm already making schematics in my head. I don't want anything that has too-modern tech, but I can definitely make improvements over my first models."

"So, what else will Fury turn up?" Stephen wondered. "Not related to Hydra, I mean. What combat resources will S.H.I.E.L.D. bring to the—" He paused to sign another autograph, then kept walking. "To the table?"

"Well. In a few years, they're going to investigate a hammer in New Mexico. From talking to Thor, we've gotta let that play out exactly like before. He needed to be knocked down a few pegs."
"Knocked down a few pegs,' right. And neither of us would have any idea about that."

"No idea at all," Tony agreed, although he didn't seem to echo Stephen's sarcasm. "And..." Trailing off, he sighed and shook his head. "Okay. This one might actually be a problem. Changing the timeline might change when—" He waited for Stephen to sign another autograph. "Change when people look at parts of the ice. Different things would be visible based on how the wind's blowing on any given day."

"Ice? Oh. You mean Rogers." Stephen shrugged. "I mean, I could locate him today, but I assume it'd be better to wait until he's actually supposed to show up."

"Ah." Tony snorted. "Of course. I should have expected that there was no problem for which you don't have a handy answer with your magical Swiss army knife."

"You're learning," Stephen laughed.

Though Tony looked ready to discuss more future heroes, or perhaps snark about Stephen's ego, he stopped suddenly in his tracks and groaned loudly enough to catch someone's attention across the street. "That's the big S.H.I.E.L.D. thing to worry about. Ugh. Unfortunately, we might need to seriously, seriously piss them off."

"I'm not loving this as a topic opener."

"I raided their files, once," Tony quietly explained. "In the lead-up to you-know-who's first attack on Earth, S.H.I.E.L.D. was conducting energy experiments with the Space Stone. They've got it right now, and it'd be a hell of a lot harder to grab later. If you can portal in—"

"No, we have to let them run those tests on it," Stephen remembered. He'd heard the tales of the various Infinity Stones, and their owners over the years. "Its presence ultimately draws the Mind Stone here. Otherwise, it remains off-limits to Earth. Loki has to be lured here before we capture either Stone."

"Great," Tony grumbled. "Good point, I guess. So, we really are going to need to round up the right people before New York. We'll have to do the whole damn thing again."

"What?" Stephen squinted. "No. We draw Loki here and then take both Stones from him." Off Tony's disbelieving look, Stephen added, "It'll be simple."

"Simple."

"Well, not if those Chitauri start invading, no. So, we'll just take him out at the very beginning. I," Stephen said emphatically, "will be working hand-in-hand with the Ancient One. Loki is not a problem."

"All right," Tony said in disbelief, and then looked up at the tall wooden doors rising above them: the entrance to the New York Sanctum. "I cannot say that I was looking forward to ever seeing this place again."

"We'll be quick," Stephen promised, and knocked. Shortly, after reality shifted to deposit them in the foyer, he inclined his head respectfully toward the approaching man. "Master Drumm."

Daniel Drumm looked so much younger than he had when Stephen futilely tried to help him, but could only watch the man die. And when Stephen's words made him chuckle, he looked younger still. "Merely her assistant, I'm afraid. Master Lin is currently involved in struggles elsewhere."
Those struggles would kill her within a few years, Stephen recalled, and thus Daniel would soon be promoted to Sanctum master. Naturally, he said nothing to that effect. "Thank you so much for hosting us."

Daniel surveyed them. Both Stephen and Tony were in casual street clothes, far different from the typical outfits worn by the mystics. "The Ancient One requested that I let you visit the artifacts," he said with visible uncertainty. "You know her, then?"

"Yeah. I... actually, just let me prove this, it'd be easiest. Tony, you mind catching me?"

"Do I mind wh-AH," Tony yelped as Stephen's limp body collapsed into his instinctive grip, as unresisting as a fresh corpse. "Stephen?!"

"I'm fine," Stephen immediately said and let his astral form appear. "Sorry. I thought you knew what was coming."

Tony's arms tightened around Stephen's body, possibly hard enough to bruise. "Not. So. Much."
Even in such a short moment, his face had reddened.

"Sorry," Stephen said again. "Be right back," he then promised Daniel, who nodded, bemused. Once Stephen had vanished, made his way up the stairs, and returned, he reappeared and announced, "You have a half-finished cup of tea sitting near a copy of Anabasis, in the original Greek."

"You're very comfortable with astral travel," Daniel acknowledged as any lingering distrust eased. "You are well-trained, then."
His point had been made. Stephen slid back into his body, which was as chilly a sensation as ever, and looked at where Tony held his still-sprawling body. "Thanks."

"Never do that again," Tony ordered as he forcefully hauled Stephen back to his feet. Only then did Stephen process how Tony thought that Obadiah's unwilling spiritual journey had left him looking dead. Apparently, he'd thought the same thing after seeing Stephen's body collapse.

"Sorry," he repeated more sincerely. Between this and vanishing behind the Mirror Dimension's walls with Obadiah, it appeared that he'd already sent Tony hurtling toward full-on panic twice in the past few days.

"Okay, then," Tony said. The redness in his face eased as adrenaline filtered out of his system. "Go get your stupid costume."

Perhaps it would be best to just let Tony fume in the foyer. Stephen hadn't expected that level of reaction from him, but really, he should have; the man was emotional. Everything about Tony was a learning experience. Eventually, he'd pass that class. "Again, thank you for hosting us," Stephen said in a clear attempt to re-set the mood.

"Glad to," Daniel said politely as he directed Stephen into the display room. "And... you appear to know where you're going."

Sighing ruefully, Stephen walked toward the glass case that held the hibernating form of the Cloak of Levitation. He really had missed it, but even if this revamped timeline version of the Cloak somehow still chose him, they'd lose all the camaraderie they'd developed. Ah, well. There was an excellent chance that it simply wouldn't chose him at all, and so he was really getting ahead of himself by—

The Cloak's collar raised, and it turned to look at him.
A slow grin dawned on Stephen's face, and he walked closer to the case.

"It is really reacting to you," Daniel noted. "Perhaps you are destined to be together."

"I'm an idiot," Stephen whispered and leaned so close to the case that his forehead bumped it. "You were on my body when the Time Stone malfunctioned that last, violent time, weren't you? The huge paradox? You woke up back here, just like we did." And unlike them, it'd been trapped inside this tiny box for all those months.

Its collar nodded fiercely, and one of its corners lifted to touch the glass opposite Stephen's face.

"Well, then. It'll let it out," Daniel noted. Faint astonishment colored his voice.

As soon as a glass panel was removed, the Cloak whipped free of its prison and wrapped itself fiercely around Stephen's shoulders. He laughed as it spun him like an over-excited hug, lifting him a foot off the ground in the process. "I'm sorry about that," Stephen said, and let one of his hands rest against the opposite shoulder where the Cloak covered him.

"It looks happy," Tony noted begrudgingly. Stephen looked over as Tony walked up the staircase, sighing and rolling his eyes in a show of continued protest. "I'm glad we came. Fine."

"I will not do the astral thing again," Stephen promised.

"Okay." Tony huffed out a sharp sigh and turned. "Sanctum Guy."


"Sure, right. There were these windchimes that we could use to contact Kamar-Taj. Do you have an extra set, by any chance?" Off Stephen's surprise, Tony rolled his eyes again and added, "For all I know, I'll need to phone you and you'll be off in some other dimension again. Maybe one of them can reach you."

"Actually, I do," Daniel said. "Given what I just witnessed, I think it's fair to assume that it's safe to give them to you." After retreating into a back room, he eventually returned with a long wooden box in hand and passed it delicately over.

"Thank you. We'll leave you alone, now," Stephen added, and opened a portal into Tony's penthouse. "Although I may need to call on you at some future time," he added as he again stroked one shoulder. It felt so good to have the Cloak back with him that he scarcely cared what an odd match it made with his winter jacket.

"Very nice to meet you, Mr. Strange," Daniel called after them as they left.

*That went a lot better than last time, Daniel,* Stephen thought. Once the portal closed, he turned to Tony, adjusted the windchime box in his arms, and said, "I am sorry about the astral thing."

"Just don't do it again. It's." His weight shifted. "Creepy."

"Oh, I should catch you up," Stephen realized. Tony's initial confusion faded as Stephen gestured the Cloak in front of him, and spoke toward it. "You already know about being sent back in time. Tony and I have to relive the timeline to keep reality stable, but we realized we needed to change a few things—"

"And then we changed just about everything," Tony said, and shrugged.
"Well. He's not wrong. Basically... I accidentally did magic on CNN. The entire world knows about me, now, and the masters of the mystic arts. Oh, and the Ancient One and I are going to come up with a plan against Thanos."

"And me," Tony cut in. "I'll help with the plan."

"And... oh," Stephen added. "You should know that Tony and I are dating." He framed the word with significant airquotes. "It makes handling the media a little easier. I think those are all the major points?"

Tony nodded. "Seems like it, yeah."

The Cloak hung as still as it'd been inside its case.

"So," Tony said sweetly, "how've things been for you?"

For nearly the next two weeks, the Cloak judged them visibly at every possible turn. The sight of an interview, unexpectedly given when Stephen had stepped out for a quick lunch and stumbled across a reporter doing the same, made it huff at how Stephen was sharing magical secrets with the world. Encountering a new tabloid shot of the two men kissing had it looking ready to unravel itself, thread by thread. It almost seemed to regret being let out of that case, and Stephen moving into a new home paid for by Tony hardly helped.

Regardless of the Cloak's judgment, it was a beautiful condo. Though Stephen had chosen it for its proximity to work—not that distance mattered any more, with portals accessible—the place itself was wonderfully appealing. He was already considering spells to adjust the colors of the walls, as it was brighter than he preferred, but that brightness came from multiple full-length windows scattered throughout. Not a bad trade-off. Best of all, it even had a small but private rooftop deck, which would be a pleasant place to read... and a perfect take-off spot for a jet-powered suit.

"Can you ward this place?" Tony wondered as he moved a hologram of a painting along a wall, and marked the nail hole once Stephen nodded at a particular position. "And fry any spy tech that S.H.I.E.L.D. tries to install?"

"Good idea," Stephen murmured and began studying the angles of the walls, and how they might interact with a spell as it was cast. "Yeah, I'll find an option to block anything they try. I doubt that they would restrain themselves to my office, like Stane did."

"Especially since Chuck is still calming down the press," Tony added. "So you don't have an office, for the moment."

Stephen sighed. Yes, that was unfortunately true. Findlay had decided that it wasn't yet time for Stephen to return for any surgeries, and he couldn't promise when it would be. There were already patients specifically requesting him for a consultation, but the hospital's attorneys had judged the risks too great. His powers were poorly understood; other doctors' patients might feel threatened; he might distract his fellow surgeons simply by existing. Until the legal department said that the hospital was not assuming additional risk, his potential of operating again remained in a holding pattern.

"I need books," Stephen concluded after examining the layout of his new condo. "I'd ask if you want to come see the library, but I think I'd need permission for you to come to Kamar-Taj. At least, to come beyond the entrance hall."

"I would like to see your weirdo boot camp, one day," Tony admitted. "But if you think it'd be a bad idea to sneak my way in today, I will agree. You've got me convinced that I don't want to be on the
"No one does," Stephen laughed as he raised his hand to open a portal to Kathmandu. The Cloak swept onto his shoulders. "Back in a while. Don't hang up any more frames."

Tony was going to hang up every single picture before Stephen got back, he concluded as the portal shut behind him. Inside the Kamar-Taj library, a mystic who'd instinctively raised his hand to fend off an intruder studied the Cloak with open curiosity. Then, he lowered his arm.

"Stephen Strange," Stephen said with an easy smile. "Hi, I studied here, but you don't know me. Time Stone. You know how it is. I assume the library still has the same hours in 2008?" He only got a confused blink in response, and Stephen nodded and turned. "I'll just go check, then."

Huh, Stephen wondered as he walked deeper inside the room. He didn't know the man behind the desk. Perhaps that was who'd earned the rumored decapitation? "Hi. Stephen Strange, the Ancient One can vouch for me. I need some books on spatial warding that can block physical intruders as well as energy signals."

This librarian did not appear to care about any explanation this stranger gave; the Cloak was enough proof. "Modern energy technology, or the energy from spells?"

God, he loved this library. Most places wouldn't have different books on each topic. "The former. I want to block a government agency's spy tech."

The librarian appeared to think nothing of that reason, either. "Let me check the stacks."

Stephen leaned back against open air, letting the Cloak support him as he waited. The pleasant, dry scent of ancient texts surrounded him, as did stray noises from the city beyond Kamar-Taj's walls. After tilting further into a comfortable angle, he abruptly stood back up straight and called, "Wong?"

Wong, looking far younger than he remembered, walked out from between two bookshelves. His brow furrowed as he studied Stephen. "I've never seen you here before."

"Yeah, Time Stone, long story." Stephen gestured in the direction of the entrance hall. "The Ancient One has the full details. I just needed some books."

Clearly distrusting him, Wong narrowed his eyes.

Oh, this was fun. Look at baby Wong. So stubborn. So... Wong. "I'm a master of the mystic arts. I swear. Quiz me."

Immediately, Wong demanded, "Perform the spell needed to draw upon the energy of the Green World."

"The Green..." Frowning, Stephen clarified, "Do you mean the Jade Dimension, World of the Emerald Shards, or that place with all the moss?"

"It was a trick question," Wong said pointedly. Ah. So he had been expected to notice that vague description.

After Wong remained motionless and his expression expectant, Stephen realized that he was still expected to perform an appropriate spell. "All right, I guess I'm picking which dimension, then." A confident flicking of his fingers and twisting of his wrists moved his hands like he was opening something between them. Soon, green energy shards exploded like a violent flower, shimmered beautifully with arcane light, and collapsed back into the dimension from which they came.
"That's the easiest one to access," Wong noted flatly.

"The Jade Dimension is dangerous to draw upon until we've passed the spring equinox, and that moss dimension smells like mildewed towels. I chose properly."

"Hmm," Wong said and studied him again. His expression changed. Slightly. "So... we know each other in another timeline, or at some other point in this one? You shouldn't be telling me this. Since you've said the Time Stone is involved, changing the timeline has inherent risks."

"It's fine, I've got it covered," Stephen said and waved him off. "Actually... since I'm here and that guy's still looking for my books, I'm going to go ask the Ancient One something."

"You can't just..." Sighing, Wong trailed off. He always had plenty of work ahead of him, and he probably didn't want to interrupt it to deal with this presumptuous stranger.

Oh, he'd missed this place, Stephen thought with a smile as he roamed the halls. There was such a sense of purposeful purity here, from the architecture to the dutiful trainees. He loved the slick newness of the condo Tony had purchased for him, as did he love the quiet grandeur of the New York Sanctum. Still, sometimes it was refreshing to cut down to the bone and remove all distractions from—

An energy whip nearly caught him across the back of the head. Rolling instantly forward on the stone tiles, he turned to bring up a shield to defend himself, then twisted his fingers like he was once again opening the Emerald Shards. Instead of light blooming, though, reality itself warped as he rotated his hand. The person standing on the ground would be knocked off-balance as it moved below them, and...

Grinning, Stephen watched the Ancient One placidly ride his rift in reality until she was standing on one of the walls, perpendicular to the ground below. "I believe this would be instructive for you to watch," she calmly said and wrapped them into a Mirror Dimension dome. Only then did Stephen notice the several novices she'd brought along. Their wide-eyed faces were exactly what he'd expect to see over newcomers' robes.

(If only he had his own master's outfit to wear, instead of this heather grey sweater and jeans. That blue would let these kids know what they were in for.)

"Inside the Mirror Dimension?" Stephen noted, and raised one eyebrow pointedly. "Well, that hardly seems fair."

The Ancient One smiled, a calm expression that barely narrowed her eyes and tilted her head. "Are all fights fair, Mr. Strange?" Though Dormammu's crest didn't appear on her forehead, he knew that greater strength suddenly filled her so long as they were inside this place.

"Nope. They're not fair," Stephen instantly agreed, and sent a wall of flames hurtling toward the Ancient One... and the novices she'd brought into the line of literal fire. They screamed, even as the Ancient One dissolved his attack into mist, and he used her defensive moment to turn all the ground below them into crackling energy. That was no problem for him, of course; the Cloak instinctively lifted him. But once again, she needed to take the time to—

Laughing, Stephen shook his head in resignation as the mirrored ceiling slammed downward to pin him flat. As soon as his own jolting electricity touched him, he released that spell. At least he'd put up a good fight.

"You were willing to put them in danger," the Ancient One calmly said as she let the Mirror
Dimension fall away. The novices scuttled to the nearest wall and clustered there.

"You put them in danger when you brought them into that arena," Stephen replied. "I figured it was only fair to make you deal with the fallout of that decision, and play on defense. I knew you wouldn't let them get hurt. Not after you brought them along."

"Your first response lacked speed and agility."

"I do need to train, yeah," Stephen admitted.

"But," the Ancient One said, and smiled more genuinely, "I see that the Cloak has once again chosen you."

As the Cloak twitched its collar in satisfaction, Stephen nodded. "Which is exactly what I hoped to speak with you about. If you have the time."

"Please leave us," the Ancient One said to the frightened novices, who left the room at nearly a run. "Of course, Mr. Strange. Let's walk."

More than a few trainees studied him curiously as he and the Ancient One walked slowly through the courtyard. It was evening in Kathmandu, perhaps an hour and a half before lights-out, and only torches lit their path outside. Even in that darkness, it was evident to the trainees that Stephen was both a stranger and someone who seemed well at ease with the Ancient One. No one seemed to know what to make of that combination, particularly when his powerful relic was added into the mix.

"I told someone about Kamar-Taj recently," Stephen eventually said.

"There's nothing wrong with that." The Ancient One folded her hands at the small of her back as they walked. "She may well make the trip."

"I didn't say 'she.'"

After a quick, almost impish smile, the Ancient One continued, "But simply because she makes the trip does not mean that she'll be admitted. Just because she's admitted does not mean that she will thrive."

"That's actually just what I hoped to hear." Stephen looked up toward the stars as they crossed an empty courtyard, and smiled at the spectacular celestial sight that was washed out by Manhattan's light pollution. Then a rooftop was overhead again, and he looked back to his companion. "To win this war, we're going to need a lot more people in the order. I wanted to make sure it was all right to begin some real recruitment efforts."

"How did you go about those efforts with her?"

"I told her the name Kamar-Taj, said she'd need to find it herself if she was destined to be here, and added that she should end her lease and quit her job if she truly wanted to try."

"Yes, that sounds about right. So long as you approach people in such a manner, I'm sure our standards won't be lowered."

"Great. That's..." Trailing off, Stephen tried not to openly study a man walking some distance away. It was difficult to be certain under the flickering flames overhead, but he looked familiar. Only when they were left alone did he quietly ask, "Was that man's name Kaecillius?"

"You know him?"
"I will." Dropping his voice further, Stephen murmured, "Eject him from the order. Immediately."

The Ancient One's gaze grew more considering. "He has lost much in his life, and needs the study of the mystic arts to again provide direction."

"You recruiting people who've 'lost much' means that some of them are going to snap, steal the pages to perform dark rituals, bring down the Sanctums, and leave me to pull that move I told you about with Dormammu. Kick him out." The Ancient One still hesitated, likely thinking she could pull Kaecilius back from whatever misguided path he'd walk. "I watched him and his zealots kill Daniel Drumm in the New York Sanctum. After which he came to finish the job with me, and very nearly did so."

The Cloak's collar nodded.

"That's how you died. He'd damn the whole world in the pursuit of his own immortality. He needs to leave. Immediately."

"Very well, Mr. Strange," the Ancient One slowly said. "He will be given the news tomorrow morning."

Stephen exhaled. "Good. Oh, and... is there a Karl Mordo here?"

The Ancient One's expression slid toward a frown. "No matter what insight you claim to have—"

"No, no, I'm not saying to send him away. He's a great guy, he helped me a lot. Just..." Stephen hesitated, then finished, "The more morally precise he gets, the more he's going to flip out if he learns about... certain dimensions. That are very poorly illuminated."

The Ancient One paused. Her shoulders squared and her chin raised. "I see."

"Right. Anyway, I was hoping to see what sorts of relics were stored here. There might be some that are tailor-made for protecting the Stones, if only we can find the right person to wield them."

"Sensible. This way."

"I didn't mean 'wield' quite like this," Stephen said a few minutes later as he studied a knife inside a rosewood box. It looked like simple silver with worn leather straps wrapped around its grip, but a disquieting black smudge rippled along the knife's edge. More than anything, it gave the impression of being angry.

"The Blade of Balam," she explained. "Cut a person with it, and the latent infection in the blade will seep into them."

"I was not expecting to find a medieval armory in here," Stephen frowned as he moved to the next item: a small but fierce-looking morning star with disturbingly organic dried strands of something clinging to its spikes.

"Glasya's Fist," the Ancient One provided.

"Great. Two demon names in a row, this is fun."

"When swung, it seeks the spot in its target's body most ripe with blood."

Grimacing, Stephen carefully returned it to the rack. "I knew we had weapons, but I was picturing things more like what Karl has. The Staff of the Living Tribunal?" A blunt weapon could cause
terrible damage, but it still seemed more civilized than these torture devices.

"A powerful relic, indeed," she said with clear surprise.

"There's something about knives and spikes that's just distasteful," Stephen grumbled. "Are there relics that are slightly less... horrifically violent?"

There were. A ring that could turn its wearer into unbreakable crystal for five seconds; a short time, but potentially long enough to save a life. Two floating eyes made of sapphire-inset marble, where one could be sent off wherever the wielder wished to see. The images it recorded would be sent into the other marble eye, no matter if a universe separated them.

"So... where do you put the other eye, then, if this one's your moving camera?" Stephen hesitantly wondered.

The Ancient One's bland smile told him that he did not want to know that answer.

"Disgusting, but potentially useful," Stephen said. "Really, all of these have clear potential. But... look, you had no idea that Kaecillius would become a threat. He surprised you in my timeline, too. That meant that he was able to get his hands on something far more dangerous than a blood-hungry weapon: the pages that spoke of Dormammu's coming, and how to make that happen."

She frowned. "What are you saying, Mr. Strange?"

"In May, 2012, an Asgardian prince is going to arrive with the Mind Stone in search of the Space Stone. That's going to be our first foray against Thanos' efforts, but it will not be the last, nor is he the only threat to face." Stephen met her gaze with fierce intention. "That's the first big blow. We need to be developing an army by then. As much as I hate it, I will be that poster boy for recruitment and send you as many potential mystics as you could ever want. But in return: cut out the threats whenever you suspect one. Cut out any threats. I know you like to give people the benefit of the doubt, and that's why I'm standing here. But we don't have that luxury any more."

The Ancient One considered that, and frowned.

"I won't know these new people like I knew Kaecillius, so I'm not going to be able to point to threats for ejection. So that's going to have to be your call. We can't afford to have someone take that morning star and go to town with it on our allies."

"I will consider our standards," she eventually allowed. "Carefully." That was probably all he was getting from her. "What is your plan for protecting those stones from that prince, however?"

"Protecting? Oh." Realizing what she meant, Stephen snorted. "Oh, it's Loki, he's easy."

"Loki," the Ancient One repeated with surprise. "Easy?"

"Incredibly easy. Suckerpunch him and he's got no counter. I still want there to be an army here just in case things go south, but trust me, I can get Mind and Space off him. Especially with your help. Reality's going to be accessible not too long after that, and that's almost certainly going to involve a fight. If you don't have an army ready for Loki, it needs to be in place by then."

"Tell me," the Ancient One asked after some thought. "Would it be wiser to use the Stones against Thanos, or keep him far away from their power?"

"If we can pick? Far, far away. Never even let him come near the things."
"Very well. I will take that under advisement as I begin to make plans." Abruptly, a smile moved back onto her face. "How did it feel, Mr. Strange, to be treated as an equal with the Sorcerer Supreme?"

Stephen said nothing for a long second, and then smiled back when he realized that yes, that'd just happened.

"I do not know when this new timeline will call me away, but I am quite sure that I will have great confidence in my successor. Get me plenty of potential masters of the mystic arts, Stephen, and I will develop a loyal army ready to stand against Thanos."

"Huh. My first name," he noted. "Do I get to know yours?"

"No."

"Fair enough."

The books were waiting for him in the library. Wong was not. Chuckling at the image of how much he'd get to annoy Wong over the years to come, Stephen stepped back into Manhattan and looked around for the pictures that Tony had surely hung against Stephen's orders. Ah. There they all were. There they all were. Right where Tony wanted them, and not quite where Stephen would have chosen.

"You're welcome," Tony said without looking up.

The Cloak tilted at Stephen in a very particular way. Though he'd never given it a mental voice, he still couldn't help but imagine it asking, You're dating this man?

"Thanks, Tony," Stephen drawled, and walked over to the couch to begin his readings. "The Ancient One and I now have plans. For recruitment, and for everything else." He opened the book, grinned, and promptly closed it again as he leaned over to add, "And we sparred in front of some novices. Absolutely terrified them."

Tony snorted at his apparent delight. "Did you win?"

"What? Oh, of course not, she kicked my ass. But then she actually listened to me when we were making plans for the bigger fight, and took my advice on nearly everything. It was..." Letting the full weight of his visit sink in, Stephen admitted, "It was incredibly gratifying, actually."

"Huh. Well, good."

"What are you working on?" Stephen eventually wondered as he flipped back to the pages he needed, for Tony still hadn't looked up. When Tony finally did, the sight he revealed put a broad smile on Stephen's face. "So, did you run to a hardware store while I was gone?"

In Tony's hand was a dark, circular object, A ring of blue lights clustered along its top, though they weren't yet lit. His first arc reactor, it appeared, was still a work in progress. "I'm going to need to do a little bit of elemental synthesizing, first," Tony said toward his creation, "but yeah, I've been tinkering with this. It'll be ready to pop right into a suit as soon as it's fabricated."

"Ready by Valentine's Day, then," Stephen said, amused.

"Hey, that was all your idea." More sincerity entered Tony's eyes, though he probably wasn't aware of it. He did seem very slightly impressed by Stephen's recent good news, and wholly pleased about all of it. "So, you've faced down Nick Fury. You're making plans with the Sorcerer Supreme. And
you've got your ride back." He gestured again to the arc reactor. "It's definitely way past time to make a debut of my own."

"Oh," Stephen realized a second later. Yes, he did have his 'ride' back. Everything about their publicity plans had just gotten adjusted, thanks to the Cloak of Levitation. "You know, the press is going to lose their shit over a shot of us flying together." Noticing the Cloak's drooping collar, he protested, "It's for a greater cause! I'm recruiting trainees!"

Filled with sudden excitement, Tony pointed at Stephen. He set his arc reactor carefully but quickly to one side. "Oh! Okay. Great idea: when the cameras are on us, I retract my faceplate and we make out mid-air. Red really pops against a blue sky."

God, that'd be an iconic shot for the ages. No one would be able to ignore their heroics, especially if he picked up his old outfit to polish off the whole aesthetic. "And the contrast of your straight lines versus the moving Cloak. Imagine that silhouette. Perfect."

_Perfect?_ the Cloak seemed to demand in disbelief.

"Perfect," Stephen repeated toward it and slammed his book shut. His hands twisted together, then drew apart sharply. A second later, a ripple of white light emerged from him and expanded until it'd reached the walls. Wherever it touched something solid it vanished like water splashing against stone, while a narrow sliver of the spell continued down his open hall. "And we are now officially off Colonel Fury's radar."

"For as long as we're inside your condo."

"Well, yeah." Noting Tony's resumed work on the arc reactor, Stephen wondered, "Want me to do the same spell for your Malibu workshop, then? I'm sure S.H.I.E.L.D.'s got the whole place bugged by now, but this spell will fry anything it hits. I could clean it out for you."

"Nah," Tony replied, and twisted a screw into place. A smug, exceedingly _Tony_ grin began to grow as he worked. "A bunch of very fun things are about to happen inside that room. Let Fury watch."
"Enjoy, Colonel," Tony smirked quietly to himself on the morning of February 14th, and confirmed the command to fabricate the final, locked-in design of his leg pieces. S.H.I.E.L.D. spy tech was certainly scattered through the room by now. He'd enjoy their imagined confusion as they watched his bizarre behavior.

As the system hummed into action and began modeling what he assumed would be the launch version of his boots and thrusters, Tony leaned back in deep satisfaction and laced his fingers behind his head. It'd be great to get back to the skies. *Remember anything coming up today?* he texted, and was sure to cover the screen with his other hand as he typed. This phone link was secure, Tony was sure, but a hidden spy camera would ruin all their fun.

Besides... he actually hoped that Nick saw Tony blatantly shielding himself from any spy tech, and *seethed* over it.

The Stark Industries board hadn't been informed of his 'discoveries' just yet, though he'd promised them something in the realm of clean energy. Vincent's software was officially signed off on for production and delivery, which kept them happy for now... but the arc reactor wouldn't make them 'happy.' It'd send them into wild capitalist orgasms. Its market potential was limitless.

Add in the repulsor tech that Pepper was still curious about, and the self-driving tech that wouldn't be hard to adapt for 2008, and Stark Industries was about to get back on top after a shaky month or two.

And, best of all: its poster boy would soon take literal flight.

His phone buzzed and Tony looked down at Stephen's response. *Not positive. Pretty sure there was a V-day assault on Philadelphia, but I only heard the story.* So, Stephen wasn't absolutely certain that demons had tried to invade Philly on Valentine's, 2008, but it was still a decent chance for Tony to make his debut.

*Let's check it out. We'll head back afterward for dinner. I'll pick somewhere nice.*

*You're sure you're up for taking on demons with a brand new suit?*

*Not my typical rodeo, yeah, but I'll follow your lead on the creepy-crawlies. Either way, it'll make for good pictures.* Smiling smugly, Tony tapped off his phone, and only then did he set its black screen aside for clear S.H.I.E.L.D. viewing.

Not knowing what he was doing had to be driving them nuts.

More was happening to heighten S.H.I.E.L.D.'s curiosity. A sprawling warehouse in Long Island City was currently in its earliest stages of being overhauled. Once ready, the initial civilian division research lab should be ready to launch by autumn, at latest. And when Stark Tower started construction, it'd be a quickish hop on the Queensboro Bridge to keep an eye on both facilities.

"Hrm," Tony grumbled after a significant pause. Off the top of his head, he couldn't remember just which architectural firm they'd gone with for the tower. Pepper had handled it, like she'd handled most of the paperwork, and he'd simply approved the renderings as they came in from... whatever firm they'd hired. Well, when he described his big idea to Pepper, and its must-have attributes, she'd likely find the same firm again.

But that would all come later, after this important heroic groundwork was established. Tony
estimated that he and Stephen staying together for, oh, another year would give them enough attention to steer the world exactly where it needed to go.

*Oof,* he thought as soon as he’d imagined the conclusion to that plan, and frowned. As weird as it was to say, he actually wasn’t looking forward to a ‘breakup.’ He’d dodged Happy recently, for obvious reasons, and Rhodey was bewildered about Stephen's abilities. Plus, Rhodey had military-grade suspicion about those portals, just like Fury. It'd been easiest to spend time around Stephen, and so Tony realized that... yes, that's what he'd naturally done in his recent life. Overwhelmingly so, even.

They'd have to find an angle on a breakup where they could still stay friends. Friends who were still each other's default hangout option. Because the thought of not spending any more time with the one person who really knew the face behind this 2008 mask was... impossible. By the time they broke up in a year (or two, whatever), they'd have to come up with one killer excuse for the friendliest breakup the world had ever seen.

The system dinged ninety minutes later, and Tony looked up from the crossword puzzle he'd started on his phone.

The final parts of the suit were ready.

Soon, Tony actually laughed out loud as the gloves and boots clicked into place, completing the suit around him. He'd missed this. He'd missed this so much, he thought as he reached down, retrieved an arc reactor, and moved it into the power port. It did feel different to have power approaching from the outside of the suit, rather than from his own chest, but otherwise... it was like coming home.

"I shouldn't need to even test this, but just for giggles..." With the precise controls he'd developed over the years, Tony increased the thrusters in his boots and gloves. He soon lifted as smoothly as a dolphin leaping from the water, then set it back down as gently as he'd risen. This thing already handled like a dream.

"Hey, honey," Tony said through his suit's speakers, as the HUD inside the helmet overlaid a message of *Call: Stephen Strange* on his garage view. "I've got a surprise for you."

"From how your voice sounds, I think I know what that surprise might be," Stephen chuckled. "One second." The call cut a moment later, but a portal opened after that.

With spread arms and a proud stance, Tony walked from Los Angeles to New York and turned, wanting to show off his suit in all its gleaming glory.

"Beautiful," Stephen proclaimed as he closed the portal.

"Well, well, look at who's gotten all effusive all of a sudden."

"It's beautiful," Stephen insisted. "Because it looks like something that is going to cut the number of autographs I sign. It doesn't have to be a huge drop," he allowed, "but it's just gotten ridiculous. Anything would help."

And it was true that he'd been hounded recently, but it was also his own damn fault. With the Ancient One's agreement, Stephen had dropped the masquerade on some of the battles he'd recently fought. Normally, mystics tried to keep the world ignorant of the terrors that stalked their streets. One couldn't be an invisible inspiration, though. He'd allowed a few, particularly gruesome-looking demons to flicker into view as they tore their way into everyday reality.

Considering that, Tony tapped his faceplate for removal and called out, "Hey, Vincent?"
Stephen's gaze flattened. "I told you not to install that thing here." Vincent might not yet be on the commercial market, but beta versions were available for any system Tony had access to. Even Stephen's, which he'd specifically told Tony to avoid.

Of course, Tony had ignored him.

The system beeped, ready for Tony's command.

"Bring up video of Stephen fighting those demony things in the Bronx Zoo." After stepping out of his suit and letting it stand idle near the dining table, Tony flopped down on the couch and waited for the video to cue. Vincent presented three potential videos for his selection, and Tony frowned in consideration. J.A.R.V.I.S. normally made the selection for him. He was still debating which approach was more user-friendly.

"I shouldn't have gone visible for this particular fight," Stephen noted as he settled in next to Tony to watch himself. "It had the potential to turn unbelievably..."

"Non-photogenic?"

"Yeah."

Onscreen, the demon-infected flamingo flock opened their beaks wide, and wider, and wider, until great black spikes emerged from the backs of their throats. Their heads vanished, replaced by their new weapons.

"That's such a cool effect, though," Tony murmured.

"Looked a little less appealing in person," Stephen wryly said.

WHiH's news helicopter hovered a thousand feet above the zoo. They didn't know whether to focus on Stephen as he sped over the bare winter trees, or the disturbingly mutated giraffes in their pen. The coverage was jumpy, but it kept coming back to Stephen.

"It's a good thing you grabbed a few outfits from KT," Tony noted, leaning closer to Stephen to murmur his assessment. The cool part was coming. Even though they were the only audience, he didn't want to interrupt.

Amazingly, Stephen didn't complain about that nickname for Kamar-Taj. "It's definitely a much more cohesive outfit than the Cloak and jeans. And—" Cutting off, he grinned and leaned further in.

A moment later, the WHiH anchor gasped as an explosion rocked through the aviary. The dark forms that emerged from its destroyed roof were no longer birds, and they rocketed toward the station's helicopter in a raging mass. As their camera showed the helicopter being struck, the cameraman and pilots began to scream.

And then the camera went silent.

Vincent cut smoothly to a story from a different station, which had been filming from the ground. Nice, Tony thought and applauded his own programming. This new station captured a view of the WHiH helicopter as its blades wobbled and tore, and then as it tumbled.

Fortunately, a master of the mystic arts was there to catch it. The helicopter itself was beyond saving, but the two pilots and their cameramen were caught on film stumbling their way to safety after Stephen's oversized energy shield brought the helicopter back to earth. With their health confirmed, the camera zeroed back in on Stephen, a bright crimson-and-blue spot against a grey winter sky.
Stephen had known this attack was coming, thanks to a few warning signs the day before, and so he'd come prepared with the proper spells. A jet of crimson light burned through the aviary escapees. When it faded, they were once again nothing but normal birds, sailing away into a February afternoon.

"Cannot believe someone whined about how I didn't get the birds back," Stephen grumbled.

"Welcome to the hero business. It's stupid."

That same crimson light was able to turn back the giraffes, the hippos, and even the spike-headed flamingos, and soon the Bronx Zoo was entirely inoculated against the demonic infection that had tried to overcome it. At battle's end, Stephen hung dramatically against the February clouds, the Cloak rippling perfectly in a gust of wind. It was on that image that the station returned to their newsroom.

"Okay," Tony said, and paused the video.

"Oh, come on," Stephen protested, and gestured toward it.

"Oh, come on?" Tony repeated, bemused. "Do I hear the voice of someone who wants to hear the local news talking about him?"

"I just..." Stephen shrugged. "They said good things."

"I didn't put that on to boost your ego, I did it to plan Philly. We don't have long. Focus." As Stephen grumbled, but settled obligingly in to this planning session, Tony rewound to a few key points on the video. "Say that I encounter something like the flamingos going all head-spikey. Should I—hey, careful."

Behind them, the Cloak pulled back from inspecting his suit. It tilted its collar at Tony in a way that looked slightly offended.

"It's not going to bother your suit, Tony. As for demons, the problem is that you don't have any way to remove that infection. All you can do is kill them. Which is definitely the right move if something possessed is about to rampage through a city," Stephen noted as Tony began to ask as much, "but the best thing to do is containment. Then I can come remove the possession."

"Actually... that'd look great," Tony realized. "I round them up for you, you magic away the demons. Teamwork. It'll be a perfect debut. People can wonder who's helping their already-beloved Doctor Strange keep the city safe, and then... my helmet comes off."

Stephen frowned, considering that imagined victory. "Is that when we do the dramatic flying kiss?"

"No, no, we keep that in our pockets for later. Just the sight of me joining you up there will lock down all the news for a week solid."

"Makes sense."

"On that point: when we end, we should make sure we're low enough for them to get a good view of my face—hey!" Glaring, Tony spun to face the Cloak again. It jerked back, but now something inside his suit was fizzling with electricity.

"What in the world?" Stephen wondered as he looked oddly around the room, frowned in thought, and began staring at the ceiling. "Nothing got through," he murmured even as Tony leapt to his feet to investigate whatever the Cloak had broken, "but energy was trying to leave this condo."
"Energy," Tony echoed. "What sort of..." His searching fingers retrieved a small disc from inside the suit's chestpiece. Its tiny form was close to the hole from the arc reactor. Though he didn't recognize the tech on sight, it had to be some form of surveillance device. If it hadn't bugged out just now, he might not ever have noticed it. "It's gotta be pretty high tech to not trip the suit's sensors," Tony mused, and studied the equipment. "Oh. Wait. Ah. Did you notice..."

The Cloak looked back at him, as if to say yes, I noticed the device, and then flew toward the office like an insulted cat stalking away.

"Sorry!" Tony called after it, and then centered his attention back upon the finger-tip sized disc. "You're sure no signal got through?"

"Definitely not, the energy shield's completely solid." Standing and frowning, Stephen walked over to join him. "How long has that chestpiece been available for someone to access?"

"It was the first piece completed. Three days, by now." Frowning, Tony pulled his phone from his pocket and accessed the security records from his workshop. The initial security reports were ignored; they could have been hacked. He overrode them with some verification tricks that no 2008 programmer could counter, just to be positive that no one had snuck inside. No one, for example... like Nick Fury.

Perhaps a lie from S.H.I.E.L.D. would have made more sense than the truth. "The only people who've been inside that room since the chest was completed," Tony said slowly, "were me... and Pepper."

A long pause weighed on him. This was... this wasn't right. There had to be some other explanation. "Hey. Can you portal me back there? I'll start a diagnostic to make sure the suit's ready for Philly, but I need to check this out."

"Should I come?" Stephen wondered.

"No. No, I need to handle this on my own. Thanks," Tony added as he started that diagnostic and then stepped back through to California. But once the portal spun away to nothing behind him, it was a challenge to even move his feet forward.

Pepper?

Of course he'd assumed that S.H.I.E.L.D. had bugged his workshop, but his actual suit had far better security. He hadn't bothered to make its software believable for 2008. If anyone came near it who he didn't trust, he'd get an instant alert.

He trusted Pepper. Of course he trusted her. He trusted her more than anyone.

And she'd bugged his suit.

"This can't be right," Tony murmured, and shook his head, hard.

"Ms. Potts," he then said levelly, and waited for J.A.R.V.I.S. to connect them. "Could you come down to my workshop, please?"

She paused before answering. "Of course."

Tension dripped by the time she finally arrived. Her teeth nibbled nervously on her bottom lip, and her eyes flicked toward the spot where the suit had rested.
She must have known that the surveillance device had been destroyed.

There were so many things he could say, but Tony only asked, "Why?"

Pepper's lips rolled inward to a thin line. Tears filled her eyes. "Tony, I don't know what that thing was that you were making, but it looked dangerous."

"Looked dangerous," he repeated, befuddled. And so she'd spied on him? And... wait, how would she spy on him? Where did she even get the disc to begin with?

"It's to help Stephen. Isn't it?" Her unhappiness sharpened. "You mentioned that you'd been testing repulsor technology. To keep people safe. And then you make this suit that looks like it can stop a bullet, after you were running toward a bullet, and then there are gloves and a helmet and—"

"Why did you bug my suit?" Tony demanded.

Pepper blinked hard. "Because you promised me that you weren't going to do anything dangerous after I watched you run at that gun. You lied, Tony. And I..." She looked down and away. He gave her the long, silent moment she needed to continue. "This way, when you need help, I'll be able to tell someone where you are. You promised me you'd stay safe, and... and you lied. You totally lied to me. So I bugged your suit. I'm not going to apologize for it." She swallowed hard, then instinctively added, "Sorry."

Sighing, Tony let his anger fall away. The instant he'd lied to her with that promise, he'd known damn well that it would come back to bite him. The piper was here and he needed to be paid. "FYI, Stephen's condo is shielded. Magic. That's what fried the tracker."

Pepper looked down and nodded once.

"How did you even... I know I didn't make that disc. Where'd you get it? I don't recognize the tech." As soon as he asked the question, Tony knew the answer. "You told me: S.H.I.E.L.D.'s been sniffing around around my house." Fresh pain warped his expression. "Pep, you bugged me for S.H.I.E.L.D.? Why?"

With pink cheeks, she shook her head and said nothing.

"Pepper! Why'd you pick them over me?"

"I didn't pick them! They just noticed me worrying more and more and more, and they offered. I said yes. I just wanted to keep you safe, Tony. Like you promised you would, before I realized what that suit had to be." Her cheeks flushed deeper with emotion. "Or are you going to tell me that oh, that thing really does stop bullets, so now I don't need to worry?"

"It'd... probably stop most bullets, yeah," he confirmed, and sighed. God, he shouldn't have lied to her. It was a terrible move. "But I know that won't stop you from worrying. Just... Pepper, you cannot do that to my tech ever again. And don't pick S.H.I.E.L.D. over me. Because whatever you try to tell yourself, that's what you did."

"I wasn't trying to, I just..." Frustrated, she trailed off.

Tony ran a hand down his face. "I just. I thought you were cool with everything. Him, the hero. Me. You made us sushi reservations. That was your idea."

"And I thought you were dating someone who puts himself in danger, not that you'd figure out a way to join him." Pepper trailed off, folded her arms protectively across her chest, and shrugged. "I kept
seeing new pieces to that suit and so it kept getting more real. And then I kept seeing that CNN footage over and over and over in my head."

She'd probably been freaking out ever since the chest piece showed up. The threat before her kept expanding and yet Tony never explained any of it. But Tony hadn't noticed her concern, or her eventual actual fear. He was only in Los Angeles for workshop hours and went right back to New York when he was done.

Pepper's worry could spiral, sometimes. And when she was left alone to rattle inside this big, lonely house with only an empty suit and nosy S.H.I.E.L.D. agents for company...

Tony understood. She'd done the wrong thing, but he'd taken the wrong approach, and so he understood.

His phone buzzing could literally not have worse timing. Sighing in frustration, Tony retrieved it and glanced at the text he did not want to see. Not right now, not during this argument: **Yep. Demons hitting Philly. Should I handle it?**

After hesitating, his fingers moved. **Portal me.**

"You've seen the kind of stuff he's facing," Tony said helplessly, and started backing away. "I can't just leave him to that. Not when I can help." Sparks opened behind his heels, and he paused. "You watched him protect me from Obi. You loved that. Now I'm gonna protect him."

"Stay safe," Pepper said in utter resignation. "And I won't track you again, Mr. Stark, or come near your suit."

"I appreciate you worrying about me," Tony said after an even longer pause. "I do, Pepper. Not... not like this, but I know what you were trying... Look. I gotta go."

As he stepped back to Manhattan and the portal closed behind him, Tony let out a bone-deep sigh. Words vomited out of him, even though he knew they were on a timer. "Pepper worried about me and so S.H.I.E.L.D. gave her the bug that she put in my suit. That way, she could track where I landed if I got hurt or something. I'd promised her that I'd stop running in front of bullets, and instead she's spent the last week watching me put together that..."

He pointed at the empty suit. "And realizing what I intended to do."

Stephen frowned. "Tony, seriously, I can handle this, if you want to go back to L.A., work it out..."

"People are in danger, so I want to fight," Tony said shortly, and opened his suit. Though he probably sounded angry at Pepper, he was really only angry at himself for that **stupid** promise he'd made. He'd known he'd break it as soon as he'd said it! Seriously, what was Pepper supposed to think at the sight of this suit appearing, day after day?

Stephen waited long enough for Tony to change his mind, then nodded once and raised his hand. "Ready?"

The faceplate clicked into place. "Ready."

Philadelphia was a more straight-forward setup than the Bronx Zoo. There were no mutating flamingos, nor aviary eagles turning into bats out of literal hell. There were only slow, muddy, amorphous **things** that began to rise out of the Delaware River. They were clearly inhuman, unlikely to bring down a press helicopter, and completely fine to just **fight.**

That fight had to start with Stephen, of course, and so Tony hung back until he saw a press
helicopter approach the world's flagship hero. The mystic who'd originally handled this fight had likely been in worse shape than Stephen. That other mystic didn't have the Cloak of Levitation, and so they couldn't hang high above the river to get a birds' eye view of each emerging mud monster.

Even so, enough monsters eventually emerged that Stephen needed a while to notice newcomers. In particular, one creeping up the supports of the Ben Franklin Bridge seemed to have totally escaped his attention.

It was time.

With a flick of his hand to fire his propulsors, Tony launched out of the alley from where he'd been watching the fight. His boots made a dramatic golden arc across the skyline. Such a slow-moving foe was easy to target, and even easier to hit. After blasting the mud monster, Tony overshot his arc into a full circle that took him back up into the sky, then landed him on the bridge with a heavy metallic chunk. "Get off the road," he broadcast to the stunned drivers who'd stopped to gawk at the sight of the heroes overhead. "Now."

*I'll round them up,* Tony somehow heard Stephen say. *Then: you blow them up.*

Tony could handle that.

Winds and water began to spiral around him. A few drivers automatically turned on their windshield wipers until they realized what was happening. The droplets falling on them were no natural storm, but the effects of the famous Doctor Strange magically lifting those creatures out of the river. The eventual sight of actual monsters, exposed and struggling as they raised ever-higher, finally inspired the rush off the bridge that Tony had tried to encourage.

*All clustered up,* Stephen eventually said. It sounded like he'd simply spoken, though Tony knew it was impossible for them to hear each other from so far away.

By now, the grey shapes of the mud beasts had oozed into one mass. Forms began to disappear into whatever was next to them, like bits of clay being smashed together. Tony's gaze roamed slowly upward as he found himself facing off against not a few dozen slimeballs, but instead one enormous boss monster.

Well.

Good thing that mud needed to stay *wet.*

Raising an arm, he fired an array of incendiary explosives across the mud monster's writhing form. It howled on impact, then howled louder as fire left its body crumbling into simple, dry, and inanimate dirt.

The wind never ceased, and now it directed that crumbling dirt toward a portal. Tall, sandy dunes lay behind it, as dry as the Sahara or Atacama. Their opponent was nothing but dust on the literal wind, carried off to a place that would never reconstitute a watery body.

Stephen lowered his hands and the portal closed. He looked over to Tony and nodded.

As the adrenaline of his first (rebooted) fight faded, Tony realized two things: Stephen was flying closer to him, and so was a helicopter. Once both were close enough to get a good shot for the news, Tony tapped the side of his helmet, let the faceplate retract, and shook out his sweaty, mussed hair.

*And that,* he thought as the helicopter changed its approach, clearly getting a better angle, *is when you lose your shit, ladies and gentlemen.*
"Thanks," Stephen said. His words carried oddly, like they'd been picked up by a boom mic for the sake of their journalist onlookers. "Couldn't have handled that one alone, Tony."

"Happy to," Tony replied. He barely kept his expression steady when his words twisted as they left his throat. Even with the noise of cars below, his own engines, and the press helicopter itself, he somehow knew that the media was getting perfect sound on their conversation. "Come on, we've got Valentine's reservations."

Chuckling, Stephen nodded and opened a portal. As he did, Tony turned back to the camera, let them get another good, long look to confirm who was in that flying suit, and waved before he flew off.

They emerged above the southern tip of Manhattan. By now the sun dipped low against the western sky. Ahead of them, windows lit up every few seconds like distant stars. If not for the brisk wind beating against his face, this would be a lot more enjoyable. Tony closed his helmet again.

"Good view," Stephen noted as they hung against a sunset sky.

"Good view," Tony agreed once he'd given himself the chance to appreciate it.

"Are you all right with the press?" Stephen wondered.

"Hey, I'm used to this. This is my normal, remember." Tony hesitated, and followed up with, "Uh. Are you all right with the wind?"

Unlike him, Stephen didn't have a facemask or an essentially airtight suit. He had an outfit with overlapping cotton shirts, which the winter wind appeared to be going directly down. His hair blew wherever the gusts willed it. When a particularly large gust hit the Cloak, it whipped around loudly enough to hear.

"Oh," Tony realized, and laughed. "You gave me so much crap about being a wimp in the cold that you don't want to admit you really feel the wind up here!"

"We have reservations," Stephen reminded him, and opened two portals into his condo and Tony's penthouse. "We should get changed."

"You just don't want to admit it!" Tony laughed as he flew toward his portal, then accidentally singed the living room carpet while landing on the other side.

"I'm liking the tie," Tony noted ten minutes later as he walked through another portal and joined Stephen. They'd changed into dark suits; both perfectly and expensively tailored, of course. Tony had paired his with a stylish gunmetal grey silk tie, ideal for a technological genius, while Stephen had gone for an interesting blue shade that was a few steps lighter than 'glacial.' "Makes for an intense look," he added and gestured at his eyes.

"Thanks," Stephen said after a faint pause, and sounded genuinely pleased once he was sure that a punchline wasn't coming. "Where are we headed?"

"La Grenouille. I mean, French for Valentine's, it seemed obvious."

"You know, I have never gone." After a moment, Stephen grinned and suggested, "Why are we sticking to restaurants in New York? Not for tonight, you have reservations. But if we want sushi again, let's do Tokyo instead of Santa Monica."

"And go to Paris for French, right," Tony nodded as Stephen checked to make sure a stretch of
sidewalk was safely empty for his portal, and then deposited them just down the block from La Grenouille. "Have you ever been to Vietnam? Because this one place—" Seeing the first camera flash, Tony cut off and grinned broadly at his waiting public. "Yeah. It's me. Hi."

"It's us," Stephen corrected and slid his arm around Tony's waist. For the rest of the time until they had to excuse themselves to make their reservations, they held that close pose. It must make for great pictures.

Over their eventual meals of oxtail and duck, Tony leaned in and whispered, "So I've gotta know: how surprised did I look after that first time you laid one on me?"

Stephen needed a second to realize that Tony meant the show he'd put on for Obadiah, and then he laughed a bit louder than was appropriate for the genteel setting. "Stunned," he then replied in a more appropriate voice.

Their close, easy contact outside had reminded Tony of where they'd started from: total shock. But by now, though, their physical affection was unremarkable. They were just two geniuses caught in a temporal paradox, and to fix the universe they needed to become downright exceptional at kissing each other. No big.

"They're photographing us through the window," Stephen murmured a while later.

Tony grinned and didn't give the photographers the honor of his acknowledgment. "Good. Oh, oh hey. Question. When I flew through your portal into my penthouse, the foot jets burned my carpet as I tried to cut them. And there's no easy way to access that place from the outside, so I can't land first."

"Yeah, and?"

"Your place has concrete floors and a balcony. Could I stay there while I find a better place? I wanna be active in the suit, and that balcony would help a lot."

"Well, you did pay for the place," Stephen noted dryly.

"Is that a yes?"

"I am not currently being battered around the head," Stephen noted after a pause. A glamour spell was on the Cloak of Levitation, as it didn't quite go with that stylish dark suit and blue tie of his. "So I don't think there are any objections."

"Yeah?" Tony asked after another pause. Stephen was so fiercely protective of his personal space. It was good that the Cloak accepted it (reluctantly), but that wasn't the opinion Tony cared about.

"When you get annoying, I'll go work at Kamar-Taj for a while," Stephen said and shrugged. "It'll be so relaxing." His eyes narrowed in faint mirth. "Because you can't come in."

"You are a mean boyfriend. But thanks, it'll just be until I find a new place. I never really liked that penthouse, anyway, so I won't mind selling it. Well," Tony acknowledged, "I will miss that whole wall of windows."

"Say that you want to go sight-seeing at the Parthenon," Stephen countered as he speared a bite of his warm apple tart, "and we're there."

"...But I can get over the penthouse windows, sure."
That had been genuinely *fun*, Tony thought with pleased surprise as they stepped back into Stephen's condo. They'd often put on a public act of having fun for the cameras, but between Philadelphia and La Grenouille, today had been genuinely, honestly... fun.

Huh. Who knew the two of them had it in them?

Well, Tony amended a minute later as he considered what clothes to bring over, the day did have one dark point. Hopefully, Pepper hadn't been too distressed by the sight of him going after those mud monsters. No, he decided immediately. She'd be fine. The fight had never gotten out of control, and so there was nothing to worry about.

"Ms. Potts," he said shortly into his phone. "Got a minute?"

"I. Yes, a minute. Yes."

"Did you watch?"

The pause she needed probably ate up half of that minute. "I watched. And... well... I won't stop worrying about you, but you were so much better at that crazy fighting than I ever expected. It did ease a lot of my nerves." After another significant pause, Pepper replied, "I am so, so sorry, Tony. I was just picturing something like a LoJack, you know? So if your car broke down, I could send help."

"I know," he reassured her. "It's okay. I know you were really only trying to help."

"Oh. Well. Thank you. Okay."

Tony added, "And I'm sorry for lying to you."

"...Thank you for that, as well."

Tony smiled. Phew. They'd gotten past this. "I do have a favor to ask you, though. I've decided to sell the Time-Warner penthouse, so I'm going to need to arrange an agent, find a new place—"

"I... wait, wait. Tony. Can this pause until tomorrow? Like I told you, I just had a minute to talk."

Tony blinked and sat up straighter. "Is something wrong?" Pepper Potts was a perfect personal assistant, and that meant being always available. She never turned him down.

"No, nothing's wrong! I mean. It's. This is awkward." Exhaling, Pepper explained, "It is Valentine's Day, and I have a date."

A date.

A date.

Tony stared at the opposite wall, his expression absolutely blank. "A date," he echoed.

"Yes. A date. Like the one that I see you just went on. I have a date."

Pepper didn't *date*. Work was her life, and so she interacted with... who? Tony, who wasn't at the right stage in his life just now. Happy, who was not a good match at all. And Rhodey, he supposed, but Rhodey would never make a move on Pepper. How could she have even met someone for a date?

"Do I know him?" he asked. His voice nearly cracked.
"No. You don't. I actually met him recently, but we hit things off incredibly well. He is so nice, and... well, he just seems like a very good person. Since you've been gone so much, we've ended up talking a lot, and... well... a date. For Valentine's. Surprise."

He'd been gone this much? Horrified, Tony raked a hand through his hair and clutched it uselessly. A 'good person'? No one was good enough for Pepper, including him.

Fine, Tony thought a second later. His jaw set. If Stephen had terrified Obadiah Stane into compliance, he could go smack this loser into shape before he got too friendly with a woman who was way, way out of his league.

Pepper interrupted his plotting. "Tony, I'm sorry, I do have to go. We can talk tomorrow about your place!"

"Right," he began to mumble, only to freeze at what he heard through the phone. She was greeting the man at the door, saying she'd be just a minute, complimenting his tie. And she was saying all of that to someone she'd just met, during the early weeks of the investigation into Stephen Strange and Tony Stark.

She was saying all of that to a man whose words and laughter were loud enough for Tony to hear.

Shortly, Pepper hung up. Tony set his phone down, moved his numb hands away from it, and stared at the opposite wall.

Well, then.

He wouldn't be asking Stephen to go pay this man a terrifying visit. He couldn't, he wouldn't. Not ever.

Phil Coulson deserved so much better than that.
"Is everything okay?" Stephen asked in the absolute silence.

After retreating to his guest bedroom, Tony had stayed there long enough for the very last twilight to fade. As Stephen went about his business of organizing notes and making media reports, he'd lit up other rooms. Tony never turned on a light, though. Now Stephen stood in the open doorway, concerned about Tony's lengthy absence. The room in front of him was a black pit of total, crushing misery.

"She's dating Phil," Tony said after an aching pause.

"Phil?" Stephen wondered as he took a step inside and turned on a lamp to its lowest level. Tony still said nothing, and so Stephen continued further inside and sat on the bed beside him.

"Phil. This guy who..." Tony blinked hard. "He died. That was our fault, we shouldn't have let it happen. Great guy. Great. And he's dating Pepper."

"Tony..." That was all Stephen said. What else was there?

"The worst part," Tony choked out, "is what I thought after I hung up. For one second, one second? I went 'well, he'll die.' Like that'd fix things." Tony shook his head, expression warping with pain, and added through a constricted throat, "I didn't think 'I get to save Phil, this time.' God. I'm a piece of shit."

"You're not."

"I am. And you were right, I've just been assuming Pepper and I had to get together. You asked me how it was gonna play out and I ignored you. Congratulations."

"I don't want to be right. But," Stephen gently added, "you don't know that this is how things will be. It's a date. That's all. It could be their only one, ever."

Tony shrugged. There was no hope inside his reddened eyes. "They get along great, Stephen. I've seen them. And Phil wouldn't put Pepper through a fraction of the bullshit I made her deal with. All of the stuff she gets frustrated about? It'd never happen with him. They just laugh and... and know each other's personal lives and... do a lot of... checklists."

What was Stephen even supposed to say? He couldn't argue against the supposed merits of someone he'd never met. Sighing, Stephen rested his hand on Tony's shoulder. Hopefully, its warmth and weight would be the slight bit of comfort that made this night possible for Tony's heart to survive.

Apparently, it wasn't enough. Nearly as soon as Stephen touched him, Tony turned to the side and melted into a desperate, needy hug. Stephen's shoulder was soon damp with tears, for Tony's soul had shattered over this one change to the timeline.

He must really, truly think that Pepper and Phil could work. For real.

As Tony kept crying, wracked with the sudden reality that his one hundred percent promised love was never a sure thing, Stephen's hands roamed across his back and tightened their embrace. If he didn't have any wise words to offer, and if every attempt just saddened Tony more, then perhaps he shouldn't say anything. He should just let Tony cry it out.
It took a while.

When Tony pulled away, he looked exhausted. Crying had wrung him absolutely dry. His normally mobile expressions were dull and heavy, and none of his normal energy crackled through his body.

"Stay here tonight," Stephen murmured. They hadn't planned an immediate move-in, but Tony couldn't be alone right now.

Tony nodded and said nothing.

"Things will look better in the light of day," Stephen promised, and gestured his hand toward the door. A box of tissues floated in from across the hall a second later. He offered one to Tony, who wiped away tears.

"I hope so."

On impulse, Stephen wiped away a tear trail that Tony had missed. "Get some sleep. I'll handle any press tomorrow."

Tony nodded, and again said nothing.

"Good night, Tony," Stephen said, and made sure to leave the box of tissues as he left.

"How are you feeling?" he asked the next morning after walking to Tony's door. Vincent had been able to tell him that Tony appeared to be awake, and so yes, would probably like breakfast if Stephen made some. He supposed the A.I. did have its uses.

"Remember how awful we felt with that scotch hangover?"

"That bad, huh?"

"No. That was like a papercut."

"Here," Stephen said after a significant pause, and walked over to the side of Tony's bed. Simple buttered toast wasn't much, but if Tony felt so awful, something plain was probably the best choice to hit his stomach. "And here," he added, and set a cup of coffee on the nightstand.

Tony ignored the toast and reached for the coffee, and actually found a tiny, tiny smile after he sipped it. "You remembered sugar."

"Yeah. And seriously, I'll handle any press questions from the debut. Don't worry about anything."

"Right, yeah. I debuted the suit yesterday." Tony exhaled, probably intending it to be laughter. "I actually forgot."

With an ease granted by their kisses for the media, Stephen instinctively smoothed down a bit of hair that had gone all wild, presumably from Tony tossing and turning all night. Then he stood and added, "It'll get better. You'll see."

Pepper and Phil had a second date on Saturday night, only two days later.

"It's happening," Tony said dully as he looked at his texts. The same heavy acceptance filled his voice as during his crying jag. It was Stephen who felt any hope wither, because he was the only one with hope left.

"You could at least... express concern about him," Stephen suggested after a long pause. "Pepper
"Yep. I could definitely wreck what she's got going," Tony agreed, and swallowed hard. "With a great guy. Who I thought could die again, just to get him out of the way."

"You said that was for a second."

"I still thought it."

"An intrusive thought doesn't define you. What does is how you react to it."

Tony raised his weary eyes. "They tell you that in wizard school?"

Sighing, Stephen sat on an armchair near the couch, and studied Tony. "Why did you tell me to portal you for the Philadelphia fight, if you were in the midst of something emotional with Pepper?"

"So now it's my fault, yeah."

"That's not what I'm saying. Just answer the question."

Tony shrugged, though his shoulders barely moved. Doing so would take too much energy, probably. "You were gonna fight. Things were about to get rough for..." Trailing off, Tony actually found it in him to do a dramatic eyeroll. "For the people you were protecting, and you. So you're convincing me that caring about others makes me a good person, after all, even though I thought that about Phil and assumed Pepper was mine."

"That's quite a lot of words in my mouth."

Tony turned and spent a long while looking out the window. He didn't turn back before asking, "What happens if I can't fix this?"

"I don't know."

"Yeah." Shaking his head, Tony finally looked back over. "I assume the board has been reaching out about the suit debut. I haven't heard anything, so either Pepper's been handling it or you have. I'll tell them about the arc reactor this afternoon, and—"

"Tony."

Tony kept going. "They're going to have some questions about the Vincent launch, too. For the media, we need to think about how long it'll be before we're seen doing solo missions. We want to establish that being worried about you inspired me, but we don't want to end up looking co-dependent. It'll be a real dance."

"...Does this help?"

Unhappy purpose had entered Tony's eyes, but at least it was something besides looking completely hollowed-out. "It helps."

"Okay," Stephen said after a long pause. "Then let's talk business."

Three months later, Tony was still talking business. Oh, he was fun to be around; he'd brightened significantly and found the purpose that had temporarily left him. He quipped, he laughed, he made recommendations for their global tour of restaurants. But whenever he got news about Pepper and Phil, he always had to do something with even more purpose to distract himself.
Because Pepper and Phil were still together.

At least she hadn't suggested a double date, yet, Stephen thought as he handed over his payment to a food vendor and received a bottle of iced tea in return. That might overload Tony's capacity to cope.

Thanks to the glamour spell he'd cast, no one looked at him as he walked down the sidewalk on a warm May afternoon. So far as anyone saw, someone with dark blond hair, brown eyes, and rather different facial features stood in his place. Stephen was able to sip his drink without distraction.

A newsstand was near the next corner, and Stephen glanced at it as he walked by.

New York Times: Tony Stark had rooted out a terrorist cell in Afghanistan (after putting his old knowledge to good use). In an unexpected ripple effect, no press figures ever dubbed him with an alias. Doctor Strange had set the new global standards, and 'Doctor Strange' wasn't a code name.

Wall Street Journal: Vincent's test launch was a wild success. The select group of households who'd won the lottery to install it were all giving feedback, and the feedback was highly positive. The era of mass smart home technology would soon be upon the world. (During an incredibly annoying early melancholy stretch, Tony had whined Stephen into agreeing to voice the damned thing. Those recording sessions had been endless, scratchy-throated nightmares.)

Every day had stories like that. The world's most impressive media platforms had become captivated by their new heroes, and it bled into other discussions whenever possible. Many now speculated on the appearance of the next hero. Others wondered whether the 'Masters of the Mystic Arts' had truly been fighting in secret all this time, or had Stephen's appearance ushered in this new era of enemies?

That sort of speculation explained the typically breathless cover to the New York Post, which was all about the rumors of Kamar-Taj's location. Everyone knew of the place, but no one could yet figure out where it was. The mystery was enticing.

It would remain enticing, because Kamar-Taj was protected by multiple layers of spells. Only a human could find it, not any satellite technology. If that human's intentions did not align with the purpose of the place, its humble door would look like only a blank wall. That didn't mean that someone terrible couldn't find it, of course; Stephen had needed to encourage the Ancient One to boot Kaecilius. But unless someone came there willing to dedicate themselves to what Kamar-Taj could provide—and demand—they would never find it.

Oh, the crosswalk had turned.

Although Stephen's target was a used bookstore, he doubled back to thoughtfully consider the window display in an antiques shop. Someone had framed the iconic album cover to Pink Floyd's Dark Side of the Moon, and going by the note hanging under it, it was original issue. Although that wasn't truly Tony's musical taste, it was from the right rock era and was quite a thing to land.

Hell, why not.

Well, this frame was heavy. Stephen soon thought as he made his way to the bookstore. If not for how he was attempting to go incognito, he'd drop it off via portal. But he couldn't send up a signal flare. Standing in the same place for long meant a crowd gathering for Doctor Strange, with autographs, and pictures, and ugh. God forbid he actually alerted anyone he was coming. A handful of scheduled interviews had been nightmarish.

Once he'd located the actually-magical book that had snuck its way into this unsuspecting owner's store, though, he was free to drop his glamour spell and portal directly back home. Those New
Yorkers who saw the developing portal gasped and leapt back, only to laugh with amazement as Stephen let the glamour drop.

Tony was there, of course. Three months later, he hadn't moved out. Stephen knew why, even if Tony wouldn't admit to it: being alone in a condo again would make Tony feel alone in life again. So long as he was still doing this 'temporary' stay with Stephen, everything was still waiting on the chance that this timeline's fate was not actually Pepper + Phil = 4Eva. If he moved on to a new condo, it'd feel like he was moving on in life.

The holding pattern wasn't nearly as bad as it could have been, thankfully. They'd gotten used to each other's habits. After setting the book aside, Stephen announced, "Surprise," and held up the paper-wrapped frame.

"Surprise?" Tony repeated, bemused, and set down his tablet. "You know it's not my birthday for a couple weeks, right?"

"Of course," Stephen lied. He hadn't even known it was in May. After filing away a reminder to also pick up a birthday present, he took a few steps forward and gestured toward the frame with his free hand. "Take it. I saw this and thought you might like it, once I noticed the 'original issue' note."

"Oh, this is great," Tony said with open approval as he stripped away the paper wrapping and took in the sight of the iconic cover. With eyes darting from point to point over his new gift, he wondered, "Then, what's the occasion?"

Stephen shrugged. "Saw it, thought you'd like it, got it." And he smiled.

"Huh." Tony smiled back. "Thanks." But of course, he had to ruin it by continuing, "I mean, it's no condo for a present, but..."

Rolling his eyes, Stephen countered, "Look, I have not worked since December on any job that has direct deposit. The 'selling my car' account covers your picture, not a condo."


"Well. Then, you're welcome."

The phone call Stephen soon received wasn't quite that ironically timed, but it followed only two hours later. When a unique ringtone sounded, it took Stephen a few blank seconds to remember whose song that was. "Charles?" he wondered as he dug the phone free.

Metro-General had been running on silent mode ever since the end of January. This was probably his official firing, Stephen decided, and waited for that explanation for the sudden call.

He was not fired. "I have some amazing news for you, Stephen, if you're willing to consider it. I understand that we might not be a priority, given... everything you've been up to, but there's this incredibly unique procedure that's come to Metro. The parents asked for you by name."

"Lots of people have asked for me by name. You told me the attorneys kept saying no, and no, and no." Noticing Tony walking in, Stephen mouthed 'Charles Findlay' and pointed to the phone. Tony's eyebrows raised in surprise and he settled in to listen.

"I understand that, and I apologize." Findlay paused. "I hope that this delay has not impacted Stark's willingness to eventually work with us."

Stephen rolled his eyes.
"But this situation is exceptionally unique. There is literally no other hospital on the planet that believes they can perform this operation. Because of that, our attorneys believe we can demand the strongest medical release waiver in... ever."

Well, now. This sounded interesting. "What is it?" Stephen wondered.

"Five month old male craniopagus twins." All right, twin infants fused at the skull, that was nothing too exciting. It certainly didn't explain why every other hospital on earth was gun-shy about this. "With a shared ependymoma."

"Shared?" Stephen echoed in wonder. These two conjoined infants had a shared brain tumor, of a particularly challenging sort that tended to intrude into especially tricky areas for removal? "You're kidding. No wonder every other hospital thinks it's a death sentence to operate."

"Which is why none of them will. Everyone's declared it an impossible operation. In hospital after hospital, the doctors told the parents to enjoy the time they have left with their sons." Findlay paused, then said, "And so their parents have asked specifically for you."

Stephen exhaled, then grinned. Tony looked at him curiously. "Charles... send over the scans."

Twenty minutes later, Stephen was bent in front of a computer monitor in fierce concentration. "What are we looking at?" Tony whispered as he leaned down and handed him a mug of coffee.

"There's no operating room that can do this," Stephen murmured and took a deliciously bitter sip. "It's literally impossible. Look." His fingertips brushed the screen. "See that?"

"...Again, I need help understanding the medical stuff. It's been a while, you've probably forgotten that."

Stephen barely acknowledged him. This was like an intricate strategy game where he needed to outperform his opponent: basic human physiology. Healthy, adult twins would almost certainly die on the operating table by the time this operation concluded. Infants? Who, he now saw, were still getting over the effects of a premature birth? Any operation attempt would just butcher them.

"Each last tiny vessel would need to be clamped simultaneously to prevent bleed-out," Stephen mused. "And there's no room for error."

"Can you actually do this?" Tony wondered, apparently picking up on a certain something in Stephen's tone.

"I'll have to move quickly. Two weeks more, and the ependymoma is likely to expand even beyond what I can manage. Their tiny brains don't have much leeway. But what I think I can do," Stephen explained, and turned to Tony, "is magically seal every single blood vessel in the operating area, and patch them up in the same way to avoid postoperative hemorrhage."

"All of that sounds good. I think." Tony's gaze was intense, and excited like he hadn't been since Pepper and Phil. "So, are you gonna do it?"

After another second to consider it, Stephen nodded. "I'll still need to get together a team for this. Hopefully, other surgeons aren't put off by working with magic, but I'm sure Charles will put every last drop of Metro's attention into making this work. Oh," he realized. "Can you be sure to handle any hero stuff until—"

"Of course, yeah, sure. Save the kids."
Grinning, Stephen looked out the window. Well. Time to go practice magically clamping blood vessels on infant models for the next week or so. It'd be fun.

Though it was only two blocks from work, and a beautiful day, Stephen didn't want to take the time for a foot commute, nor the elevator ride up to the management offices. "Charles," he announced as he stepped from his condominium into the CEO's office.

"Oh my God," Findlay said from behind his desk, jolting. His eyes seemed as wide and round as the portal itself. "You actually did it. The thing from TV. That's... Stephen, when did you even learn all of this?"

Recalling his time-looped voyage into another dimension, where he'd been able to practice his lessons in-between an endless series of fatal blows dealt by Dormammu, Stephen hesitated. "Around. Anyway, I'll do the surgery. I need three people from the following list on my team—"

"Only three?" Findlay echoed. "But for a surgery of this complexity, I understand that's not anywhere standard."

"Well, and nurses, but this is not a standard surgery. I'm not going to need the typical number of hands on deck, because my hands—" He gestured, and an array of two dozen tiny sparks appeared in the room like drifting leaves. "Can cover more than the usual ground."

Findlay let out a tiny, squeaking noise, completely unexpected to hear coming out of his sturdy, sixty-something body.

"Three people from the following list," Stephen repeated. "Write this down, Charles, and contact them. I don't have time to do that; I need to plan my approach." That had given Findlay enough time to find a pen, and so Stephen recited, "Aziz, Emmanuel, Navarro, Atherton, Guerrero, Pham, Mann, Wu, Silva. Every single one of them is an expert on infants and that's the only place I'll need support. I need three to back me up in the OR. Three."

"I will get you three," Findlay promised, writing frantically.

"All right. I'll get to work."

Once again, he didn't want to take the elevator. Stephen portaled himself down into his office, then smirked slightly and walked over to a three-ring binder he'd long forgotten about. "I cannot believe I used to worry about you, Obadiah," he murmured as he retracted the listening device, then fizzled it away into a series of energy sparks.

(Trying to fool Obadiah had made Tony suggest their fake relationship, at least, and that'd worked out well.)

A knock on the door made him turn, and Stephen answered it to see the receptionist gawking at him. "Oh," Nadine said, her eyes huge. "I thought. I saw. Through the blinds."

"Good to see you, too, Nadine," Stephen said, and closed the door.

Two hours later, it sounded like every employee in the hospital was milling in the neuro office lobby. Didn't those people have patients to save?

Two days later, Charles got Stephen his three back-up surgeons. It had been nowhere near as difficult as expected; since Stephen was the one putting his head above the parapet to assume the public risk, multiple surgeons were intrigued by the idea of seeing this bizarre, unexplained "magic"
in the operating room.

Ten days later, the world watched.

A conjoined twin separation would earn news coverage on its own, as would conjoined twins with a shared tumor. Stephen Strange, famous magic-user, returning to the operating room would also be quite the news story. Put all of those things together, and the news coverage was as fierce as it'd been when he first revealed his powers. The entire planet seemed to know what he was doing today inside Metro-General.

These kids had better not ruin his perfect record.

"Wait, where's your anesthesiologist?" asked Dr. Silva as she looked around the operating room and adjusted her operating mask's ties behind her head.

"We're not using anesthesia," Stephen replied. His gloved hands were held in front of him, sterile and ready to operate. For once, he hadn't simply glamoured the Cloak away; it was waiting for him back at the condo. Its presence would be unacceptable in the operating room, of course.

"You're not using anesthesia?" repeated Dr. Aziz in disbelief. "This was never part of our discussion!" He sounded ready to storm out, likely picturing himself operating on wide-awake, screaming infants who didn't understand why they were being tortured.

"There are some things," snapped Dr. Atherton, "that we should be able to simply assume."

"You assumed wrong," Stephen said. "We all know the risks of general anesthesia, and you know those risks better than me when it comes to infants. This operation is already going to push their bodies to the limits of survivability. Anesthesia would kill them."

"We can't operate on conscious children!" snapped Dr. Aziz.

"There you go," Stephen drawled. "Assuming, again." The team looked ready to operate, and so moving delicately, Stephen extracted the boys' spirits from their bodies as cleanly as he'd done for Obadiah. While that had been a knockout punch, though, this movement was gentle. When he sent their spirits off, he aimed them toward a warm, soft place that would wrap their souls into a comforting blanket until they were done.

Of course, the other doctors had just seen him wave his hand over their patients, and then those patients went absolutely still.

"Wait," Dr. Silva said blankly. "What did you just do?"

"I removed our patients' consciousness from their bodies. They won't feel anything until I retrieve them after our operation concludes."

The three other doctors stared blankly back at Stephen. Then, in near-unison, they turned to look at the monitors.

Stephen smirked behind his mask. He knew from personal experience that this would work. When Christine cut his chest open to resolve the puncture wound he'd taken from Kaecilius' zealots, he hadn't felt a single damned twinge until he'd finally returned to his body.

(Of course, that explanation would be a little hard to give the surgical team.)

"It's... working," Dr. Atherton said in disbelief. Then, in total unison, the doctors turned back to stare
"This is far safer than anesthesia," Stephen replied dryly, acutely aware of how totally he'd captured everyone's attention. Overhead, a camera filmed the operation under a joint arrangement with several news channels, though it was thankfully not live. "However, it's not ideal to have one's consciousness removed, so we should move efficiently. Shall we get to work?"

After eight hours and forty-seven minutes of that work, his approach proved successful. Not only had magic let the children be operated on without any negative effects from anesthesia, but he'd been able to send up clarifying illusions whenever another surgeon wanted to verify an approach. If blood seeped from a vein, magic sealed it more precisely than any surgical clamp. And when it came time for the infant specialists to perform their own unique tasks, Stephen was able to monitor the tiny bodies' health in ways beyond what medical equipment could offer.

Soon, the boys were ready to awaken. As carefully as if he were their own father, Stephen gently retrieved their souls from the dimension to which he'd sent the boys, and placed them back into their newly separated forms.

They started crying instantly, of course, even though they were now on painkillers. Physical pain explained only part of their protests. The boys had just experienced an euphoric dimension far beyond what Earth could offer. Until their short infant memories forgot this experience, their lives would be temporarily disappointing.

But their lives were saved, and those lives would be long.

"So," Stephen announced as he stepped back and peeled off his gloves. "Who's going to ask me to be their co-author first?"

The other three doctors looked at each other. Stephen smirked.

This press conference was far more enjoyable than the one he'd held in the Time-Warner lobby. He felt in total control of the media by now, and this operation was a synthesis of medicine and magic that made Stephen's life feel more whole than it ever had.

When he called on journalist after journalist after journalist, Stephen felt like a conductor in front of an orchestra. Right now, it felt like the whole world moved on his command.

Even with ten short days to prepare, that surgery had gone exactly as intended. He was sure that he'd now be able to move between medicine and magic whenever he wanted, in any schedule that would do the absolute most good for the world. And this really felt like his world, now, instead of a place into which he'd been violently ejected. This was the way his life could have turned out if every last thing went exactly right.

All of this attention was wanted. All of it. Normally, Stephen tried to limit the focus he got in person, because it was more trouble than it was worth. But with this medical-magical operation, he didn't care that the entire world had been paying attention to Stephen Strange, in Metro-General Hospital in Manhattan, for practically the entire day.

As he eventually retreated to his office, Stephen felt his phone buzz. *Shit!* Tony sent, along with a frowny face. *Got pulled into a device consult. I didn't notice the time or conference. Went good??* 

Stephen smiled. *Perfect.*

Yes!! Tony had been the target of much of Stephen's nervous energy as the operation date approached. He understood the stakes.
When will you be home, do you think?

I'll head over. See you soon.

It was a beautiful night and he'd just saved lives. Perhaps, for the first time, Stephen would take advantage of his condo's short commute and simply walk home. He wouldn't even bother to glamour himself; in the shadows, he was unlikely to be noticed, and if someone did notice him... well, it was a good night to do so. He deserved this attention, and he kind of still wanted more.

He did portal himself to a quiet entrance, though, and leave from there. Portals made him entirely unwilling to wait on an elevator.

The world was good, Stephen concluded as he breathed in the May night air. He'd found a quiet corner of the hospital perimeter where no foot traffic seemed to wander. From it, he looked up to study the skyline of a world that was truly feeling like home.

When first dropped into this timeline, he and Tony had assumed they'd landed in hell. With a lot of work, though, the two of them had carved a bit of heaven within it. On a night like tonight, it was easy to believe they'd win. They'd win everything. Capturing Loki would be even easier than Stephen assumed, and the Ancient One would develop some brilliant plan that defended the planet against the coming war.

Those two boys should not have survived. But Stephen Strange gave them their lives back.

Yeah. He'd be able to do this for the whole world. All he'd need to do was—

Pain lanced through him. Fiery agony tore apart his chest and boiled through his veins like hot tar. Stephen was almost too surprised to scream, and when he tried, the pain silenced him, anyway. Shaking, he looked down at his chest. A knife's handle erupted from it.

He shouldn't have stared at the sky like that.

Not when the whole world knew where he was, today.

"I'd already lost everything," hissed a familiar voice.

Trembling more, and feeling his knees weaken, Stephen looked up.

The days since leaving Kamar-Taj had torn at Kaecillius with hungry claws. He was achingly thin, and although no dark halo of energy surrounded his eyes, they looked more desperate than ever. "My one door. Shut."

With quaking fingers, Stephen reached up to touch the knife's handle. He remembered this handle: silver, wrapped in worn leather straps. He'd thought that the Blade of Balam seemed angry.

And a relic chose its owner.

Already, he could feel the infection trapped within the blade begin to pour into him. It choked him like rising swamp water and the skin where he'd been stabbed grew blazingly hot. No ER could fix this, he realized in a daze. There was only one chance, and he... needed... to...

With his remaining strength, he blasted Kaecillius away and opened a portal, and stumbled through it into his home. Falling heavily forward, Stephen cried out in pain as the knife's handle impacted the concrete floor and drove itself further into his chest.
"Wind chime," he choked out when the Cloak flew to him in a frantic rush. "Wind... ch..."

Now frigid winter seemed to pour from the wound. It twisted itself through the blazing heat like molten iron pouring onto a glacier. Inexorably, his eyes fell shut. His hands went limp.

With his last ounce of strength before darkness took him, Stephen's soul cried out through astral space: TONY.
Chapter 17

"Angels win," Rhodey announced, and lifted his mug of beer. "Which means I win. You owe me some answers."

Tony glowered at the televisions lining this sports bar's walls. That last call had been bullshit. "You're a *Dodgers* fan."

"This was California versus New York. California," Rhodey said, and gestured at himself. "New York," he finished, and gestured at Tony.

"I live in Malibu!" Ugh, Rhodey was going to ask some awkward questions. At least they were tucked away inside an isolated booth in the corner, where no one had noticed him and would listen in. (How could the Yankees lose to the Angels?)

"You've moved for good, I can tell. You're a New Yorker. Like your guy."

Sighing, Tony gestured him onward. Rhodey had been sent back to D.C. for some work, and that East Coast trip was the perfect chance for them to catch up. The military wanted to learn all about Tony's power armor. (It was so weird that it wasn't known as the 'Iron Man armor.') Both of them knew that the questions Rhodey would ask would be far more forgiving than what Tony would get from any other military representative, so they'd made a meeting happen.

But they'd already covered the official military consultation on Tony's *device*. Which meant any questions Rhodey now planned to ask would be personal ones.

"Tell me seriously," Rhodey said, and leaned in. "Did you know about all that weird-ass stuff he can do? I know you told the press 'no,' but... come on."

"Nope."

"Seriously?"

"Why is that so hard to believe?"

"I don't know," Rhodey admitted. Then he really thought about it. "Well... for as long as I've know you, it was always a mystery of which woman you'd take to bed tomorrow. And then you seriously commit. For the first time ever." Rhodey snorted into his beer, sipped, and finished, "To a dude."

"Don't even get on my case about that, I already dealt with it from Obadiah."

"Hey, I've got no *problem* with it," Rhodey said, and held up his hands. "I was just wondering what caught your eye and totally changed the status quo. Magic's a good explanation."

"I didn't know."

"All right," Rhodey relented.

(Tony was just lying to everyone he cared about, wasn't he?)

After munching on some of the last of their nachos, Rhodey folded his arms and studied Tony again. "You've kinda gone radio-silent, Tony, so I don't know for sure... but you're really, really into him. Aren't you?"
Tony grimaced. "Sorry for dropping off the radar a lot, yeah. Life's been wild ever since that party."

"Seriously." Rhodey's eyebrows lifted, and he asked more bluntly, "Do you love him?"

"Would I make my suit to help him if I didn't?" Tony replied breezily. That flippant reply seemed to annoy Rhodey, who—to be fair—did have room to be irritated at how he'd been shoved way, way down his friend's priority list. Accordingly, Tony tried to sober himself. He needed to sound in love, and so thought of all the ways he'd describe love from everything he remembered of the woman he'd married. "When you have a friend, their happiness is more important than your happiness. But when you love someone, their happiness is more important than your pain. And God, if they're in pain? You can't be happy."

"Huh," Rhodey said, and blinked. "That was... sincere. I haven't seen any of his missions go south, but from that 'pain' comment, I guess you've seen a lot more."

Tony found himself flashing back to the interior of his Saleen, and feeling his heart wrench with desperate sympathy over the anxiety attack he saw building. He'd been talking about Pepper, but... yeah, of course he'd seen things from Stephen that the public hadn't. "Well, I'm not going to get into that, obviously. I want to respect his privacy."

"Sure, okay." At least Rhodey seemed to accept this, even if he still found the whole situation peculiar. As he studied the remaining nachos, looking for the best chip to pull, he added, "All of that sounds really nice. I mean, not with a guy. No offense."

"None taken," Tony assured him. He had suspicions about whether some people might be a little flexible, but Rhodey wasn't one of them.

"I haven't had that," Rhodey continued a little wistfully. "Someone who can't stand seeing me down, or who gets that happy just because I'm happy."

Oddly, with each statement Tony again found himself flashing back to Stephen: the way he'd kindly looked after Tony after hearing about Phil. Buying that framed album cover out of absolute nowhere, just because it reminded Stephen of his supposed partner.

Wow. They had gotten really good at this.

"Damn," Tony then groaned.

Rhodey blinked. "What's wrong?"

After pointing to the news ticker now crawling across the screen—EXPERIMENTAL SURGERY BY DR. STRANGE SUCCESSFUL—Tony dug out his phone and explained, "I lost track of time. Forgot to follow his press conference."

"Someone's in the dog house," Rhodey sing-songed.

Shortly, Tony looked up from his texts. "I gotta go, sorry. That's... oh hey, want to see the armor? I could have it fly over here."

Rhodey grinned, then reached into his pocket for his wallet. "Seriously?"

Glowering, Tony beat him to what he estimated was the bill, putting down three times as much as was necessary. No one out-spent Stark. "I covered everything," he said loudly to their waiter, and pointed to their table until the man nodded. Turning his attention back to Rhodey, he said, "Yeah. Come on."
"Well... all right, then," Rhodey happily said and followed Tony outside. Nearly as soon as they did, Tony's presence was noted. A few people lingered nearby and more soon trickled in. No matter how large the crowd grew, though, Tony knew that Rhodey would never be impressed with him like they were. Indeed, Rhodey sounded like he was only expecting another typical piece of tech when he noted, "Everyone's been wanting to get a look at this thing up close."

After Tony clicked a remote on his watch, Rhodey wondered, "So, when do we get a shot at this?" Ah, there was the question he'd been dancing around all night, in-between talking about technical capabilities and authorization protocols. Clearly, Rhodey hadn't just been sent to measure the suit's capabilities in Tony's hands.

"Tell you what," Tony said as he studied the sky. "You reach out to Colonel Nick Fury and ask him how his fumigation is going. If he gives you the thumbs-up, you and I can talk."

"Fury?" Rhodey repeated in surprise. "The S.H.I.E.L.D. guy, right?"

"Yep."

"You have really been leading an interesting life, recently," Rhodey chuckled, only to trail off as he saw the approaching gleam of fiery jets. The few fans who'd gathered near Tony gasped when they realized the suit was coming, and gasped again as it actually landed and opened for Tony's entry."

"That," Rhodey said with approval as Tony began to seal himself inside the suit, "is damn cool."

"It's so damn cool," Tony confirmed, just before the headplate snapped into place. "Double-or-nothing that the Yankees take the next game!" he announced just before firing all jets and blasting off.

Of course, Rhodey had to ruin his smooth exit. "You're too high in the sky," Rhodey soon smirked in a call that filled Tony's helmet. "Gotta file a flight plan at this altitude."

"Buzzkill."

"You know it."

"Any way you can find some fun loopholes for me?"

Rhodey laughed. "And why would I do that?"

"Because—"

TONY.

Horrified, Tony drew to a stop in mid-air. Stephen had just screamed inside Tony like nothing he'd ever felt. It had all the horror of when he'd watched the Sanctum's reality collapse around him, but... no, but worse.

Stephen was dying. Right now.

With terror choking him, Tony cut Rhodey's call and powered all thrusters to maximum. He somehow knew that Stephen's scream had come from home and he angled there as fast as his suit could weave between skyscrapers. Landing on the balcony hard enough to crack its tiles, Tony forced himself through the openings in his suit as soon as they seemed large enough. They weren't; scratches scored into his exposed forearms.
He didn't care.

"Oh, God," he cried as he ran inside and saw Stephen's utterly limp body sprawled there. This was no astral trip. A pool of inky liquid was spreading under Stephen, and even before seeing a knife, Tony somehow knew with exquisite horror that it was blood.

A second later, the Cloak zipped in from a back hall, threw a long wooden box on the couch, and yanked Tony physically toward it. The Kamar-Taj wind chimes, he realized after a paralyzed moment. They'd never hung them up, but now they could bring help. "Help," Tony begged as he lifted the chimes from their box and began to ring them. "Help, help, help, come on, God, help me!"

A portal opened, and Tony screamed at the mystic behind it, "He's dying! Get the Ancient One! Please!"

Tony threw the chimes down as soon as the portal closed, and knelt next to Stephen. His heart hammered. His face tingled. Tears streamed. It agonized him to leave that knife inside Stephen, but he knew that yanking it free would kill him. But it had to be the source of that black blood. Leaving it might kill him, too.

His jeans drank the black blood as the puddle spread. He could feel the wet heat against his skin. It clung.

"Don't do this," Tony begged. Hand shaking, he reached out and cupped Stephen's cheek. His skin was icy cold for a moment, then rippled with a deadly fever. "Don't do this."

All of the quick-witted arrogance, the flashes of compassion, the dry humor was gone. Stephen was helpless and limp, captured by dark magic, and undeniably, inescapably dying. And Tony had zero idea how to help him.

"Please," he begged the second he saw sparks again. He'd taken Stephen's hand in his. Black blood slicked them both. "Help."

"No," the Ancient One gasped softly as she studied the sight before her, and moved with precise urgency as she knelt at Stephen's other side. "One pound of dried black arbutus," she immediately demanded. Tony's confusion over how he was supposed to get that 'arbutus' faded as he realized her voice had carried into the distance, just as theirs had during the fight in Philadelphia.

"Can you save him?" Tony asked. He could barely see, by this point. The world was a sloppy, warped mess on the other side of his tears.

"We can try. Put on two pots of water to boil." As Tony lunged for the kitchen, the Ancient One rolled Stephen flat onto his back and stared with fiery intention toward the knife standing above his chest. She wrapped her hand around its grip. She breathed once. Again. And then, in one smooth move, she yanked the knife free of him and slammed her other hand down on the wound it left.

Her jaw clenched and brow dipped. A second later, Tony saw why: a black eruption exploded from Stephen's chest and nearly pushed through her golden shield. But the Ancient One's will was unshakeable, her hand unmoving, and the geyser faded. Ignoring the black lake that now surrounded them, containing far more blood than a person could ever normally lose, the Ancient One leaned further over Stephen and increased the flow of energy through her hand. Soon, it glowed brightly enough to blind. Tony flinched and looked away.

"Is he okay?" Tony shakily asked when she sat back, exhaling. Her yellow robes drank as thirstily as his jeans had, and darkened along all their edges.
"He will not bleed to death." The Ancient One's gaze was downcast. "I've healed the cut from the knife, but only Stephen himself can heal the infection introduced to him by the Blade of Balam. Here," she said softly, and stood to retrieve a basket passed to her through the portal. After murmuring a few things to the mystic on its other side, the Ancient One walked toward Tony in the kitchen.

Seeing Stephen on the floor like that, deathly pale and slicked with his own black blood, filled Tony's eyes with tears anew. It was hard to understand the words he heard. It took him two tries before understanding that he was meant to take the basket she offered.

"Divide half of the arbutus into each pot," she explained. "Let them steep. As soon as you can no longer see their bottoms, you're ready to begin. From one, boil it each hour and give him a single, small cup of that tea. It will reduce over time and become more potent."

Tony nodded desperately.

"For the other, a constant low boil. Add more water whenever you must. Soak bandages in that mixture and lay them on top of the wound. When that bandage darkens, put down a fresh one."

Desperate sadness filled her expression. "Perhaps... if you are able to keep up his strength inside, and draw enough of the poison out..." Her shoulders slumped.

"I should not have given him the benefit of the doubt," the Ancient One whispered to herself, and probably thought that Tony could not hear.

"Here, Mr. Stark," the Ancient One added, and accepted the stack of bandages that someone passed to her through the portal. "If you need more supplies, ring us again."

"Are you leaving?" Tony realized with blank dismay.

Deep sadness filled her eyes. "I cannot risk the continued existence of reality. If Stephen dies, the Time Stone may collapse into a paradox. It is up to you, now, to see if he can be saved. If he cannot... then I must have already found a way to accept that burden onto myself, lest reality crumble." Her gaze slowly lowered. "I let a man linger in Kamar-Taj to say some good-byes." It fell to the floor. "I should not have done so."

Her portal flared. When it faded, Tony and Stephen were alone. With shaking hands, Tony dipped the first bandage into its pot and waited for it to absorb the berries' color. The tea wasn't ready yet, but he could put down this, at least.

His footsteps echoed like walking through a tomb.

"It'll be okay," Tony promised as he knelt next to Stephen. (God, he was so still, and so pale. Especially against the black halo of blood around him.) "I'll make it be okay." Shoving aside Stephen's ruined shirt scraps enough to expose the wound, he placed the wet bandage on top of it with gentle precision. No blood leaked, thanks to the Ancient One's spells, but he supposed those berries would do something, regardless.

But even though no blood leaked, by the time he returned with a small cup of tea the entire bandage had blackened. Swallowing hard, Tony replaced it with a fresh one before tilting Stephen's head up and easing tiny drops of tea into his mouth.

As that slow attempt concluded, the very furthest edges of the second bandage turned black with the knife's blood-spell.

Moving robotically, Tony placed a third. Then a fourth, and fifth, and sixth. As he lifted that bandage...
to put down the seventh, he noticed small black lines radiating from the wound. Like an infection settling in.

It took just over eight minutes for a bandage to totally blacken, once laid down.

Tony knew he'd made a second cup of tea, but he didn't remember doing so. And now there were ten all-black bandages surrounding him like rotting leaves on the floor, but he didn't remember those, either. When the Cloak handed him yet another fresh cloth, soaked with the only chance Stephen had to survive, it felt like someone else's body was moving it into place.

A drop of water splashed on Stephen's face. It took Tony several seconds to realize that he was crying again, in big, fat drops lancing trails down his cheeks.

"I should have been there," Tony whispered. "I should have been at the hospital. I could have stopped this."

It took just over seven minutes for a bandage to totally blacken, once laid down.

What if Stephen died?

Actually asking the question was like having his guts ripped open. Tony pictured being in this condo alone, in this universe alone, and felt complete hopelessness overcome him. He couldn't do this. Not without Stephen. He couldn't live this new life without that aggravating, captivating person he'd leaned on to build their existence. This timeline even existed because they were anchored together, goddamnit; how was he expected to live apart from the other half of his reality?

Through the windows, the neighborhood quieted. Lights faded. The city went to sleep, and all Tony could think of was what if they wake back up into a world without him? How would Tony go to sleep, and wake up, and eat and drink and laugh ever again in a world without him in it? In a world without their balancing egos, their laughter, their sharp, sudden flashes of compassion?

Five cups of tea were inside Stephen, and he hadn't moved. Black bandages lay in messy piles. Tony's knees felt bruised against the concrete floor, but he didn't care. He wouldn't leave Stephen's side.

It took just over eight minutes for a bandage to totally blacken, once laid down.

"Eight," Tony murmured, thick-headed. It had been seven minutes for a while, right? Now it was taking longer again?

The timer sounded for another cup of tea.

It took just over nine minutes for a bandage to totally blacken, once laid down.

"Please," Tony whispered as he watched the latest bandage darken, slower than any that had come before. Leaning down, his face nearly brushed Stephen's. "Please, please, find your way back. I'm here, I'm right here. You're so strong, I know you can do this." His voice wavered. "And you have to, because I can't if you don't."

By the time of the next cup of tea, it took nearly fifteen minutes for a bandage to totally blacken, once laid down.

Tony barely dared to hope. What if Stephen were fading out, rather than back in? Would that explain the slowing leech of his blood's poison?
Each time he'd given another tiny cup of tea, it had been tilted into Stephen in delicate amounts too small to choke on. It was more like an ointment being applied to the tissues of his mouth rather than anything he actually drank, and Tony could only hope that the absorption was doing any good.

This time, Stephen instinctively swallowed.

"God," Tony said, in a fierce combination of joy, relief, and desperate hope. "Yeah, keep going. You can do this. You can do this."

Before the next cup of tea, Tony only needed three bandages.

"Cloak," Tony eventually said, around 4 a.m. "Let's get him to bed. So he's not sore from the concrete when he..." A wet, disbelieving laugh escaped Tony. He was exhausted and delirious, but by now there was no escaping the fact that Stephen's breaths were deeper than before. His skin, a healthier shade. His temperature was equalizing, his pulse steadied, and he was going to fucking live. "So he's not sore from the concrete when he wakes up."

"You can't do that to me," Tony whispered in Stephen's bedroom. Towels were under Stephen to absorb any runoff drips from the bandages, but it had to be so much more comfortable than before. "Never again." Tony's fingertips lightly traced down the face of the man he'd spent months kissing as deeply as he'd ever kissed anyone. Even so, this felt like the first time they'd touched. Tony's terrified heart thawed in his chest.

"Jerk," Tony murmured after a strong, steady series of breaths further eased his concern. Stephen looked so weak, still, but he'd live. He'd live. "You don't know what it was like, watching this." His hand cupped Stephen's cheek. "How am I supposed to handle seeing you hurt, huh?" His head shook. "I can't. Not ever."

As he leaned over Stephen, feeling like he could live again now that he knew Stephen would, Tony blinked once. And a second time. And then Tony went very, very still.

_But when you love someone, their happiness is more important than your pain. And God, if they're in pain? You can't be happy._

"Oh, my God," Tony said, his gaze falling unfocused. "I love him."

The realization pounded through his skull. His heart swelled like standing on the edge of a firepit: hot and fierce and on the verge of being consumed by this if he walked further in.

When the current bandage eventually blackened at all, it took Tony a minute to notice. He couldn't stop looking at Stephen's face as it relaxed with his easing pain. There were so many things to study: the way all the brash arrogance fell away in sleep, in favor of a man who was kind in quieter moments. The places where faint signs of age would develop as they walked toward the future, together. "I actually love him."

His hand came to rest on Stephen's bare shoulder, then jerked instantly away. Face flushing, Tony looked, stunned, over the man who he'd practically climbed in front of tabloid photographers. Now that he'd realized this, though, Stephen's skin was like metal under a blazing sun. Tony couldn't bear to touch him. Not asleep like this, unknowing.

It was time for another cup of tea, Tony abruptly realized, and moved unsteadily to his feet.

The blood lake had dried hours ago. _Will we be able to get the stain out of the floor?_ Tony blankly wondered. He felt detached as he walked through the condo, his home of the past three months. He'd never found the motivation to leave it, as he'd said he would.
With each movement he made in the kitchen, Tony kept repeating his epiphany. *I love him. I love him. I love him. I love him.* Surely it would turn up a splinter, a crack, some imperfection that revealed it as a fake.

None ever came.

Because he did: he loved him.

Tears filled Tony's eyes again, but only as a thin, glossy layer that accompanied his laugh of relief. "Oh." He looked down at the tea in his hands. "Oh." His own face looked back at him from its rippled, fluid surface. The sight warped with the liquid's motion. Sometimes he looked twenty, like the man he'd grown out of being. Sometimes he looked old, though; older than he'd been in the original timeline.

A whole life to experience, still.

With skin tingling, Tony set back into motion toward the bedroom. Stephen was asleep, but looked so much stronger. That bandage had been on his chest for nearly forty minutes, yet there was only a limited black bloom at its center. When Tony tilted the tea into Stephen's mouth, he readily swallowed.

Smiling through his tears, Tony set down the cup and looked toward the first hint of dawn. Another day was coming in this world they'd carved out. That world out there was still going to have Stephen in it.

And so was his.
There was only pain. Stephen's flickering awareness was trapped deep under a black, oily lake of agony. When existence chilled, the lake congealed into a greasy mass that froze his drowning lungs solid. When it heated, his skin seared from the burning oil. Muscle charred but never fell off the bone.

Over hours, the pain eased. Slightly. The vestiges of his awareness assumed he was dying. It seemed the only explanation for any pain ebbing: he was finally being set free. He couldn't remember who he was, why he was trapped here, or where here was, but he knew death would save him.

No, though. He wasn't dying. After more pain faded, he could remember his name instead of falling toward oblivion. After yet more pain fled, he remembered the knife that had done this to him.

And, as his eyes hesitantly opened toward airy sunshine, he remembered...

"Hey," Tony whispered at him, and gently laid a hand on Stephen's cheek.

He remembered Tony. "You did it," Stephen said with exhausted relief. His chest still ached, but that was all. Looking down at it, there was a damp bandage with a dark spot at its center. After moving it, Stephen saw a pale scar in the shape of the knife's narrow wound. It looked years old, but had odd, shifting black spots along its length. The infection wasn't quite out yet, then. He put the bandage back.

"You did it," Tony corrected. His thumb stroked lightly down the cheekbone it rested upon.

Stephen didn't have the energy to laugh, only to make a short exhalation through his nose. "I won't criticize movie virus logic."

After staring blankly at him, Tony burst out laughing until tears formed, then leaned forward to gently bump their foreheads. He seemed ready to say some quip in return, but every line died in his throat. Instead he just sat there, silent, as they felt each other's warm breath.

"Never make me think that I'm going to lose you," Tony eventually whispered.

"Tony," Stephen murmured back. There was a hint of a question in it, though he wasn't sure why. After the surreal hell world of that knife's infection, this bedroom was a comfortable, certain refuge. The heat of Tony's skin was an anchor holding him to life. Wanting to keep that anchor firmly in place, he lifted a weak hand and threaded it through Tony's hair.

Tony inhaled sharply.

"Tony?" Stephen murmured again, and this time the question was plain. Their eyes locked from scant inches away. Tony's dark eyes were glossy with emotion, and still reddened from what must
have been a long, hard night. His pupils moved just enough to suggest that he was looking over
Stephen's face while always drawing inexorably back to their shared gaze.

No explanation came. As even more emotion overcame Tony, he seemed barely able to breathe, let
alone speak. His mouth opened and closed after a few useless seconds. The hand against Stephen's
cheek trembled.

*Oh,* Stephen thought suddenly as he recognized what was in Tony's eyes. *Oh.* Shock ran down his
spine and left him reeling.

Sudden clarity fell into him like a rock being tossed down a well, clattering its way down, down,
down. The splash at its end washed away all uncertainty, all hesitation about why both of them had
made some of the choices they had. As two geniuses, they should have seen otherwise as they
carved out this new life together... but as two geniuses, they'd always been able to come up with an
explanation. With great purpose, they'd let themselves ignore how their act never quite seemed to end
offstage.

"Tony," Stephen murmured a third time, and felt the energy forever shift between them. "There are
no cameras." And thus no *excuse.*

After staring back for a long, weighty moment, Tony whispered "Better not be" and kissed him.

It was as if none of those showy kisses for the public had ever happened. This first, gentle touch was
searching, almost hesitant, and felt like nothing they'd ever done before. Stephen's right hand stayed
locked in Tony's hair while his left reached up to caress his back. Though Tony needed to prop
himself up with one hand on the bed, his other held Stephen's face with the delicacy of fragile
crystal.

"So," Stephen said after they barely pulled apart. A faint smile bloomed.

"Mmmmm." 

"This makes sense."

"Yeah." Joy filled Tony's eyes, and he added, "Apparently, I love you."

Stephen's smile grew. The words felt bold and bright enough to counter every memory of that black
lake. "Apparently, I love you. We just... never noticed."

"Big blind spot."

"Huge."

"Wonder how long this has been going on."

"You've got me."

"Kinda embarrassing."

"Incredibly embarrassing."

Tony opened his mouth for another joke, only for fresh emotion to overcome him. He inhaled wetly,
set his jaw, and swallowed. After that, he said again, "Never make me think that I'm going to lose
you. Last night, I felt alone in the universe. You're my *whole* universe now and I just realized that.
We're not *there,* any more. We're *here.* Together. And I can't lose you."
The raw passion in Tony's voice choked Stephen's throat. "I was dying." His hand slid down Tony's head a bit, and he used his thumb to wipe away a tear coming from those warm, dark eyes. "All I knew is that I needed you with me." Another tear trickled, which Stephen dutifully wiped away. Then he asked, "So... can I say that I have a 'someone,' now?"

After a moment, Tony sat back and laughed. He'd apparently filled with too much emotion and needed some space and another, louder burst of laughter to let it safely out. Then he nodded and confirmed, "You apparently have a someone." Early morning light glinted off the trail those tears had made on his cheek. It crinkled when he smiled.

"Can you get me another medicated bandage?" Stephen wondered. "And get a long, dry one from the bathroom medicine cabinet." Off Tony's confusion, he explained, "You look utterly exhausted, Tony. If you put a fresh one on me and secure it, you could finally get some sleep."

"No way. Not until I know you're at one hundred percent." Something far different—something cold—entered Tony's eyes. When he leaned forward again, it wasn't for a kiss, but to demand, "Who did it?"

"What will you do if I tell you?" Stephen wondered after a long pause.

Tony's eyes further chilled. "I doubt that knife can cut through my suit. Pretty sure I can cut through him."

"No," Stephen insisted. His hand lifted to lay against Tony's chest.

"No?" Tony repeated, practically spitting it. Anger burned away his exhaustion. "Nah, this isn't a no. This is a yes. He does this to you, I pay it back to him. I know you don't want to kill people," he interrupted, "but oh, right now, I really do."

"You can't," Stephen sighed. As Tony's eyes darkened nearly to black, he added, "Not because of my ethics." He doubted that argument would ever fly. Tony was too dedicated to the idea of stopping threats by force. "But because if you do, someone will find out. You'll need to explain, and —"

"I can pay for the best lawyers in the world."

"And people will learn that Kamar-Taj stores objects that dangerous in it. That someone was able to get his hands on one to nearly kill me. All we'd do is inspire people, again... but not in the way we've been doing so far. Not in a way that we want." The hand on Tony's chest slid up to the junction of shoulder and neck. Even though his grip was weak, it let Stephen feel like he was holding Tony in place. "The Ancient One can handle him."

"She let this happen in the first place."

"She'll keep it quiet. Not keeping it quiet will just make this happen again." Stephen waited through Tony's furious silence, and added, "You don't think there would be people interested in weapons strong enough to nearly kill me with one blow?"

Anger remained in Tony's expression, but it eventually eased into simple frustration. He sighed, then nodded reluctantly after a long, long pause. "Okay. Then what..." Should I do to help?, he didn't finish. He didn't do well with feeling useless; neither of them did.

"Like I said: secure a fresh bandage on me. And sleep."

Rolling his eyes, Tony began to protest at again being told to drop his guard. But then he paused,
shrugged, and said, "Okay. We'll both sleep."

What he hadn't mentioned was that they would both sleep in that room. Tony was apparently only willing to let himself fall unconscious if he were right next to Stephen, able to respond at a moment's notice to any distress. He stepped away to change clothes and wash his face, but would soon take the other half of that bed.

As he waited for Tony's return, Stephen still felt too weary to move. He did need to sleep, he acknowledged, but couldn't do so until he saw Tony's face again. Even lifting his limbs to touch Tony had taken a lot out of him, and now it was a chore to roll his head toward the doorway and smile tiredly at the Cloak.

"Here," Tony murmured when he eventually returned with a fresh, damp bandage. He lifted away the one on Stephen's chest, which only had a postage stamp-sized black spot at its center, and put the new one in its place. Then, to Stephen's bemusement, he placed a layer of cling firm over it before unwrapping a longer bandage.

"Modern solutions to ancient problems," Stephen noted as he looked at the plastic-covered bandage. The mystics who'd developed this approach for drawing out magical poisons probably hadn't considered a Saran Wrap topper in their recommendations.

"It'll keep the other bandage from absorbing the liquid," Tony noted as he moved to apply the longer, stabilizing bandage on top of it, only to pause with his hands a few inches above Stephen's chest.

Momentary confusion gave way to flustered realization. It was one thing to lay a small, flat bandage down on him, but another to need the type of touch that this full wrap would involve. Both men looked at each other, and then laughed sheepishly and broke their eye contact a second later. "We've practically gotten each other off on camera," Tony muttered as his neck flushed pink.

Stephen smiled weakly. "That phrasing doesn't really help." After another awkward moment he wondered, "So how are we going to navigate... this?" Now that it meant something like all of their public showboating never had. They'd made a habit of treating the other man's body like a prop in a worldwide show. It was an awful lot of momentum to slam suddenly into this new wall of realization.

"We can't even tell anyone," Tony realized with a sigh. His cheeks remained faintly flushed. "'Oh hey, I actually fell in love with my boyfriend.' No one would have a clue what I meant."

They'd been putting on this show for months. They probably should have noticed how natural that romantic playacting had become. Trying for a light mood, Stephen said, "So... the two of us are the only ones who know the truth of a situation? At least we've practiced that. A lot." He'd sound a hell of a lot more convincing if not for how Tony's hands near his bare skin weren't suddenly interesting in a way he'd never before considered.

"We have practiced that," Tony agreed. "We've practiced it a lot. And, well... we practiced going with the flow." He exhaled, and then laid his hands deliberately flat against Stephen's chest before he lost his nerve. The heat was searing. Though both their breaths caught, a second later they both laughed at the tension breaking. "Right." Grinning, Tony shifted his hands slightly. Stephen could feel the faint calluses he'd earned in his workshop. "Let me get this bandage around you."

It was still awkward, especially when Stephen found that he didn't yet have the strength to push himself high enough off the bed so that the bandage could pass easily underneath him. Tony's strong arm caught him and gently lifted, while the other passed the bandage under. "Thanks," he softly said once the work was done.
"Sure," Tony said, just as soft, and there was an undercurrent to it that Stephen could hear as clearly as if it’d been shouted: *thanks for letting me.*

"So, I guess you're not moving out, after all," Stephen murmured once Tony had closed the curtains and slipped into the bed next to him. Though the king-sized mattress had plenty of room to sprawl, Tony had curled up in its center, putting him very close to Stephen. It was as near as he could come without jostling Stephen as they drifted off.

"Course I am," Tony said with a smile. "With you. We need more space. But I can probably deal with three bedrooms for a little while longer."

Stephen smiled drowsily back. "Spoiled."

"Says the man I met in a twenty-k square foot townhouse." All right, Stephen did miss the Sanctum's sprawling footprint. (Daniel would take excellent care of it in this timeline, though.) Seeing that acknowledgment in his eyes, Tony laughed and reached gently over to him. "Yep. Bigger place. We'll keep this place for backup, if you want."

As Tony's hand brushed his cheek, Stephen brought his own hand up to catch it. For a while they studied each other in silence, unwilling to drift off. Even though memories of somewhere dark and painful still crept around the edge of Stephen's awareness, he felt whole in a way this castaway timeline had never before granted to him.

He'd known that potential *someone* would probably never be met in this altered history. Besides, trying to start anything would be under unacceptably false pretenses. Yet, even as he'd assumed he'd end up alone, there'd been an obvious answer right in front of him that was impossible to consider. Impossible, that was, until death very nearly took him.

Contentment lulled them both. Though Tony resisted sleep as it approached, his eyes eventually drifted shut. Once he saw Tony's eyelids fall, Stephen's did, too. When his eyes slit open again, the angle of the light streaming around the curtain's edges looked more like midday.

No wonder he'd slept so well, Stephen thought drowsily, and smiled as he looked down at where Tony had started treating his shoulder as a pillow. He'd expected to return to that black, oily pit in his nightmares, but this warm body had probably been like a protective charm against any Blade of Balam memories.

Apparently, he'd stirred enough to notice. "I could get used to this," Tony murmured against him. His beard tickled when it moved.

Stephen's hand stroked down Tony's arm, luxuriating in this idea that all the intimacy they'd grown used to faking could actually, sincerely mean something. "Mmm. We will." For perhaps the first time since realizing he could operate again, this new timeline didn't feel anything like a burden.

That earned fully open brown eyes, then a slow but satisfied smile. "Yeah," Tony agreed with a dawning sense of wonder. "We will."

"Another message has been left for you, Mr. Stark."

Mr. Stark? The hell? In his sleepy recovery, Stephen needed a few seconds to understand that he hadn't said those words, despite hearing them in his voice. Tony looked confused, too, until they simultaneously processed what was happening: now that they were awake, Vincent was once again giving them alerts. "This is why," Stephen said, and tiredly rubbed at his eyes as he sat up against the headboard, "I didn't want to voice the stupid thing."
Tony opened his mouth, only to pause with a deeply sad expression. "Imagine if this was all I had left of you."

"Tony."

"Right." Tony sat up, too, and wiped a hand down his stubble-rough face. "Vincent, who's it from?"

"Colonel James Rhodes, in his eighteenth unanswered call."

"Eighteenth?" Tony echoed. "Oh. Shit. I cut off in the middle of a call with him when you reached out to me. And..." He fumbled on the nightstand for something, then nodded at the wrist device he'd let rest there and whatever confirmation it gave him. "My suit came inside after I did, so everything was contained within your magic field. Rhodey's had zero way to track me."

Stephen had the suspicion that he was about to once again hate being famous. "Computer—"

"Vincent," Tony helpfully supplied.

Stephen ignored him. "How many unanswered calls are waiting for us both, in total?"

"One hundred and seventy-nine."

Groaning, Stephen let himself collapse onto Tony's shoulder. It was hard to maintain his frustration as Tony ruffled his hair, but hearing the rundown of their waiting inboxes did keep his mood sharp. Major news stations had wanted to follow up with him on the groundbreaking surgery, and then a few had somehow caught wind that he'd been threatened afterward. Surgery calls also came from hospital employees, at Metro and elsewhere, and then Rhodey had apparently passed his fears onto everyone in Tony's circle. "Come on," Stephen sighed and slid his legs out from under the covers. "It's already late and I need coffee, first."

Tony insisted on hurrying around the bed to support him. Stephen's knees only wobbled twice as he stood, but even one time was another sign of how draining the previous night had been. That relic had been far more dangerous than he'd ever given it credit for, and he'd left himself far too open to attack.

Knees wobbled again when Stephen reached the living room and found himself standing on the edge of a seeming bottomless pit. It took him a few bewildered moments to realize that something had stained everything it had touched into a pool of absolute, non-reflective darkness. "Was that me?" he wondered and lightly brushed the bandage covering his chest.

Tony's expression was grim as he looked down at what the previous night had wrought. His voice was worse. "Yeah."

Stephen's fingers still hesitated above the scar. "I lost a lot of blood." A few liters' loss would have killed him. This looked like gallons.

"I don't know if it was blood." Tony's hands had gripped Stephen's upper arm to steady him when he wavered, but now it sounded like Tony needed the support. "Come on. I'll make you coffee." As Tony steered him firmly around the stain, he barely seemed able to acknowledge the remnants of last night's events.

Although both Tony and the Cloak tried to guide Stephen onto a stool at the counter, he first took the chance to check the trash can. "I lost a lot of blood," Stephen repeated as he stared at the completely full can and the crumpled bandages inside it. With the sharp angles they'd dried into, it was like a flock of black origami cranes made from his own life.
He finally looked down at his body with enough attention to notice that the pants he was in hadn't been black the day before. They'd been dyed by that puddle as darkly as the floor and furniture. At least it left their bodies alone, he thought as he inspected his elbows, then pulled a bit of hair just into view. Of course, that selective behavior made even less sense. Magic could be very weird.

"We really don't need to keep talking about your blood," Tony said as he punched in commands to the coffeemaker. Strain tugged at his voice.

Now Stephen did let the Cloak guide him to a seat, where he sat in quiet thought while Tony busied himself with breakfast. "I should say that I was attacked," he eventually decided. "To the media."

Tony frowned. "I thought that you didn't want to let people know what had happened."

"I don't want to let people know that there are weapons that can take me down in one hit," Stephen corrected. "But right now, I'd make a great almost-martyr." Off Tony's continued hesitation, he continued, "Someone tried to murder the modern world's first superhero right after I saved two babies from cancer. I'd probably inspire a lot of righteous outrage that we could put to very good use."

Tony sighed and sat a cup of coffee in front of him.

"We've still gotta win this," Stephen pointed out and closed his hands around the mug. "It's up to us to guide the planet in the right direction. If I'm a public figure, then let's get people righteously mad about me being attacked."

"Don't make a habit of this," Tony relented. "I don't want you playing hero recruiter by getting stabbed in the heart a few more times."

"Stabbed in the heart," Stephen repeated thoughtfully after sipping his coffee. "That's... hmm."

"That's hmm?"

"This isn't the first time that facing this man has ended with me getting stabbed through the heart. Although," Stephen acknowledged, "last time his disciples were involved, rather than just—"

Realizing he was about to identify Kaecilius by name, Stephen fell silent. He still didn't trust Tony not to fly off in a pique of violent revenge.

"I want to kill him," Tony said plainly when he realized why Stephen had trailed off.

"In your world, that's the worst end you can give someone. In mine, there are far worse things than dying."

"That doesn't make me not okay with killing this guy. I'm fine with dealing out some B-plus level revenge." Off Stephen's level stare, Tony threw his hands up and grumbled, "Fine."

"As I was saying," Stephen said pointedly, "I've been stabbed through the heart before because of this man. I specifically tried to avoid all of that in this timeline."

Tony frowned and poured a cup of coffee for himself. "How?"

"I knew he'd become a threat. He's who was responsible for bringing down the Sanctums to allow Dormammu to invade our world." Noting Tony's furrowed brow, Stephen summarized, "Big evil demon, lives in a timeless dimension of agony, nearly ate Earth."

"Ah," Tony summarized after a long pause.
"I wanted to avoid that happening, and so I told the Ancient One to kick him out before he ever had the chance to find any information about Dormammu. She did, but he apparently found out about my request." Stephen rubbed unhappily at the bandaged spot above his new scar. "And so my attempt to change the future took me down a very different path... that led to the exact same spot."

"It could be a coincidence," Tony pointed out.

"It could," Stephen allowed. But all he could think about was Time energy trying to stabilize a broken history. It'd used the two of them as tools, but they'd soon assumed this new world was theirs to paint over in however the mood took them.

After realizing they could change the timeline without breaking reality, all concerns about 'fixing' history fled. What if some events would always end up happening, though? Not with their original lead-up, but would still remain at the end of some different path? It seemed like an awful lot to assume... but Kaecilius had just stolen something from Kamar-Taj before Stephen was stabbed through the heart with a magical weapon.

Again.

That was a pretty specific repetition.

"Do you think Hydra's inside the Air Force?" Tony wondered after a long, aching pause. His subtext was clear: they had yet to hear back from Fury after setting him on the track of rooting out something dangerous. What if 'Hydra very nearly controls the world' wasn't as easy to avoid as they'd assumed?

Stephen's hand pressed lightly on the medicated bandage. "I think they're probably everywhere."

Tony grimaced, but didn't argue.

"I'm assuming you said 'Air Force' for a reason," Stephen noted. "Do you think that Rhodes is at risk?" In the silence, Stephen's concern grew and he amended, "Are you thinking of telling him? Tony, he's no spy. He's not going to be able to probe as softly as Fury."

"I'm just worried." Tony's fingers tapped against the counter. "Let me think this through."

"Well, while you do that, let me—" Stephen's knee buckled as he tried to step off the stool, and he sighed as he just barely caught the counter in time to steady himself. The Cloak was there instantly to help; Tony followed a moment later. "Moved a little too fast, there."

"Let's worry about other things tomorrow," Tony suggested as he locked Stephen's arms into his firm, steady grip. "You make the calls you need to make, then rest up some more." Off his instinctive stubborn expression, Tony added, "I doubt you'd recommend that anyone go wandering around their condo fourteen hours after heart surgery."

Heart surgery. That was what he'd gone through, wasn't it, in both this timeline and the first? In the original, Christine had needed to open up his chest to stitch that wound closed. Then, he'd forced himself to push through the pain and so made it through everything that followed. But in this timeline, the Blade's infection didn't just leave him in pain; it left him too weak to reliably stand. He'd be fine after more rest, but in the original history, Stephen Strange needing this long for recovery could have doomed all human existence.

This became more unsettling the more he considered it. All of his easy, overblown confidence after the surgery had long since vanished. Not only could events repeat in this redone timeline even if they tried to avoid them, but apparently they had no assurance that events would turn out better if they did recur. His brain began to churn over the years ahead and worried over every potential event they
"You in there?" Tony asked and lightly trailed a finger down the side of Stephen's face. When Stephen snapped out of his contemplation and met Tony's gaze, a quick smile was his reward.

Concern fled. God, he loved that face. Stephen couldn't say when aggravation had turned to friendship, and when friendship had eased into an unacknowledged more. Some paths in this new history might lead to harsher outcomes, but this... this was unquestionably great.

"We're doing this, aren't we?" Stephen wondered after catching Tony's hand and clasping it inside his.

Tony's amusement sobered into something deeper. "I meant every single word."

"So did I."

"Then... yeah." Tony retracted his hand, bringing Stephen's with it, and placed a light kiss on the fingers that were still undamaged in this timeline. "We're doing this. This life of mine only works with you in it. Not for the tabloids. For me."

"And for me," Stephen murmured as they leaned forward and fell into a second, more unhurried kiss than before. It had all of the skill they'd developed in knowing how the other man moved, but was now fueled by deep emotions that made those months of practice suddenly matter. His heart ached again, but not with any injury. It was a good, full ache from all of the potential their lives suddenly held. Real potential, rather than putting on a show for the camera.

But of course, count on Tony Stark to find humor even in the middle of those emotions. "So," he murmured as they broke apart. "My adventures are downright famous. But have you ever been with a guy, or..." 

Stephen instinctively snorted at Tony throwing his history around. "Playboy or not, I've seen more bodies than you."

The kneejerk competitive response earned a smirk from Tony. "I didn't ask about seeing people, doctor. I asked about..." Trailing off, he raised his eyebrows pointedly. The tip of his tongue darted out.

Stephen Strange did not have a playboy past. From the day he entered undergraduate studies, his life had been consumed by that career goal far off in the distance, after a challenging degree and medical school and an internship and residencies. He'd managed to compress fifteen years of work into ten and that didn't happen by wasting any time. Dating only happened in the margins of that busy life. It was never prioritized, and nothing about it had been unexpected. Ever.

Tony's grin spread at the silence, which he took as clear confirmation. "Oh, really?"

"What's your point?" Stephen laughed, after relenting and accepting that he couldn't argue his way out of this.

"And to think, you really went for that first kiss in front of Obi. Wow." Tony's solemn nod was ruined slightly by the mirth behind his eyes. "That's some solid beginner's luck." Seeming to recognize he'd pushed things toward annoyance, Tony grinned before darting forward into another kiss. "Go call the media, I'll call Rhodey. And then rest up as much as you need."

"Because?" Stephen duly prompted.
"Once you're healed up more," Tony promised, "I think you're gonna like how that night turns out."

Stephen couldn't help but look away after failing to control his smile.

"Yeah." Tony trailed a finger down from his shoulder, circled the small patch where his medicated bandage was hidden, and gently tapped it. "You've made a good point about history. It'd probably be good if you just... stopped controlling things for a little while. Stopped planning. Put the pause on any big ideas. And just." His finger trailed further down, to the skin below the bottom edge of all those bandages. "Reacted."

It was difficult not to shiver at both the sensation and the promise, but Stephen gave it his very best, most stern-voiced effort. "Are you seriously trying to use the lead-up to me being stabbed as your come-on approach, Tony?"

When Tony leaned forward to whisper into his ear, Stephen lost that battle for control. His whole body seemed to shiver with anticipation. "I am," Tony confirmed, "and it's working. Just admit that I know something better than you do."

Struggling to control this new smile probably made him look foolish, but grinning as widely as he wanted would look even worse. He'd been tortured in a magical hell, discovered that their timeline efforts were more dangerous than expected, and realized that countless landmines were still scattered in front of them. None of that seemed to matter. Not when a lonely universe had turned on its head to leave Stephen feeling completed instead of isolated. Not when he could still remember the heat of Tony's sleeping body against him.

"Well," Stephen murmured back, and was now able to control himself enough to meet Tony's confident gaze with one of his own. "Good thing for you, then, that I'm a very fast learner."
Chapter 19

It was amazing what twenty-four hours could do, Tony thought as he was left alone in the kitchen. Stephen had retreated to his room to start returning calls, and Tony would soon do the same in the office. But before that, with his suit standing silent guard in one corner and the Cloak inspecting the black stain in another, his roiling emotions finally had a chance to settle.

Over the course of one day, he'd been pinballed through time until the universe broke and he landed permanently in 2007.

Over the course of one day, he'd nearly gotten himself shot and accidentally turned Stephen into the modern world's first superhero.

And over the course of one day, he'd almost lost who was apparently the new love of a new life, only to realize that label even applied.

These big days were exhausting. Hopefully, there wouldn't be many more of them. After today's wonderful realization, Tony wanted little more than a long, calm stretch of nothing in particular in which to enjoy their new Official Boyfriends status together.

"Vincent," he called before retreating to the office. Once the program cued, he requested, "After Stephen finishes his current call, check with him about what story he's giving the media. I don't want to cross any wires."

That answer came by the time he poured himself a fresh cup of coffee, sugared it, and closed himself into the office. So far as the world heard, twelve hours of prep time, surgery, and the press conference follow-up had exhausted Stephen. 'A criminal' had taken advantage of that exhaustion. But that was all the detail he'd provided.

Frowning thoughtfully after hearing Vincent's summary, Tony gestured to turn on the news station that Stephen was talking to in a new, longer response. There had to be more and Tony didn't want to make his own calls until he knew what that 'more' was.

Stephen had pulled on a robe but otherwise allowed himself to look rumpled and drained. He'd never before set a vulnerable image like this in public, and the anchor who'd accepted his video call seemed positively stricken over the sight. "You're telling our audience that someone attacked you right after you saved those two boys from cancer," the anchor said in apparently repeated disbelief.

"Let's be more precise. I'm saying that someone tried to murder me."

Tony flinched even more than the anchor.

"I'm sore, but fine. I just wanted to pass this message along to anyone else who gets the same bright idea: I'm not going to stop helping people and you've got no chance of stopping me." Oh, well, that was just asking for trouble. Just because Stephen wore a red cape, Tony thought as he watched, didn't mean that he needed to wave it in front of a bull. "But I will need to take a few days off. I'm sure Tony's going to be working overtime, but I also wish there were more people willing to step up and help. Not that many people have found Kamar-Taj, yet."

The anchor frowned in thought. "Since you brought it up, Doctor, and we know people are so curious... wouldn't it help if you told our audience more about where you've studied?"
"If they can find it, it's right for them." Stephen looked pointedly into the camera. He sounded more drained than ever, but also more focused. "I saved two children yesterday. Someone tried to use that as a chance to murder me. If hearing that makes you angry enough, you might be able to find Kamar-Taj. To protect the world, as you need is willpower. Anyone can help... and I could use that help," he admitted.

Tony exhaled and turned off the screen. It was a good recruitment message, and he knew that recruitment had to happen, but he still hated seeing Stephen's near-death experience being used as any sort of tool. All sorts of fierce, protective instincts were being cued inside him. He never functioned very logically when they were in the driver's seat.

At least Rhodey had that context when Tony called him. "Is everything okay?" he asked as soon as he picked up. "I'm guessing that's why your call cut off last night."

"Yeah, sorry." Tony found himself walking to the full-length window and staring out at the cheery, sunlit city. The arm not holding up his phone wrapped about his torso like he was hugging himself. "While you and I were talking, Stephen... thought into me, I guess. I had to get here to help him."

"I checked to see if you'd gotten any other signals," Rhodey admitted. "We apparently can't scan for 'thinking,' though." He paused. "How bad was it?"

Tony swallowed hard. Last night's fear bubbled back up into his voice. "A whole lot worse than he's saying on TV."

"I kinda figured. Is he really going to be okay?"

"After a few days, he thinks so, yeah."

"I'm glad." Rhodey hesitated. "How are you doing, Tony?"

Tony's hand flexed around his phone. He loved Stephen, and now he knew that, but Stephen Strange was nothing if not reliably aggravating. Stephen had every right to turn his attack into this recruitment effort, and Tony would never stop him from doing so, but still... he'd never considered how Tony would feel while watching it.

And Tony could deal with that! He could, without complaint. But it was hard to not be able to talk with complete honesty to anyone but Stephen, especially when Stephen's state was what had him worried.

Well, except for talking to the Ancient One, Tony amended, and rolled his eyes. But she wasn't an especially approachable sounding board. And even if she would keep their secrets, she was from Stephen's world, not Tony's. She wasn't the sort of friendly ear with whom Tony could talk things out... when...

"I'm holding it together," Tony said after that long, considering pause, when he realized he should say something. "It's hard, but I'm doing it for him."

But seriously: what if he told Rhodey the truth? Rhodey would keep their secret, wouldn't he? If he knew the stakes?

"Good. Hey, I need to head back down to D.C. for a few days, but I could come back after that. Do you think you could stand to leave your guy alone by then? I know there'd be no chance in asking you to leave until he heals up, but you could probably use a mental health night after that?"

"Let's do it," Tony impulsively decided. He wouldn't yet commit to telling Rhodey anything, but...
but over the next few days, he'd assess those pros and cons. There were an awful lot of pros that he could already see: having another friendly face to rely upon, being able to bounce their ideas off another logical mind, and filling Rhodey fully in on the Hydra situation before he was ever put at risk.

"Good. You want me to handle calling your other people, or...?"

"I'll call Pepper," Tony decided. "Hopefully, she can handle some of the other journalist calls for Stephen. I don't know how much longer his energy'll hold out."

"Sure. And really, I'm glad he's okay."

Tony smiled faintly. The terrifying image of being alone in this false universe surrounded him again. "So am I. Thanks, Rhodey. And I'll stop with the radio silence."

"Glad to hear it. Talk to you soon."

It was becoming awkward standing there with his phone, and so Tony swapped to video as he returned his next call. He probably shouldn't have; seeing him looking so drained just worried Pepper even more. "It's way, way worse than he's telling the news," she guessed as soon as she saw Tony's face.

A slow nod. "Yeah. He'll be okay, but yeah."

"Does he need to go to the hospital? I was looking for any signs of an ambulance after Rhodey called me, but you two totally dropped off the radar."

Tony shook his head. "It was a magic weapon, so a hospital couldn't help. No, we fixed it. Someone came from Kamar-Taj and..." Trailing off, Tony's expression dropped again. Oh. Damn. There was another reason he should have thought twice about placing a video call.

"A magic weapon?" echoed Phil Coulson as he walked up beside Pepper.

Swallowing, Tony watched as Phil brushed Pepper's arm with casual ease. He'd been valiantly trying to ignore their relationship, but by now they'd been together for three months. *Three months.* Until this very moment, Tony had managed to avoid any actual evidence of that burgeoning relationship. But all that strategy had accomplished was letting the two of them grow even more comfortable together as he tried to pretend it wasn't happening.

"Sorry," Phil realized when Pepper and Tony stayed silent. "I was eavesdropping, wasn't I?"

"A little bit," Pepper admitted.

"You just darted in from watching the news when the call came, I didn't know if something was wrong—"

"Well, I mean, it was wrong. But it's apparently going to be okay, now."

"Even though they used a 'magic weapon'?"

"Yeah, I don't know what that means," Pepper admitted, and both she and Phil turned back to the camera.

They'd just bounced off each other's speech as easily as he and Stephen had, Tony realized with a soft, sad smile. He'd spent months avoiding this sight precisely because he suspected that Pepper and
Phil could work perfectly together. Confirming that suspicion might not hurt like a magical knife through his heart, but it still ached.

Tony gave himself a few moments to recall and wallow in the pain he'd felt after landing in this new timeline. Then, with a great swell of regretful acceptance, he let his old future go like a seed blowing away on the wind.

He wasn't there, any more. He was here. Seeing the two of them together had forced him to finally, totally confront that truth.

His life had changed. Forever. There were different things to look forward to, now. Good, amazing things. Magical things, Tony amended, and found himself able to smile at the tiny joke.

Right. Okay. Moving on. "Yep. A magical knife. It introduced an effect beyond just the stab wound," Tony summarized. "Stephen was fighting it off all last night. Like some weird Twilight Zone thing."

"We're going to need to study that," Phil instantly said.

The memory of a black geyser erupting from Stephen's chest filled Tony's vision. His jaw flexed as he sought to otherwise hide his emotions. Then, he lied, "No can do. Stephen bolted away from the guy and his knife to keep himself alive. No clue where he ended up." It'd be better if S.H.I.E.L.D. wasted their time trying to hunt down a weapon that was supposedly still in the wild.

"Mr. Stark, this is a little awkward considering..." Trailing off, Phil smiled at Pepper. "Things, but I'm going to have to insist. On behalf of S.H.I.E.L.D."

"We don't have the knife," Tony repeated pointedly. "And someone from Kamar-Taj will probably scoop it up before you guys ever find it."

"You know where Kamar-Taj is," Phil said. It wasn't a question.

Tony shrugged. "Not, like... a street address, no."

"Work with Phil, Tony," Pepper suggested. "I've learned a lot more about S.H.I.E.L.D. from him and they could really help both of you. Stephen was just saying on TV how he wishes that he had more help, right? Well..." Trailing off, she shrugged and offered him a hopeful smile.

"One hundred percent, we're not working with S.H.I.E.L.D.," Tony said bluntly. Maybe they could some day, but not while Hydra was still embedded in it. Hydra would track down Kamar-Taj, they would find a way to grab every last dangerous book and item inside its walls, and they would succeed in taking over the world like they hadn't managed last time. Stephen now seemed convinced that some points in history would repeat despite their best efforts, and possibly turn out worse than before. This setup was like a big, flashing warning light for exactly that result.

Hydra had captured the Space Stone. They'd used the Mind Stone to twist Wanda and Pietro into weapons. Like hell was Tony going to give them any clues about where to track down Time; it'd be a far more dangerous prize for them to win.

Of course, Phil Coulson didn't know any of that.

"You're really treating S.H.I.E.L.D. like an enemy," Phil pointed out after a significant pause. "That's probably not the best idea for either of us."

"It is. Sorry."
"Phil," Pepper said after a long pause of her own. "Would you mind leaving us alone?"

"Sure," Phil readily agreed, and kept his expression neutral as he looked between her and Tony. "I've been eavesdropping, anyway."

Once they were alone again, Pepper shot Tony a disbelieving look. It didn't scream 'I'm on your side.' Because she was with Phil, now, Tony reminded himself, and felt his heart ache again with painful acceptance. "Tony, you need to step more carefully. You've been acting, well..." Pepper cleared her throat. "Kind of unaccountable. To anyone."

Yes, he and Stephen had both assumed the world was now theirs to shape at will. A black stain across half of the living room showed how well that assumption had gone.

"You blew off the director of S.H.I.E.L.D.," Pepper continued. "And no, I didn't know he was going to show up at that restaurant, but he's reached out a few times since then. Not just through Phil, either. Directly. I'm glad you met with Rhodey, and hopefully that calms down the Air Force, but there are a lot of other people who want to know about your suit. And Stephen."

"What about Stephen?" Tony asked with a frown.

"About his powers. They just have concerns. And honestly, they're fair concerns! But you've just been... heroing, constantly. You pose for the press, you take quick questions, but no one can get either of you to sit down for anything long." That had been on purpose; deep journalism could give away the game, and so neither of them had wanted to do anything beyond short interviews. Pepper bit her lower lip. "If Stephen getting hurt means that you need to pause for breath for a few days, then maybe I can finally get you to listen to some of the concerns that people have been raising?"

She'd probably been trying to raise those concerns for months, but he'd pulled back from giving Pepper his attention so long as Phil was there. "I. Augh." Tony ran a hand through his hair. "I can't work with S.H.I.E.L.D. Okay?"

"But why not?"

"I can't tell you. Some day I will, and please trust that I have my reasons... but right now, I can't tell you." Because if he did, she'd wind up in some Hydra torture chamber, screaming out everything she knew. Tony could accept no longer loving her in the present tense, but there was so much past tense between them. He'd never let her become Hydra's target.

Concern filled her gaze; annoyance shaded it. "Okay, fine. But I don't know how long I can stonewall them. You're going to need to give all of those government people something, Tony. You've only got so much leeway. Philadelphia's seen a sudden twelve-percent spike in asthma attacks and people are wondering if the dust from that mud monster had something to do with it."

"What? We saved that city," Tony protested.

"You did! You totally did! But. Just." Pepper tried for the brightest smile she could manage. "It's another question. You have three months of questions, by now. Five if you include the ones about Stephen. And you guys aren't answering questions to clear the backlog."

"I will think about what I can give the government people to show them that we're trustworthy," Tony promised after a significant pause. "I can't give them my suit, even though the Air Force wants it." (Hydra was probably in the Air Force, after all.) "And I can't tell S.H.I.E.L.D. about Kamar-Taj." (Hydra was definitely inside S.H.I.E.L.D.) "But I'll figure out something."

"It'd help if you brought me into the loop, more," Pepper pointed out.
"If I bring you into the loop," Tony countered, "would I also be bringing Phil?"

It took Pepper a long time to respond. "Tony... do you have a problem with him? Not S.H.I.E.L.D., but Phil?"

Well, now. What a loaded question that was. "No." Tony swallowed. "He seems like a... like a great guy. Really solid. It's just S.H.I.E.L.D. that I've got an issue with." Her subtext was obvious, and he followed up with, "I really haven't been avoiding you because of him." (He had, ever since Valentine's.) "Playing the hero is just way more fun than I thought, and you, Ms. Potts, are my biggest buzzkill." A quick grin softened the label. "I will keep you in the loop if you don't pass it on to S.H.I.E.L.D., though. Deal?"

"Deal," Pepper agreed with a sigh. "But I'm really going to look forward to you being able to work with them. It'll make my life a whole lot easier."

When he could safely work with S.H.I.E.L.D., it would mean that the lurking organization that had caused the world so much pain over decades—that had taken his parents from him—was destroyed. "It'll make my life easier, too."

"Do you need anything else from me, Mr. Stark?"

Tony smiled, not quite as sadly as he wanted to. "Nah. We're done."

She didn't recognize the greater good-bye, of course. "All right. I'll prioritize the requests from... all of those very, very many government people, then? And the news? Hopefully, you can knock off a few of their biggest questions to calm them down."

"Will do. Thanks." Tony's heart ached again, but it was like the aftereffects of pushing a muscle to its limits in the gym. It hurt, yes, but it served a greater purpose. "Take Phil out for a nice dinner, too. On me. To apologize."

"I will do that," Pepper promised, then smiled. "Take care of Stephen, Tony."

Her heart didn't seem to ache at all, of course. Tony nodded. "I will."

When the screen cut, Tony stared at its absence for a good ten seconds. Actually seeing Phil with Pepper had ripped off the final band-aid he'd spent months avoiding, but by now that sore spot was fading. "Pepper's with Phil," he said to himself out loud, very deliberately. "They're happy. Phil and Pepper are happy. Together. Pepper Potts is happy with Phil Coulson." One slow nod later, he added, "And I'm with Stephen."

That did make everything hurt a whole lot less.

"Vincent, what's Stephen doing now?" The smooth voice that answered him put a broad smile on Tony's face. He loved that sound, and now he could admit that to himself. Even a simple sentence—that Stephen was finishing up a call with the hospital—left him happy. Tony could only imagine what'd be like to have Vincent read his emails to him, or the complete original text of Les Misérables.

Right, he should focus on things beyond that phone call full of painful truths. They should eat more than toast and coffee today, and Tony's renewed protective instincts didn't trust any deliveryman. Tony didn't count 'fine cooking' among his many talents, but he was decent enough, and Vincent knew every available ingredient in the kitchen and could point him toward possible combinations.

(When Vincent and all of its consumer modules hit the broad market, Stark Industries was going to make an absurd amount of money.)
"Just give me five more minutes," Tony promised Stephen when he eventually walked out from his—their—bedroom, and detoured around the black stain. "You need some healing fuel." In front of Tony, his wooden spoon occasionally slid through the garlic-ginger sauce as it reduced over a chicken and vegetable stir-fry.

"You cook?" Stephen asked with seemingly genuine surprise, and not a small amount of pleasure. They were used to dining in whatever best restaurant was closest to the latest fight, not as part of a domestic scene like this. While they'd had ingredients handy to use in the kitchen, they were nothing more than backups for especially exhausted nights. Neither of them had ever made an actual meal to enjoy.

"It's not a habit," Tony admitted. "And this hardly counts as cooking. But I knew it'd be good for you." Off Stephen's silence, Tony laughed and wondered, "I can engineer anything and you think I can't follow a recipe?"

"Huh. Then I'll help cut up the meat, next time," Stephen gamely replied. A frisson of pleasure moved between them at the easy reference to 'next time.'

"Excellent use of your surgical talents," Tony agreed, and stirred more. "How'd your stuff go?"

"I'm betting you watched the long news call." After Tony nodded, he continued, "After that, on the medical side, they wanted to talk about the surgery as much as my attack. It was hard to focus on anything from yesterday, though. I just kept remembering last night and..." Trailing off, Stephen leaned forward onto the kitchen island and shivered faintly, despite his warm robe and the sunlight streaming through the window. "A black lake."

The burner was safely on low; Tony could let the pan idle. He circled the island and pulled Stephen into a firm, solid embrace from one side. "You're back."

"With you," Stephen added after turning to study him.

Tony studied him in return. "I called Rhodey. And Pepper. Phil was there."

Even though the robe he was wearing, Tony could feel a line of tension enter Stephen. He probably thought he was hiding it, or perhaps he'd successfully convinced himself that he was in control of his emotions. "So, how'd that go?"

"I saw them together." With a deliberate movement, Tony reached up and laid his hand gently on Stephen's cheek, like he'd done when Stephen first woke from his nightmares. "And by the end of the call, I told her to take him out for dinner on my tab. This is it, now. You and me. We did the whole big love speech, I meant every word, and I know your memory's good enough to remember it."

The soft, touched expression he got in return said that yes, Stephen remembered their earlier confessions, but he'd also known that Tony had one giant emotional hang-up that he'd spent months picking at. He'd probably expected a complication to develop, just like Time energy had flared up once they'd thought the world was fixed. Hearing that he didn't need to worry about that any more had soothed him more than he'd let on.

"So now I want you to go sit on that couch," Tony instructed, "pick out a movie to distract yourself, and let me bring you your dinner. Because we're just going to breathe and relax for a few days. And once you feel up to it, I'm gonna give you another night that's awfully distracting."

Any remaining tension inside Stephen vanished, and he leaned forward into a kiss that felt just as
significant as their first real one. Instead of that kiss and its surprised awe, this felt like more of a commitment than a celebration. "Let's try to make the next condo last," he murmured as they broke apart.

Tony grinned. Between his old penthouse, Stephen's one-bedroom, and this condo, this had been an awful lot of real estate churn in eight short months. "Like I said, we'll keep this place." His eyes darted to the black stain on the floor, which Stephen would certainly want to avoid seeing in his daily life. "But I'll just turn it into a Midtown suit garage. The next place will be all we'd ever want."

"For good?"

"Yeah." Tony's heart didn't ache at all, now. His earlier concerns didn't seem to matter. Any lost future now paled in comparison to all the potential of this new one. "For good. Go sit down, dinner's ready."

With one last smile, and an affectionate stroke down his arm, Stephen did as ordered. Now Tony's heart was filled with nothing but excitement over how this new commitment would play out. S.H.I.E.L.D. didn't matter, Hydra didn't matter, the news and government agencies and everything else didn't matter. They could worry about all that later, after they'd spent their first official days together.

It really was amazing, Tony told himself as he filled two bowls with their dinner, then settled comfortably at Stephen's side, what twenty-four hours could do.
"You're a cuddler, apparently," Stephen murmured as he woke up the next morning to discover that Tony had again pressed against him. Stephen wasn't, and so perhaps that closeness should have felt oppressive, but it didn't. At all. The two of them couldn't possibly be touch-starved after the show they'd put on for the media, but true affection was a different thing. It'd been longer for him than just these eight months.

For an answer, Tony curled up more closely, then rolled over to sprawl his arm across the bandages that still covered Stephen's chest.

"That's a yes," Stephen laughed and looked over at morning sunshine streaming through a window. It'd rained overnight—he could still see damp patches on a nearby building's walls—and the city looked scrubbed clean. Overcome by an almost incapacitating sense of contentment, he brought the arm on Tony's side around to embrace him.

"How are you feeling?" Tony eventually wondered and brushed his fingers against the bandages.

"So much better." Stephen used his free arm to check under the longer bandages and retrieved the small, medicated one. He'd put down a fresh square before going to sleep the night before, hoping to wake up to exactly this: a completely white bandage, for there was not a single drop of infectious poison left to pull out.

Tony grinned when the spotless bandage was lowered into his field of vision. "Best thing I've ever seen."

"Yeah," Stephen agreed as he craned his neck down to study where Tony was slumped against him. "It is." Though they'd started far apart, being stranded together in this timeline had driven away so many instinctive issues between them. With those resolved, what was left seemed very nearly close to perfect. Now, he would—

Twitch, after Tony's face moved above the bandages. The beard was one thing, but those cheeks covered with days' worth of flat-topped stubble were scratchy. "Go shave."

"You, too," Tony laughed and brushed a hand along his face, but then trailed off with a silent question after that very male quality had been mentioned: you're really up for this? They'd already discussed how Tony's storied past had taken him down many trails, but this was new territory for Stephen. It didn't seem like unease that this might not happen; they were too comfortable together. But, before they did anything more, Tony seemed to at least want verification.

They really were older souls in these younger bodies. There was no chance that 2008 Tony Stark would have hesitated before going all the way. That 2008 body looked good, too, in a way that Stephen had never bothered to acknowledge during an exceptionally busy life with an already limited dating schedule. "Go shave," Stephen repeated, and rubbed his thumb across that stubble very deliberately, and with great affection.

With a broad smile, and a repeat of Stephen's motion, Tony climbed out of bed and retreated into the bathroom.

This redone life was wonderful, Stephen decided as he stared up at the ceiling. Even though he had a
new scar on his chest and might always (vaguely) remember that black lake, that was nothing compared to everything he'd gained. After one last look around the bright, sunlit room, and a thought to the world beyond the window where he had both a hospital office and library privileges at Kamar-Taj, Stephen stood. Today, his knees were steady.

The master bathroom had two sinks, and so he joined Tony there as the man rumbled through a cabinet. "I still can't believe you cooked," Stephen noted as he retrieved his shaving cream from a different one, then offered it.

Tony inspected it critically, opened the top to test the faint sandalwood scent, and nodded with approval as he began to apply it. Stephen reclaimed the jar as soon as he did. "I'm using this," Tony announced and grabbed a fresh razor when he found it in a drawer. "A stir fry hardly counts as cooking. I said that already."

"Still," Stephen said as he applied the expensive cream. (That sufficiently fancy-looking jar had probably been why Tony hadn't bothered retreating to his own supplies in his own bathroom.) "It tasted like actual food."

Between steady strokes of the razor, Tony replied, "Boy. Your expectations of me are just at rock bottom, huh?"

Stephen set that shaving/talking pattern, too. "My expectations are sky high. For your actual priorities."

"Well. You're my priority."

That shut Stephen up. It was hard to get a proper shave when he couldn't stop smiling.

"Eventually," Stephen later said as he walked into the living room, and stopped abruptly enough that Tony nearly ran into him, "I will stop thinking that's a hole." He stepped onto the black stain very deliberately rather than veering around, but then hurried across it to get to the kitchen.

"I'll start looking for the new place ASAP," Tony promised as Stephen placed a pan on a burner and slid in a pat of butter to melt. "Or. Actually. Hmm." Frowning in thought, he leaned against the kitchen island. "I could start building Stark Tower early, but I don't know if I even wanna, this time around."

"No?" Stephen asked as he cracked two eggs into a bowl, then nodded and repeated the motion after Tony held up two fingers. He remembered that conversation they'd had while looking out from the Time-Warner penthouse, about how Tony had wanted to make his mark on the skyline.

As Stephen whisked in some salt, pepper, and milk, then poured the mixture into the heated pan, Tony explained, "I learned that it wasn't the best setup for the company or the team. I don't know how much of a 'team' this timeline will even have, but assuming there is one, I know the facility campus works better for it than a skyscraper in the middle of New York." Tony eventually nodded. "Yeah. Let's just find a place for us."

Lumps were beginning to form, and Stephen gently folded them back into the egg mixture. "Three bedrooms is apparently not big enough for you. That limits our options for any 'condo.'"

"Well, yeah, obviously. That old penthouse wasn't a serious home, either. I need a decent workshop and fabrication area. And a garage, for cars and suits. Although this will be a good backup staging area for suit options," Tony added and gestured around himself at their current condo. "Server space would be good, too, for anything I don't trust to the cloud. A clean room for finicky electronics work.
And a gym! We both need a gym so we can finally start some serious training. And I assume you need a library, a study... okay, start suggesting, I don't know what you need for magic."

"I want a medical research room," Stephen replied, since Tony had thoroughly demolished any size restrictions. (He was used to spending a large budget, but not this large.) "I want to fully visualize any other specialized surgeries I'm offered. And an actual medical bay in case you get hurt. I trust myself more than any hospital."

"Great idea, done." Tony paused. "Since he offered you that surgery, I should probably finally write Chuck his full check and get him his robots."

Stephen grinned, moved half of the scrambled eggs to one plate, then the other half to another, and turned off the burner. "He'll probably outright cry when you do. But yes, I'll also need a library, study, artifact room... it'd be nice to have a dedicated portal spot, so I'm never worried about cutting through anything... uh, let's see..."

"Are you getting all this, Vincent?" Tony asked, then forked in some eggs.

"Yes, sir."

Stephen grumbled at hearing his own voice dutifully call Tony 'sir.' "J.A.R.V.I.S. gets installed in that place, by the way. Not Vincent."

"Hey," Tony said, and gestured with another forkful of eggs. "This tastes like actual food."

The echo of his own words very nearly ruined Stephen's stern expression. Tony was so good at annoying him. "They're just eggs."

"And that was just stir-fry."

"Promise me you'll install J.A.R.V.I.S.," Stephen repeated.

"Good eggs," Tony mumbled through another mouthful, then looked around for the coffee mug that wasn't there. He stood to make himself some and continued to ignore Stephen's request.


"Start looking for suitable properties, Vincent," Tony said as he poured in the proper amount of water to the reservoir. "And don't bring Ms. Potts into the mix. I don't want S.H.I.E.L.D. poking around this deal. Well, from the start of things, anyway," he amended, and clicked on the coffeemaker. "I'm sure they'll stick their government noses in soon enough."

"Tony. J.A.R.V.I.S."

"I'll consider it," Tony said after a long pause, and grinned at him. "I do love the sound of your voice, though. It'll be a hard decision. Oh, hey, we've got a message from the doorman, and it looks pressing. Eat up, drink up, we should hurry down there."

Stephen opened his mouth, but then his shoulders slumped and he could only smile in amused resignation. With Stephen being in good health again, Tony's relief was bubbling out as overblown exuberance. Their new love and planned future together had him downright hyperactive. When had all of that behavior become... charming?

"Hands out of your pockets," Tony ordered when they headed downstairs, and Stephen decided to take the stairs rather than the elevator. (His body wanted to move.) "So you can grab the banister if
"That's..." Trailing off, Stephen did pull his hands out of his jeans' pockets. The request sounded annoying, but he knew it came from a caring place. (And honestly, if he'd survived that terrible relic, it would be downright embarrassing to snap his neck on a staircase afterward.)

Tony shoved his hands deep into his own pockets and jogged down the stairs, his bright mood evident with each bouncing step. With a rueful shrug, Stephen followed him. *What have I gotten myself into?* he wondered as they reached the bottom floor and exited into the building's compact lobby.

Applause sounded as soon as they did. Startled, Stephen looked toward the wall of windows separating the lobby from the street and realized that a crowd waited there. Some of them held signs celebrating his recovery, while a few others promised that they *would* find a path to join the mystics, no matter what it took. Others held up their smartphones and filmed him through the glass.

For a moment, Stephen flashed back to the very first time that he and Tony had walked out of the hospital together, and how disoriented he'd been by the journalists waiting for an update on Tony Stark's status. But then he took in how these people looked ready to cry at the mere sight of him up, walking, and healthy. The people holding signs about Kamar-Taj were ready to uproot their entire lives based on his request. He'd known those calls to the media would serve as a recruitment message, but seeing that effect in person was so very different. It felt... amazing, actually.

In the next moment, he lifted his hand toward the crowd and smiled.

Tony grinned as cheers surged on the other side of the windows, then nodded toward the doorman's desk. "Hey, Franklin, you said you had something for us?"

"Happy to see you up and around again, Dr. Strange," Franklin first said, then gestured toward the back room where he stored any packages delivered for the building's residents. "And yes, Mr. Stark, you could say that."

"Good lord," Stephen soon said with a blank expression as they were shown the contents of the storage room. It was positively *filled* with vases of flowers, stuffed animals, and every other sign of sympathy that might be delivered to a patient. "I didn't realize the entire city had my mailing address."

"Well," Tony allowed. "I have been landing on your balcony. News travels, I guess."

First things first; Stephen swept a wave of energy across the room, and nodded when he didn't notice anything blatantly dangerous hidden inside it. There still might be technological bugs, magical wards, or other more subtle dangers, but those would be dealt with once he brought the gifts inside their condo and through its protective shields. "Franklin," he then mused. "Can you help us pass these along?"

The crowd cheered again when Stephen sparked a portal in the lobby, and that cheering continued as Franklin and Tony passed gifts through it. Stephen relocated them all as efficiently as he could, but all that did was positively fill this sleek, modern condominium with a variety of adorable bears clutching stuffed hearts.

"Well," Stephen commented once Tony had joined him through the portal, and it shut behind him. "Now what?" Flower vases covered every flat surface the living room had to offer.

"Standard procedure is to give the flowers to hospitals, so patients can have something pretty in their..."
rooms. Stuffed animals can't be guaranteed to be sterile enough, so a lot of hospitals won't take them for the kid rooms, but other youth charities are safe bets for donations."

"I'm glad you know this stuff," Stephen laughed and poked a random orchid. It bobbed.

"And you're actually listening to me," Tony laughed back. "It's amazing. You never act like this."

"Yeah, well." Stephen looked at him sidelong, and let his smile grow. "I have a lot of reasons to be in a good mood."

It almost felt like they were setting themselves up for another crash. Being on top of the medical world again had left Stephen so cocky that he'd gotten stabbed through the heart. Before that, feeling completely in control of their media romance had been the cue for Phil Coulson to enter the picture. But today, the only crisis was that his energy abruptly ran out a bit after seven in the evening. An hour after that, Tony gently woke him from his slumped spot on the couch.

"Not quite there, yet," Tony noted with a knowing smile as he steered Stephen toward the bed.

"Not quite," Stephen admitted. It was common for recent physical trauma to bring abrupt hard limits to someone's activities. "But I'm—" He yawned. "Very close."

"Would have been more convincing without that jawcracker of a yawn in the middle," Tony noted. "I'm arranging the last pick-ups for the stuffed animals, so go to sleep. I'll be in later."

With that hour of sleep behind him, more didn't immediately come. Stephen wasted time poking around Google News (well-established by 2008) on a proprietary tablet design for Tony's own use (iPads wouldn't launch until 2010). "Huh," he murmured as one news story mentioned a website that he hadn't yet visited, and he dutifully followed the link to findingkamartaj.com.

Different parts of the globe all had their own sections of the message board, with different cities and countries tracked by individual threads. Nepal had its own thread, though not an especially active one, but sharp-eyed readers could have noticed that people who posted about their upcoming visits to Kathmandu all seemed to drop off the radar. Instead, most attention appeared to be focused on the London Sanctum, which someone was certain they'd identified as something magical after noting its untouched appearance in an etching made before the Great Fire of London.

"Go to sleep," he eventually heard, and had the tablet plucked from his hands.

"You could make a killing beating Apple to a mass-market tablet launch, you know."

"Not a bad idea," Tony chuckled. "But go to sleep."

"Get in, and I'll consider it."

Yeah, he could really get used to this, Stephen thought the next morning as Tony curled up close again. Recalling the serene sight of drifting snow on Christmas morning, he smiled drowsily and pictured more snow falling outside of a bedroom window in their permanent home, with them secure and warm under the covers.

They were both too busy to stay in bed for long. Though Tony had no foes to worry about with his suit, surprisingly, he did have feedback from Vincent's beta launch. That was the last holdup before they started shipping units, which already had their physical elements manufactured, and so he dutifully closed himself into his room to begin software upgrades.

For his part, Stephen made a quick visit to Nepal with the Cloak in tow. "Hey, Wong," he said after
tracking the man down in the library.

Wong frowned at him.

"Can you do me a favor," Stephen began, and continued before Wong could say 'no,' "and pull a full list of all relics known to Kamar-Taj, along with anyone who currently controls them. That'll be important to review."

"And why do you think that you should be allowed to review it?" Wong wondered. Right, they'd only met the one time.

"Check with the Ancient One. I promise, she'll back me up on this."

Despite himself, Wong couldn't help but look curiously at this stranger who kept popping into Kamar-Taj, wearing a relic and throwing around his supposed relationship with the Ancient One. "I will check with her," Wong said after a significant pause. "Return home, I'll be in contact."

"Thanks. Really. We should grab dinner, some time," Stephen suggested as his portal opened. "Catch up."

"No."

"I'll wear you down again," Stephen promised, but only after stepping back into his condo and closing the portal. He'd annoyed Wong into friendship once before. That part of history would definitely repeat itself.

Until the list of relics arrived, he busied himself with replying to more media follow-up questions, on topics ranging from the surgery to his future medical plans to Kamar-Taj to Tony. Whenever he found himself tiring from the public's attention, Stephen remembered that adoring crowd down near the lobby, smiled faintly, and continued. It was an odd sensation, but to his continued surprise, not an unpleasant one.

The relics list arriving was just as much of a surprise. Stephen had expected the wind chimes—which they'd now properly hung—to summon him back, or for one of the librarians to hand off the papers through a portal. He certainly hadn't expected the Ancient One herself to make a sudden appearance in his living room.

"I'm so glad to see you doing better," she said as he stood, but her gaze wandered down to the black stain on the floor.

"It was a near thing," he admitted.

"Where else did your blood stain?" she wondered as she set down the list of relics. "Everything it touched should be safely and permanently disposed of. Given the attention being paid to you, there's a potential for dark uses of your essence."

Ah yes, he should have thought of that. Fortunately, they hadn't yet taken out the trash. "Bandages, furniture, clothes, sheets, towels... we'll get it all."

"Good." As her gaze returned to the stain on the floor, the Ancient One nodded once, then extended her hand. It wouldn't normally be surprising to see rings of green energy appear, nor for the black void to begin to retreat into itself. The Time Stone was far too dangerous to use for frivolous purposes, but she was apparently concerned enough about his affected blood to think it worthy of attention.
However, he didn't know where the Stone was.

"How are you doing that?" Stephen wondered. The Eye of Agamotto was nowhere to be seen, nor did he sense that the Time Stone itself had been hidden away somewhere.

The Ancient One studied the green energy around her wrists, then let it fade after the stain on the floor did. "When you were attacked, I feared that your death could shatter our universe. The Time Stone expected you to be available in this reality and removing that tie could unravel everything. Such a fate is my responsibility to circumvent."

"So, what did you do?"

"Three Stones have found their home on Earth," she said after a significant pause. "A woman was caught in an explosion from the Space Stone and empowered by it. I looked into alternate worlds and possible futures, and saw two people affected by the Mind Stone. That inspired me as to how I could stabilize the Time Stone, should the worst happen with you."

"What did you do?" Stephen repeated and walked over to her.

"With you in such a dire state, I had to move quickly toward any solution. I took part of the Stone directly into me," she explained and extended her hands, "and offered it part of my life energy in return."

What? But that was impossible. She was extraordinarily powerful, but still human, and a human's life force was nothing like that of an Infinity Stone. Stephen took her hands when prompted again and shock soon filled him. Touching the Ancient One felt like cueing the energy of the Time Stone itself.

"Such an exchange cannot last, of course," the Ancient One said, and wrapped her fingers around his wrists when he tried to pull back. "As soon as I'd divided that energy, the Time Stone began to reclaim what I'd taken from it. That set up an unshakeable connection between it and myself that is now also a foundation of this reality."

"You really do have the Time Stone flowing directly through you," Stephen said in continued wonder as he felt Time energy flow through the prominent veins of her wrists. "How is this possibly safe?"

"It's not. I have fifteen years to live, at the absolute most."

Stricken, his eyes widened.

Her expression gentled into a sad smile. "It appears, Mr. Strange, as though your path intersecting with mine will always lead to my path's end."

"I've killed you again," Stephen said as a deep, crushing regret overtook him. "Saving me kills you. I can't..." Trailing off, he shook his head and blinked hard. All he could see was her fading astral form as a moment stretched into eternity. "I'm so sorry. I never should have let myself be attacked. I was distracted, and arrogant enough to think I could allow that distraction to happen, and—"

"Stephen." The Ancient One's hands around his wrists slid into a more gentle grip. "I have held this responsibility for a very, very long time. I could describe my time as the Sorcerer Supreme in years..." Her smile was interrupted by a faint, breathy laugh. "In centuries, but that would not remotely touch upon its true length. I'm sure you know of what I mean."

He smiled sadly, too. Yes. He knew very well of time loops, and how even if the years there hadn't officially happened, they lingered in awareness like memories of dreams. Those dreams often fully
resurfaced at night, meaning that even though no one else knew they'd even happened, they could never be escaped.

"And I have continued that tenure without complaint, because it was a responsibility that must be carried. My life exists only in service of reality and I've never been able to entrust that great task to anyone else." Her hands tightened around his. "Until you."

Even if he'd tried to speak, the lump in Stephen's throat would have prevented words from coming.

"With this energy flowing through me, I see your potential as though it's already happened. You haven't doomed me. You are allowing me to rest. Finally, and with full confidence. My last battle will be to protect the Stones, and I will die for that cause knowing that existence will continue under your oversight." The Ancient One paused, presumably to allow him to reply or ask questions, and smiled again when he couldn't. "So, you have a plan?" she prompted as her eyes crinkled in amusement.

"So," Stephen dutifully repeated in a thick, choked voice, "you have a plan?"

"I have a plan," she confirmed, "inspired by Kaecilius' attack on you. So do not think that the attack has somehow doomed me," she added. "It did make you suffer, and will make me die, but was also my inspiration to save reality. A fair trade, indeed."

He couldn't see how his torture under that black lake had anything to do with Infinity Stones, let alone keeping them away from Thanos. Even though knowing he'd received the Ancient One's tremendous trust (while condemning her) remained overwhelming, at least his emotions had steadied enough to let him focus on anything but her death. "Should I know about this plan of yours or not?"

"Only when events have further progressed. I trust you completely, but I do not trust your memories if Thanos somehow gets hold of the Mind Stone and turns it upon you. For now, it's best to keep my secrets." The Ancient One's gaze sharpened. "Tell me everything you know of when the Mind Stone arrives here."

"Can I bring Tony into this conversation? He was a lot more deeply involved with that than I was. I was focused on emergency surgery, not Infinity Stones."

She agreed that adding Tony made sense, and he hesitantly walked out to join them when called. Surprise filled him at both the Ancient One's appearance and the stain's absence.

"Perhaps somewhere a bit more inviting," the Ancient One suggested in the heavy silence, and gestured. After a portal swept across them, a mountain meadow suddenly surrounded the trio. It was a small, hidden valley, without any visible trails or roads, and flowers were nearly as thick as the carpet of grass below them. "British Columbia," she provided when Tony instinctively reached for any readout that would tell him where they were.

"Well," Tony said wryly after a short pause, and sat himself upon the grass, "the government's already annoyed with us. Might as well add passport violations to the list."

"We've been doing that for months," Stephen pointed out, and folded his legs to join him. "And I doubt you cared much about going through customs in the first timeline."

"Yeah, true, not so much."

"I'm glad you've found each other," the Ancient One said as she also settled on the grass. "And ceased your playacting."
Tony paused, then turned to Stephen. "How does she just... know things?"

Stephen shrugged.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?" the Ancient One asked as she studied the valley around them. "Life."
Prompted to follow suit, Stephen turned to take in the sight of the Rockies in May. This far north, snow still clung to the dark, striated tops of even modestly-sized mountains. Nearby, the purple tops to lupine flowers jutted above the rich green ground; at the edge of the meadow, positively enormous fir trees echoed their forms. Those mammoth firs continued in an unbroken blanket as the landscape swelled in the distance, stopping only at the treeline where bare rock took over.

"Not quite the Himalayas," Stephen agreed, but paused to consider his words as soon as he'd spoke them. Even Nepal's lower valleys hadn't been this lush, with such towering trees, but all that did was make each determined flower more precious as it sent out its roots. Especially as they were seen against a backdrop of the most spectacular mountains on earth. "But that was its own sort of beauty, I suppose."

Seeming to feel that something was expected of him, Tony drawled, "The desert canyons were ugly and that's all you're getting out of me."

The Ancient One chuckled and folded her hands around one knee. "The desert has its own beauty, too, but I doubt you saw that beauty in a camp dedicated to death. Those men destroyed everything they touched." Off his confusion, she clarified, "With Time energy running through my veins, now I can see echoes of the original world from where you came. Enough to understand both of you more, but not enough to make firm plans about someone else... dedicated to death."

Though Tony had looked ready to question her 'veins' comment, her suddenly sober conclusion focused him. It was as if the pleasant temperature in the meadow had dropped twenty degrees. "What all do you want to know?"

"Tell me of how the Mind Stone arrives on Earth, in as much detail as you can provide."

Tony exhaled. "Well, I hacked S.H.I.E.L.D.'s files on their helicarrier, so I know they were researching the Tesseract in this lab with Selvig and Clint..." For more than half an hour, he spoke of Loki's assault on Earth. Each time he added something new, the Ancient One probed with questions on tiny details that contributed to that length. Halfway through, Stephen reached through a portal to grab Tony a bottle of water.

"Well," the Ancient One said at the end of his tale, when Tony had trailed off after discussing the nuke. Stephen had scooted closer to him as his voice progressively tightened, and by now he'd taken Tony's hand into his own. "We certainly don't want that full invasion to happen. The good news is that I see plenty of chances to resolve matters before that Chitauri army arrives."

"I told you," Stephen said. "Loki's a pushover if you surprise him. I saw a lot of chances in there, too."

Tony's brow furrowed. "You're really positive? I know you two are strong, but so were the six of us. And he'll have two Stones to your one."

"We just need to surprise him," Stephen insisted. "And, well... look at how easily I was nearly taken out when I was surprised." His hand strayed up to press the spot where he bore a narrow scar above his heart.

"Fair point," Tony unhappily admitted.
"It would still be a good idea to collect a team, just in case the worst happens and the army does arrive," the Ancient One allowed. "And there are many other struggles to face that lay beyond the concerns of the masters of the mystic arts. But yes, for this one foe, Stephen and I should be able to easily handle him."

"Okay," Tony said after a lengthy pause. His gaze roamed around the mountain meadow, full of all the life they were trying to protect. "Okay. Then I will trust this magic-on-magic violence plan, and start thinking about the 'other struggles.'" Inside Stephen's comforting grip, Tony's hand tightened, then pulled itself loose. He scooted back far enough to put both mystics in his sight simultaneously.

Stephen tilted his head in confusion.

"I want to tell Rhodey the whole truth. About everything."

"Bad idea," Stephen instantly said, just like he'd rejected the suggestion of hinting at Hydra, but was surprised by the Ancient One holding up her hand and remaining silent. Apparently, she wanted Tony to explain his reasoning.

"We've been building up some bad attention from the government. Fighting in cities, causing some damage... crossing borders," he added, and gestured around them to Canada. "Rhodey could be on our side, but only if he knows what's going on. We've gotta tell him everything if we bring him in the loop, though. Reset timeline, Infinity Stones, Hydra, all of it. Rhodey's a smart guy. He'll notice any holes in my story and go digging."

"I don't like the idea of telling more people," Stephen admitted. "Sorry."

"When you first came to Kamar-Taj," the Ancient One dryly replied, "you made a habit of telling everyone you met that you were from another timeline."

"I. Well." Off Tony's raised eyebrow, Stephen grumbled and muttered, "I did that in the Time Stone's home, yes. Oh, come on, stop giving me that look." He poked his scar again. "I learned that lesson, and that lesson says 'we don't tell people.' Saying my name that day just made me easier to track down."

"If we have the chance to stop a threat," Tony countered, "would we hold off because it'd be revealing too much about what we know? Like, say... Loki?"

"Obviously not."

"Well, you know that'll happen. Conversations will only get harder. If we tell Rhodey now, we're bringing someone into the loop on our terms, in our own timeline." Tony paused. "So to speak."

It was a fair argument, and James Rhodes did appear to be one of the most measured, thoughtful people they could possibly approach. Stephen was still reluctant, but he found himself nodding. He'd been totally against hinting at Hydra to Rhodey, but oddly he could find justification for sharing everything, instead. "Should I be there when you tell him?"

"I'll think about it. But thanks. Him knowing is going to help us, I'm sure."

"Right, then." The Ancient One stood. "Be sure to permanently dispose of all the stained objects, Stephen. And try to make real friends with Wong."

"I... yes, fine."

Amusement filled her gaze, but soon sobered as she reminded him, "Just like Mr. Stark wants to
bring in Colonel Rhodes, you'll need those trusted ties when you take my place as Sorcerer Supreme."

"Right," Stephen said sadly. Guilt stabbed at him anew. Seeming to realize he was missing something important, but wanting to offer support for whatever was happening, Tony squeezed his hand.

"Goodbye, gentlemen. I should return to my previous tasks."

A moment later, as her portal vanished, Tony turned to Stephen and said, "Well, I sure hope you have a ring on you." Pleasant Canadian birdsong carried on a light Canadian breeze, in the beautiful Canadian meadow in which they'd abruptly been stranded.

Laughing, Stephen tapped the water bottle Tony still held to remind him that yes, he'd opened one from there. They returned home after that.

"You were sad," Tony noted. "When she talked about you taking her place. If she seems to know everything... does she know for sure that's coming?"

"Yeah." Stephen's gaze strayed to the now-unstained floor. He could only imagine how overwhelming it would be to have Time energy flowing through him. Riding the Stone's pinballing hiccups between timelines had been disorienting enough. Until the day she died, the Ancient One was now committing herself to constantly anchoring herself in the proper time, moving at its proper speed, and focusing on her actual timeline instead of its branching possibilities.

She was someone capable of doing all that... and she thought him worthy of taking the title from her after she passed.

The crowd's attention he'd received in the lobby suddenly staggered Stephen. How could so many people put their trust in him? So completely? Suffering alone through unspeakable magical torture was one thing, but this... this was a challenge.

"You'll do amazing." At Stephen's blankly surprised look, as he wondered how Tony could possibly know that he was thinking about that lobby crowd, Tony clarified, "When you take over for the Ancient One, after you make her plan work. You'll do amazing."

"Thanks," Stephen said with deep sincerity, and reached out to squeeze Tony's hand.

But when he tried to retrieve his hand, Tony didn't let him. Instead, Tony pulled him in close, smirked as he met Stephen's eyes, and said, "But assuming you can stay awake tonight, you're following my lead. And if there's still a crowd down there, they're gonna hear my name."

Heat rushed to Stephen's face. God, he'd just gone through being a global inspiration, planning to recover two Infinity Stones by force, and ultimately stepping into the role of Sorcerer Supreme. That should be at the top of his mind, and yet everything suddenly fled. How was Tony so good at knocking him off-balance?

"So I hope you can stay awake later than you did yesterday," Tony added, looking as smugly satisfied as a pampered housecat.

"Do you still have more software updates to do?" Stephen wondered after a significant pause. He did feel better than yesterday, but running out of steam the night before had taken him by surprise. There was no guarantee that the same thing wouldn't happen again.

"Few hours, yeah."
"Good." Put him up against an impossible foe, and Stephen was unyielding. But Tony... Tony made him vulnerable. It was an oddly pleasant feeling. "Then, just in case... I might go take a nap."

Tony grinned. His eyelids lazily lowered. "See you later."

As he walked across the unstained floor and into their shared bedroom, Stephen imagined the life of responsibility stretching ahead of him. It'd be a hard life... but just like he'd thought for the last two cozy mornings, it'd be a wonderful one.

_And a fun one_, a voice in his head added. The image of Tony's confident, lazy smirk filled his memories, along with every promise he'd made. Each detail felt electric.

It was good that Tony's technical work would still take him hours. Stephen needed a while to fall asleep.

Chapter End Notes

Y'all know what that means for next time.

(It means they're fucking.)
Chapter 21

By the time Tony's dinner order was ready, so were Vincent's updates from the beta launch feedback. With a satisfied smile, Tony packaged the finalized software and uploaded it onto the company server with a note that it was ready for distribution. If their marketing people were on their game, pre-orders would start shipping by the day after tomorrow; if they were really on their game, they would realize that they didn't need to waste tomorrow checking Tony's work.

Perhaps he shouldn't have bothered Stephen into voicing the thing, Tony mused as he jogged down the stairs. Using the voice of the famous Doctor Strange would mean that they'd sell an absurd number of units, true... but it'd also feel like Tony was sharing him. Tony didn't want to share.

Well, it'd just help solidify Stephen in the public's consciousness, Tony told himself and walked through the lobby door. Should he feel jealous about that? No, he decided with very faint surprise. Tony Stark (not Iron Man, no journalist had ever used 'Iron Man') was earning fans of his own. Those fans would grow with the products he'd bring to the market next: self-driving cars, tablet computers (it was a good suggestion), and, of course, the holy grail of clean energy. More importantly, his fanbase would also spike with each terrorist cell he took down, and with all the future foes to follow.

Even so... most merchandise appearing in stores had stylized energy shields or portals on it, not arc reactors or helmets. Somehow, though, Tony didn't mind. It mattered more that Stephen was able to stay securely in control of the world's attention and steer it, rather than how Tony wasn't yet at that tip-top level. And it mattered that Stephen had finally, sincerely smiled at a crowd cheering for him, and the warmth that sight had caused in Tony's chest.


His only regret from leaving that beige Time-Warner penthouse, Tony thought as he signed two autographs and then accepted his take-out order from a trusted local restaurant, was giving up room service. He could have tried to cook again—Stephen clearly appreciated the effort—but he wanted to be sure to stick the landing tonight. This dinner's quality was too important to risk. After one quick stop into another store, he hurried home with his two bags, jogged up the stairs, and let himself back in.

"Showtime," he murmured in the dim bedroom as he knelt near Stephen, then used his thumb to stroke Stephen's still-dark temple until there was movement behind his eyelids.

"Did you just say 'showtime'?" Stephen wondered after a few seconds.

"Yeah. Because I'm so good at this." Tony grinned. "C'mon, get up and get ready to be seduced. Dinner's ready."

That blunt order forestalled anything Stephen had to say in return, and he looked Tony over like he was taking notes. "All right," he then said in an inscrutable tone. "Be out in a minute."

Every movement was made with purpose as Tony returned to the living room, because yes: Tony was really good at this. With a gesture, he cued the first (long) song on the playlist he'd curated, then retrieved their dinners and plated them like they'd been served directly from a restaurant kitchen. After informing the Cloak that they were having a romantic meal, it flew off to the office and probably wouldn't reappear until morning. Someone else would enjoy having a bigger place, Tony thought with a smirk, and wiped away a smear of sauce on one plate.
Since they were at home, his clothes were deliberately casual: snug jeans, a typical graphic t-shirt, and a short-sleeved button-up over it (that was just a bit too tight for the arms he'd started working). Though it looked good on him, it wasn't an impressive outfit. And that was the whole point. They'd worn two thousand dollar suits in some of the finest restaurants in the world. There was nothing exciting about luxury, and it'd just feel like another fake show for the tabloids. Real, genuine emotions in their private home, though... that was different. New. Intriguing.

And a proper seduction was all about what intrigued a person enough that they allowed their instincts to take over.

"Thanks for cleaning up, Baldie," Tony murmured as he glanced at the spot where the black stain had once sat. That could have been a real mood killer. But now the room looked nothing but peaceful, and so he was able to set down their plates, light a small candle, and dim the lights with total confidence.

"Wine?" he heard as he was extracting the cork.

As it popped, Tony turned and held the cork in one hand and the bottle of Torbreck Viognier in the other. "Wine."

Stephen folded his arms and walked forward. "You know that I haven't had a single drop to drink ever since our scotch misadventures."

"I do," Tony confirmed as he surveyed Stephen's approach. Stephen's earlier inspection of Tony had apparently cued his wardrobe: similarly casual but close-fitting, with a button-up shirt rolled to his elbows. "And it's time for you to get very gently back on this horse, because I have selected a perfect pairing. One glass of white. That's all."

"All right," Stephen relented, then seemed to notice the music. His smile turned more wry. "Wrong album."

Tony grinned as he poured more wine into their glasses than a fancy sommelier would recommend. He'd seen that comment coming, because no, Pink Floyd's Echoes wasn't on their Dark Side of the Moon album. (Stephen's framed cover gift currently hung in Tony's now-abandoned bedroom. In their new place, Tony would migrate it to wherever he spent most of his time.) "Wrong album, yeah, but perfect lyrics."

He couldn't have timed that better, for and I am you and what I see is me, and do I take you by the hand came on the speakers as soon as he'd spoken. They did have their similarities, and those had certainly worked out for them.

"Fair enough," Stephen allowed after a considering pause. "I do like other food," he then said as he saw salmon plated on one side of the table, with a mildly spicy glaze that Tony knew would pair perfectly with the wine.

For an answer, Tony walked over with a wine glass in each hand, set one deliberately down for each of them, and then carefully transferred one of his seared scallops to Stephen's plate. "Bon appétit."

After a few more amused seconds of taking in Tony's whole production, Stephen dutifully took his chair and lifted the wine glass to inhale its scent. "Rich, for a white."

"You know, I get that so much."

Stephen stared blankly back, then couldn't help but laugh and ask, "Weren't you supposed to be seducing me?" Between the joke, their outfits, and the laid-back but hardly romantic music, nothing
seemed blatantly seductive but the wine and candle.

"I am. You just don't know it, yet." Grinning, Tony speared his fork through one enormous scallop, slid a knife through it, and lifted his first bite. "Eat."

They both did. The playlist's first song was an abbreviated version instead of its original marathon length, and it soon slid into the next song. Echoes wasn't a typical romantic choice, no, but it had been intended solely as a conversation starter. Tonight wasn't a relentless drive toward a one-night stand, but a smooth physical transition for an established relationship. It was best to start with a reminder of that long relationship.

(Tony was so good at this.)

The next few selections were just as strategic, because they seemingly weren't strategic. In Your Eyes, Sailing, and When I See You Smile were pleasant, absolutely generic choices for a romantic classic rock playlist. Tony had set their volumes appropriately low to let them fade into the background. All he wanted was subtle reinforcement that, by now, the date had started.

"I love this city," Tony said during that generic sequence, and turned to look out of the broad window near their table. Outside, the last ruddy tones of sunset faded toward night. Their single candle soon seemed to have a dozen scattered reflections as windows lit in neighboring buildings.

"I'm glad you moved here early," Stephen said, then turned from studying the city to study Tony, instead.

"So am I." Tony turned, too. A gentle smile curved his lips. "I never would have believed how well this'd work, but... it just does."

"It just does."

"Not even four months of living together, and I'm buying us a..." Tony laughed, and bumped Stephen's leg with his. (Casual and comfortable, but now they were making physical contact.) "A castle. We just work. It's wild."

"Not that either of us would have believed it at the beginning," Stephen agreed with good humor, then kept eating. Tony returned his attention to his plate, too, until Stephen eventually looked back up. "Thank you. I didn't tell you that, before."

"It'll be my house, too," Tony countered.

"I mean for saving my life."

"I..." Tony tried to respond in some clever way, but raw truth won out. "That was as scared as I can get. Seeing you like that." The very worst of it had already faded from memory—he wouldn't be able to function, otherwise—but he knew that he'd been operating on nothing but paralyzing fear and desperate hope that night.

"I could have slipped away so easily. You pulled me back."

As Tony opened his mouth to reply, Richard Marx's Now and Forever cued next at a louder volume. He'd meant this to be an abrupt emotional sucker punch after the generic song sequence, but he never could have planned on the intensity of this timing. With glistening eyes, Tony closed his mouth and let the song speak for him.

Stephen blinked at the sudden uptick in volume, but then took in Tony's silence and followed suit to
listen. The stripped-down, heartfelt lyrics soon also left his eyes glossy where they reflected the flickering candlelight. When Tony extended his hand, he met it.

Standing, Tony used their linked hands to gently guide Stephen to his feet. "It's a whole universe," he murmured, and stepped closer, "made just for us."

In the dim light, Stephen's eyes looked like somber grey, but his voice sounded warm and welcoming. "This all sounds rather... fated, put like that."

"Rather," Tony agreed in a contented whisper. A whisper was as loud as he needed to go, for he'd leaned in so very close. He hung there for a second, inspecting his heart's guide map for their brand new history, and then closed his eyes and closed the gap between them.

It was as gentle a kiss as their first real one. Just like luxury meant nothing, nor did showy spikes of passion. That was what they'd given the tabloids. Slow, soft, and sincere was only for them.

But unlike their previous soft, real kisses, Tony didn't let them break apart from this one. His arms ran down Stephen's back and locked into a possessive embrace that soon had the other man pressing closer, and closer.

As Stephen ran his hands along Tony's body in return, their shared heat spiked higher. Tony had intended on making measured steps as they turned their showboating into something real. But Stephen's hands were suddenly not running over the fabric of Tony's shirt, but sliding under it.

Tony pulled back just far enough to grin up at Stephen. In the times he'd been with men, he enjoyed the experience of their bodies responding in the same way, with the same urgency and fierce, focused need. And so, he was pretty sure that Stephen also felt like they'd gotten past any curves and were presented with a straightaway.

Time to accelerate.

Tony steered Stephen's hands to the buttons on his top shirt, and began to work on the buttons in front of him in return. Their fingers sped. At some point they set into motion toward the bedroom. By the time they reached it, both button-ups had been abandoned in the hallway and Stephen was pulling Tony's t-shirt over his head.

With ruffled hair and a fierce, hungry grin, Tony pulled Stephen back to him. Their pulses raced inside bare chests, but those pounding heartbeats were hardly the only signs of their need. All of Tony's being seemed to center around his stiffening erection. Knowing that Stephen felt the same, Tony bucked his hips forward and received a groan in response.

Every 'passionate' moment they'd attempted in public was childish playacting next to this. The tabloid kisses had been detached, focused on how they looked to others instead of how they felt. Now they were concerned only with heat and skin and more.

Each man met the other with certainty. If nothing else, all that tabloid work had made them confident with each other's body. As he felt deft fingers unbuckle his waistband and move to shove down his jeans and boxers in one sure stroke, Tony just remembered to retrieve what he'd stuck in his pocket.

Somehow they ended on the bed, groaning into each other's mouth as their bodies' desperate rhythms ground against each other. Tony could barely pause long enough to expel a bit of the tiny tube into one palm, where his body heat made the lube feel pleasantly warm.

Then, he reached between them.
Stephen moaned in exquisite disbelief as Tony's sure hand caught both of their erections and stroked. First up and down them, and then focusing more on the shifting, rolling contact between their cocks, it was all Tony could do to keep his eyes open. He wanted to retreat behind his eyelids into pure, unfiltered sensation... but even more than that, he wanted to watch Stephen under him.

That viewing lasted until their next hungry kiss. The heat, the contact, the raw vulnerability: it was all close to perfect. If not for their bodies pressing too tightly for Tony's hand to easily move, they could have stayed like that for hours. But the hot, thick need trapped between them soon demanded too much attention. Tony's arm desperately wanted to piston again.

Eventually he had to break their full-body kiss to do so. As Tony's left arm propped him up over Stephen, his right hand stroked along their cocks. What should have been an erratic first time moved smoothly under his guidance. His grip locked firmly enough to steer their hips' instinctive rhythm. That rhythm sped.

Under him, it apparently wasn't enough for Stephen to simply run his hands along Tony's bare back. Not compared to the ecstasy Tony was causing them both. With his breaths coming staccato, Stephen splayed one hand over Tony's left temple and closed his eyes.

Tony barely had the capacity to wonder what was happening before Stephen's magic hit him. It was a roughhewn, imperfect connection between consciousness, but he suddenly felt every blissful sensation cranked up far past normal. I'm feeling him, Tony realized in overwhelmed wonder. He's feeling me.

Tony's arm worked harder and his eyes fell inexorably closed. As energy surged within him, centered upon the blazingly hot spot where they met, Tony's short breaths turned guttural. He'd never felt this much urgent desire. No single mind could.

Existence collapsed into heat, pressure, and aching need. His hand wasn't moving them toward pleasure, but toward escape. Each second trapped in this bonfire strained Tony further. The closer he came, the less he could think of anything but his cock. Another stroke, and another, and then a desperate gasp from under Tony left him feeling so full and heavy that it nearly drove him mad. The strokes of his hand became urgent. Frantic.

Another. Another. One more... one... more...

When bliss hit, it echoed. Relief gave way to surging rapture, and even Tony's overloaded mind knew he wasn't just feeling his own. His skin tingled. His muscles sang. It took him a while to swim through his daze and recognize the panting breaths coming from under him.

Stephen met his eyes, laughed once, and then let his eyelids fall closed. He looked deliciously exhausted.

With a loose, sloppy laugh of his own, Tony murmured, "Well, that was pretty neat." His head tilted against the loose grip Stephen still had on it, indicating the magic Stephen had used.

As Tony's arm retreated from between them, Stephen's other hand brushed lazily against it. Nodding against his pillow, he said, "Neat. Yeah."

"That an official thing they teach you?" Had his boyfriend studied at wizard porn school?

Laughing again, and sounding exhausted as he did, Stephen let both hands fall to the mattress. "Improvised."

"Improvise again."
"Do that again."

Grinning, Tony brought his head down low enough to gently bump their foreheads, like he had when he was so desperately relieved to see Stephen waking up. "We'll figure out all sorts of stuff. We've got time."

"Years of it."

"Years," Tony repeated with satisfaction, just as a familiar bass line drifted down the hallway. He craned his neck around to acknowledge that yes, he'd made that shameless playlist decision. By this deep into the lineup, he was sure they'd be well into things.

Stephen paused, then raised one eyebrow at Tony. Amusement filled his voice as he asked, "Marvin Gaye? You were confident."

"Well. Yeah." Laughing, Tony rolled off Stephen to clean themselves up before bed. After standing, a smirk spread as Tony turned slowly toward the bathroom, giving Stephen ample time to study the sight he presented. (Stephen did, with great satisfaction.) As he walked off, Tony looked back over his bare shoulder and reminded Stephen, "I'm really good at this."
I had to travel to a graduation, but I'm back with something that will be significant much, much later.

(And to anyone who graduated recently, congrats! :D )

A stranger's voice was not supposed to be there when Stephen woke up.

Blinking, he pushed through the first few flickers of sensation: Tony's bare leg against his. Golden-pink light that suggested early hours. Luxuriously smooth sheets contrasted with a faint, air-conditioned chill on his shoulders.

And someone's voice.

That sudden, sharp confusion woke him fully, and he began to sit up before realizing that a video call was playing on the opposite wall. Beside him, Tony was letting the sheets cover his legs and waist as he had a bare-chested conversation with someone. "Sorry," Tony then said with genuine apology after noticing him waking. "Emergency."

Stephen had only begun to tilt himself toward a sitting position, and so the sheets only slipped down a bit as he was able to make sense of who was on the screen. "Colonel Rhodes, I believe," he then said after an awkward, significant pause.

Rhodey nodded, and managed to maintain at least a veneer of professionalism. "Doctor." He cleared his throat. "I, ah, really wasn't trying to catch you two in... bed. Sorry 'bout that."

"He said it was an emergency," Tony explained.

"You didn't need to take a video call," Rhodey countered.

"You said you had something to show me."

Closing his eyes, Stephen sighed, then opened them again and asked, "What's the emergency?" This was how he was finally meeting Tony's best friend, apparently.

Still maintaining his professional veneer, Rhodey told them. There was a classified project being developed jointly between the U.S. and Canadian governments. Parts of the research had been farmed out to different universities, from CalTech to MIT to Georgia Tech to Stanford. In Canada, it'd been handed to two schools: Toronto and British Columbia. At the latter, summer session was in full swing. That was a smaller population than usual, which had probably helped to keep their death count low.

"Death count?" Stephen echoed with a frown.

So far, nine people with ties to the UBC campus had died: students, staff, faculty. It'd been a delayed effect, as the employees had all died in the city proper after leaving work. So had a graduate student who lived in off-campus housing. But the ninth death had been an undergraduate student on campus,
who'd been discovered by his roommate in a horrifying condition, and so now the concerned buzz running throughout Vancouver had spiked suddenly into a fever pitch.

"Horrifying?" Tony repeated.

Rhodey sighed. "Picture a corpse that's been in Death Valley for three days, in July."

"And I'm guessing Vancouver's been a little bit more temperate than that."

"Kinda sorta, yeah." Rhodey shook his head, and needed a pause before he continued. "The project's going to get shut down eventually, zero doubt, but with so many parties involved no one can give one clear order to help before it gets any worse. I was hoping you could see if there was anything you could do in the meantime. If I didn't at least ask, each new death's gonna be on my conscience. With how my friend's a..." Trailing off, Rhodey eventually finished, "A superhero."

"What can you share with us?" Stephen wondered.

"It's an engineering project. I've gotten previous permission to work with Tony as a consultant on classified matters related to engineering. I checked and that permission still holds."

"And I butted my way in when he was heading out, and interfered with whatever he was planning," Stephen replied. "Nothing you could do."

Rhodey nodded solemnly.

"Sounds like a plan," Tony said. "Send over whatever you can."

"We'll set up a more formal meeting after this is resolved, Colonel," Stephen dryly added.

Clearing his throat, Rhodey forced away a slight smirk at the sight they made on the bed. "We should meet officially, yeah. And glad to see you're doing better."

Stephen maintained his own level expression with great effort. "Thank you."

"We'll look for the stuff, Rhodey," Tony cut in. "Update you later."

As soon as the screen vanished, replaced by a download process bar, he turned to Stephen and laughed, "Sorry."

"I really don't want to meet your friends for the first time naked, Tony."

"I mean. There's a sheet." Tony plucked at the bed linens on top of them. "And a comforter."

"You have completely demolished any afterglow from last night."

"It was a good afterglow," Tony said with a grin, and leaned in close to kiss him on the shoulder, then neck. In a lower, softer voice, he wondered, "Seriously, did you really just improvise that thing where we... felt each other?"

Stephen felt his skin flush warm under Tony's mouth. "It wasn't very precisely done."

"Precise enough." Tony grinned against him. "But we could definitely practice."

"I figured if I was able to reach directly out to your spirit for help, I could probably link our..." As Tony pulled back, Stephen turned and wondered, "What?"

In a dry voice, Tony said, "Mentioning that night is a definite afterglow killer. And I..."
On the holographic screen, Rhodey's information package finished transmitting. The first sight it displayed was of the student he'd mentioned, who had been discovered as a desiccated corpse in his bed when his roommate arrived after a late-night library study session.

"Afterglow's completely gone," Stephen confirmed after a long pause.

Tony's face twisted into a grimace. "So gone."

Henry Zhao had been seen in a class that ended at four, at dinner at six, and shortly after seven when he told a friend that he wasn't feeling well and was going to turn in early. His roommate discovered his body shortly before midnight, where it looked like it had been baking under a relentless sun for three days straight. "Whatever happened to him," Tony murmured, "happened fast."

The other deaths had happened to people living alone, and so the similar condition of their corpses had been successfully hidden. Vancouver knew something was going on with people who worked at the university campus, but until Henry's body, not what.

"Vancouver," Stephen said thoughtfully as Tony began looking through the other files. "I wonder if that's why the Ancient One picked British Columbia for our talk. There are plenty of mountain meadows around the world, but perhaps she could sense that something was coming there and wanted to be close, just in case."

"You could be right," Tony mused as he read through a heavily redacted file. "Which makes it seem like a big deal."

Even with the scant visible information, Tony was able to identify what was going on with this communications project jointly funded by NASA and the Air Force. Using some astrophysics calibrations previously obtained through 'Project Pegasus,' they were going to measure whether space-time wrinkles could be used to obtain scientific readings from distant galaxies, and communicate directly with vessels that were otherwise unreachable. It sounded rather dry, but each word darkened Tony's expression.

"Yeah, it's a good thing Rhodey called both of us in," Tony grumbled. "I can only guess what sort of things they invited in by opening that door."

"What door?" Stephen wondered.

"Project Pegasus was shut down in the '90s, but it'll be restarted soon. And I know a lot more about it than what this file is telling us." Tony's face was downright grim as he studied the screen full of black censor bars. "Pegasus is those two orgs plus S.H.I.E.L.D. researching the Tesseract as a power source. Remember how I hacked S.H.I.E.L.D.'s files? Pegasus research is what Loki's going to interrupt in a few years."

"So, we're dealing with side effects of an engineering project inspired by old studies of an Infinity Stone?" Stephen mused. "Specifically, one that opens dimensional gateways. Yeah, I think the two of us might be able to do something about this."

"Let's go," Tony agreed. Between engineering accidents and dimensional effects, they easily had to be the two most qualified people in the world to handle this. "It's still the middle of the night in Vancouver, so no one's even going to... get so... distracted."

Stephen smirked as they both slid out of bed, still bare. "Focus, Tony. And be ready in ten minutes."

"No one seems to have noticed your portal," Tony noted eleven minutes later, in Vancouver. The university campus was at the end of a peninsula jutting into an ocean strait and a forest separated it
from the city. It was, they'd realized upon reviewing the other research campuses, the only one that wasn't buried in the middle of city neighborhoods.

That was probably why they'd been given the most dangerous project.

(Not that the researchers knew that.)

The campus was cool and quiet in the dark. Evergreens and the ocean mingled into a pleasant perfume. Only security lights were on, and a few scattered windows of what had to be dormitories. They probably had at least two hours before even the earliest risers started investigating them.

Or, someone might see Tony's suit. There wasn't anything noticeable about the fabric of Stephen's outfit at night, but between Tony's arc reactor, foot jets, and hand repulsers, he was a walking signal flare. Hopefully they could keep to the ground; seen from a distance, the circle of light on his chest plate would probably only look like a flashlight. "Let's start looking," Stephen said after they made their initial inspection. "I scan for any Tesseract-adjacent issues, and so do you."

"What exactly do you think happened to that kid?" Tony wondered as they roamed through campus. It probably would have been more efficient to split up, but there was an unspoken agreement between them: after Stephen's near-death experience, they didn't want to risk that.

"I think it's pretty likely that they accidentally opened a dimensional door a lot wider than they meant to." Stephen's hands gently probed the air as they walked, while Tony's clenched fist moved his scanners in a steady pattern. "Given the state of the corpses, I'm not sure if they were being drained of life itself, or just simply water."

"If those things love water," Tony noted as he nodded toward the moonlight-touched strait in the distance, "this place would definitely catch their attention."

"Good point. We should—" Stephen barely brought a shield up in time, and stabbed forward with an energy spike coming from his other hand. A second later, he let his hands fall to his side as confusion swept him. "I think I got it, but I don't know what it was. I didn't see or feel anything coming until it was right on top of me."

As Stephen's thumping heartbeat eased, Tony also lowered his hands. He'd instinctively moved to join the fight, but seemed to realize that doing so would have only managed to hit Stephen. "Let me try some other scans, then. I'm not seeing anything obviously energy-related," Tony said as he slowly turned. Though he was surely concerned about Stephen being attacked, the harsh voice of his suit masked emotions. "Which was my first guess, since they're working off Tesseract research."

"Can your suit scan for dimensional ripples themselves?"

"Mmm, maybe, that's trickier. And kinda squirrelly, because there are a lot of ways for that to play out. I don't think so, though. That's... huh." Tony leaned forward slightly. "What're the chances that someone's standing around with an eight degree celsius body temperature?"

Normal human body temperature was thirty-seven celsius, so they'd either found their target or some outdoor sculpture. "Yeah, that's... unlikely. Let me guess: the current outside temperature is slightly warmer than that?" Stephen had only noticed the movement of an approaching attack when a 'cool breeze' had moved with too much purpose. Otherwise, that thing had blended right into their surroundings.

"Bingo. Ten C." Tony gestured toward the spot he'd identified: a tree-lined pathway next to what was apparently the main engineering building, going by the dimly lit sign near its entrance.
"Whatever that thing is, it's invisible to normal vision. Only thermal scans reveal it."

Stephen wouldn't have any way to know when he was approaching danger, then. A disquieting notion, but one that made him glad that they'd stuck together. "Then lead the way. Let me know when we're getting close to anything."

After a second spent studying him, Tony nodded and moved forward.

"Look out!" Tony said as soon as they'd reached the walkway, and Stephen was again just able to bring up his shields in time and strike with another energy spike.

This was irritating, Stephen thought as his jaw clenched. He still wasn't sure exactly what he'd destroyed, only that it was gone. "Can you find the source of these things?"

"Stand closer to me while I scan." Even through Tony's suit-modified voice, by now Stephen could make out clear concern. "Got it. There's a real cold spot further down the path and it's probably the source. But—damn. Yeah, three more just came out. I'm guessing they're starting to claw the door open wider on their side."

"We'd better stop them now, then."

Tony's head shook. "You can't even see what you're fighting, so I don't want you going in there. Not against three."

"This is literally my job."

Tony turned his attention away from the dimensional wrinkle to focus totally on Stephen. "Hey. I nearly had to watch you die once and I'll be damned if it happens again."

"So," Stephen wondered, "are the life-sucking demons just waiting around for us to figure out a plan, or are they wandering off to kill someone else while we're arguing?"

"They're... shit," Tony muttered, and raised one hand to presumably aim at one.

"Tony!" Stephen sputtered as he realized an attack was about to be launched in the middle of a university campus. The Avengers had never been very good at minimizing collateral damage, not compared to Stephen's background of slipping quietly into parallel dimensions and fighting on spiritual planes. As he confirmed that yes, Tony was really about to launch something at that foe unseen to Stephen's eyes, Stephen raised his own hand and tossed up a shield behind where Tony was (hopefully) aiming.

A second later, a tree exploded in a blast of heat and sound, but all its shrapnel rebounded off Stephen's rounded shield and came to rest in a relatively small mess of debris. Both men studied that sight, then turned to each other. "Did you get it?" Stephen wondered.

Somehow, he was sure that Tony was smiling inside his helmet. "I sure did."

Well, then. They apparently had a plan for taking these out from a safe distance. "Okay. Track the next one, and give me fair warning of where you're aiming."

By the time they took down the third escaping demon, the sound of Tony's explosions and their mutual lightshow had drawn a crowd. "Two more got out while we did these," Tony said, and pointed toward the cold spot that Stephen still couldn't see. "Let's shut 'em down and shut that hole."

The kills were easy enough; shutting the door took more creativity. While Tony had handled the
kills, this task was Stephen's and it took him a few tries to find the right approach. But eventually he drew back his hands, which felt like he'd been holding them under arctic water, and nodded. "It's done."

That was Tony's cue to address the crowd, which he'd been keeping at bay while Stephen worked. Most of the onlookers wore sweatshirts or warm pajamas; all wore fearful expressions. "Whatever was killing those people is stopped," Tony promised and retracted his helmet. "Sorry we didn't know about it earlier, but you're safe, now."

"You're safe," Stephen echoed, and resisted the urge to rub his hands together for friction's warmth. "But just in case," he realized as he looked around the trees, bushes, and benches that lay in shrapnel piles along their path, "you should probably get back to your dorms until security handles cleanup."

"It's going to be way more than security swarming that campus," Tony pointed out once they were back home and he'd stepped out of his suit. Since they no longer needed to impress the public, Stephen shoved his hands under the kitchen faucet and sighed happily at a rush of warm water. Going by what he'd felt, if they'd left that doorway alone, the entire city of Vancouver was potentially at risk from those icy life-suckers. Tony continued, "Governments, military, they're all going to get involved with the cleanup."

"I wonder how bad it was in the original timeline," Stephen wondered as he retracted and dried his warmed hands. "The agencies had to be running this experiment before, but I don't remember reading anything about bizarre Vancouver deaths. And that's the sort of thing that would be discussed in the medical community. There must not have been too many more before they shut it down."

"S.H.I.E.L.D.'s good at Men in Black-ing things. They probably helped tone down the damage, then shut up anyone who'd gab about it." Tony shook his head, then took Stephen's hands and checked them carefully over. "I want to make sure these stay in good shape," he clarified as he felt them. It went slowly, with his fingers trailing with gentle, caring purpose along each of Stephen's.

"I'm fine," Stephen promised, though he let Tony's inspection continue. Unlike Tony trying to hold him back from a fight, this concern felt pleasant. "It's definitely for the best that we cut this 'experiment' off shorter than it would have been. I'm glad Hydra won't see whatever was on the other side of that door."


"...Is around, yes."

"Wait. No. Rhodey talked about how this was a communications project." Tony snapped his fingers. "Everything I read about those flying death carriers seemed to have some serious data chokepoints going on. I couldn't figure out how they'd have managed a smoothly sustained operation, especially after killing all of the planet's best people. If they were able to lock signals via a Tesseract fold algorithm so that their line-of-sight issues weren't so pressing, that could resolve the choke."

Off Stephen's faint uncertainty, Tony paraphrased, "I think this research project helped the big Hydra plan. Us shutting it down earlier than before probably screwed Hydra over. At least a little."

Ah. Well, that was good. "Seems beneficial, assuming we didn't just make some targeted enemies."

Grimaces hit both of them at the possibility. "Urgh. Yeah." Tony paused, studied the city under morning sunlight, then turned back to Stephen. "I do want to tell Rhodey everything, like we agreed. But now I'm talking... today, tomorrow. The sooner there are more heroes running around, the
sooner we can get second-tier stuff like Hydra out of the way and focus on the big fight. There have to be way more of these tiny fires that could be put out to give us breathing room."

More heroes? "You really think he'd hop straight into a power suit, too?" Stephen asked. That wasn't the impression he'd gotten of Rhody from the previous timeline, Tony's mentions, and their highly unfortunate conversation that morning. Of course Rhody would eventually suit up, but he didn't seem the type to rush headlong into heroics.

"If he knows everything."

Stephen had unhappily accepted that this would happen, but was still hesitant about the potential fallout. "If he knows everything, he could tell everything. That's my one issue." He paused, then tilted his head. "Unless he can't." Turning from Tony, he hunted around the room until he found where the Ancient One had set down the list of relics she'd delivered. Though this wasn't why he'd requested the list, it was a serendipitous coincidence.

"What's the plan?" Tony wondered as Stephen flipped through the parchment pages.

"There has to be some some way to compel people," Stephen mused, his gaze dancing across the text.

Tony's expression dropped. "Uh. Compel?"

"If they agree to it," Stephen clarified. "I'm sure there's some way to make it so that Rhody can agree to not share anything we discuss, and magically lock him into that. If I can find something like that, I'd feel a whole lot better." His finger jabbed at a page. "There."

Tony hurried over to look at it, squinted at the page, and then turned to Stephen in confusion. "Greek?" he guessed.

"Koine Greek," Stephen agreed. "The dialect's been used in one location or another for two thousand years. Made for very stable book-keeping." He supposed the mystics' library helped keep that usage record going, but they didn't like to advertise their activities to any scholars.

"And what's it say?" Tony asked after a short pause. His voice was filled with equal parts affection and exasperation. It took Stephen a moment to realize that this had to be another display of the sort of 'useless knowledge' that had inspired Vincent's name.

"The Horkos Staff makes a person incapable of violating an oath they swear after activating it. If they push through and violate that oath, the backlash is fatal," Stephen recited, and looked up. "Problem solved."

"The backlash is fatal?" Tony repeated, blank-eyed.

"Don't worry, Rhody wouldn't even have a way to break the oath, so he'll just simply be bound by it. No temptation to break it in the first place." Stephen set the parchment aside. "Think he'd go for it?"

"Is Rhody going to swear to a magical stick that could kill him?" Tony paraphrased.

"It's not going to kill him!" Seeing Tony's continued unease, Stephen promised as he tapped the parchment. "It's all completely consensual, according to this description. He wouldn't be surprised by anything and he'd only be bound by the specific oath he pledges."

"We can ask," Tony relented. "And I—" Cutting off, he turned toward a screen on the wall that
displayed the message *Incoming call: Pepper Potts.* "I'd probably better take this."

"At least we have clothes on," Stephen dryly said, just before the call connected.

"Canada," Pepper said as she appeared onscreen. Her hair had been brushed, but that appeared to be as much as she'd gotten ready. The room behind her was dark, as was its window, and she wore a satin pajama top.

"Hi, Pepper," Tony said. Stephen nodded at her in silent greeting.

She looked between Stephen, still in his full mystics' getup, and where Tony's suit visibly stood in the background of the living room. Then she sighed, smiled brightly to hide it, and continued, "I know you were helping those people, but it's four a.m. and I've already been contacted by three different agencies and a bunch of journalists. Is there any chance you're going to start doing those meetings and interviews you promised me, Tony?" Her smile looked more than a little strained.

"Yes."

She blinked at Tony's blunt answer. "Really?"

"Yep. Air Force, ASAP." Tony glanced at Stephen, who nodded. "We're setting it up later today?"

Stephen nodded again at the underlying question.

"Oh. Well, good." She still looked surprised at how easy that request was. "I can tell everyone else that the USAF is first contact with you. If any government people need to follow up, they can reach out there. And can we schedule a press interview before you get back to full-time work, Stephen?"

Stephen wasn't totally sure of what to make of the dynamic between himself and Pepper. She was Tony's assistant, but apparently also looked after him by default. (Sometimes.) He'd veered Tony away from ever getting together with her, but only after she'd veered toward another man. (And to this Pepper, 'dating Tony' would sound absurd, anyway.) Put basically, it still felt odd for her to ever directly address him, and because of that he needed a few seconds to catch up. "Press interview? I've done plenty."

"You've done a lot of little snippet interviews and a couple of press conferences. The last actual *feature* about either of you was that CNN thing on Christmas Eve about Tony's donation, and we all know how that night ended up."

"We really should do a cover story," Tony said when Stephen looked uncertainly toward him. "Remember, if you don't give a statement, other people make it for you. Let's stay in control of the conversation, because it's been going on for a while. New topics come up. Like how we just blew up part of a college campus."

Like *Tony* had just blown up part of a college campus, Stephen did not correct him.

Stephen still preferred to avoid lengthy interviews for the same reason he was concerned about Rhodey: potential danger to the timeline. With Rhodey, the positives did outweigh the negatives and that oath relic could further reduce the risks. With a journalist, though, they couldn't exactly ask them to swear fealty to a rod and shut up about the tricky bits of history. But... if Pepper and Tony both thought it was important to do a renewed media blitz, it probably was. "What are our options?"

Pepper began, "People—"

"No," Tony said instantly. "Something with more gravitas."
"NPR—"

"Less gravitas."

"Vanity Fair—"

"Absolutely not, someone there hates me. Totally biased POV."

Inhaling, Pepper began rattling off names too quickly for Tony to discount them individually. "GQ, Rolling Stone, Time, Newsweek, and the New Yorker are all trying to get both of you for an interview. Which should I commit to?"

"Feel out GQ and Rolling Stone's angles and make a decision between them," Tony decided. He held up a hand and started ticking off points on his fingers. "We want an interview that talks about doing good, inspiring others, and being an awesome, hot couple that's better than you. The generic 'you,' of course," he clarified to Pepper, who smiled and shook her head with affection.

Pepper readily replied, "I will do that, and let you know what the best move is. And I'll let the other government people know to go through the Air Force for information. Since you're doing that today, I'll try to set up the magazine interview for tomorrow?"

"Perfect," Tony said with a nod and smile. "You're a lifesaver, Ms. Potts."

"That's what the news stations are saying about the two of you, again," Pepper laughed, and only looked a fraction as tired as she probably was. "Although by now it's getting into talks about what you actually stopped in Vancouver."

"They were invisible," Tony noted, "so that'll be some fun speculation. By which I mean: dumb speculation."

"I'm so glad I was able to contribute to this conversation," Stephen then said in desert-dry tones. This was clearly a practiced public relations dynamic between the two of them, so it'd snowballed without any chance for him to interject. And then he was suddenly committed to either GQ or Rolling Stone. For a cover story.

His words seemed to remind both Tony and Pepper of his existence. As Pepper's expression filled with wry amusement, Tony paused, smiled in apology, and turned to him. He took one of Stephen's hands with deliberate purpose and asked, "Stephen, how do those two magazines sound? Should we add another to the list?" Then his hands gently stroked his, like they had when he was checking earlier for injury.

Stephen smirked. He'd made his point. "The two you picked sound just fine. You should probably let Ms. Potts get back to sleep, now."

After she'd said her goodbyes and the screen vanished, Stephen shook his head ruefully as he migrated toward the coffeemaker. Between this conversation and the argument he and Tony had held in Vancouver, it was a good reminder that they were still *them*, no matter what they'd done the night before. The two of them were never going to be a smooth, easy, boring ride through life. The two of them had to be allergic to boredom, so that was generally a good thing.

It did leave him tired enough for a cup of coffee or three before they started talking with Rhodey, though. As Tony began setting up that visit for later in the afternoon, after Rhodey could make the trip up from D.C., Stephen worked in the kitchen. "So," Stephen wondered as he poured himself a first cup of coffee. "Should I be expecting to pledge something to that oath relic, too?"
Tony accepted his own coffee, but frowned as he stirred sugar into it. "For...?"

"It's your birthday tomorrow." Stephen met Tony's eyes over the rim of his coffee mug before taking a sip. His face was impassive after he lowered the cup, but only with great effort. "When you informed me of your plans to ravish me, it was all about me doing whatever you said." He said the last bit meaningfully. "You shouldn't plan on that as a regular thing by any means, but for a special occasion..."

"No," Tony said instantly.

That was certainly a final-sounding answer. "Then I'll need to think of another present." And damn, he'd thought that was a real bit of inspiration. A potentially fun bit, too.

"You said that thing can kill you if you fight it too hard. Rhodey might not have magic to fight it, but you sure do. So unless you're going to swear an oath to never die, meaning you wouldn't even be able to fight the relic to begin with, I... am actually liking this idea." Grinning, Tony tilted back a large drink of his coffee. "Okay. That's what I want for my birthday present. You swearing to never die."

Stephen grimaced. Oh, Tony Stark and his bright ideas. "Not doable."

"Oh, but it's just what I want. No more near calls with a magic knife. No more facing off against invisible Canadian demons. That's my birthday present. Happy birthday to me," Off Stephen's continued reluctance, Tony leaned forward on the kitchen island. His emotional, responsive face grew increasingly sincere. "When I found you in here with that knife in your chest, there was nothing more terrifying than the thought of watching you fade away. A few mornings after that, I had to argue you out of diving into the middle of a bunch of invisible water vampires. When you get that oath rod for Rhodey, I want you to promise me that you won't die."

For someone who made his own habits out of diving into danger, this was rich. "And I can't make that promise, because I might have to."

Now tension tugged at Tony's aching sincerity. "You said the Ancient One has a different plan for Thanos."

"That's not what I mean. I... ugh." Stephen closed his eyes, sighed, and continued, "You know how we're worried that some things might repeat, despite our best intentions to avoid them? I've died way more times than that one you saw, thanks to Time Stone loops. Just in case, I need to keep that open as an option." If he'd gotten stabbed through the heart again, despite his best efforts with Kaecilius, then someone else might manage to lure in Dormammu. Existence ending because he was simply incapable of pulling off that time loop plan again would be a phenomenally stupid way to go.

Tony's blank stare moved into sudden fear. "Wait, when you said that someone had ripped you apart... you were serious?"

Had Stephen mentioned that? Apparently so. "Completely serious. And if I hadn't done those loops with a bunch of different ways to die, the world would have ended before Thanos even showed up. So I need to keep death on the table." Off Tony's distant, broken look, presumably as he imagined those deaths on repeat, Stephen hesitantly wondered, "So... do you want a birthday cake?"

Hollow horror was his answer.

"We could head back to that restaurant you liked in Lisbon?" Stephen offered.

"You can't do that plan," Tony abruptly announced with fierce satisfaction. "Because if you die, this
"If you die," Stephen corrected him, "this universe breaks. The Ancient One figured out a way to back me up."

It appeared as if Tony were short-circuiting. His eyes were as wide as they'd been after Stephen surprised him with a first kiss, but sadness filled his face, rather than shock. All he seemed to focus on was the 'dying' part, rather than the 'time loop' side of things.

Canada had kicked off an exceedingly awkward conversation. This had not been a good way to start their day. "Hey, for all we know," Stephen offered in the heavy silence, "that'll be one of those things we avoid entirely. Fingers crossed." That still didn't do the job, and so he tried, "It all happened before we met, so I was obviously fine afterward."

Tony looked down. Although he didn't argue against that logic, he still looked desperately sad. Happy birthday, indeed. It was as if he was already watching Stephen spiral toward death again, and with them now being lovers instead of cluelessly in love, it hurt him all the more. He seemed to be processing the news, and would eventually accept it, but right now the wound was fresh.

"I definitely promise not to cut off a hand, if it helps." That didn't get a response, and so Stephen awkwardly clarified, "That was a joke."

On the wall, a holographic message cued: I can be in New York by three. Good?

"You should probably confirm with Rhodey," Stephen suggested when Tony still didn't respond. "I could go get the relic." Distraction still filled Tony at the knowledge that this path they were on might be sending Stephen inevitably into more suffering than Tony had ever expected, and so Stephen leaned forward to take his hands. "Tony. You're trying to convince Rhodes to suit up, and that's not going to happen if you make heroics seem like... you currently look. And we apparently have a cover story interview tomorrow. We'll need to be in a good mood for that.

"I'm fine," Stephen insisted when Tony remained locked inside unhappy contemplation. "If I could choose to avoid the car accident or those time loops, I'd erase the accident a million times over."

"A million?"

Bad phrasing. "I'm going to go get the relic," Stephen announced after a pause. "And then I'll come back, and we'll dispose of anything with a black stain like the Ancient One told me to. We could dump it into a lava flow?" he suggested. "You want to watch lava eat the couch?" he added after noticing its legs had darkened.

"That sounds okay," Tony admitted after a few more seconds.

"Good," Stephen said, and stepped forward to lightly stroke along one of Tony's cheeks. "I really am fine. And I'm glad we stuck close together in Vancouver."

When his hand began to pull back, Tony caught it. The intensity of Tony's concerned, loving gaze was disquieting. Stephen had never been accountable to anyone, not since entering this mystic's life. Wong shared his dedication to the cause, and they got along well, but Stephen had been able to set his own hours, fight his own battles, and make his own choices without answering to anyone. Working as a lead surgeon had trained him well for that. Even with other people in the room, the flow of surgery followed his decisions. Other people were support personnel in his life.

And that perspective was why every single romantic relationship he'd ever tried had failed. Miserably.
Just like when Pepper and Tony had steamrolled the magazine interview discussion, perhaps he should listen to other people a bit more. Perhaps he should consider Tony a bit more. "I felt you last night," Stephen murmured, and stroked his thumb across Tony's fingers, "but it wasn't very precisely done."

"You said that before," Tony noted, and sounded a little confused at the mention of that night together.

"Getting used to what makes you happiest," Stephen clarified, "will take me more practice. Sorry."

His true meaning—an apology for assuming Tony would be fine with Stephen pitching headlong into danger—sank in, and Tony smiled. "Thanks. And I..." He trailed off, then admitted, "I'm also used to doing what I want." Like with that magazine decision, or planning to blow up the invisible demons, he didn't need to add.

They were two of the strongest personalities imaginable. When they were pointed in the same direction, any foe should fear them. When their intentions crossed, however, that strength was set up to prompt some fierce conflicts. "I want this to last," Stephen added, and squeezed Tony's hand.

"Me, too."

Neither of them were used to not being talented at something, but at least they were willing to work at this. "So... good. Things might not always be simple, but we know we're always trying. So we'll be able to struggle through. All right." Stephen took a measured breath, then asked Tony in the sweetest tone he could manage, "What would you like for your birthday?" Since his suggestions had flopped, it'd be best to simply ask.

"Blowjob."

The abrupt answer caught Stephen off guard, and he blinked.

"I don't need you swearing to a magical oath death stick," Tony laughed. "And I definitely don't want you swearing to that thing if it's setting up something dangerous. But if you're offering something in bed, then hell, I'll take it."

"I. All right." Bemused, Stephen pulled back. (He'd never given one. Hmm.) "Then, ah, I'll go get the relic. For Rhodes."

"And I'll confirm the time with Rhody," Tony said, and looked pleased at Stephen continuing to seem a bit off-balance. "See you soon."

"After we talk with Rhody," Stephen said after a significant pause, during which he recollected his typical composure, "we should talk about a strategy for that magazine interview. We need to be exactly on the same page if we're doing this as a PR move."

"Solid plan," Tony nodded. "We'll do that totally productive interview tomorrow before you suck me off." Stephen couldn't help but laugh, and so Tony cheerfully added, "Happy birthday to me."

"Happy birthday to you," Stephen agreed as he opened a portal to Nepal. "And many more."

"Same to you," Tony said with sudden, sober sincerity. It took Stephen a second to realize that Tony wasn't somehow convinced that they shared a birthday, as he'd thought from the odd phrasing, but only that he wanted to make sure that Stephen had many, many more years ahead of him. After the black lake, Vancouver, and learning about Dormammu, that was the gift he really wanted.
Twenty minutes later, after he'd gotten permission to borrow the Horkos Staff for one day, Stephen stepped back into Manhattan. The instructions he'd gotten for how to use the thing still rang clear in his mind, and he studied the foot-long ivory staff with deep consideration as his portal closed behind him.

"You got it?" Tony wondered without looking up from his work. "Rolling Stone's the one, by the way. They've got us for lunch, and then however long the person needs afterwards."

"Fine," Stephen said with distraction, then nodded once and walked into the kitchen. Certainty suddenly filled him. He could feel the rod's carved markings hot against his hand. "Tony," he said as he gestured to the white staff. "There is another gift I could give."

"I..." Tony's instinctive complaint died in his throat. Stephen hadn't sworn something without asking. He'd earlier argued away the impossible request that Tony had made of him to never die. By now they were having a conversation instead of making assumptions, and so Tony slowly asked, "What?"

With a determined nod, Stephen slit the pad of his thumb open and placed the blood against the rod. It flowed instantly across its surface, trailing through the carved markings as liquid flowing into light, and for a disorienting second Stephen felt his mind bound by the same crimson runes as he was holding. Whatever he spoke and meant next, he somehow knew, would become as deeply part of his existence as the need to breathe.

Tony still looked deeply worried, but that unease faded as Stephen made a promise he could keep. "I swear not to die in a way that can't be safely reversed," he said, "and in a way that still leaves me as me." His thumb pulled away from the rod, and the odd sensation of shackles around his mind abruptly ceased, as did the red lights circling through the carved markings. The slit on his thumb healed before his next breath.

There wasn't a single required death Stephen had suffered that wouldn't be covered by the first clause, and the second should keep him from being brought back as some sort of undead construct. (Better to be safe than sorry.) Perhaps this oath would limit him from some other, smaller risks along the way... but then, that was the whole point, wasn't it? He remembered dying when it counted, and so it was vital not to die when it didn't. It would be phenomenally stupid for him to actually fall to some pathetic one-off monster like those Vancouver demons.

"Does that help?" Stephen wondered as he set aside the Horkos Staff. Normally, Stephen would never constrain himself like that... but the universe had very nearly broken because he'd stopped to gloat outside after a press conference. Getting this universe safely to an Infinity finish line mattered far more than him.

And that smile on Tony's face mattered more, too.

"Thanks," Tony said softly. Unease that he probably didn't realize he'd been carrying began to fall away, as did a shadow that Stephen now realized he'd held ever since the black knife. Tony knew his own history, of course, and Stephen knew his own, but Tony Stark was a public figure in any timeline. Because of that Stephen also knew the risks Tony had faced, but each new threat to Stephen's life caught Tony by surprise.

A few breaths later, Tony wondered, "So do I still get...?"

Smirking, Stephen walked over to him and placed his hands lightly on Tony's waistband like he was ready to unfasten the button there. "Assuming you don't embarrass me to Rolling Stone tomorrow."

"Damn," Tony sighed, but he couldn't quite hold back his smirk. "I'm never getting laid again."
Hours later a buzzer sounded. Tony glanced at the alert screen to see a feed from the building’s front door: Colonel James Rhodes was waiting to come up. It was time for them to share their outsider status to this universe, then, and hope that he took it well. (Or at least, hope that his head didn't explode.) With a nod from Stephen, Tony granted permission for Rhodey to enter.

"Thanks, man," Rhodey said as soon as the door opened, and he pulled Tony into a quick, back-thumping hug. "I felt so much better seeing that the Vancouver situation got shut down fast. I've learned to guess how much red tape is coming, and this would be days, at least."

"Better not tell anyone you asked us," Tony said wryly. "We've got a Rolling Stone interview tomorrow. I don't want them asking why the U.S. Air Force sent a paramilitary strike unit into Canada."

"Can't say that I've ever been labeled 'paramilitary,' before," Stephen noted to no one in particular. "Can't say that I'm particularly fond of it, either."

Right, right, Stephen and his military issues. "He's a doctor," Tony laughed to Rhodey, like that explained everything. "Anyway: Rhodey, Stephen. Stephen, Rhodey. You've kind of met, but now you have pants on."

From the flat look Stephen gave him, he apparently thought that Tony was needling him for the fun of it. No: Tony was needling Stephen for a very good reason, and that reason was to ease Rhodey into this visit before they splattered his brains against the far wall.

"Colonel," Stephen dryly said as he extended his hand, which Rhodey dutifully shook. "I think we should just mutually agree to ignore Tony making a jackass of himself."

"I don't know," Rhodey replied. "I've been trying to do that for years and it's way tougher than you'd think." Then he grinned in that broad, sudden, purely James Rhodes way. "Hey, it was a long trip up here, can I ask one of you for a drink or..." Trailing off, he finally seemed to notice their mostly-emptied living room. "Redecorating?"

Tony flashed back to what they'd tackled before Rhodey's arrival: watching every last bit of blood-corrupted furniture, bandages, or anything else burn away into ash in Hawaii's Kilauea caldera. They'd kept their plan secret, as it was surely a massive environmental violation, but better an environmental violation than letting someone potentially control the Sorcerer Supreme-in-waiting.

"Yeah, basically," Tony then answered. "But we've got chairs," he added, and gestured to what seating was left.

"I'm kind of impressed that you two are still together," Rhodey admitted once they were settled into those chairs, with drinks in hand. (Non-alcoholic; Stephen had said that alcohol could ruin Rhodey's ability to fully consent to the Horkos Staff.) "No offense to you, at all," he quickly added to Stephen, "but I've known Tony for a long, long time. You flipped a switch in him, Doc. I didn't even know he could clean up his act like this."

Tony raised an eyebrow as he sipped his lemonade, but said nothing. Rhodey wasn't exactly wrong, thinking back to how he'd acted in this stage in his life. Those who'd known Tony best in 2008 would be shocked if he dated someone twice in a row, let alone staying together with them for months. Moving into this condo must have torpedoed every last expectation they held.
"He's a good man," Stephen said with a smile that warmed Tony to his toes. "I've had a chance to learn that."

By now it felt like they were breaching The Discussion That Needed To Happen, and so Tony turned his attention toward the ceiling. "Hey, Vincent? Seal any windows and doors. We want to make sure this is on a top security level."

Rhodey blinked at that interruption, but he was used to top-secret discussions and probably assumed they wanted to talk about Vancouver. Instead of looking concerned, he simply smirked at the confirmation Vincent soon gave them. "So, how is it to hear your own voice on that thing?" he asked Stephen.


"Tony never listens," Rhodey confirmed.

"Tony," Tony interrupted, "has something very, very important to tell Rhodey." And he did, but anxiety suddenly choked him. It was one thing for Stephen to fill in the Ancient One on all of this, or Wong or any of the other mystics. They guarded the Time Stone and were used to the idea of a fragmented multiverse of infinite possibilities. James Rhodes, on the other hand, lived in a world directed not by an ancient mystical order, but the Pentagon. He requested military equipment, not relics, and he wrote his reports in military jargon instead of ancient Greek.

"And Tony," Tony added a second later, when he realized there was no possible way to get Rhodey to accept anything about that oath stick without a demonstration, "has something to show you, first."

"What is that?" Rhodey wondered as Tony held the Horkos Staff, overseen by Stephen's watchful eye. He looked ready to grab it at a moment's notice should Tony mishandle the relic.

"Magic," Tony summarized. "If you activate it, you can make a promise while holding it that you can't break."

"Okay," Rhodey said hesitantly.

"You need to promise not to share anything we tell you before you leave today. Ever. With anyone but us." As Stephen interjected a suggestion, Tony dutifully added, "Unless we both give you permission to bring someone else into the loop."

Each second had Rhodey looking more perplexed. "Is this about Canada?"

"Obliquely," Stephen said.

"This won't hurt you at all," Tony promised, and murmured something to Stephen. As a miniature sharp-edged energy shield bloomed near Tony's hand, he added, "And you won't get roped into anything except what you specifically decide to promise. Here, watch this." With only faint hesitation, Tony sliced his thumb open on the side of the shield and pressed that pad against the Staff. Shock ran through him. He was sure it was far more than Stephen had displayed, for Tony wasn't used to the flow of magic through his body. It felt as if his very cells were molding to some alien pressure totally unknown to their dimension. It took him a few startled breaths to regain control, and then more after a sense of compulsion settled around his mind like a fence stretching around a yard.

When Stephen used this thing, he'd sworn something huge and spectacular and life-changing. Tony just wanted something harmlessly funny that would prove his point to Rhodey. "I swear," Tony said as he watched his blood flow across the Staff as liquid ruby light, "to kiss Stephen's hand until he
tells me I can stop." Then he lifted his thumb away from the Staff, watched its skin heal, and waited.

A second later, his body moved for him. It was like a cramp making his leg twitch, but without any pain. Tony felt entirely like himself... except that his mouth was pressed gently against the back of Stephen's right hand and he'd knelt on the ground to better achieve that position.

"You're either proving something very weird," Rhodey said after a long moment of studying him, "or this is a really weird improv act. But, either way: it's super weird."

"It's no improv act," Stephen promised, and reached for his drink... with his right hand. Tony mmphed in surprise as his entire head was tilted along with Stephen's motion, yet he couldn't do a single thing to stop himself. Though he knew his lips looked same as ever, they might as well have merged with Stephen's skin for all the control Tony now had over his own head. "Although I do find Tony's choice of an example pretty funny."

"What exactly is this conversation about?" Rhodey wondered after a longer pause.

"Unfortunately, we can't tell you that until you've sworn not to share anything about our discussion. We wouldn't be doing this unless it was that big a deal, Colonel."

"I'd appreciate a hint. I'm not risking... that," Rhodey added, and gestured to Tony, "without a damn good reason."

"You yourself choose exactly what you swear," Stephen clarified. "For example, Tony was worried about me, and so I swore an oath about keeping myself safe."

"Because of how you got hurt?" Rhodey guessed, and nodded when Stephen did.

"Mmmphrrrmmt!" Tony bellowed as best he could behind his closed lips. Both men seemed to be forgetting about him and his exceptionally stupid idea for this demonstration.

"So, he seriously can't stop kissing you?" Rhodey then wondered, and began to chuckle when Tony's unchanging stance proved as much. Him leaning over to muss Tony's hair was too much to tolerate, and so Tony began swatting Rhodey until the man, laughing more, sat back against his chair.

"Tony, you may stop kissing my hand," Stephen grandly said, and barely seemed able to fight back his own laughter.

"One: screw you guys. But two: I made my point," Tony said as he found himself able to speak again. Both men earned a dark look as he retook his seat. "Rhodey. Seriously. Will you promise to keep today a total secret? It's a big conversation, but it's really not a bad one."

"All right," Rhodey relented after a weighty pause. "After that demonstration, I owe you that much. Can't believe I'm doing magic," he muttered as he accepted the Staff, but needed a few deep breaths to slice his thumb. The same surprise Tony had felt filled his expression after he placed that thumb against the ivory surface, and he stared at the activated staff for so long that Tony wondered if he would back out. "I swear," Rhodey then began, "not to share a single thing you tell me today with anyone else, unless you both say I can." His thumb pulled away, and he exhaled as he watched it heal. "That's... yeah, really super weird."

"It is super weird," Tony confirmed. He swallowed and felt anxiety suddenly sweep him, and Stephen squeezing his hand with encouragement scarcely helped. Now that Rhodey was locked into secret-keeper mode, they could share this... but Tony had no idea how his long-time best friend would take the news. Well. Only one way to find out. "There's something else really, really super
"weird that I need to tell you."

"Okay," Rhodey warily replied. "Shoot."

"I'm not from 2008."

Rhodey hesitated, blinked, and asked, "What?"

Now that he'd spoken the first bit of truth, Tony's mouth felt like it was working on autopilot.

"Stephen and I are actually from ten years in the future. Our minds got thrown back into our younger bodies on—"

"September 15, 2007," Stephen supplied. "A few seconds before Tony was knocked down the stairs at that party of his."

"Okay," Rhodey said after another significant pause. Not a single muscle moved below his neck.

"You think you're from the future. Okay."

"Think?" Tony repeated. "No, I am from the future. Wow, you totally don't believe me."

"Should I?" Rhodey asked. "Tony, this is insane. For you to think you're from the future just because you..." Trailing off, his gaze fell heavily on Stephen, and a deeper concern entered his eyes.

Tony followed his stare, realized Rhodey thought Stephen had done something to him, and rolled his eyes. "For God's sake, Rhodey. Stephen didn't do anything to my head. You and Pepper both have to be so suspicious," he added in a low mutter, but it wasn't low enough.

"Pepper thought I did something to you?" Stephen asked, frowning.

"She got over it, it's fine. Anyway," Tony then continued emphatically in Rhodey's direction, "I am literally from the future. How do you think I knew Obadiah was trying to screw me over? How I was able to find all of his cached videos?" That didn't do the job. "You've said I've cleaned up my act, right? It wasn't just because I started dating Stephen, it's because I'm ten years older than the Tony you know."

"Okay. Then how?" Rhodey wondered. Tony wasn't sure if he was really open to hearing an explanation, or simply wanted more detail with which to catch them in a lie.

"There are things called Infinity Stones," Stephen cut in. "They control various aspects of reality. The one that controls Time was caught in a paradox after a tremendously traumatic event. The only way it could keep the timeline steady was to bring the two of us back to our past, permanently."

"Infinity Stones," Rhodey hollowly repeated. "Right. Stones that control aspects of reality, and they sent your minds back to the past. Which is my present."

Rhodey did not sound convinced. "We should have planned this better," Tony said toward Stephen.

"See, this is why we need to talk things out before the Rolling Stone interview tomorrow," Stephen dryly replied.

Yeah, this was not going well. The problem was that any proof they could offer Rhodey had either been explained away as something else—like Tony's supposed Stephen-focused inspiration for the power suit—or would simply be meaningless in 2008, like 'you're going to get paralyzed in Germany when an Infinity-powered android misses his shot.' "Just tell us," Tony then asked. "What could we tell you or show you that would convince you that we're from the future?"
Rhodey's thousand-yard stare said that he had no answer to give them. He'd been presented with an absurd situation, so what could he possibly say? The world's first superhero might now be fueled by magic instead of technology, but Rhodey's world hadn't overlapped that magical one. He had scant reason to believe this impossible thing they were telling him, and a lifetime of rational, reasonable decisions to point him in the opposite direction.

"If you want hard proof that we're from the future," Stephen said in the heavy silence, "I have an idea."

Tony blinked and turned to him. "You do?" Stephen leaned over and murmured something, and Tony's entire body seemed suddenly both electrified and numb. " Seriously?" he murmured, too quietly for Rhodey to hear. "You think it's okay?"

"We're changing the timeline," Stephen whispered back. "And this might help with... that other significant issue."

Yeah. It might. Still... no, no this made sense. And if he sat and thought about this too much, Tony might reject it. After Tony nodded once, Stephen nodded in returned and stood, then walked away.

"Where is he going?" Rhodey wondered as Stephen vanished down the hall. He didn't sound fearful of the other two men, exactly, but by now he clearly wished to be anywhere but in that condominium.

"He needs to look something up," Tony said in a carefully controlled voice. "Because we both know about this from the future, but he needs to check his footnotes a little before he gives you the details."

"You know this is ridiculous, right?" Rhodey asked after studying Tony for ten silent seconds. " Were the two of you together in 'the future?' Is this some weird plan you dreamed up?"

"Nah, I was with Pepper in the future." That admission didn't really hurt, by now; it ached like a fading bruise, but only if he deliberately pushed the wounded spot. "Boy, was that a kick in the teeth to see her looking at me like nothing more than... than her boss." A deep sigh tore out of Tony. "But me and Pep weren't supposed to get together for years, so I tried to make that happen. That plan blew up in my face."

"And then you fell in love with a wizard," Rhodey dryly supplied.

"Yeah, it was the damndest thing. You know, originally we just faked being together because it was easier to stay in contact." Tony laughed at the memories, and how awkward they'd initially been and how outraged Stephen had acted when Tony first proposed the idea. "I'm assuming you've never been sent on a secret operation where you played grab-ass with your mission partner?"

Rhodey stared levelly back at him and said nothing. He'd apparently reached his tolerance limits for what he perceived as absolute nonsense.

"Well, anyway," Tony continued in the silence, "it was weird as hell. Especially the first time he kissed me. But we got used to it, because... we were alone in this whole universe. Together. We were the only people who totally understood each other. Then he nearly threw away everything he cared about to save my life," Tony added in softer, more sincere tones, remembering the bewildered shock of watching that golden shield bloom in front of him in Metro's ER. "After that, it was just dominoes." His hand stayed up to a spot above his heart. It wasn't next to an arc reactor on his own chest, and was where Stephen had a new scar on his. "Eight months after we got here..." Love. Deep, all-consuming love.
"So, you've been lying all this time," Rhodey paraphrased. "To me, Pepper, Happy, the media..."

Tony's romantic nostalgia shattered like glass. Oh, come on, that cynicism hurt. "We've been trying to protect existence all this time," he countered. "We know all sorts of things that are supposed to happen. Some have gotta play out, and others we're trying to avoid. So no, we weren't together back in September like we told the media, but right after he got hurt we finally figured it out."

"After he got hurt, huh? Guess that explains why you didn't have any clothes on when I called," Rhodey muttered.

Tony couldn't help but smirk. "Yeah, you had some killer timing. Does that mean you believe me?"

"I believe," Rhodey said after long consideration, "that you believe this."

For God's sake, why did everyone distrust the hugely powerful wizard who'd altered Tony's sensory perception just last night, and was openly amused today at how Tony was magically forced to kiss his hand? *I should be less sarcastic to myself*, Tony thought, and sighed. He'd made that point too well. "We're going to prove this to you," Tony promised. "Because we've got our eyes trained on a point ten years in the future, where we have to win a fight or things..."

"Or things what?" Rhodey wondered.

"Or half of every living creature in the universe dies." Tony stared levelly back at Rhodey as the man waited for him to admit he was kidding. "I'm serious. That's what lead to our timeline flipping out. It was huge, destructive, and it caused trauma that the universe couldn't deal with. We've gotta avoid it in this go-round, and do that we need help. We need *your* help."

The hollow expression Rhodey gave him in return could unfortunately mean a lot of things: that did sound like a terrible fate, and he'd help them avoid it. Or, he had deep sympathy for what they'd suffered. Or, it hurt him to hear his friend sound this apparently, completely, painfully delusional.

And unfortunately, until they could hand Rhodey some real evidence, Tony suspected the last one held true.

With perfect timing, Stephen walked back into the living room, presumably carrying the evidence they needed to prove their point. "Here," he murmured to Tony and handed over a piece of paper. Tony stared down at it. This one single handwritten line would further change reality, and they had no way to assure what would happen after it did. But they needed to roll some dice, and this didn't seem like a bad roll to make. Before he handed the paper over, Tony added one line to the page—a name and agency—then passed it to Rhodey. "People have been in contact with the Air Force after our mission today, so I know comm lines are open with all agencies. Send that agent to that location, and say that it's urgent."

"It's all right if you share that, so there's confirmation from both of us. And it's urgent enough," Stephen added, "that I can portal him and a team directly there. No need to arrange a flight."

"Why?" Rhodey wondered as he stared down at the slip of paper. Above the name Tony had added was the latitude and longitude that Stephen had written. "What should I say is waiting?"

"Don't say anything beyond that you've gotten a lead, it's safe, and it's urgent," Stephen replied. "But if you do this, you'll see that we absolutely know the truth about the future. You can trust everything we've told you."

Shaking his head slowly, Rhodey replied, "You mean that you're both ten years older than you look,
Tony shrugged at Stephen's raised eyebrow. Yeah, he'd shared that; what about it?

Rhodey continued, "And in ten years, someone's going to kill half the universe? And I'm supposed to help you with that? That's what you're going to prove?"

"Yep," Tony said simply.

"Whatever. I'll make the call," Rhodey said after a lengthy pause, during which he studied them both and waited for the punchline. When none ever came, he rose and walked over to the holographic screen on one wall and began the lengthy chain of obtaining authorization for the call he was supposed to make.

Nearly twenty minutes later, Stephen nodded and stood after Rhodey turned to him. His hand sketched out a circle in the air, but no sparks appeared before them. The two ends of the portal were hundreds of miles away in one direction, and thousands in another. And on the video screen, the man Rhodey had finally been authorized to contact turned in surprise toward his end of the portal, then soon stepped through it with two other agents he'd brought in as an emergency call.

"I sure hope you're not about to make me look really dumb," Rhodey muttered as they watched Phil Coulson's body camera make its journey through the portal, and nearly lose its feed for a few seconds as it adjusted to the newly blinding light around it. The three men in the condo also flinched away from the sudden brightness, and only turned back once the screen darkened. "Why'd this one guy have to go?"

"Because I know him," Tony replied without looking away from the screen. "He's the right pick. The only pick."

"Okay," Rhodey said after a few uncertain seconds. "Are you sure this is the right spot, though? There's nothing here."

"It's here," Stephen said as he stared intently at the camera feed. "I did the location spell immediately before you started calling people and so I knew exactly where to open that portal."

"There's nothing," Phil confirmed into his body camera. His gloved finger tapped the lens. "Colonel Rhodes, I think Mr. Stark may have sent me on a wild goose chase."

"Scan below the surface," Tony loudly said. Phil didn't even know what he'd been sent to look for, so it was unsurprising that he didn't know how best to search.

With a sigh, Phil gestured at his fellow agents and passed along those orders. Frowning in thought, Rhodey watched as the S.H.I.E.L.D. agents turned their attention to the snow and ice below their feet, then asked without looking away from their feed, "What's a good sign? What should they be seeing?"

"Metal," Tony said. "An awful lot of metal."

Four minutes later, Phil spoke up again. "There's something enormous below us. We're clearing away the snow to try to get a better look." Eight minutes later, during which Rhodey stayed silent and increasingly tense, Phil spoke up again. "We've exposed... something. We're going to need to bring in a cutting unit to—"

Stephen gestured. Onscreen, his sparks did the work that would take a laser cutter at least ten minutes, and a man-sized hole appeared in the rigid framework the S.H.I.E.L.D. agents had exposed.
"Let's save ourselves some time, Agent Coulson. You're free to enter, now."

"Seriously, what is this?" Rhodey wondered as, onscreen, they saw the view in front of Phil's chest camera: a wintry wasteland stretching into the distance, interrupted by a metal framework and the hole Stephen had just carved into it. Now a rope was being brought to him, and once it was secured, Phil began to chase his flashlight's beam into the interior of the craft they'd exposed.

When that flashlight hit the floor, it sounded like Phil stopped breathing. Next to Tony, Rhodey actually did.

"What in the hell?" Rhodey then asked as Phil restarted his descent toward the sight of an iced-over but unmistakable red, white, and blue shield. "Is that...?"

"Oh my God," Phil soon said. His shaking hands extended into the camera's view, and after a few moments' hesitation, he became the first man in more than sixty years to lift Captain America's shield. "Oh my God. This is Red Skull's Valkyrie aircraft. That's why that metal framework looked familiar. This is..."

"Keep looking, Agent Coulson," Stephen said loudly enough to be heard across the comm channel. "My location spell indicated that the actual man was somewhere there." Then he leaned forward and muted the call, and both Stephen and Tony turned toward Rhodey.

James Rhodes barely seemed able to stand, let alone speak. His eyes were enormous as he watched the progression of the retrieval effort for Captain America, in a search no one had known to make in a place no one would have thought to look. "You knew that plane was there," he eventually said. "Not because you did some... some 'location spell,' but because you knew there was even anything to look for."

"Because in 2012," Tony gravely replied, "that man and I needed to team up when an alien invasion hit New York City. Yeah. I knew Rogers was there."

"I imagine you've looked into my history, Colonel," Stephen added after a few silent seconds. "Were you able to find any period during which my location was unaccounted for? When I could have studied at Kamar-Taj and mastered the mystic arts?"

"There was nothing," Rhodey softly confirmed. "I couldn't figure out how you did it. It seemed like something you'd really commit to, but you were always doing your medical stuff. You've had eyewitness accounts for most days of your life since undergrad."

"Because I haven't studied there, yet. And I didn't until 2016."

"Does that make any puzzle pieces fall into place?" Tony wondered.

"It does," Rhodey whispered. "I can't believe this, but it does." In open shock, he turned to Tony and looked him over. "How old are you?"

"Like I said: about eleven years older than you think. But they were a long eleven years." Tony clicked the screen to black, just in case Phil could somehow turn his attention away from his fanboy treasure trove, and guided Rhodey to the nearest chair. "The reason we grabbed Rogers specifically is because Hydra is here, active, and embedded throughout S.H.I.E.L.D. For all we know, they're in the Air Force, too, because they're... everywhere. But S.H.I.E.L.D.'s their big prize and Fury's been working for months on trying to get things settled there. I know he hasn't done that yet, because he hasn't come back to bother us."

Tony's finger pointed at the black screen. "But the guy on that ship helped to fight back Hydra. If
Fury needs help to take them out, then he's the guy. Going by our history, anyway."

"Hydra," Rhodey repeated, and sank further into his chair. "The guys from World War II."

"The guys from World War Now," Tony corrected. "For all you know, you've been reporting to a Hydra commander. We need help to clean them out. We need help to deal with... God. Hammer and evil elves—"

"Elves?" Rhodey sounded positively dazed.

"—And hopefully not Ultron, but Loki and—"

"Loki? Like library book Loki?"

Tony knelt in front of Rhodey like he'd done to Stephen, but this time he was the one who felt in control. He took Rhodney's hands, squeezed them just hard enough to hurt, and waited for focus to return to Rhodey's eyes. "We're from ten years in the future, and we need your help to save half the universe. I wish I were kidding about any of this, but it's all real."

"It's all real," Stephen grimly confirmed, and sent up a quick illusion with a gesture of his hand. A miniature of Manhattan filled their living room, with a swarming alien army on top of it. "This is what our 2012 really, really looked like. We're trying to avoid it for your 2012."

Rhodey's expression was entirely still and his skin looked waxen. Only his eyes moved as he tracked the movement of a Chitauri army over New York City, and his fingers as his grip tightened around Tony's hands.

"You in there?" Tony eventually wondered.

Swallowing, Rhodey looked away from the illusion, which Stephen then let vanish. His uncertain, distant stare migrated down to the floor, where it hung heavy as he tried to make sense of everything he'd seen and heard. It seemed an impossible task. Eyes grew glossy, perhaps with emotion or hollow shock, and he occasionally shook his head like he was arguing with his own mind.

But after that, his gaze abruptly focused. He looked up and met Tony's stare levelly. "What do you need me to do?"

Laughing with relief, Tony grabbed Stephen's hand, drew it to his mouth, and kissed it again with sharp, delighted relief. "First things first: we come up with an explanation for why you just called in Captain America's location to S.H.I.E.L.D."

As soon as he'd spoken, Tony trailed off. Captain America might be the first superhero, but in this version of existence, Doctor Strange was the first modern superhero. It was his name in the press, his name on merchandise, and that same real name in medical journals and on his medical school diploma. Stephen Strange was a hero. Tony Stark was a hero. And soon, James Rhodes would be a hero.

'Captain America,' with all the retro incongruity of that war bonds-selling code name, was about to feel more out of place than ever.

"Sorry, Rogers," Tony whispered to the black screen, where Phil Coulson had to currently be losing his absolute goddamn mind. "You're up."
They should have expected the call they got within an hour of Rogers' discovery. "I'll take this in the office," Stephen said, and stood. Tony had been laying out Rhodey's future for him: the suit, its capabilities, and how he could help with the larger fight they faced. Rhodey was up for that challenge, but was clearly overwhelmed by it. It'd be best if Tony stayed to comfort his friend.

And that meant that Stephen needed to face down Fury.

"Doctor," said Fury as soon as the call connected, and didn't bother to add anything else.

Stephen shrugged at him. All Rhodey had told S.H.I.E.L.D. was that Doctor Strange had provided those coordinates, and due to previous personal contact Tony had suggested the mission's lead agent. That meant that someone would want to dig out why Rhodey had been handed that information in the first place. Apparently, that 'someone' was right at the top. "So I surprised you today, huh?"

Fury stared silently back. Stephen's dismissive comment made his expression live up to his name.

Stephen met that shadowed gaze. It was easier than staring down Thanos, but quite a bit harder than Obadiah. "So, did you just call to say hello, or...?"

"I called for an explanation on how you suddenly had the location of one of the biggest assets in U.S. military history, when no one else knew that asset even still existed."

"Asset?" Stephen repeated dubiously. "I shared the location of a person."

"I said what I said, Doctor. What am I supposed to make of this?"

"I was nearly killed recently," Stephen said. He'd refined this lie over the past hour. "As you know. The world can't afford to be without heroes if that happens again, so I was trying a sort of divining spell to see where some other potential mystics might be. But the spell apparently didn't only consider mystics as protectors. It left me wondering why its strongest response was in the middle of the North Atlantic."

"Huh. That's an airtight explanation you just gave me."

Stephen smiled blandly. It was actually fun to frustrate Nick Fury, perhaps because Stephen so comfortably understood the role of working in isolation to make grand (questionable) plans for keeping the world safe. And in that role, he preferred to be the top dog. "Which is apparently a problem?"

"When you've informed me of organizational issues of which I should be aware," Fury said, neatly dancing around a precise mention of Hydra within S.H.I.E.L.D., "and then you come out of nowhere to tell us that Steve Rogers is alive and off the coast of Greenland, I start wondering things. I pride myself on running an awfully tight ship, and yet you've turned it into a colander."

"Oh." Stephen snapped his fingers. Neurological studies dealing with severe hypothermia didn't really take off for a couple more years, and so they couldn't afford for 2008 S.H.I.E.L.D. to mess up this thawing process because they'd scooped up Steve Rogers ahead of schedule. "Let me send you an overview of how you should handle Rogers' medical recovery. If you do it wrong, all you'll recover from this mission is an extremely patriotic vegetable." Doing this right would take days. At minimum.
Frustration clenched Fury's jaw and squared his shoulders. "Because you know how to do that."

"Well. I am a doctor."

"I want to know how you have information that no one should have. And that request is non-negotiable." Fury leaned forward. "'Magic' is not an answer, by the way."

"It's a little unfair to say I can't give you my actual answer as an answer," Stephen pointed out. Fury gripped his desk and looked ready to rip off its top, and so Stephen added, "Colonel, knowledge is just as valuable to me as it is to you. It's both our currency. I don't have a power suit or super soldier serum. I have what I know."

"You've got Aladdin's flying carpet," Fury noted, which was a fair enough argument to make. Still. "The Cloak of Levitation chose me on its own volition because of what's in my brain. I am my mind, just like you are. I out-strategize my enemies, just like you do. Neither of us would be of much use to anyone if we talked more than is absolutely necessary. Of course," Stephen allowed, "I doubt that answer will make you like me. Or trust me."

"You are smart," Fury drawled.

"I've pointed out a threat that you had no idea about," Stephen said, and held up a finger. "I've brought back one of S.H.I.E.L.D.'s biggest 'assets.'" A second finger rose. "How many times do I need to help you to earn your trust?"

"I'm not particularly fond of handing out trust," Fury countered. "I prefer to chip away at distrust. Slowly. And you sealing yourself into an airtight magical seal in that house of yours isn't helping with that."

That was rich, considering that Fury had learned about that magical seal because of how S.H.I.E.L.D. had tried to bug Tony's suit. "I'll send over the directions for successfully thawing Rogers. He actually will be a good asset as you try to take care of that problem we talked about, by the way. Tell him about your current projects. Despite his outdated origins, he'll have some good insight about how to proceed." After a second of consideration, he lifted his hand again. Before dropping it, three fingers were up.

Stephen still remembered reading news articles after the fiasco in D.C., and how 'Project Insight' had nearly ended the world. Considering the scale of the construction and the scope of the algorithm, he assumed that the Insight concept had to at least be in the discussion stages by now. The official story was that it had been inspired by the Battle of New York, but something of that complexity didn't happen in two years.

And from the way Fury pulled back when Stephen said 'project' and 'insight' with slightly too much emphasis, and then raised his hand, he thought he'd guessed right. Right now, Fury had to be wondering if he should pay special attention to a proposal that was currently only being brainstormed, still lacking a champion to push it through the pipeline into reality.

"I'll look for your medical recommendation, Doctor," Fury said after a lengthy pause, and transmitted a document drive location. "Send it to this address. I'll have my people look them over."

"No need to bother. I'm better than anyone you have."

"I might listen without double-checking your work," Fury noted, "if I trusted you. I'll look for your message. Fury out."
"Colonel," Stephen groaned after the message flashed dark. "You are frustrating." Though he probably deserved that frustration, actually, from how much he'd enjoyed teasing Fury. The two of them were sure to have many long years ahead where they each tried to out-plan and out-maneuver the other.

It took a while to type up medical recommendations, especially since Stephen didn't have Rogers' files and so had to provide options for many different possible conditions. Contact me for any clarification, he added at the bottom of the file, pointlessly, and sent it off to Fury. "Fury is slightly placated," Stephen announced as he walked back to the living room, "and I've given my medical opinion about Rogers' recovery."

"Rhodey," Tony announced with open disbelief, "wants a blue suit."

Stephen blinked and rounded on their visitor. "Your suit is grey and black."

"My suit," Rhodey countered, "doesn't exist yet." Flipping his phone around, he showed them the clean blue angles of the Air Force logo, with its rigid colored wings interrupted by gleaming silver trim. "I want this."

Tony's entire face compressed into a grimace. "That looks like my suit and Rogers' suit had a fashion runway baby. No way."

Rhodey's eyebrows rose.

"What about silver with blue accents?" Stephen suggested when Tony looked ready to blow a fuse. He hadn't noticed before, but the blue version of the Air Force's logo did look incredibly like that one streamlined version of Rogers' suit. Tony being asked to dress his best friend as a (future) version of Captain America clearly had him short-circuiting. Perhaps reversing the color arrangement would do the job.

"Let me try it," Tony grumbled, and with a gesture, brought a holographic version of the War Machine suit into existence in their midst.

"So," Stephen noted to Rhodey as he settled back into an empty chair. "You seem to have warmed up to the idea of heroics."

"It's amazing," Rhodey admitted, laughing, "what seeing your own suit being designed for you can do."

"Hydra needs to be cleared out more before the Air Force gets convenient access to this tech," Tony noted without looking up from his holographic work. "Rhodey, Stephen and I are getting a new place. After we—"

"You just moved in here," Rhodey said.

"Yeah, but it's way too small."

"I bet this is fifteen hundred square feet. In Midtown Manhattan."

"Just about," Tony confirmed. "And that's how big my bedroom should be."

Stephen smirked at Tony's indulgent nature, but said nothing. One, Stephen Strange had no room to talk about overblown luxury purchases. And two, he certainly wasn't going to complain about opulent lifestyle choices that would benefit him just as much.
"Anyway," Rhodey prompted after a significant pause.

"After we have that new place," Tony continued like he'd never been interrupted, "I'll have a full fabrication unit for making my own stuff. I've got some civilian Stark tech facilities going up just over the East River, but I want full control over this manufacture. And that delay will give Fury more time to root out Hydra."

"Speaking of Hydra," Stephen added, "I gave Fury another pointer of something to zero in on. Insight," he said to Tony, who nodded but kept working. "I also wrote up a guide for neurological recovery after severe hypothermic coma. Some important publications in that arena don't arrive until 2010."

Rhodey opened his mouth to say something, but a faint line scored between his eyebrows. He'd been reminded of their future status and was apparently struggling with it anew. Just because he'd started to accept this news didn't mean there wouldn't be stumbling blocks, and mentioning specific future dates apparently did make him stumble.

Well, Stephen amended as Tony sat back from his tweaked hologram and Rhodey's eyes lit with sudden excitement. Rhodes wasn't struggling that much with their status, by now. A power suit was the best distraction imaginable.

"This is weird," Tony said as he surveyed the first War Machine suit for this timeline. It had a base model to match the later versions they were familiar with, but the veneer looked far different. As requested, the greytone design the two of them were used to had been palette-swapped to the brilliant chrome and cobalt blue of the Air Force logo. It was as bold a look as the Iron Man armor itself, and looked like a deliberate counterpart in blue and silver to Tony's red and gold.

"That's pretty sexy," Rhodey decided, and rose to study the one-eighth size model of his future suit with a closer eye. "I think I—"

"Swap the chrome to gunmetal and the cobalt to navy," Tony loudly announced. The suit rippled with its color change a second later. The grey areas now nearly matched Rhodey's old-timeline suit, and the navy areas were close cousins to the old black patches. "Sorry," he then told Rhodey. "It was just too weird."

"I think I can work with this," Rhodey finished wryly, after giving Tony a long, pointed look, and reached out to spin the hologram to inspect it from all angles.

This new palette did look nice, and was a tidy compromise between Rhodey's requested color scheme and the even more muted one they knew from their reality. "You're definitely used to your suit being the attention-grabber of the two, Tony," Stephen noted. The sharp look his comment earned from Tony eased a second later, presumably as Tony realized that yes, Stephen was right: he'd always gone flashy for Iron Man. "Rhodes, does this mean you're really on board?"

"I suppose I am," Rhodey replied as he continued inspecting the hologram.

"How much did Tony tell you about the future?" Stephen wondered.

"A lot. I know what I'm in for. Not that I can tell anyone any of it," Rhodey added. "I haven't even tried, yet, but I still know that I can't because of that oath stick. I can feel it like a wall around my brain. Magic's weird, Doc." He hesitated, then added with a grin, "So if you're from the future, who should I bet on in the next World Series?"

"Philadelphia wins it over Tampa Bay in five."
"He remembers everything," Tony confirmed when Rhodey turned to him in surprise.

"Not that you'll be able to tell a bookie that," Stephen added smugly, "since we haven't given you permission to share it. But it'll be some good confirmation for you to see in a few months, before really ramping up your work in the suit."

"Oh, that reminds me," Tony abruptly said, and turned to a different holographic screen that appeared under his hand. It filled with apparently meaningless numbers, and so Stephen and Rhodey shrugged at each other as Tony conducted this new work.

"Before I go," Rhodey said, "what all can I tell command? We still need to settle on the final details. I'm gonna need a full public story that I can actually... say."

Stephen's eyes turned toward the ceiling in thought, after which he looked back down and suggested, "I was sensing some sort of dimensional effect. I mentioned it to Tony late last night, interrupting a call you two were making."

"And you told us it'd be worth checking out the UBC campus," Tony said without looking up. "Because you were just getting so, so worried. You figured we'd either find nothing... or save some lives."

"I still get a slap on the wrist for confirming that much," Rhodey sighed, then shrugged and nodded. "But I guess that's what I'm in for, now. So, to make it official: I can share that story with command?"

"Off both their nods, he exhaled and added, "I'm gonna leave. It's not like I'm gonna blab about whatever we talk about from this point out, but knowing that every word I hear inside this apartment today is off-limits is getting a little old."

"Thanks," Tony said, looking up from his work, and stood to help Rhodey to his feet. " Seriously, man. Thank you. This was a hell of a situation to find ourselves in. Knowing that we've got backup with all of this is... it's a big deal."

Rhodey took a while to answer, during which he studied Tony with deep consideration. "Hearing about future alien invasions is one thing. Seeing you step up like this, Tony... it's blowing my mind just as much. Maybe more. We'll talk again soon, all right?"

That prompted another back-thumping hug, after which Rhodey let himself out of their apartment.

Once alone again, Stephen turned toward Tony, only to get a clear view of the holographic screen he'd been working on. As his gaze flattened, Stephen noted, "That's an awful lot of stock shares you just bought."

Tony grinned and tapped the confirmation button, locking in his purchase order. "It's actually delayed until January of next year, but I knew I'd forget, otherwise." Almost instantly, his broker confirmed Tony's intention to buy a ridiculous number of Disney shares right after the new year, when the economy would hit its lowest point. "Rhodey wanting to place a winning sports bet reminded me that winter is coming, and I just couldn't let it go."

Stephen rolled his eyes at the Elsa reference. "Well, don't play the stock market too much. You're already affecting history by introducing these new technologies. Too many perfect buys and people will get suspicious."

"Speaking of affecting history," Tony said, and dismissed his stock purchase and Rhodey's hologram with two quick waves of his hand, "we need to plan our interview."

"Right," Stephen agreed, and settled in for a focused, productive discussion that lasted for as long as
they needed it to.

Or, until his injuries caught up with him again. It had been an early, demanding morning for someone still in recovery, and by shortly before nine Stephen found himself barely able to keep his eyelids open. They'd had hours to plan, and did feel ready, but this was still annoying.

"Go to sleep," Tony ordered as he curled up next to Stephen. Though not yet ready to fall asleep himself, he'd tagged along to bed. His tablet had its brightness turned down low enough not to be distracting. "That's all... huh."

"Huh?" Stephen drowsily echoed. Tony's body heat was something that Stephen was already growing used to as a sign to drop his guard and drift off. Occasional flickering memories of time loops had been tamped down, too, instead of stalking vulnerable nights in search of moments to pounce. This new normal was good.

"I just got a message from Fury. Somehow." Tony clicked it. "You're ignoring him, apparently."

"Don't tell him I'm falling asleep," Stephen said around a huge yawn. His trauma exhaustion wouldn't be properly appreciated, and so this early hour would just look embarrassing. Especially when he was in the arms of a man famous for leaving clubs and casinos right before the sun came up. "Wait. What's the message?"

"His doctors want to double-check their assumptions on what drugs to use," Tony recited from the screen.

Oh, that was easy. He didn't even need to claw back fully awake to remember those hypothermia articles. "Benzodiazepines and propofol," Stephen murmured against Tony's shoulder, and nodded when Tony lowered the tablet into his line of sight. The spelling was correct.

"Okay. Sent it."

"Thanks." Stephen closed his eyes, went totally slack against Tony's skin, and felt satisfaction fill his fading awareness. He'd chipped away at a tiny bit of Fury's distrust, apparently. Actually getting Rogers out of that plane and back into their facility must have made an impact.

"Happy birthday," he said the next morning, and smiled against Tony. It'd rained again; droplets scattered the window like a handful of diamonds as sunlight broke through clouds. How had he never noticed something as beautifully simple as morning light before Kamar-Taj? And now? Stephen Strange, surgeon, really had held a limited perspective on existence. "Two more years and I'll be able to call you an old man."

Tony blinked awake, then snorted. While in their thirties, forty had sounded old; while in their thirties again, forty was nothing. "Pretty sure you're older than I am."

Only if they counted perceived time. And perceived time didn't cause those expressive crinkles at the corners of Tony's eyes, physically marking just how emotional and reactive and Tony he was. Stephen was actually looking forward to watching more lines appear and deepen in years to come, because new emotions would earn every one. "Let's get up, so we're not rushing. And I'll make breakfast."

"Ethan Weiss," Tony announced once they were up, shaved, and dressed in deliberately casual clothing. This interview was about showcasing their heroics, but also about making them seem relatable. "That's our interviewer. Seems like a pretty normal guy. Don't think he'll have any particular agenda."
"What are some of his other articles?" Stephen wondered as he flipped Tony's omelette.

"Everything from Kanye to Colbert," Tony eventually replied, still scrolling through their reporter's story archive. "He digs deep, so we should be prepared for that, but it's to get a better story. Not known for stirring controversy, so that's good."

"Do we know where we're eating?" Stephen plated Tony's breakfast, then began his own. "Should I portal us somewhere?"

Hesitating, Tony then nodded and grinned. "Yeah, absolutely. I can see that article opening already: 'If you mention you're craving Thai food to Doctor Stephen Strange, you may soon find yourself walking through a magical portal into Phuket.'"

Stephen laughed at Tony's effortless recitation. "You've done a lot of these interviews."

"I've done a lot of these interviews." As Tony began shoveling in his breakfast, making appreciative noises that soon trailed off in favor of simply eating, he checked his tablet with his other hand. Nodding and swallowing, he added, "Nothing in the news about Rogers, yet. If S.H.I.E.L.D. locked that retrieval down, then he's not going to makes any headlines until he breaks out into Times Square. How long's recovery going to take?"

"I understand he's got healing properties, but I still recommended at least a five-day timeline. Minimum. The expansion of water inside frozen cells can hugely damage them, and whatever healing he's got needs a chance to wake up again and do its work while he's still comatose."

"Perfect. We'll make sure we've got the cover photo done by then, too. Weiss can add in whatever he wants about Rogers while he's writing up the story, but we're not getting pulled into a follow-up about the Captain America news."

Stephen frowned thoughtfully at his omelette as it cooked, then looked back up to Tony. "He was my idea, because we had to do something to convince Rhodey. Are you okay with this, though? Now that it's happened?"

Tony shrugged. "Sure."

That answer came too quickly. "Really? What I know the most about you two is that huge falling-out."

Shrugging again, Tony leaned forward on the breakfast bar. After a sip of coffee, he replied, "Pepper is Pepper, Happy is Happy, Rhodey is Rhodey. Some people stay pretty steady. But coming to the future did a real number on Rogers. The guy who just got defrosted twenty minutes ago probably won't even feel like the same guy from... all of that."

"All right," Stephen allowed after studying Tony to see if he truly meant that, and seeing nothing to counter it. He couldn't say for certain that Tony wouldn't respond poorly to Rogers once they were face to face, but at least Tony seemed to think that he'd be fine. Hopefully he was correct.

Stephen and Tony had finally managed to be completely honest with themselves. These next days were all about what other people thought, instead. From Rhodey to Phil to Pepper to Fury, everyone had to be on board with their intentions. Ethan Weiss, reporter for Rolling Stone, was no different.

He was relatively young, around Stephen's (visible) age, with a mop of brown curls and wireframe glasses. He recognized them on sight, of course, after they walked into a corner restaurant at noon. When he held his hand up to direct them toward his booth, Stephen and Tony found themselves walking toward someone very like them, down to his chosen outfit. All were in jeans and t-shirts;
Stephen's shirt had an interesting geometric pattern, Tony's was a vintage concert tour, and Ethan's had a watercolor of the famous Montauk lighthouse.

"Hey, thanks for coming," Ethan began, before Stephen interrupted him. Neither interviewee had taken a seat, yet; Tony had suggested how best to make this particular first impression.

"Have you already decided on the menu," Stephen asked, "or is there something else you're in the mood for?"

Their young, offbeat reporter was up for an adventure, which was how they soon ended up at an unassuming grill overlooking a beach in Rio de Janeiro. "It's better than it looks," promised Ethan as they took a battered, scratched table near a window. Radio music played faintly through tinny speakers. "I was here three years ago, and I've never been able to get their spices quite right at home."

"Give me good barbecue and a beer," Tony promised, "and I'm happy."

From the look Ethan soon made after biting into his perfectly seasoned, flawlessly roasted chicken, they'd made their reporter more than happy. "So," Ethan said once they'd all had an initial chance to sate their hunger. His recommendation had been a good one; the food was humble, but it was also delicious. "Let's start with the obvious. How'd you two meet?"

Stephen and Tony glanced at each other and smiled. So, this was the initial angle they were being asked about, rather than heroics? Neither would complain about that. In conversational tones, they related the story they'd formulated for Obadiah: they'd encountered each other once before Tony's injury. On that night in the hospital, they'd hit it off after remembering that initial chance meeting.

"Fate," Tony confirmed when Ethan asked them if that was really all they had prior to that famous night when Tony had paraded Stephen out in front of reporters and announced they were dealing with personal matters. "Sometimes, you can just feel it happening."

"And sometimes you can't believe it's happening," Stephen chuckled, "and it happens anyway." That was true for much of their life since landing back in 2007, not least that night with his energy shields in the Metro ER.

"You've seemed to lead a pretty focused life, Doctor," Ethan said to Stephen, who nodded, "but Mr. Stark, you've been famous for a lot of personal exploits."

"Have I?" Tony asked blandly. "Like what?"


"Is there a question buried here?" Stephen prompted. Tony sobered at his tone.

Ethan had the grace to look abashed. "You've been together with someone—the same someone—for eight months. Coming up on nine. What changed?"

"Sometimes," Tony reiterated, "you can just feel fate happening. Look, I'd developed a lot of extremely fun habits. It would have been easy to ignore the feeling that hey, this is different. But on that day, I knew that I'd woken up into a chance to overhaul my life."

With an admirable effort, Stephen controlled his expression. Yes, September 15th had started and
ended very differently for Tony Stark and Stephen Strange.

"I'm the world's greatest genius," Tony continued with his customary smooth tones and slick smile. "In technology," he added when Stephen cleared his throat, and flashed Stephen a particularly self-satisfied grin before continuing. "If you're smart, you always pay attention to the world around you. You look for opportunities, inspiration, anything that holds up its hand and says 'hey! Over here.'"

"So you recognized that things felt suddenly... unique?" Ethan prompted.

A significant pause answered him. On the booth seat between them, unseen by their interviewer, Tony found Stephen's hand and gripped it. "I thought I knew exactly what my life was going to be like," Tony eventually answered in a weighty, sincere voice that caught Stephen by surprise. "But one night, everything changed." It took Stephen a moment to realize that Tony was no longer talking about the night of his head injury on the staircase, but the night of Stephen's black blood. "I thought my life was great as-is. Then I realized that nothing in my life actually means anything without him in it."

Stephen's heart felt to swell until it ached. "Tony." He squeezed the hand he held. Across the table, even their reporter couldn't help but smile.

After a respectful pause to let the emotions subside, Ethan asked, "Does that have anything to do with the change in corporate strategy?"

"I knew that he was so much more than a weapons manufacturer," Stephen said without looking away from Tony's loving gaze. "He's meant to change the world in spectacular ways." Although Ethan had been recording their conversation, now they heard the furious skritch of a pen against paper. There must be notes to take beyond simple audio.

"He's hardly asked us about heroing," Tony quietly noted once Ethan slipped off to the restroom.

"Yeah. Not exactly what I expected." Their fingers were still locked. Stephen stroked gently down the back of Tony's hand with his thumb.

Even with days of realization behind them, this thing still felt all-consuming like no romance had since college. The show they'd put on for the paparazzi had sent their physical intimacy to ridiculous levels. The knowledge that they were stranded together in this redone universe had forced them into emotional intimacy, as well. When a romantic revelation abruptly arrived, it had enormous piles of fuel already stockpiled to burn.

"We want to make sure we talk about it," Tony eventually replied, once they'd sufficiently reveled in this reminder that the black lake was safely behind them and a bright, shared future was ahead. "For recruitment."

"Right." Blinking, Stephen realized just in time that Ethan was returning; he and Tony had let their world zero in on the other man. "So, I'm sure you have a lot of questions to ask about..." His hand slipped out of Tony's and gestured vaguely into the distance. "The hero business."

Ethan dutifully took that prompt to begin heroism-related queries: Tony's inspiration for the suit, the greatest struggles they'd run into so far, what it was like seeing merchandise for themselves, whether Stephen planned to tackle more magically-enhanced surgeries in his pursuit of saving lives.

"Of course," Stephen said, though he dryly amended, "without leaving myself open to attack, this time."

Tony stroked down his arm.
"Medicine and magic are just different perspectives on the same universal forces," Stephen continued. "The more tools you have access to, the more likely it is that you'll be able to make the best move. I care about saving lives. Sometimes the ideal way to do that is with spells, sometimes with scalpels, and sometimes with a new suite of surgical robots."

"Surgical robots?" Ethan asked as he scribbled down more notes. "Is that something that Stark’s getting into? Like your consumer electronics?"

"Sure," Tony said hesitantly. Stark Industries hadn't committed to that for development, but apparently he didn't mind the idea. But then the real reason for his hesitation emerged as Tony added, "Uh, let me know when you two are good to go. I should probably finally write Chuck his check."

Oh, right. Tony hadn't wanted to commit to that Metro donation until Stephen was actually back in the operating theatre, and they'd both obviously been rather distracted after those infant twins were operated on and Stephen was subsequently stabbed through the heart. Laughing, Stephen added, "Only eight months late?"

"Think of how excited Chuck'll be when I finally do it," Tony said, and grinned. "It was just... foreplay."

"Foreplay. That's one perspective," Stephen said dryly, but his hand slid over the curve of Tony's thigh. I remember what you asked for, the motion said, out of anyone's view, and yeah, you'll get some foreplay.

If Ethan noticed Tony's long, controlled inhalation, he didn't comment on it.

"Let me ask you one last thing," Ethan eventually said at the end of an interview that had lasted nearly two hours. (They'd also booked the cover shoot for the next day, safely before Rogers would wake.) "For months, people have been trying to find Kamar-Taj. Has anyone actually done it, though?"

"Of course," Stephen said mildly. He didn't know if anyone had based on his inspiration, yet, but he suspected as much from the people in that Kathmandu message board thread who'd suddenly stopped posting. Either way, every mystic currently filling its halls had tracked the place down in one way or another. People had always found Kamar-Taj; he simply wanted that number to rise. "People are training right now to save lives."

"Save lives how?" Ethan asked. "From what, exactly?"

Truths died in Stephen's throat. The world wasn't ready to know about the greatest threats lying ahead. He couldn't remember how much about Vancouver they were authorized to share. Even his own work was dicey to describe. His mention of eyeball-infecting demons had horrified Tony, once. Would he still be an inspirational hero if the world knew about those unspeakable threats? If they associated him with Lovecraftian nightmares? There was a reason he'd only dropped the masquerade on selected fights.

As the trained public figure, Tony stepped smoothly in. "My dad worked with the Allies in World War II. There was this creep named Red Skull who was building Nazi cult weapons that were as much magic as technology."

"Red Skull, of course," Ethan said as he took notes, and did genuinely seem to recognize the reference.

Stephen took a drink to keep his expression steady. He supposed Tony's mention of Red Skull
sounded natural, given Howard Stark's involvement, but it'd be a perfectly convenient lead-in for the forthcoming news about Captain America. He'd teed up a blockbuster story for Ethan, and the man didn't even know it. Yet.

"There are going to be more Red Skulls," Tony continued. "For all I know, Obadiah planned the same thing before Stephen and I shut him down. Right now, there are blueprints for God only knows what floating around on the darkest corners of the Internet. Three-dimensional printing is taking off, and people can buy literal supercomputers for their home office. The worst people can organize easier than ever. The world's standing on the brink of something terrible, but get the right people together and we can hold the line."

"And," Stephen continued, once his mood had steadied from Tony's overly-convenient namedropping, "populations keep growing. People keep clustering into cities, more each day. For some types, that just means there are easier targets. There are a lot of people at risk, and like Tony said, the world needs those who actually can hold that line. It's only going to get worse unless people fight to make it better."

Tony smiled. "Good speech."

"Yeah, yours too."

Ethan laughed, and jotted down his final notes. "I'm going to get a ton of pull quotes out of those. Thanks. Can I follow up for any clarifications?"

"Over the next three or four days, sure," Tony replied, sounding genuinely gracious for offering even that much, though he was simply pre-empting any Rogers follow-up after that timeline. "So get your notes together pretty quickly. Sorry, it's my birthday today and I already put off my birthday vacation to..." He turned and studied Stephen. "Where are you taking me?"

"If I said where we're going," Stephen said with affected patience, like they'd had this argument before, "then it wouldn't be a surprise vacation."

"Pretty sure he's taking me to Norway," Tony said in conspiratorial tones and leaned toward Ethan. "I mentioned the fjords once and his eyes lit up. He does that when he starts plotting. And for all I know, he can magic up some snow."

Tony definitely needed to let this Frozen in-joke go. "He can think that if he wants to," Stephen airily replied, "but yeah, we'll be unreachable for a bit. I'm not sure what your deadlines are like." If Tony was going to this length to avoid Rogers' debut, Stephen would play along... and also, Tony was probably less okay with everything than he'd promised.

"I'll find any holes quickly to clarify, yeah. Sorry, I didn't realize I was ruining your birthday," Ethan cut in.

"Are you kidding me?" Tony snorted. "I get to talk about myself to Rolling Stone. Happy freaking birthday to me. Come on, I want you to watch me sign a donation check. Make me sound really great when you write this up, by the way. It's a big, big check."

They probably really would have to go somewhere, Stephen realized as Ethan and Tony began struggling over the restaurant bill. (The magazine would never ask its subjects to pay for their interview lunches, but Tony laying down money was always a point of pride for him.) Their movements were always tracked, and if they were in New York when Rogers made his first appearance there, someone would know it.
But before that, Charles Findlay and Metro-General Hospital needed to receive their donation for the surgical suite, the research grant, and the ER upgrades. Tony signed that check with a flourish big enough to live up to both Findlay's and Rolling Stone's most outsized expectations. To the photographer Findlay had summoned up from the marketing office, Tony flashed his customary peace sign and adjusted the sunglasses that he (of course) hadn't removed inside.

This was a perfect cap to days that had been all about doing good by involving more people, and so Stephen smiled as he watched Tony slip easily into showboating mode. On a whim, he raised his own phone to snap a shot of Tony's peacock for the camera, then texted that photo to Pepper. She'd appreciate being thought of, and it'd be convenient if she liked Stephen.

And then, he put Pepper firmly out of his mind.

It wouldn't do to think of her while he was deciding on the best approach to suck off Tony Stark.
Tony groaned and fell backward onto the mattress. His erect cock bobbed with the motion.

Depending on whether the night was steered by Stephen's inexperience or personality, Tony had expected either hesitation or arrogance to deliver his birthday present. He hadn't accounted for the possibility of simple, focused determination. Stephen might not have done this before, but by God, he was going to figure it out.

"Good," Tony grunted as he felt sure fingers glide around his balls, then trace up the underside of the shaft at a deliberate pace. With Stephen down between Tony's legs, they couldn't repeat their hand-to-head connection to share sensation. Knowing that, Tony didn't hold back on a single vocal reaction. There'd be no confusion about how anything made him feel. "Good," he repeated as a longer, louder groan as Stephen made light contact with the most sensitive skin just below the glans.

Stephen studied Tony with sharp eyes, nodded once to himself, and lightly stroked the frenulum again. With that newly focused expression on Stephen's face, for a second Tony felt more like a lab rat than a lover. That didn't ruin the jolt of pleasure, though. Another light brush against that cluster of nerves earned a wordless moan toward the ceiling, and Tony tilted his hips forward in needy encouragement.

"Yeah," he panted as Stephen, still as serious as if he were directing a tricky surgery, wrapped his hand around Tony's cock and began to move. "Like that." After some experimenting Stephen found a nearly perfect rhythm, and so Tony bucked his hips up again to lock in that pace. Behind closed eyes, he moaned, "That's g—nghmmm!"

With his eyes shut, he hadn't expected the sudden wet heat of Stephen's mouth. Tony couldn't help but laugh breathlessly at whatever noise had just escaped him. Nothing mattered but the aching, delicious need at his groin and the steady sensation of Stephen working at it. For a while he let himself stay locked in blissful darkness.

Eventually his eyes slit open again, and another groan erupted at what he saw. Stephen was focused entirely on pleasuring him. This was a man who could bend reality as he willed, and yet nothing in the universe seemed more important to Stephen than tonguing Tony's shaft.

That sight was hotter than anything.

One hand firmly gripped the base of Tony's cock; the other cupped his balls. When Stephen slipped his mouth back over the head, then flicked his tongue against the same spot that had driven Tony wild before, it was too much. Reason fled Tony. His body screamed for more, now, and his hand instinctively reached down to grip Stephen's hair, hard. He needed to keep tonguing that same spot. Forever.

After a faint, aggravated noise of surprise, Stephen opened his eyes and looked up at Tony. Though he hadn't removed Tony's cock from his mouth, having his head suddenly locked into place was apparently not on his gameplan for the night. His eyes narrowed. The hand cupping Tony's testicles retreated to gesture in a quick, sideways motion.

Startled, Tony gasped as a small jolt of energy ran through his hand and its fingers twitched open. Bands of shimmering energy wrapped its wrist, next, and then slammed backward onto the pillow near his head. Stephen's hand gestured again in the opposite direction; Tony's other hand also jerked down. And then, confident that his work wouldn't be disturbed, Stephen continued as if Tony had
"Okay," Tony said breathlessly toward the ceiling. His arms strained against their bonds. His chest arced with that effort. "I can work with this. I can work with—" Once Stephen's tongue drew against that sensitive spot again, harder than he had before, Tony's words turned into garbled laughter. Lightning stabbed straight to his brain and curled his fingers and toes.

This was good. This was really, really good. This was 'my boyfriend has never actually done this before, fine, but he's a world-class expert on every nerve in the human body' good, and that was a learning curve that Tony Stark was goddamn excited to experience.

As Stephen returned to a steady rhythm of mouth and hand, pleasure began to slowly swell inside Tony like waves on a rising tide. Each soft sound and increasingly confident movement from the man between his legs made Tony's skin tingle. After one particularly perfect stroke, bliss surged and took higher thought with it. His animal hindbrain screamed for attention. Despite himself, Tony tried to reach forward again to lock Stephen's head back in place.

The magical bond held him as soon as he tried, of course. Another deep part of Tony's brain jolted with the reminder that he was bound and helpless. Helpless. Totally, wantonly helpless. Tony had no choice but to take whatever pleasure Stephen dealt him, of his choosing and on his schedule.

Oh. Oh, that was gonna do it. Point of no return.

Teeth clenched, Tony's breaths began to come in short pants as his fists struggled uselessly. He felt his balls tighten as heat raced through his body, prickling beads of sweat on his chest and tensing his muscles. By now he was on the very edge, just waiting for that one, last—

Stephen's tongue pressed hard on that spot he'd discovered and light exploded across Tony's vision. His hips bucked; his arms strained. As he came hard into Stephen's mouth, Tony let out a cry at full, unbridled volume. His entire awareness collapsed into raw sensation, and then his body collapsed bonelessly onto the mattress.

When Tony's orgasm hit, Stephen looked just as surprised as Tony sounded. It took him a few awkward seconds to swallow. He coughed.

Once coherence returned, Tony sighed happily toward the ceiling. That might not have been perfect, but boy it was a good place to start from. Contentment rolled through him. His mind felt fuzzy. Warm. Good. "Happy birthday. To me." And he grinned.

A moment later, he realized Stephen was still inspecting him like a patient on the table. He'd wanted to do this right, dammit, and apparently needed to assess his success even after Tony had come. Honestly, the clinical expression was a bit of a glow-killer. Tony hooked one of his feet around Stephen's leg. "Hands," Tony murmured after Stephen came obligingly closer. As they released, he pulled Stephen into a deep, concentration-ruining kiss.

This had been a perfect birthday. The warm weight on top of him had Tony looking forward to the next year, too. But when they broke apart, Stephen's gaze roamed yet again in silent inspection. He looked less intense, thankfully, but still... still uncertain, Tony realized. Stephen never let himself look uncertain, not unless existence was spiraling out of control.

Apparently, making sure that he'd done right by Tony was worthy of equal concern. That was downright heartwarming. Though he never would have believed it back in September, by now Tony was looking forward to Year 38, Round Two. Having a someone made all the difference in the universe.
"So," Tony said with a smile up at Stephen, and placed his hands securely on bare shoulders. "Thank you very much for that." His hands squeezed. "But I realized there's something else I want."

Stephen frowned down at him. "Yeah?"

Laughing, Tony rolled himself on top and replied, "For you to stop thinking." From the sounds Tony soon earned as he began to return the favor, Stephen was doing as requested.

The next day, Tony checked his hair as the Rolling Stone photography crew buzzed around him on the company's set. Estimating that they needed another five minutes to perfect the lighting, Tony let his memories fill with the previous night. It was always fun to mentally replay a session in bed when he was supposed to be in professional mode.

The assistant rolling a lint wand over his pants didn't know that Tony had been bucking up into Stephen's mouth twelve hours earlier. The photographer explaining his process for the cover shoot had no idea that the men he was about to capture had made mutual, gasping fools of the other. Stephen seemed to know what was in Tony's mind, though, when he saw the particularly sharp grin directed at him. He grinned just as widely and said nothing.

Seeing a new figure enter the busy set made Tony do a double-take, and his imagination went blank. He hadn't requested that Pepper attend the photoshoot. Nor had he known she was even coming to the East Coast. Yet there she was, showing her credentials to a security guard and making her arrival in a cream-colored dress she would ruin with spilled wine in a year or two.

Another wave of surprise hit him a second later. Pepper had walked in while Tony was thinking about the previous night... and it didn't hurt. Even when he prodded the bruise of their loss, he didn't feel guilty. At all.

He'd spent the first five months accepting that they weren't together now. That loss had ached, of course, but Tony's constant denial blunted the blow. Phil entering the picture had lead to nearly four months of facing the harsh reality that they were no longer aimed at a future of being together, ever.

If Tony hadn't had that one initial, unforgivable moment of thinking that hey, Phil would die and that would fix everything, he might have fought harder. But he had. He'd thought it. For a fraction of a second, he'd thought it. He'd seen Phil Coulson up and walking around again like a miracle... and then he'd wanted Phil to die again to make Tony's life better.

If any part of him could accept even a sliver of that, then he'd never been any kind of hero.

He didn't feel guilty over moving on, because he still felt guilty over Phil. That had just been a single intrusive thought, but it was so unacceptably terrible that Tony knew he had to make up for it. It was why he'd let Phil keep sniffing around his work and missions, like his career demanded. It was why he'd told Rhodey that Phil Coulson had to be the man who got to retrieve Captain America from the ice, even though that caused curiosity. It was why he'd never said one bad word about Phil to Pepper, like Stephen had suggested.

And besides, Tony realized with a soft smile, he wouldn't want to ruin something that left Pepper looking so happy.

He'd been right all along: the two of them could be great together. By now, that didn't feel like a threat to the way his future was supposed to play out. It didn't even feel like something he could grudgingly accept (if he absolutely had to). It just felt like a warm promise that in this new and different world, Pepper's life would still feel full.
Good. He was glad. And 'glad' was all he felt.

"You both look very nice," Pepper said as she walked in to inspect them. Their suits were simple, slim-cut black with matching dark ties against crisp white shirts. The typically white Rolling Stone cover background waited behind them.

"Pepper," Stephen said with surprise at the sound of her voice, and turned away from the stylist doing some last-minute touchups. (He was more annoyed by these details than Tony was, naturally.) "I didn't know Tony called you in."

"Officially, he did not," Pepper replied. "But I got to thinking about how you're now trying to set up multiple civilian facilities in New York. It's an awful lot to juggle. Especially with. You know. The hero suit."

"Oh." Tony blinked. Yes, he planned to introduce consumer household electronics, clean energy, and apparently medical robotics, and it made sense to have separate facilities for each developmental area. His plans kept expanding from 'one building in Long Island City.' "That'll be helpful. Thanks."

"And," Pepper added a second later, "Phil said he was going to be back east for longer than he expected. So I figured I could check on your facilities during the day, and at night he and I could... I don't know, see some shows." With a bright smile and shrug, she added, "Any recommendations?"

Tony turned to Stephen and waited for some useless knowledge.

"In The Heights got good reviews," he gamely replied.

Her smile further brightened. "Thanks."

"Check out the cover concept," Tony added, and walked over to where he'd stowed his supplies. What looked like an oversized silver briefcase sat just inside a nearby dressing room. After retrieving it, Tony kicked off the black leather shoes he'd brought.

"We might not do a full-length shot," the photographer called over when he saw what Tony was doing. "Or we might not like those on camera, so it'd just wrinkle your pants—"

"Nah, I'm good," Tony called back and stepped his sock-clad feet into the waiting Iron Man boots. They compressed snugly around his slim-cut pants, as did the gloves around the forearms of his jacket. Stepping back, he let Pepper take in the view of him in a severe but flattering Tom Ford look. That suit was an elegant monochrome backdrop for the real focus: the pieces of crimson power armor.

"I mean, it is a very Rolling Stone sort of look," Pepper decided after studying him critically. And it was, with the playful tweak on his image paired with the bold red/black/white color scheme. "Which makes it perfect, probably?"

"Please cooperate," Stephen said as he leaned past them and ducked into the dressing room. Pepper's momentary confusion shifted into another smile when Stephen returned with a red/black/white color scheme of his own, for the Cloak had settled on his shoulders. From the droopy angle of its collar, it was still unhappy about anything to do with the media.

"It doesn't look very... perky," Pepper soon decided.

"No," Stephen dryly agreed. "It doesn't." He turned to murmur something to it; probably a reminder that this was for recruitment, and so it had a heroic point.
The photography crew drew to a sudden halt at the appearance of their heroic gear. Even though these people handled the world’s biggest celebrities each month, they weren’t used to seeing sights like this. And that novelty was exactly why magazines had fallen all over themselves trying to land the first feature interview, and why Tony suspected this would be one of their top-selling issues. Ever.

By the time they were directed in front of the stark white backdrop, the Cloak had perked up enough to look normal. As directed, they posed side-by-side, but with Stephen slightly behind. The photographer explained that it was to hide a portion of the Cloak behind Tony, so that amount of red wouldn’t overwhelm the shot. Stephen, though, sighed that it was simply the burden of being taller.

"Shut up," Tony laughed, then tried striking a pose with one glove’s palm aimed toward the camera. A series of clicking noises from its lens followed. They were officially in business.

Inside the dressing room, several hundred rapid shots later, Tony had to assure Stephen that it had gone smoothly. Cover shoots were always a little awkward and always seemed to go on a little too long. Their photographer had seemed pleased, though, and so they should be getting a selection of possible covers for approval in short order. "And then," Tony added, "whatever one we pick gets sent to the Photoshop room."

"The Photoshop room, sure," Stephen dryly agreed. He still wasn’t a fan of the whole media circus.

Remembering Stephen's old desire to be journal famous rather than tabloid famous, Tony asked as he took off his bits of armor, "So. Think you'll get any doctor articles out of that twins operation?"

The abrupt topic change took Stephen by surprise, but after a few seconds he nodded with what seemed like genuine enthusiasm. "I had other things to worry about right after the surgery—obviously—but yes. I've already gotten interest on a lot of different angles from that procedure alone. I think some people want to set up other studies."

Talking about those medical angles was quickly meaningless to Tony, but it kept Stephen happy. He chattered away about journals in neuro-oncology, anesthesiology, and 'NEJM, of course.' This was his wheelhouse as surely as that cover shoot had been Tony's, and so Tony dutifully nodded along with everything until they were back in casual clothes.

"I looked at the previews," Pepper said as Tony called her inside. She opened her mouth to continue, blinked in surprise at the Cloak coming over to inspect her, and then smiled cheerfully at it. "I saw some really good cover options."

Tony gave her a thumbs-up, then handed off his garment bag to Stephen. He gestured a quick portal into existence and laid both of their suits on the bed at home, then hid the Cloak with a glamour spell as it settled on his shoulders.

By now, Pepper barely reacted to the display. "While I'm here, is there anything you'd like me to handle besides checking on the new facilities?" Though she was still getting used to magic's various shadings and had yet to make friends with the Cloak, Tony had been traveling via portal for months. She hadn't been a perfectly matched personal assistant to Tony Stark by being easily knocked off balance, and so Stephen closing his portal was no more notable than someone hanging up a call.

"No, that should cover things," Tony said. "Stephen's taking me somewhere for my birthday, so we'll probably be gone most of the time you're here. If you could handle any follow-up from Rolling Stone after we leave in a few days, that'd be great."

"Of course," she dutifully said. Her attention turned to Stephen. "Where will you be going?"
Stephen hesitated, then smiled. "I understand Tony's got his heart set on some mountains in
Norway."

Tony rolled his eyes where Pepper couldn't see. He was going to pay for that stock purchase. She
simply smiled and said, "Well, if you can actually unplug him for a few days to relax offline, I'll
consider that quite an achievement. Don't worry, I can handle anything from the magazine while
you're gone."

"Thanks, Pepper," Stephen said, still sounding a bit peculiar. "Do you need to be getting anywhere?"
he prompted, and held up his hand.

Blinking as she realized a portal was being offered, Pepper said, "Oh? Oh! Um, well, Happy
dropped me off here, and he's got the car." Apparently Happy had flown to New York, too. Tony
did actually feel a little bad about how he'd plucked Happy out of his life. "But," Pepper then
continued, "I've been wanting to try one of those things for months. So... yes, please portal me to the
facility in Long Island City, and I will have Happy meet me there.

"Bye!" she soon brightly said on the other side of a portal, with a warehouse in Queens behind her.
She looked downright thrilled to have just moved between boroughs in a single step, and waved as
the portal closed between them.

"She's fun," Stephen noted, though his eyes flicked to Tony as he said it.

"Yep," Tony gamely agreed. "Are you seriously taking me to Norway? We're trying to get off the
journalism radar when the Rogers news hits. But to have that happen in Europe, we'd have to get
majorly off any beaten path. I don't think we could even be on a lightly-spanked path."

"This is a surprise trip," Stephen said enigmatically. "I'll just lock down some details, and then we
will be out of any journalist's way. Trust me."

The next few days, during which Steve was (presumably) getting properly defrosted, were pleasantly
normal. Tony took down another terrorist cell in Central Asia. Stephen captured a demon that was
about to possess its way into being Panama City's biggest serial killer. They picked out a cover
photograph from their Rolling Stone options.

This was just what their lives were, now, Tony mused as he smiled down at Stephen's sleeping form
next to him, then flicked through a few real estate possibilities that Vincent had found. And those
lives were good.

All he could hope was that things wouldn't change too much when the Captain America news hit.
Their responsibilities wouldn't, nor their day-to-day patterns. But the world's mood would forever
shift when that red, white, and stubborn hero ran back out into it.

As Tony looked down again at Stephen, still and content in the darkness, he could only pray that his
own mood would stay steady. Because right now, Tony was happy. He was genuinely, deeply
happy in a way that he'd once thought this time hiccup had forever stolen. Eight months of oblivious
build-up had needed one hell of a eureka moment to make him realize what was in front of him.
Now that he had it, though, he'd be damned if he lost it.

He even knew that Stephen wouldn't do anything dangerously risky to end it all, Tony thought with
a contented smile, and stroked his fingertips lightly down the shoulder next to him. It'd been a
surprise when Stephen willingly pledged such a huge oath to that relic, but Tony would never
complain. Not when he knew this new happiness he'd discovered would safely last for years into the
future... so long as he didn't let his Rogers stress ruin anything.
He couldn't let that happen. For more reasons than one, too, because Steve was needed to run a lot of significant missions. Even beyond the global Hydra threat, he'd be putting out smaller fires all over the world. Bioweapons, dam threats, suitcase nukes being hijacked; there was a constant stream of danger that Rogers had wrangled for S.H.I.E.L.D. and as Avengers co-leader. If Steve felt like he couldn't step into the heroic life of the twenty-first century after being thawed in the microwave, millions of people would die. At minimum.

Which meant that Tony had to dig up a whole lot of additional memories besides Pepper, and let go of those, too. Sighing, Tony looked down at Stephen again. "I might get tense," he mouthed. "Sorry. I'll try real hard."

At least endorphins were a great stress reliever, Tony thought as he studied a realtor's listing for a full building on Wooster. (Only a few blocks from the Sanctum. He'd have to check with Stephen whether that'd be convenient, or if memories would sting.) The two of them were both smart, observant, stubborn, and helplessly in love. They were still figuring out each other's best rhythms in bed with all of those talents, and it'd been a hell of a fun learning process.

There was a reason Stephen was sleeping so well. He was recovered from his injury by now, and so exhaustion from the black lake had nothing to do with it. With a newly smug smile, Tony brushed his hand down Stephen's shoulder again. This time, the movement felt downright possessive. Then he flipped through the sales listing's other photos, and wondered where Stephen was taking him tomorrow.

"Wait, are you seriously taking me to Norway?" Tony asked the next morning as he saw a mountain-ringed meadow beyond a portal. Stephen estimated that Rogers would be waking (and breaking out) later that afternoon, and so it was time to make a safe exit.

It was a beautiful sight, but it was also downright desolate. The green curve of the valley was shouldered by imposing, stony peaks. All down its visible length Tony couldn't make out a single road, nor dwelling. "Are we... camping?" he asked in disbelief as he studied the completely empty land before them. "FYI, we do not need to hide out that far off the map."

"Just go," Stephen said, and gestured to the portal.

"I do not camp."

"Portal."

"At absolute minimum, I would glamp."

"Portal, Tony."

"I don't particularly want to glamp, though," Tony continued, "and I definitely don't want to camp, and since this is for my birthday—"

"Just go through the damn portal."

Sighing, Tony did. Only then, totally surrounded by the new landscape, did he take in the placement of the sun. It was still daylight, but at a sharper angle than what should have been midday in Europe. "Wait." Hoisting his bag onto his shoulder, Tony slowly spun and took in what he had to admit was a spectacular sight. The air was crisp like he remembered from the Canadian Rockies, but notably thinner and drier. "We're not in Norway," he soon concluded.

Stephen smiled. "Rule one: don't go into any restricted areas."
Tony blinked in confusion, then frowned.

"Rule two: no one in white can give you orders, but you have to listen to anyone else."

"Wait, wait."

"Rule three," Stephen added, and gestured to himself. He was suddenly in his mystics' outfit again. The Cloak shimmered into visibility a moment later. "I get to be the one to bug Wong first."

Laughing, Tony took in the landscape around him again. With expectations adjusted, he was able to appreciate the mountains' full, spectacular heights. "You did not take me to Norway. Okay. These are the Himalayas, and you finally got permission for me to hit KT."

"Just don't embarrass me in front of the Ancient One," Stephen replied, "and don't cause trouble."

"That is so offensive. I have never caused trouble a single day in my life. Except for all those days I... totally did." Grinning, Tony looked Stephen over, then wondered, "So, do I get my own spa robe set?"

"That depends," Stephen said dryly. "Are you planning to give up all ties to your former life as you dedicate yourself to the pursuit of universal knowledge? And only return to that life once you've surrendered to the implacable cosmic will?"

Nah. That didn't sound very fun. "Jeans it is," Tony brightly said, and gestured toward a convenient spot for Stephen to open the Kamar-Taj portal. "And I've gotta say, you did manage to find the one place where journalists can't possibly track us down."

As that portal opened, Tony looked through it with excitement. This part of Stephen's life was such a mystery that even the full world's attention hadn't been able to crack its code. Tony was curious about Kamar-Taj on its own merits, yes, but he was even more curious about the place that had permanently changed Stephen. This would be some real insight into who was still a very private man.

Impressive architecture in muted colors sat beyond the circle of sparks. At a glance, its humble coloring masked how large the place actually was. Perhaps Tony should have expected that, given the size of the one mystical building he'd seen, but people had easily located the three Sanctums. For a place like this to remain hidden to the world, even in a city of a million people, well... there was no other explanation but magic.

"Come on," Stephen said with a smile, and gestured forward. They stepped through it together. As the circle spun away into nothing, Tony turned to inspect the hallways that Stephen had once walked.

"I can't believe you didn't call me on rule two," Stephen chuckled as soon as they were securely and permanently inside Kamar-Taj.

"Rule two?" Tony repeated, then remembered it: while at Kamar-Taj, he had to listen to the orders of anyone not wearing white. With a rueful sigh, Tony once again looked over Stephen's blue and red ensemble.

He'd known exactly what he was doing.

Oh well. Tony's sigh morphed into a smile as he was steered down an austere hallway, for memories had returned of his wrists being magically bound in place. On very, very rare occasions... he might let Stephen tell him what to do.
"Where's our room?" Tony wondered as Stephen opened the door to a characteristically humble Kamar-Taj personal chamber, with a single window and twin-sized bed. He'd apparently been picturing a minimalistic retreat, not the Four Seasons Kathmandu, but this austerity was beyond anything he'd expected.

Stephen simply smiled. Part of this visit would be giving Tony a glimpse into his past. This sort of room was part of that past.

Dismay filled Tony's face when he realized that yes, this was it, and with a gesture to the individual bed he repeated, "Where's our room?"

"Most rooms are singles and privileges are earned."

"Then we can stay somewhere else," Tony readily replied.

"Tony," Stephen laughed, and laid a hand on his chest. "It's not going to be for long, and we'll be very close. And spending our days together. And then soon, picking out a new home afterward."

Tony still pouted, overblown and adorable. "Sleeping alone isn't a fun birthday present."

"Letting us rest up might be, though," Stephen countered. Tony couldn't help but chuckle at that; as soon as Stephen had recovered from his injury, they'd made every effort to tire themselves out. As his tone softened, Stephen continued, "I'd like you to see where I came from."

"Okay," Tony relented, and raised his hand to rest it on Stephen's. "I will meditate and... whatever is it that I'm supposed to do here." He hesitated. "Is there meditation? Is that on the daily schedule?"

"I mean, you could, yeah." Stepping back, Stephen gestured with a thumb over his shoulder. "Let me drop off my things. I'll be right back."

As requested, their rooms were side-by-side. He'd arranged this on the prior day and was mildly disheartened to hear that his request would be easy to fulfill. It wasn't like he'd expected Kamar-Taj to be filled to its limits by mid-2008, but needing some thought as to whether there were two adjacent rooms available would have been nice. Still, he remembered that message board website, and how people had vanished from the discussion after making a trip to Kathmandu. By now, there had to be newcomers.

His bag thumped against what sounded like an equally firm mattress to the one he remembered. They'd brought enough clothes for a week, though they might leave earlier, and he planned to put that time to excellent research use. Not only were there books to read, but he also wanted to examine some of the more intriguing relics in person. Many couldn't be borrowed offsite, not even for a day.

"Here," Stephen said as he walked next door again, and extended a card he'd been sure to collect before coming. It was safe to assume that Tony wouldn't want to be without internet access. Some people would relax if they unplugged; Tony would probably blow a fuse.

Tony glanced at it. "Password?" he guessed, and continued typing on what looked like a relatively normal phone, but was (of course) heavily customized.
Stephen retracted the card. "You're already online."

"Not the best security measures," Tony said, looking focused on whatever he was doing. "About a three-second brute force attempt and I was in. I tried accessing my satellites first," he added as he sat on the edge of the bed, "but that was a no-go. There's not a single accessible signal except for this wi-fi, so... good job on that at least, wizard IT."

"Well, there is a spell to block Kamar-Taj from satellite discovery," Stephen noted, and sat next to him. "That's probably interfering with your signal."

"Huh." Tony stopped for a second. "Yeah, probably." Genuine consideration filled him, but then he returned to his work.

"What are you doing, anyw—"

"There," Tony announced, cutting him off, and tucked the phone back into his pocket. "Your ISP was throttling your speeds. Most do. Upstream's not an embarrassment any more, and downstream's at least triple what it was."

Of course this was Tony's introduction to Kamar-Taj, Stephen thought with a laugh, and pulled them both to their feet. "Come on. Let me show you around."

The early June evening was humid with what felt like a passing thunderstorm, but it wasn't as oppressive as it would be at Manhattan sea level. Sunlight was breaking through clouds, and more filled the weather forecast. Privately, though, Stephen wished for a bit more rain before the storms left. Its sound through the window screen was soothing.

"Tell me what I'm seeing," Tony eventually requested. He'd stayed silent through a few hallways, but once they emerged into a walkway surrounding the largest courtyard, with the total scope of the complex evident, his curiosity swelled too much to ignore. Imagining this sight through Tony's fresh eyes reminded Stephen that it was as impressive as any world heritage site, yet unexamined and unknown even to a lifelong jet-setter.

"We'd train there," Stephen said, gesturing to one area where a small group of novices was working through forms. "Every day, we'd—" His forearm instinctively moved to block Tony's. A second later, they both smirked.

"We're out of practice."

"Well, you said our new place would have a gym." Relaxing, Stephen continued. "It was exhausting. I don't mean physically... though it was. My injuries still lingered when I came here." He watched the novices for a bit, and how they clearly couldn't yet weave their spells as desired. Seeing that, all his old training frustrations came back fresh. Failure had been a valuable lesson here, but an absolutely agonizing one. "For months, every single day I was faced with countless things I didn't know. Honestly, I hated it."

"But you stayed."

"I spent my very last dollar getting here. Yeah, I stayed." Though Tony nodded, Stephen could see a lack of something in his eyes. He might intellectually appreciate the idea of burning through every single available dollar, but it wasn't a stress he could truly empathize with. Stephen added, "And so far as I could see, it was literally my only hope for having any sort of worthwhile life."

Now that, Tony understood. He nodded again.
"It wasn't the only path I could have taken," Stephen added. "I can see that, now. I wasn't just the best surgeon because of how I could cut, but because of how I thought." He folded his arms and shook his head again at the memory of where he'd stood just like those novices, resenting everything he was trying (and failing at). "There were other surgeons who could have implemented my ideas. I could have worked in research, just like Christine suggested."

"But if you didn't cut again, then nothing in your life was 'worthwhile,'" Tony paraphrased. "Right."

"So you were right there," Tony mused as he studied the novices. "Looking like that." They were trying to generate small, plate-sized energy shields as they stood face-to-face. If their unprotected knuckles struck each other when each partner punched forward, they'd bruise and injure. If only one partner managed the shield, the other would end up striking it, and the energy would leave their skin pink and tender. If both succeeded, though, the shields would safely rebound.

"I wasn't even able to try some training for weeks," Stephen recalled. "Couldn't have my hands impacting anything. Which slowed me up even more."

"Huh," Tony said softly, without looking away from the novices. His hand found one of Stephen's and held it gently, then stroked his thumb across its skin. Consideration still filled his expression, for he was clearly putting all his agile imagination to work on imagining Stephen's history.


Stephen frowned.

"You have to come here for the universe's timeline, but you didn't come here until you had no other options. So far as you could tell, anyway. You would have left if you had any chance or reason." Tony gave the novices a lopsided, distant smile. "But I fucked up and let baby Strange see those operation scans. Including the date. It really was all my fault."

Oh, Tony couldn't blame himself for that. (Even if, right after it'd happened, Stephen had gladly assigned that blame.) "Baby Stark was actually willing to work with me on keeping the timeline steady," Stephen warmly countered. "I think I know who the bigger troublemaker was, that day."

Tony didn't look like he agreed, exactly, but he appreciated the effort being made. For nearly a minute they stood under an approaching sunset, in a deeper peace than should be possible in the middle of a city. Tony's thumb still occasionally swiped across Stephen's hand, then trailed gently down the fingers that would remain healthy. "I'm happy I'm here," he eventually said in the silence. Stephen looked over to him.

"I mean, if you asked me then, on that day... I don't know." Tony sighed and shook his head, then smiled off at nothing in what looked like apology. Yeah, Stephen couldn't blame him for any lingering uncertainty about landing in this timeline, even with the improvements they'd made to it. It wasn't a matter of being stranded together, but of being stranded with absolute hell waiting for them... again.

"But since it happened," Tony said, and turned. "I'm so goddamn happy we figured this out. And I'm happy I'm standing right here with you."

Low, gentle light wrapped them both. It skimmed along elegant architecture and turned the old, polished paving stones under their feet into sheets of late-day gold. Tony's dark hair gleamed under that fading sunlight. Everything looked like a master's painting.
For a moment Stephen instead pictured Tony in a Metro emergency room, backlit by the gleaming halo of an energy shield. Stephen had thought that moment with the gunman would end what mattered in his life, and yet... it'd saved Tony's whole life. That was an easy trade. "I'm happy, too," Stephen confirmed after studying him, and smiled. "You hungry?"

"That just totally demolished my nice moment." Tony smirked in that fond, lopsided way he had. "But yeah, I'm actually starving. I skipped breakfast."

They'd been eating in some of the finest restaurants around the world, picking options from expensive menus. That would change. The kitchens at Kamar-Taj served rice and vegetables at breakfast, one vegetarian option at lunch, and two options at dinner. (Sometimes, one was vegetarian; sometimes, both.) There were no substitutions, for food was simply fuel for the body and these meals were always smartly chosen.

"Come on," Stephen suggested when they'd grabbed their plates. Momo dumplings made up all of the dinner options. Some of them were filled with vegetables, others with chicken or goat. "Let's take in the rest of the sunset."

To his mild surprise, Tony had taken some of the momo with goat fillings, and plenty of the vegetable ones. He'd spent occasional time in India, he explained as they sat on a set of broad stone steps, and this food looked familiar. "Not bad," he said after chewing one of the small dumplings, which he'd dipped in a spicy sauce that sat between them. "You'd really pay for something this fresh in New York."

"It took me a while to realize that," Stephen said after washing a mouthful down with a drink of crisp, cold water. "At first, all I could think about was how a year earlier, I'd been trying out Michelin stars. But now I was alone. Penniless. Joints in fresh pain every time we had a cold night. And... eating minced goat."

"Goat can be good," Tony countered, and popped in another sauce-covered momo.

Stephen smiled and said nothing as he reached for one of the chicken momo. In the decades he'd spent seeing Tony Stark in the media, he'd assumed the man was frivolous. A magpie of sorts, who was constantly distracted from his distasteful military work by the latest shiny (or fast, or expensive, or...) object to enter his life. In comparison, Stephen kept his focus. He only allowed himself a few specific interests beyond medicine, and stayed deep and narrow with indulging them.

Of course, by now he knew that Tony was an infinitely better man than he'd given him credit for. He also saw that Tony had let himself enjoy a hell of a lot more in his day-to-day life than Stephen had, with fewer concerns about whether it was appropriate for his station. He'd gone too far with that indulgence, obviously; the Iron Man crisis forced him to course-correct. But, as Stephen remembered how his own time as a novice had been so painful because his boundaries were so rigid and so certain... well, the two of them probably balanced each other very well.

(They did both equally disregard others' rules and boundaries. But that was a different discussion.)

As he swallowed down his next mouthful, Stephen realized with surprise that one of the novices was walking over from their training exercise. "We might have studied them a little too obviously," he noted quietly to Tony, who nodded but shoved in another dumpling.

"Dr. Strange?" asked the novice when she came close enough. Her dark hair was pulled back into a tight, rather unflattering ponytail. She'd been working hard; her freckled cheeks glistened with sweat. Hopefully she'd improve her magic skills soon, for she was probably just over five feet tall and thin. These combat exercises couldn't be fun with just her own fragile body for backup.
Stephen smiled with the instinctive PR habits Tony had helped him develop, about to ask whether he was known from the media or from (foolishly) introducing himself all around Kamar-Taj. But then he blinked and sat up straighter. He'd just had a flash of what she must look like with her hair down. "Rosa?" he asked uncertainly.

An enormous smile beamed. "You remembered."

Yes, this was that woman who'd shoved her business card at him for an autograph. Her long hair had been loose and flowing, then, and her height was more impressive in towering heels. "And you found Kamar-Taj," Stephen replied and gestured around them. Leaning over to Tony, he murmured, "Santa Monica. Sushi night," and saw recognition light in his eyes.

"I found it," Rosa laughed, and wiped away a trickle of sweat. "It's hard, but it's worth everything."

She looked barely twenty-five. There was a lot of work in this woman's future, but she'd also have so many chances to learn and grow. "Make a shield," Stephen prompted, wanting to start her on that path.

Inhaling, Rosa nodded once, extended her arm, and balled her fist.

To give her an honest chance, Stephen waited until disappointment filled her face before assuming she'd failed. "No, put it back up," he said when her arm lowered. "Have you made one before?"

Frustration visibly intensified. Oh, yes, he remembered that feeling well. "Twice. But..." On accident, Rosa didn't need to say. He remembered that, too.

"Where is energy flowing? Where do you feel it being gathered?" When she wiggled her clenched fist, Stephen shook his head. He'd made the same mistake. "Here," he said and stood, and held his palm against the flat front of her fist. "Try to aim the energy into me. Like it'd follow the line of my fingers."

Tony frowned slightly at him offering to be a target for this practice, but said nothing.

Even so, nothing happened. Now embarrassment mingled with Rosa's frustration. She wasn't just failing for herself; she was failing in front of the man who'd diverted her whole life.

As soon as her efforts began to tense her muscles, Stephen had known that failure was inevitable. She was trying to force this. So long as a mystic tried to control energy inside one's self, they'd never succeed. Mystics weren't like Thor or Danvers or Maximoff, drawing upon a well of energy from their own beings. What they learned here was how to align their bodies and intentions with infinite, multiversal flows of energy. They weren't a source; they were a conduit.

"Try again," he prompted, and pulled his hand back an inch. Prompting her to separate the flow from her own self should help. "The energy should appear along the plane of my hand."

"Try again," he prompted a minute later, and pulled his hand back another inch. If she understood that the energy shouldn't be appearing inside her, perhaps that would let her freely release it. "No. Keep your hand where it was." When she began to move her hand back toward him after another useless try, Stephen's voice tightened. "I said to keep your hand still."

"Sorry," Rosa almost whimpered.

Yeah, he could understand the Ancient One's decision to strand him on a mountain summit. People came here with so many assumptions about what power was and how to wield it, and those assumptions were wrong. The necessary surrender didn't come easily, most especially to stubborn
people like him. "Tony," Stephen said after considering things, and sat back down. "I'm about to astral project. Could you please catch my body, and lower it?"

At the reminder of the time in the New York Sanctum when Stephen hadn't given him fair warning of what would happen next, Tony smiled and reached for him. "Yes. I can do that. Thank you for asking," he added, a little too pointedly.

Rosa soon swallowed at the sight of Stephen's translucent astral form. Her gaze kept darting down to where his abandoned body now lay. As Stephen stood in front of him, Tony's hand rested on the still body's shoulder. He'd pulled that body closer and the head used his leg as a pillow. Even without his suit handy, Tony gave every impression of waiting in protective guard.

"Look at me," Stephen ordered Rosa when her gaze wandered one too many times. "When someone astral projects, it's complete but directed submission to the energy flows of our universe. You are able to merge so seamlessly with external forces that you allow that energy to carry you out of your own body, in the precise way that you intend."

The other novices had all ended their class, he saw in the corner of his vision. They were watching the lesson.

"Your soul matters," Stephen continued, and gestured to his translucent form. "That's only a tool," he added with a gesture to his body. (Tony didn't seem to appreciate that description.) "Prioritizing the parts of your existence properly is the single hardest lesson you'll learn here. We're used to thinking of our bodies as us."

When he first showed up here, he certainly had. He could still recall the fury of informing the Ancient One that there was no broader perspective about life, no higher goals than biological functions, nothing. God, he'd been such a short-sighted dick.

"And they're not?" Tony wondered. A novice who looked too interested in Stephen's abandoned body stepped quickly back when Tony's sharp gaze turned on him.

Stephen looked over his shoulder. At an angle where the novices couldn't see, his eyebrow arched. "If you woke up in a different body, in a different place and time, but still knew who you were... would you still be you?"

"Huh," Tony said after a long pause, and smiled. Before this timeline misadventure, he'd probably had the same rigid scientific perspective that Stephen had first carried to Kamar-Taj. But if anyone had experienced something to make them reassess how souls mattered more than a specific body, it was the two of them.

That question just sounded like a vague hypothetical to Rosa and the other novices, of course. "So my shield," she guessed, "isn't me forcing energy, it's me letting go of energy. Like you let your soul come loose of your body." Her gaze danced again between Stephen's astral form and his motionless body. Their novice audience made the same study. A few held up their fists to consider them.

A moment later, one of the other novices had a shield successfully bloom in front of his hand. Laughing, he began moving that fist around and looked proudly at how the shield followed it. "It works," he said in a strong South African accent. "Don't think of forming a shield," he quickly added to his fellow novices. "Think that you are helping a shield to form. It wants to. Protective energy already exists. We shape it, not make it."

After that explanation, a few more managed to have shields pop. Rosa had a few shimmering sparks appear, at least. That was more than before.
"Work with them," Stephen told her. "You'll get it."

Nodding and smiling, she stepped back and rejoined the crowd. A moment later, Stephen found himself blinking up at the darkening sky as he woke up in his body. "I didn't know you had a teacher in you," Tony noted as he looked down at where Stephen's head rested on one of his folded legs, and adjusted a bit of hair.

"Oh, I don't," Stephen admitted. Impatient and impossibly high standards weren't a good combination for mentoring anyone. But then he hesitated, studied the excited novices, and reconsidered his words. "So far as I know. But... I did actually try to involve my residents more in surgeries, this time." Because it wasn't about him, after all. Maybe he was learning more than expected in this second go-round on life.

"Well, good. And by the way, your astral-less body still kind of creeps me out," Tony admitted in a whisper, probably not wanting to harsh the novices' mystical buzz.

"Just pretend like I'm sleeping," Stephen replied, and sat up.

"I can try, but. Er. Wait. Something else kind of creeps me out, too," Tony murmured as Stephen began to stand, and pulled him back to a sitting position. "Four o'clock. Don't be obvious."

Stephen tried to look like he was inspecting a novice's attempt as he peered over his right shoulder. Any subtlety was ruined, however, when he couldn't help but brighten after realizing who'd been watching them from a far walkway's shadows. In those red apprentice robes, it took him a moment to recognize Karl Mordo. That meant his consideration was obvious, and the reaction.

"And the creepy guy is walking over," Tony noted as Stephen encouraged them both to their feet. "Terrific."

"Sorry. I smiled."

"Dr. Strange," Karl noted as he walked over. "Mr. Stark. I'm Karl Mordo."

"You know us?" Tony asked with clear hesitation as he looked Karl over. The man walked with the same certainty he'd always shown while helping to train Stephen. Now Stephen realized that much of the teaching he'd displayed, both here and in the operating room, mimicked Karl's pointed but encouraging tones toward him.

Medical studies had always been easy for Stephen, as had all its component parts: organic chemistry, biology, and the like. That confidence was one reason why he'd so often disrespected his school instructors, who seemed to have little to offer him except for awarding another 'A.' Magic was the first time he'd truly needed help. The Ancient One was his compass guiding the way, but Karl Mordo was the man who'd been there day-to-day to steer the ship in a storm.

Unaware of all of that history, Karl inclined his head slightly. "There are a lot of news stories about you two." Tony wouldn't know what those clothing colors meant, but to Stephen's eyes, Karl was already moving like someone who'd earned the right to customize his robes. Odd that he wasn't wearing his typical green, yet, with the confidence he clearly held.

"Well," Tony allowed a moment later, after studying him again. "I guess you do have internet, here."

"May we?" Karl added with a gesture toward a distant path that would take them away from the novices and their distracting shields that now lit up the deepening night. "And one of you," he called in a louder voice. "Take those plates back to the kitchen to be washed."
Once they had more privacy, Karl continued, "I've been wanting to meet you, Dr. Strange."

"Stephen." His voice was warm like he directed at few people. After Karl left abruptly in Hong Kong, he'd been missed. Stephen always expected him to pop back up, yet he never had. He wondered what had become of Karl in the days since his departure. They hadn't separated on the best terms, to say the least, and that was a real regret.

"Stephen," Karl duly corrected. "I think I've learned all that you shared with people during your previous visits. You're rather... intriguing." Tony eyed him sidelong, but said nothing as Karl continued, "Is it true that you're from another timeline?"

"I really should have been more careful about sharing that," Stephen admitted, "but yes. It was a side effect of a terrible battle. You and I knew each other, there, and we actually became close. That's why I smiled at you." Off Karl's considering nod, he added, "You helped me a lot when I came here. You..." Flashing back to earlier than their lessons in magic, to when Karl had driven off attackers and argued for Stephen's acceptance in the order, Stephen finished, "You saved my life as much as anyone ever has."

"Really," Karl replied with increasing bemusement, and not a small hint of pride. "I did that to the famous superhero?"

Right. 'The famous superhero.' Their dynamic was all different, now. Even with Karl knowing that he'd come from an alternate timeline, Stephen couldn't share how he wasn't supposed to arrive at Kamar-Taj for years. He was far too skilled, thanks to the knowledge overload granted via the Time Stone. It'd been the most intense practice imaginable, endlessly challenging and with zero holds barred. Normal practice on Earth would take decades to match it.

And Karl was a little touchy about using the Time Stone. Better to let him think that, in an alternate timeline, Stephen had been training since young adulthood, or even childhood.

"You did," Stephen confirmed. "I was left vulnerable, but you drove them off and got me to safety. It's how we met."

"Interesting," Karl mused.

"Did I know that?" Tony asked, a bit too pointedly. "Huh. I don't think I did. You never mentioned him."

Frowning, Stephen looked at Tony, then looked at Karl, and then back. Hopefully, Tony picked up on the underlying message: *stop acting weird, he'll notice something.*

"When the Ancient One saw that you'd arrived," Karl continued, "she asked me to observe you. Apparently, you'd mentioned to her that we knew each other where you came from. She encouraged me to see what you were like in person." His gaze flicked back to Tony, who still seemed oddly grumpy. "And to see how the outsider behaved."

"Huh. Outsider. So. How have I behaved?" Tony wondered.

This time, Karl noticed. He drew to a halt with his hands folded at the small of his back. "Suitably respectful of Kamar-Taj's traditions. I trust that will continue?"

"Oh yeah, I'm super respectful," Tony nodded, even though his stance looked like he was standing in his suit. "It's really important not to cross any boundaries. Don't you agree, Karl?"

"Tony, what the hell are you doing?" Stephen muttered, right near Tony's ear.
For a long moment, Karl said nothing. His face remained as controlled as ever. Then a small smile threatened to burst through, and he looked down until his typical composure had returned. "Stephen, you're of course free to roam freely; the Ancient One's made sure people know that. Tony—"

"Mr. Stark."

Stephen's eyes closed. He barely kept himself from sighing.

"Mr. Stark," Karl corrected, "what are your plans while you're here?"

"Apparently, I'm meditating." Tony rested his hand on Stephen's shoulder and added, "But when Stephen tests some of the relics, it'd help if we had different types of eyes on that prize. So I'm here for that research, too."

"So long as he doesn't touch any relics without you present," Karl said to Stephen, who nodded. It was a reasonable request. At least Karl was staying steady, even if Tony was still oddly twitchy and abrasive. "Well, Stephen, there are things I must attend to before lights out, but thank you. Watching you work with the novices was fascinating. And not at all what I expected, from what I've seen on the news."

"I actually learned that teaching from watching you," Stephen said, just barely remembering that he couldn't say he'd learned any magic from Karl. Tony's hand tightened on his shoulder. After a long breath to steady his response, Stephen finished, "It's genuinely good to see you, Karl. We'll catch up. So to speak."

Once they were alone, Stephen counted down an additional five seconds, rounded on Tony, and held his hands out in expectation of getting an explanation for whatever that had been.

Bizarrely, Tony looked just as annoyed.

"What was that?" Stephen demanded, only to finally, finally place the look on Tony's face. The world needed a few seconds to realign. After it did, Stephen barely kept from laughing, and Karl's struggle for composure made sudden sense. "Tony. Let me ask you something. How many men did I say I'd dated before you?"

"You..." Tony went very still for a long, awkward stretch. His tight expression barely moved, yet shades of embarrassment and regret filled it. "None," he then confirmed reluctantly, for that admission demolished the assumption he'd clearly made.

"You were jealous," Stephen said with an increasingly huge grin.

"I was not—" Tony lifted his hand, inhaled, and lowered it. "You're hardly friendly to anyone and you definitely don't admit that you needed anyone's help. You only started acting like that to me after we... y'know."

"Started sucking face in front of the paparazzi, right." Stephen gestured toward where Karl had walked away, then back to himself. "So. Were you imagining things?"

Tony's broad, bland smile was a warning to stop.

"Naked things?" Stephen added. He again gestured between himself and Karl's departure. "Was some Pornhub take-off on 'arriving at Kamar-Taj' playing in your head?"

"Stop," Tony said outright. Rolling his eyes at himself, he shook his head and pointed out, "Don't look so proud of yourself. You've gotten all twitchy when I mention Pepper, FYI. There's no
superiority, here."

"Counterpoint: you were actually with her."

"Stop arguing," Tony grumbled. Clearly, he had no real counter against how yes, he'd been overly defensive. "This is supposed to be my birthday trip. Celebrate me a little more."

"Sorry," Stephen said as he gestured them toward the residence hall. As they set into silent motion down the path, he remembered Tony looking protective of his abandoned body as Stephen astral projected. He'd known perfectly well that Tony wasn't a fan of that sight, and although he'd asked first this time, he'd done it anyway. And then, after firing up Tony's protective instincts, meeting Karl couldn't possibly have helped that mood.

Especially since they'd come here to avoid... Stephen nearly stopped walking, and smoothed out his pace when Tony looked curiously toward him. Especially when Tony had come here to avoid being asked about a man who had veered away from what Tony thought was a stable, predictable relationship. The ticking clock of Rogers' arrival colored everything that happened here.

All right, Stephen admitted as he thought about their individual bed chambers. He should have traded off the 'accurate glimpse into Stephen Strange's past life' part of things in favor of requesting a double room. Tony would obsess over that developing news story as he was left alone at night, and since he hated astral projecting, Stephen walking through the wall to chat wouldn't help anything. Damn, he'd messed this up.

"Hello again," Tony said with lingering suspicion when they rounded a corner and saw Karl standing in front of their doors. His frown said that he might have accepted that they weren't ever a thing, but he still didn't like how easy it was to imagine that possibility.

"I was just writing you a note, Stephen. And Mr. Stark," Karl said pleasantly, and folded away the paper. "I suppose that's not necessary, now. Here."

Stephen looked down as Karl passed over a key. He didn't recognize whatever room it was to.

"The visiting caretakers of the Shivkhori shrine left early this morning," Karl said, still with the same amusement he'd displayed ever since Tony's flaring jealousy. "So there was actually a double room available for you two. Number twenty-nine."

Tony opened his mouth, laughed faintly, and closed it without saying anything. He looked up at the ceiling, shook his head once, and finally said, "Thanks."

"Of course," Karl said. Mirth danced in his eyes as he walked away.

"Whatever. He's fine," Tony admitted. "Come on, let's grab our things and relocate."

"Right. Lights out isn't in too long. I know we're on New York time, but we'll just have to adjust." The room they soon discovered was equally humble to the ones they'd left, though larger. It wasn't a king-sized bed like they'd grown used to back home, but Tony was a cuddler. They didn't need much space.

"I'd 'celebrate you a little more,' as requested," Stephen said once they'd locked the door behind them, and found a place for their bags in the tight space, "but those window screens aren't exactly soundproof."

"So long as I'm not alone," Tony readily replied and stripped off his shirt. Soon he would crawl into bed and wait to fall asleep, though it would probably only be a nap for someone on New York time.
When he went to bed but wasn't yet ready to sleep, there were two options for what he might do while he waited. The open window, blocked only by a carved wooden screen, took the more athletic of those possibilities off the table.

Therefore, there was only one likely option for what Tony would do while he waited for sleep to come on an awkward Eastern Time schedule. With that in mind, Stephen walked over to Tony. "The very first person I directed toward Kamar-Taj managed to find it."

"You know, I completely forgot about her by now," Tony admitted, "but yeah, I was glad to see that. I bet that means that other people will be able to track it down, too. I know you were worried about people making it to Kamar-Taj."

"I was," Stephen agreed. "And I did better with astral projecting around you. We're not in two separate rooms. And you learned that there's no reason to worry about Karl, whatsoever."

"Uh huh," Tony said uncertainly, and waited for whatever the point of this conversation might be.

"Things you're worried about can turn out better than expected," Stephen carefully summarized, and retrieved the tablet he'd slid free of Tony's bag. The other thing Tony did to fall asleep was read the news... and by now, there were probably stories. "Come on. Let's lie down."

They did. Cool night air was coming in through the window screen, and so they were both glad of the other's body warmth as they inspected the tablet's feed in the darkness. It was midday in Manhattan. Hours had gone by in the crowded city, and there were probably many stories that had already emerged: broken water mains, a hit-and-run, an assault on the subway with the suspect still at large.

None of those mattered, though. Not compared to the screaming headlines of CAPTAIN AMERICA RETURNS.

"So, there he is," Tony murmured as the article's photograph loaded and they both saw a bewildered Steve Rogers staring at the sights of 2008. Nearly every top story on Google News looked the same, for nothing else seemed to matter that day. The only differences between the countless stories were the angle of the photos and specific wording of the headlines.

"Things can turn out better than expected," Stephen reminded Tony after taking in the way he was staring at that photograph, and the terrible, aching conflict that filled his gaze.

Tony nodded, but didn't look away. The eyes in his young face looked older. With a sigh, he leaned his head against Stephen's shoulder and said, "That'd sure be nice."

Chapter End Notes

I've been spacing out introductions so it didn't feel like they were all coming at once, but I've been waiting impatiently on Karl for a long time. :)
Chapter 27

Yes, they meditated at Kamar-Taj.

Tony exhaled. Air moved back into his lungs. He held it for several seconds, then made another smooth exhalation. Thoughts crowded his skull, but they were held back like wasps behind a window screen. He focused instead on sensations of his body: the pattern of his breathing, the angle of his spine, the hands he let lay idle against his thighs.

This wasn't the first time he'd meditated; stressed Los Angeles billionaires were ready targets for overpriced life gurus. He hadn't made a habit of that, just dipped in and out whenever Pepper offered another recommendation after his nerves stretched especially tight. He should have done it more, though. It did help. When a soft, purposeful chime sounded, he was able to swim calmly back up into awareness and felt far better than before.

After waking from fitful rest earlier, Tony had not been calm. Not only had it been hard to sleep on this portal-adjusted schedule, but he'd kept imagining a phone call, an email buzz, a text alert. As promised, Pepper had screened the media contacts. Only one email ever arrived, from her. His imagination spiraled, though, as it tended to do, and so he'd heard constant phantom alerts.

Right after dawn, he'd sent her his official comment on Steve Rogers. Officially, this was exciting news, Tony knew that his dad had worked with him, and they'd have a hero-to-hero meeting when he returned from vacation. Stephen had said much the same, though he swapped out a Howard Stark reference for noting that Steve Rogers' recovery was medically interesting. It was all very professional, warm, and unremarkable. Pepper could surely turn it into a believable press release.

But Tony couldn't believe it was actually going to be that easy. His overclocked brain refused to settle down... until Stephen suggested joining this meditation group. The room was dim, in the same wood-and-gold coloring that seemed to make up most of the common areas. Jasmine-scented incense was pleasant without being cloying. He'd bought his share of expensive antiques over the years, and so he knew at a glance that the thick, elaborate wool carpets softening the floor would costs thousands of dollars apiece.

All right, KT might not win any hospitality awards for their guests' rooms, but its other parts weren't half bad. I can do this, Tony told himself, with more confidence than he'd felt overnight, and stood. "So," he asked as he rejoined Stephen. "Did you actually stay in your body?"

Stephen had been utterly still when Tony glanced over, and so the possibility of more astral projection had come to mind. "Yeah, myrrh's better to have burning for any sort of out-of-body meditation. It protects the body while you're distracted. I assume you want breakfast?"

"Your stuff is so freaking weird," Tony said fondly. "And yeah, I do."

Every corner they turned was something new to study. "Not sure how well I would have done here," Tony mused as he watched a pair of white-clad novices hurry by. This place had the oddity of Hogwarts, the rigidity of a religious order, and the guest amenities of a iron-fisted detox day spa.

"Oh, you would not do good at all," Stephen said.

Tony looked pointedly at him as they walked. It was one thing to think that, and another to say it instantaneously. "As in, 'it was hard for me, so it'd be just as hard for you?'"

"Nah. Way, way worse."
An even sharper look was Tony's response.

Seeming to realize he should adjust his answer, Stephen amended, "As in, 'you want to shape the future, and Kamar-Taj was built to protect the legacy of a long, long past.'" Stephen glanced over, smiled warmly at him, and then looked back toward the hallway's far end. "You'd just be hobbling yourself if you tried to work here. It's not just hard, it's totally wrong for you. Better to let me handle this. Past and future are stronger when they work together." That almost sounded like some sort of flirting, which of course he'd intended.

"Eh. Okay, solid answer," Tony allowed. He hadn't been able to break through the shielding spell to access his satellites, even after he'd tried again during an awake, anxious stretch overnight. If he'd come here, he probably would have (futilely) tried to turn this ancient temple into a modern workshop and frustrated everyone in the process. Better to do what he did best in his labs, and let Stephen bring in the knowledge of past millennia.

Breakfast was even more humble than dinner, but everything was still fresh and tasty. The tea was as fragrant as meditation incense. "So," Stephen wondered between bites of rice. "Do you want another tour, or should we get right to work?"

"I am here to work," Tony promised him. His poor sleep had left him tired and a bit grouchy, but he'd operated under those conditions during many days in his life. "Are the newbies still eying me?"

Stephen looked over at the novices that were apparently still staring at Tony, and nodded. "Yeah. I think they're trying to figure out whether you're joining the order or not. We don't get visitors."

Tony nodded, lifted his cell phone, and took a selfie that had all of those gawking novices in the background behind him. "It's rude to stare, and now I've got all you offenders on film," he told them as he turned around to show the photo. "What?" he then asked Stephen after turning back. "You told me: I don't have to listen to any freshmen."

"Come on," Stephen said dryly. "Let's go play with some relics."

This new room felt different from any they'd entered before. It was even dimmer than the meditation chamber, and what illumination existed didn't have any obvious source. The heavy stone walls didn't help the oddly oppressive feeling, nor did the lack of windows. It was like a bank vault lined with safe deposit boxes that ranged from tiny to massive, but of course they looked nothing like modern steel. Each drawer had a multi-layered wooden starburst on its front. Those layers were stained different shades from near-black to honey, and carvings in the wood glittered dimly with gilt inlay.

"So I could cause a lot of trouble in here, huh?" Tony guessed as he studied all of those fascinating drawers, and wondered what was inside them.

"Oh, I think we both could."

"Which is why you've been assigned oversight," said a brusque voice. They turned in surprise to see a familiar face entering the door and shutting it behind him. It closed with a clunking rattle of multiple locks.

"Hi, Wong," Stephen said with a broad smile.

"Hi, Wong," Tony said with a grin to match.

"So," Wong said after a long pause. "You know me too, Stark."

"Enough to annoy you, yeah."
"Hmm." Wong looked them over and appeared highly unimpressed as he did. "Officially, these artifacts are under the purview of the library. Until a relic selects its owner, librarians oversee them." His lips thinned slightly. "The Ancient One requested that I observe your research."

"Because we're friends," Stephen readily supplied.

"In an alternate timeline. According to you," Wong corrected. "Only one relic is allowed out of its chamber at a time. I will handle those requests."

It wasn't like they had any idea of what might be in there, so Stephen gestured at one with a memorable location. (In a corner, on the top row.) "The last time I saw some relics at Kamar-Taj," he noted as Wong climbed a stepladder and performed some complicated movement with the wooden sunburst's layers, "they were just on shelves inside a locked room. It wasn't this whole big lockbox production." A guard had managed access to this room even before those multiple locks came into play.

"Yes, they were more easily accessible, then." Wong hesitated before pulling open the chamber. "The... side effects of that visit are why we've implemented better security."

Tony glanced at Stephen, who nodded once with a shadowed expression. Then Tony's gaze flicked down to his chest, and the terrible wound he remembered tending.

"Here," Wong said and climbed back down the stepladder. He walked past Stephen's waiting hands and instead placed the relic on a table in the center of the room, in the brightest spot of light anywhere in the chamber. It looked like a short, wide golden tube, carved with Arabic script and inlaid with mother-of-pearl, until Wong clicked a certain place in the metal and it opened on a hinge. Then, it became suddenly obvious as a form-fitting necklace. "Wearing that with the relic's approval removes your need to breathe."

"And... wearing it without approval?" Tony wondered as he bent down and studied the metal. It looked like some ancient museum piece, but he could occasionally see odd ripples of energy rolling through it when his head hit the right angle.

"It removes the ability to breathe," Wong said pointedly.

"This place is so goddamn weird," Tony murmured to himself, but then straightened and pulled out his scanners.

Relics, Stephen explained as they worked, were objects imbued with powerful spells that were impractical to cast repeatedly or had some unique long-lasting effect. The Cloak of Levitation, with its flight and intelligence, was one of the greatest example of a relic's potential power, and had needed multiple talented mystics to achieve.

"Huh, that makes sense," Tony said and trailed off to look at the collar, which looked back at him. "I suppose someone did have to make you."

The Cloak looked back at him, then gestured in a dismissive way that he somehow took to mean Yeah? And someone made you.

"Focus, please," Stephen requested as he handed the breathing necklace back to Wong, who retrieved another box's relic.

A narrow copper bar with four attached ring slots was next. It glowed with a faint green light that looked unsettlingly familiar, which Stephen confirmed as he showed Tony how it would fit onto a hand like a pair of brass knuckles. "It says this was developed after studies of the Time Stone," he
explained as he read the small Greek print on a notecard, "and can stop perceived time."

"You've got a backup Time Stone?" Tony sputtered.

"No, it's just one specific, limited effect," Stephen mused, and punched toward the wall with the relic equipped. "Hmm. Nothing." He considered it for a moment longer, then angled his fist toward himself and punched forward again before Tony or Wong could stop him.

"No!" Tony yelped as Stephen froze in that position with a blank, unfocused stare, only to start laughing a moment later and slide the relic off his hand.

"This relic only works if you're attuned to it, according to the notes." Stephen grinned and handed it back to Wong. "But I just wanted to double-check. Oh, lighten up. It only affects perceived time, so even if it had worked I'd have just blacked out for a few minutes."

"Don't test the relics on people without asking," Wong informed him, looking more annoyed than usual. "Including yourself."

"Listen to Wong," Tony said emphatically. "And what exactly are we trying to do here?" He'd gotten what readings he could from those two relics, and he didn't mind seeing adapted uses of the Time Stone, but right now he felt rather directionless. This room had an awful lot of boxes along its walls. Was he simply supposed to take energy readings for each one, and then head back to New York with a pile of unsorted data?

Stephen's voice dropped in volume. "We should be looking for any relics uniquely suited to the fight against..."

Thanos, he didn't say, but Tony nodded. Ah. Right. There were five Stones left to gather and one extremely angry prune to take down. For the final fight, and all the ones leading up to it, the two of them might be able to identify something uniquely useful.

"The fight against who?" Wong demanded, breaking his concentration.

"You have really good hearing," Tony said after an impressed moment.

"If you intend to use these in a fight against someone," Wong continued with a deeper frown than usual, "we must know who it is."

"The Ancient One does. This is all authorized," Stephen said, and gestured in a circle. Pausing, he frowned, then tried again before lowering the hand bearing his sling ring. "I, uh, was going to have her verify that for you."

"This relic blocks sling ring portals inside the immediate area," Wong said, and tapped one of the box fronts.

"Could I see that one?" Tony wondered, and began scanning it as soon as Wong put it on the table. It was a crude brass sculpture of a sheep or goat, nothing impressive to look at, but his scanners were having all sorts of fun with the energy fields that warped around its small form.

"Well, anyway, the Ancient One knows what we're doing," Stephen promised Wong. "And..." He looked over to Tony. "You know, if we're looking for help on researching possible avenues of attack..."

Tony stared blankly back, then rolled his eyes and groaned at their embarrassing oversight. "Oh, yeah. Totally. Wow, right. We should have brought him in way earlier."
"Oops," Stephen agreed, and turned to Wong. When Tony also fixed his gaze on Wong a second later, the man took a wary step back from their mutual attention. "If you could put this one back, please," Stephen then said, and handed over the small brass sculpture that Tony had been scanning, "and retrieve the Horkos Staff for us?"

"Why?" Wong asked. "You've requested that one before, it's nothing new to you."

"If you want to know all about that other timeline," Stephen said, "how we know you, what these relics are being used for, and why the Ancient One's going along with me on all of this, we'll just need you to get that staff. Because we will tell you everything, but you can't tell anyone else."

Wong eyed him flatly for a long moment, then turned his gaze on Tony. After he presumably saw what he needed to see in their eyes, Wong pulled back another step. "Wait here," he ordered. Once the brass sculpture was safely back in its box, he murmured a quick incantation that made all of the gilt inlay on the lockbox's starbursts turn matte and dull. Then he opened the door, stepped into the comparatively blinding light of the hallway, and shut it again.

"Well. I sure hope he comes back," Stephen said dryly after they heard the sequence of locks click into place.

Yeah, with that portal-blocking relic nearby, they wouldn't have an easy escape. Which was actually a bit anxiety-inducing after a bit of time ticked by and they remained locked inside the chamber. Soon Tony felt like he had before the morning's meditation had soothed him, and because of that he couldn't help but say, "I'm sure Karl'd come save you."

Disbelief painted Stephen. "Really? We're doing this?"

Okay, Tony shouldn't have said that. He completely believed that they'd been as platonic as him and Rhodey. He did. But. "You could have mentioned the guy who apparently saved your life and got you accepted here in the first place. You could have mentioned him once. The kinda sorta cute guy who'd swept in like some Arthurian knight at Stephen's lowest moment? Yeah. Could've at least been mentioned. Once. Ever. His existence was fine. The cover-up, however, was weird.

Stephen's pale gaze grew sharper. "When I saved Earth from being consumed by Dormammu, Karl was so furious about my methods that he cut all ties with me. All right? I lost him as a friend, I regret that, and it's a slightly touchy topic."

"Oh." Okay, that made things far less weird, but significantly more awkward. "Sorry." Tony offered a tiny smile. He'd never been good with keeping his mouth shut when anxiety bubbled. Although Pepper was anything but a pushover, she'd tolerated a hell of a lot more from Tony to maintain the peace than Stephen ever would. "I'm really just tense over Rogers. So, um, think we can avoid the big falling-out between you and Karl, this time 'round?"

Stephen eyed him sidelong a moment longer, then relaxed. "So long as I don't violate natural law while we fight Thanos, I don't see any reason why he'd run off again. Although," he mused, "he could still learn how the Ancient One—"

Sudden sparks made him cut off, then exchange a wary glance with Tony. According to that portal-stopping relic, those sparks shouldn't be possible, and this was probably the most dangerous room on the planet for someone hostile to break into. With that in mind, they treated whoever was coming like a threat.

Stephen pulled back and formed two broad shields, while Tony stepped behind one and raised his left hand. A blaster clicked into shape around it. After that foolish move he'd made toward the Metro
ER gunman, it seemed wise to develop his emergency, watch-contained hand blaster early.

A moment later, they blinked in confusion and lowered their weapons.

"I appreciate your readiness to protect these artifacts," the Ancient One said with her typically faint smile. "Perhaps I should have announced myself."

Stephen's shields vanished as he frowned. "I thought this room was blocked from any portals."

"I have my methods. Please join us," she called to Wong through the portal. He walked forward only after a significant pause. "We were watching through this room's security spell, which I'd activated. I felt that Wong should be brought back into the discussion before yours progressed any further." Her eyes looked to the side, troubled. "Things may need to move more rapidly than I'd intended. Considering that you've mentioned... certain people."

"I assume she's not talking about your behavior related to Mordo," Wong said gruffly to both of them. Stephen shot Tony a pointed look; Tony sighed. "I remember the name 'Dormammu,' but little more about him. And I do not recognize 'Thanos' at all."

"At this point," the Ancient One suggested, and looked around the room into which they were now firmly locked as her last sparks faded, "an oath would be appropriate."

Once Wong had bound himself to the relic staff, he was told more than Rhodey had learned, and in far greater detail. Distress entered his eyes early and intensified as they talked, but not once did he look away from the conversation. "All six Stones being used together would be a catastrophe such as the universe has never known," Wong murmured as their explanation ended. After his head shook, he looked up and wondered, "You're supposed to be the next Sorcerer Supreme?"

"I appreciate the vote of confidence," Stephen said, and nodded once. "Thanks." Tony smirked faintly and touched his back in a quick gesture of affection.

"I now see the past as clearly as the present, and the present as clearly as the future," the Ancient One said, and lifted one arm to show them its pale underside. In the dim light, a faint green glow moved through the veins at her wrist. "Stephen is meant to be my successor, yes. But for there to even be a title of 'Sorcerer Supreme' to fill, we must protect our universe from the decade-long onslaught about to be launched upon it. I trust you will join that fight with full enthusiasm and confidence, Wong."

"I will," he said after a short pause. Though the look he gave Tony and Stephen contained no more friendship than before, it did hold more respect. "But this secret must be kept. You know that you'll need more security than this room can provide, or that oath I made."

"You are about to become my personal assistant," the Ancient One confirmed with a nod, "and thus will need to interact far less with the other librarians."

Tony held back his instinctive yikes reaction. He was sure that Pepper-the-personal-assistant saw him as a charming, charismatic socialite genius to center her life around. The Ancient One just seemed scary and weird.

"So, that's why you are investigating these relics," Wong concluded after another long pause. "I see." He turned a slow, considering arc around the room. The constant irritation he'd held while overseeing their studies was gone, replaced with deep thought. Abruptly, he turned back to Stephen and Tony. "You're not working efficiently. Let me make some suggestions. Strange, focus your work here in this room, and don't worry about using the library while you're at Kamar-Taj. I can pull
those books as needed."

Stephen brightened, then smiled at Tony. "You know, it really does seem to be working well to tell people."

"It does," Tony allowed. But he couldn't help but muse on worst-case scenarios. "Right up until we tell the wrong person."

Wong's gaze flattened.

"I wasn't saying that you were the wrong person," Tony tiredly amended. Boy, Wong had to be one serious dude to make Stephen Strange look lighthearted in comparison. "Can we get back to work?"

The Ancient One departed like she'd arrived, and the trio of men now worked together on studying the relics. Wong moved with more purpose, kept detailed records of what they'd investigated, and made directed suggestions of how to progress. Though the lockboxes had no labels, he somehow had an encyclopedic knowledge of what item could be found inside each small chamber.

Wong now offered his own, more in-depth description of each item as it was laid on the table. Stephen tested it magically, if possible, and Tony took energy scans. Sometimes these objects simply broke the laws of physics and left his scanner as a mess of error codes, but they just marked that down for future study. There wasn't any problem that Tony Stark couldn't fix... eventually.

He looked up at the ceiling, considered the satellite-blocking spell, and nodded once. Oh yeah. He'd figure out a way to understand that blockage... eventually.

Kamar-Taj held a truly terrifying armory, Tony realized once he saw more and more of these objects pile up in his databanks. "How long has this place existed?" he wondered as Wong showed them an elegant crystal blade that could cut through anything, but would weaken with each slice and eventually shatter, inevitably killing its wielder.

"Hey," Stephen noted. "Could've gotten out of the room even if we did get locked in."

"Desperate times, desperate measures," Tony agreed with a glance toward the door, then considered whether this unstoppable crystal blade should be used against Thanos. His head shook as soon as the question was raised. A melee weapon meant getting up close to the man, and getting up close meant that Thanos could steal that sword and turn it on them. That would do them no good unless the crystal was just about to shatter, and he didn't want to test that luck.

"Agamotto was Earth's first Sorcerer Supreme," Wong explained as he watched Tony carefully scan the crystal blade. "Supported by the power of the Vishanti in humanity's Stone Age, he was the first to determine how to wield an Infinity Stone. The casing he constructed for the Time Stone—the Eye of Agamotto—allowed it to be used more readily in the defense of Earth. Such a powerful weapon had to be protected. The Masters of the Mystic Arts were gathered to take on this responsibility, and the temple of Kamar-Taj was founded as their home."

After that, Tony was glad that Stephen had taking teaching tips from the relatively short-winded Karl. "So," he summarized. "The place is old."

"As old as civilization," Wong agreed as he accepted the beautiful crystal blade and returned it to its lockbox. A formless, pinky-sized lump of pewter replaced it on the table.

"Well, that's less impressive," Stephen said.

Wong reached over, somehow snapped the lump in two, and handed half to Stephen. He then
walked to a far corner of the chamber and said, "But possibly useful."

Stephen and Tony looked down at the lump in Stephen's hand, from where Wong's voice had emerged. "Not bad," Tony admitted. Yes, it could be useful for communication. "Keep talking, let me take more readings."

When those readings were done, the pieces of pewter snapped back together as if it'd never been broken. More relics followed. Bracelets that sharpened the wielder's fingers into claws, dripping with paralyzing venom more deadly than any cobra's. An armband that gave tremendous strength in combat, with the trade-off that the wearer himself would begin to feel pain if he didn't cause violence to others. A sapphire circlet that strengthened one's astral talents significantly.

Though much of it was fascinating, Tony's vision of using multiple relics as a one-man killing party was ruined when Wong reminded him that relics must choose their wielder. "But the more trained mystics that arrive," Wong added as he returned the latest relic to its lockbox, "the more potential wielders we have." He looked pointedly at the two of them. "Find us more dedicated novices, and your antics for the media may actually be worth it."

"I wouldn't call them 'antics,'" Stephen said.

"It's late," Wong deflected. "We should resume tomorrow."

"They're not 'antics.'" Stephen sighed, then turned to Tony. "I guess we go see what's for dinner."

"And accept our antics-hood," Tony agreed with a laugh.

It did feel good to have Wong on their side. Who else should be told, Tony mused as he worked on a delicious chicken curry. Pepper? No, even though she could help to organize things. Knowledge meant danger, and it'd be safer to keep her out of it. Bruce was an obvious 'yes.' Thor? Eh, maybe. Eventually. He wasn't exactly the most cautious ally they had. Speaking of 'cautious'... Nat, and Clint to follow? Possibly, Tony thought as he chewed. The one problem there was not knowing when her loyalties had become totally firm. Although, he supposed the oath staff could handle that, too.

Steve?

Tony sighed, loudly.

"What?" Stephen wondered after swallowing what he was chewing.

"So, does Rogers hold the stick?" Tony murmured after miming slicing his thumb again, then placing it against the Horkos Staff.

Stephen's gaze turned very solemn. "Honestly... you know him a hell of a lot better than I do. I think it's up to you."

"I thought I knew him," Tony corrected, and sighed again. "I'll think about it."

He thought about it the next day, with more work on more relics. And the third day, and the fourth. By then they'd tested every relic inside Kamar-Taj's walls, giving Tony his data and everyone ideas on how they might be used in the grand fight against Thanos. (Assuming they could find people capable of wielding the relics in question, of course.) But what Tony still didn't have was an answer to the question of whether he wanted to tell Steve Rogers the truth.

This wasn't the Steve who'd earned any of Tony's ire, he reminded himself. This was a guy who'd only lived a handful of post-War days and had to be dealing with one hell of a culture shock. He'd be
shaken, lonely, and confused... and he had no idea that Bucky Barnes was even alive, let alone having sided with the Winter Soldier over Tony. Officially, Tony had no reason not to trust this gosh-darn wholesome symbol of bald eagles, baseball, and Mom's apple pie.

Except for his memories of a now-erased universe.

Boy, memories were tricky things.

"Mr. Stark," said a familiar voice when Tony was packing up his clothes. Stephen was collecting a few choice books from the library to take back with him, and had said he'd be a while, still. Because of his absence, this arrival was potentially awkward.

"Mr. Mordo," Tony said after a pause, and nodded to Karl. They never had properly smoothed things over after his initial knee-jerking. By now it seemed too late to do so.

"I understand that you're leaving?"

"For now. We got what we came for at this stage, so we're heading back home."

"I'm glad that your visit proved useful. The Ancient One seems quite intent on supporting whatever it is that you and Stephen are focused upon, and so I'm sure it's of vital importance."

"It is," Tony confirmed after another pause. He didn't want to bring Karl into the trusted circle, and not for any foolish jealousy. Stephen had mentioned that Karl had stormed off in a snit. They couldn't trust someone like that to not pull the same move again.

"Before you get back to your efforts in New York," Karl said, "there's one other thing that you may wish to see."

It was tempting to ignore Karl, but more tempting to follow him. Tony set his things aside and let himself be led along the central courtyard, then through a hallway that Stephen had never shown him.

By the time they were three floors down a sunless stairwell, Tony was starting to become genuinely nervous. "Where exactly are you taking me?"

Karl stopped on the fourth landing, turned to a heavy wooden door banded with iron, and unlocked it. Slipping the key back into his pocket, he opened the door wide and indicated that Tony was welcome to walk through. "To an opportunity the Ancient One allowed me to provide to you, Mr. Stark."

"Opportunity?" Tony repeated warily as he approached the door. "What sort of opp—fuck!"

Inside the chamber, a thin man was seated on what looked like a metal throne. Bonds locked his arms, wrists, and forehead rigidly in place. His gaze was unfocused and unseeing, and pain was evident in every line that had etched itself into his skin. "You've got torture chambers?" Tony demanded, and looked Karl over again not like some imagined rival, but a genuine, dangerous enemy.

"He has been duly judged in violation of this order," Karl said, voice and gaze unreadable. "Every law was followed to its precise letter. The evidence was clear. He was condemned to suffer the sensations of agony he dealt to an innocent. The perceived time suffered by that innocent would be the actual length of his sentence." Karl's gaze flicked to the man. "He's not close to done."

Horror still filled Tony. But realization followed shortly, and a cold, calm certainty swelled to take its
place.

After Karl saw that recognition enter Tony's eyes, he nodded once, then stepped outside and closed the door. Tony was left alone with the man who'd nearly murdered Stephen.

His right hand moved immediately to his left wrist. The emergency hand-blaster erupted from his watch. "Oh," Tony said in a quiet voice as he held his palm an inch away from the man's nose. "I've really been wanting to meet you."

The man said nothing. He didn't blink, even as the light from Tony's palm repulsor reflected in his glassy, unseeing eyes.

One shot. One shot, and he'd be gone. His head would be gone. Like every piece of shit that Tony had gladly taken down from terrorists, Hydra, and other villainous groups, this man would be dead and Earth would be better for it. He might not be aware of his approaching execution, but he still deserved it. And Tony itched to give it to him.

Stephen had just saved two babies, goddammit, and this guy used that exhaustion to jump him? And he didn't just try to kill Stephen, but to torture him as he went? He'd nearly stolen Stephen away from Tony before they even realized what they had? The thought of Stephen fading out instead of in in that living room curled Tony's mouth into a snarl, and he leaned forward to place his hand repulsor directly between the man's eyebrows.

He wanted to kill him. He wanted to kill him.

And then he would have to tell Stephen.

Who didn't want to kill anyone.

Anger warped Tony's features. He took a deep breath, shoved his hand harder against the man's skin, and clenched his jaw.

He doesn't want this, a voice deep inside Tony murmured. Stephen doesn't want this.

Muscles tensed. The power readings on his watch flared.

Stephen doesn't want this.

Energy hummed, waiting to be released.

Stephen doesn't want this. Stephen doesn't want this. Stephen doesn't want this.

Though his arm nearly vibrated with restrained rage, Tony lowered his hand.

The imprint of his palm repulsor remained as a red circle on the man's forehead. The would-be killer still hadn't noticed him, but trembled from whatever that metal throne was forcing him to experience. Tony blinked hard against the frustrated, angry tears that prickled his eyes, then exhaled sharply and opened his hand wide. The glove retreated back into his watch, then vanished.

"I'm done," Tony said after opening the door.

Karl said nothing, simply looked between Tony and the man on the throne. His passive expression offered no indication of what the man behind it thought.

"Stephen wouldn't want me to kill him."
Nodding, Karl began to lead Tony back up the stairs.

"So," Tony wondered as they returned to ground level. "Was that a test? Did I pass it?"

"It was a choice," Karl said simply. "Neither was right, neither was wrong. The Ancient One reminded me of that cell, but did not encourage me to come speak with you. I made that choice myself, even knowing that you might choose his death. But instead, the outcome of both of our choices is for him to still live." Karl considered his words, then amended to, "Him to still draw breath. You cannot call that living, I don't think."

"A choice. We're our choices," Tony agreed softly. Consideration weighed heavy. This timeline was different because of choices they'd made; Tony Stark and Pepper Potts weren't a sure thing and Stark Industries didn't need a crisis to expand beyond weapons. Those outcomes weren't 'good' or 'bad' in some cosmic test; they simply were. Not killing that man wasn't 'good' or 'bad,' it just traded Tony's satisfaction for Stephen's.

"I don't know what I would have done in your place," Karl admitted as they returned to ground level. "There were people I've loved in my life, and if I had access to the person who hurt them... well. That's why I came here, I suppose."

Tony had come here to get data on those relics, and see what assets they had against Thanos. Officially. And he'd come here to understand Stephen's past. Officially. But unofficially... he'd come here to avoid Steve Rogers.

And unofficially, he'd come here to meditate. Exhaling, Tony let stress flow out of him: the stress of seeing that thin man in his cell, wondering why Stephen hadn't mentioned Karl, fretting about what to do about Steve. Breathe in, breathe out. This was just another choice to make, as surely as he'd made one down in that room.

Fortunately, Karl got Tony back to his room before Stephen returned from the library. Tony wasn't sure what explanation he'd give if asked. When Stephen did return ten minutes later, Tony simply looked busy with the last of his packing. "Ready to go?" Stephen wondered, and held up his books.

"I am," Tony decided, and made a choice.


"Let's go home," Tony continued. "We've got a lot of work ahead."
"Welcome home, Dr. Strange."

"Don't greet me," Stephen grumbled, and frowned up at the tiny speaker along one wall of their condo. "It's weird."

"Of course."

He sighed sharply at the sound of his own voice, then turned to Tony as he came through the portal. "I'm serious: the next place gets J.A.R.V.I.S. You still haven't promised me that." It was already annoying to picture his voice obligingly following the rest of the world's orders. Being greeted by himself was downright disorienting.

"Welcome home, Mr. Stark."

Tony smiled up at the speaker as Vincent welcomed him, and then turned his smile on Stephen. "I'm still debating."

Glowering, Stephen walked away to place his stack of books on a desk in the office. "Speaking of a 'next place,' when's that happening?" he asked as he walked back out. "It seems as if we're diving into a more active planning stage against Thanos, instead of just doing the public awareness campaign. It'd be nice if we had all of the rooms we need."

"I've already found some listings that we could look at. Or, rather..." Tony pointed at the speaker. "He's found them." Off Stephen's newly annoyed look, Tony chuckled, but soon sobered. "Hey, so... now that the vacation delay is over, I kind of want to pull off the band-aid ASAP."

Confusion faded. Tony meant that he wanted to do the meeting with the newly-awakened Steve Rogers right away, to see what their new dynamic would be. "I'm ready whenever you are. How do we get authorization to visit? I'm..." After hesitating meaningfully, Stephen finished, "Probably not Fury's favorite person, and I'm sure Rogers is still under lock and key."

Tony considered that, then nodded. "We're good. We've got an in."

Little over an hour later, they walked with purpose through the sleek, modern architecture of S.H.I.E.L.D.'s midtown offices. While Tony had tidied up, Stephen had changed outfits entirely. They were trying not to startle the displaced soldier and the full Doctor Strange look would make quite an impact. Their two casual outfits were unremarkable, and lightweight suit jackets on top helped them blend in among special agents' monochrome ensembles.

A few agents glanced at them regardless as the infamous duo strode through the hallways, but confusion soon faded. Leading their way was Phil Coulson, who quieted any questions before they came. "I'm glad to see you've decided to work more closely with S.H.I.E.L.D., Mr. Stark," Phil said as they walked. "As I said before, an adversarial relationship isn't in either of our best interests."

As Tony responded with some bland reassurance, Stephen studied Phil. So, this was the man who'd unwittingly torpedoed Tony's entire future. Stephen couldn't be mad at him for that, not with how he'd freed up Tony for a different future, but the fact remained that he'd had been wildly impactful. It was quite a lot for someone so pleasant-looking but unremarkable, who appeared more suited for
office work than secret missions.

Phil stopped at a hallway junction and smiled at him. There was a certain sharpness to his gaze that let Stephen know he'd been aware of that inspection. "It sure was fortunate that you knew Captain Rogers was even alive to find, Doctor."

Fortunately, Stephen remembered the lie he'd come up with for Fury. "I was looking for possible mystic back-up. Instead, I found Rogers. It was one hell of a surprise when I realized who I'd located."

Nodding slowly, Phil wondered, "So... is that something you can do for anyone? Just decide to locate any person on the planet?"

Yes, Stephen did not say, because of course that's exactly what S.H.I.E.L.D. would want to hear. Either he'd be treated as even more of a security threat, or they'd draft him to find their targets of interest. "I can try to locate notably powerful protectors," Stephen corrected. He pointed his thumb toward Tony. "He actually helped me figure out who I was seeing. Apparently, right before Rogers got frozen, he'd been involved with an object of tremendous power. Tony's dad scooped it up from the ocean floor afterward? That thing. It made the location spell echo far more than it should."

Phil considered that, then nodded slowly. "Makes sense."

As they set back into motion, Tony leaned over and whispered, "Nice."

"Thanks," Stephen whispered back. (Magic was so good for bullshitting knowledge he shouldn't have.)

"You should know," Phil said as they continued down the hall, "there are some complications with Captain Rogers' military service. Soldiers who enlisted in World War II agreed to serve for the 'duration of the war or other emergency, plus six months.' Obviously, for everyone else, that meant six months after President Truman made a peace declaration. But some people argue we just got back a very powerful weapon, and say that he's still obligated to follow orders through the end of the year."

"The end of the year at minimum, I would guess," Stephen said dryly.

Phil raised his eyebrows and said nothing until they'd rounded another corner. "Others are arguing that Captain Rogers came right back into an 'emergency' and so he's still fully active. You two have been fighting a different kind of war, but it's still a war." Looking pointedly at Tony, he added, "Especially with how you've been working solo against groups that the military can't dig out. Your independent operations have been pretty effective."

"Fury's using that loophole to say that Rogers has to stay in military service, isn't he?" Tony asked after a pause. "He's the one making that argument."

"Director Fury is involved with this discussion," Phil noted, but confirmed nothing else. "This is it. Let me go tell—" Although he probably wasn't aware of it, a small smile appeared and his voice brightened. "Captain Rogers that you're here."

Once they were alone, Tony sighed and turned to Stephen. "Not loving how I'm kicking off this meeting by feeling guilty over keeping his enlistment active, whether he wants it or not."

Aware that their speech was almost certainly being recorded, Stephen tried to be circumspect. "Those people needed to be stopped. Once you started going after terrorists, Rogers was always going to wake up into a world that knew heroes were a good option for doing that."
Tony studied him silently, then nodded. Stephen's meaning was clear: *this enlistment discussion must have happened before.* Once the Iron Man armor was in the military's sights, they were always going to be thrilled about the return of a different *weapon.* It didn't soothe Tony completely, but at least the situation wasn't any worse than before. He was just aware of it, this time.

Phil's return interrupted any conversation before it could continue. "He's ready to see you. He's been trying to read the news, so he knows who both of you are, but there's been a lot to take in. Probably best to assume he knows your names and nothing else."

"Does he know we... fight?" Tony wondered.

"Well, he does know that, yes," Phil replied. "Which is an adjustment all on its own. In the world he came from, there was him, that experiment gone wrong with Schmidt, and no one else. So just take things slow, and we should be good."

Nodding, Tony looked toward the door. His gaze was shadowed with a dozen different shifting emotions. He was a reactive, emotional man on both good days and bad, and he outright reveled in being difficult to predict. Even so, Stephen had become talented with understanding Tony. Right now, he looked reluctant to see the man with whom he'd fallen out. Guilty over contributing to him being locked in this room (no matter how S.H.I.E.L.D. characterized it). Curious to see this freshly-thawed version of Steve Rogers. Countless other competing motivations filled him, and so long as they warred for control, his feet were anchored where they were.

"Well," Stephen said cheerfully, before Phil started wondering why they weren't moving, "I should go hand over my title of 'first hero' to the Captain, then." Knuckles rapped sharply against the door, which slid open after a 'Come in' sounded through it. The small apartment didn't *look* like a prison, even if it essentially served as one. About the size of a hotel suite, it had a tiny kitchen and broad windows that looked out on the bustling city. The curtains had been drawn on those windows, though. Modern skyscrapers and sleek cars couldn't be seen through them.

A nearly physical wave of memories struck Stephen. On his last day in 2018, he'd locked 2007 Tony into a mirrored playpen because seeing a modern city would make the timeshift undeniably, overwhelmingly real. Stephen hadn't known then that those were the last hours he had left to live in his native timeline. But he was soon the one being confronted with time displacement as he saw the wrong hospital tiles under his feet, and a Manhattan skyline outside of Tony's condo that was full of holes.

Eleven years into the past, and it'd felt overwhelming.

How bad were these sixty-three years into the future?

"He can't stand to see the city," Tony murmured beside Stephen. The same realizations must be hitting him. In Tony's complex battle of emotions, sympathy currently won out.

"Hi," said the man inside the apartment, who stood up from its couch and nodded once. Steve Rogers appeared just as young as he'd been after making his 2011 debut, and far more uncertain than he'd ever looked on the fawning news stories about his return. "I understand you two are the..." Trailing off, Steve laughed once, then finished somewhat sheepishly, "The heroes?"

"Dr. Stephen Strange, hello," Stephen said, and walked forward to extend his hand. The grip he got wasn't as firm as he expected; Steve must be holding back from using his full strength. "This is Tony Stark, and... yes. I suppose we're 'the heroes.'"

"Stark," Steve repeated after a considering pause and turned to Tony. Phil had said that he'd read
articles about them, but if those articles were about their heroics and Tony's power suit... perhaps he'd never before seen Tony's face. After looking Tony over, something very close to hope bloomed behind Steve's eyes. The focused commander from the next decade's news became suddenly and intensely vulnerable.

"I..." Tony trailed off and looked at Stephen. An almost frantic edge formed before he looked back and nodded. "Yeah. Howard was my dad."

"Howard was your dad," Steve repeated. Because of how he turned away to shake his head in soft amazement, he didn't notice Stephen laying a comforting hand on Tony's back, then letting it fall.

For a moment, Stephen wished he had one of the telepathy or empathy relics they'd studied. Even with the talent he'd developed at understanding Tony Stark, this was a challenging moment. No, he thought next. It wouldn't help, for the intensity of Tony's emotions was clearly overwhelming him. He probably barely comprehended what was running through his mind and heart.

In the first timeline, Tony and Steve had taken much longer to meet. Any initial vulnerability that Steve felt after being ripped out of time had a chance to shrivel up and die off. Though Stephen didn't know Rogers back then—or at all, really—he could guess the countless feelings that might have taken vulnerability's place. Deep, crushing isolation. Regret over everything lost. Confusion and resentment toward a changed world that expected him to plug right back into it. Frustration as he tried to do so. In other words... harsh, unhappy emotions.

In comparison, the look he saw from the Steve in front of them was simple: lingering shock, with sudden happiness. In a world where he shouldn't know a single person, he'd just found a connection to home.

And Tony was left facing a Steve Rogers who was glad to hear that he was his father's son. Stephen didn't know all of Tony's history, but oh, he knew enough to understand this reaction was complicated for all sorts of reasons.

"How old are..." Steve cut off. "You look about Howard's age. My first thought was to wonder if he got married right away, but you're not in your..." His stare dropped to the floor. "In your sixties." Because it'd been more than sixty years since he crashed that plane, yes. Each reminder of that was a fresh blow. (Just like each mention of Howard was, to Tony.)

Tony nodded slowly. "Just turned thirty-eight. He waited a while."

Steve didn't ask what'd happened to Howard, since time would have done the job on its own. He also seemed to sense that Tony was tense about the topic, even if he had no idea why. Giving an answer to that question might have been too much for Tony to handle, and so Steve's discretion was fortunate. Tony was teetering on an emotional edge. "So, ah... I'd ask if you want some drinks, but there's not much to choose from."

"Water's fine," Stephen readily said, and let Tony stay silent.

"Water," Steve repeated slowly and turned toward the kitchen. "Right."

Frowning slightly, Stephen flicked his gaze to the small kitchen's sink. He'd expected that to be the easiest option imaginable. He understood that Rogers was having more than a bit of culture shock, but they did have faucets in the 1940s. Had he suffered some neurological damage from that hypothermic coma, after all?

"Is it..." Inhaling, Steve raised his hands, almost like he was blocking an incoming blow. "Is it okay
if I ask you two some things that might seem, well... a little stupid? Those agents stuck me in here, and they seem nice enough, but with the kind of big topics they were talking to me about I didn't want to ask them some questions."

Even though heavy emotion still filled Tony's eyes, a faint, curious flicker of amusement now colored them. "Okay, sure."

Steve walked over to the refrigerator, reached inside, and pulled out a bottle of Aquafina. "Is this some special kind of water?"

Tony blinked, then let a genuine smile emerge as he tried not to laugh. "Just water."

"I was trying to figure out why it's in these bottles," Steve continued and studied the label. "It says 'purified drinking water.' Is the city supply not safe now? The agents didn't mention anything."

Stephen smiled, too, though he tried to keep it small. This was actually rather endearing, but from Steve's perspective they'd probably just look to be laughing at him. "The city water's fine, and bottled water is a completely unnecessary waste of plastic. But some people like it, anyway."

"Huh," Steve said shortly and put the drink back. He still didn't seem to understand why people would buy individual bottles when there was a working tap. Honestly, it was a fair point to make.

Both of them migrated far enough over to look at what S.H.I.E.L.D. provided in these short-term apartments: a limited variety of bottled drinks, pre-made salads still in their plastic shell cases, and single-serve packages of cold cuts that could be paired with the loaf of wheat bread on the counter. "I know what Cokes are," Steve continued, still looking in the fridge. "They taste different now, though. But I haven't tried these..." He pulled out a glass bottle and studied its label. "Frap..."

"Frappuccinos," Tony readily supplied, "and so that's where my tax dollars are going. Hand one of those over, I'm thirsty." Stephen normally didn't go for these, but it seemed easiest to just let Steve retrieve three of the same thing. Soon they settled down around the small dining table, each with a mocha bottle in front of them.

After unscrewing its metal top and noting the faint pop of the air seal, Steve sniffed the opening and then took a wary drink. His expression was inscrutable as he swallowed, then as he set the bottle back on the table. "It tastes like someone let ice cream melt into their coffee," Steve concluded as he studied his drink. Befuddlement wrinkled his forehead.

"Yep," Tony replied, and took a swig of his.

"You're free to ask us anything else about 2008," Stephen said. "No judgment. But since we are unique in one particular way... are you interested in the, well. The hero thing?"

"I mean, of course. From the sound of it, 'the hero thing' is what they want me doing," Steve added, then shook his head and sat up straighter. The commander voice Stephen remembered from the news took over from the vulnerable man they'd been sitting with. "Right. S.H.I.E.L.D.'s given me their take on things, but from your perspective, what's the global situation?"

"I don't know how much use I'm going to be to you," Stephen admitted. At his side, he could practically feel Tony's surprising openness to Steve begin to close off. Right, then; Captain Rogers was infinitely harder to deal with than Steve Rogers. "I focus on threats you'd have no access to. Things crawling out of other dimensions, demonic possessions, that sort of foe." Considering how that all would sound to someone who'd never encountered magic, he added, "And now I imagine you're going to politely ask me to leave."
Steve laughed. "I saw a clip of you at the zoo, with those flamingos. No, I already know you're straight out of Weird Tales. It's interesting. But you're right: Tony, you and that suit of yours probably take on more of what I'm used to facing. That suit is one impressive piece of work, by the way. I wish Howard could have seen it. He'd go nuts."

"Thanks," Tony said after a short pause, and took another sip. "Right. So, the current name of the threat game is 'decentralized cells.'" With precise efficiency, Tony communicated the worst threats he still saw out there, how government agencies were targeting them, and how a single operative could take a different approach. Though he looked initially confused at the sudden change in Tony's mood, Steve responded well to the clipped, formal tone; it probably sounded like his old military briefings. It hurt Stephen's heart, though, because he knew this formality was covering how Tony's heart ached.

"You know," Stephen said, cutting in once Tony had started sounding like a detached Tonybot, "we can write this sort of thing up for you in a report. Ignore what I said before. Ask us the stupid stuff."

Steve blinked at the interruption, as did Tony. But an off-balance Tony was better than that clipped, distant Tony, and so this felt like the right move.


"I..." Steve trailed off, laughing, and then did as prompted. "All right. Greatest sports moment and best movie?"

"Miracle on Ice," Stephen said for the first. "Men's ice hockey in the 1980 Olympics. I'm sure someone can get you a clip, it's famous." Then he turned to Tony to allow him the second.

Tony's mood had improved enough to let him immediately answer, "Die Hard."

"Die Hard?" Stephen repeated. "Seriously?"

"What? It's a great movie. Absolute peak Willis."

"You cannot pick Die Hard for best Christmas movie and best movie of the past six decades."

"Name something that's better for either."

"Schindler's List. The Godfather. Godfather, Part Two. One Flew Over the—"

"I sure hope you're not going for 'Christmas movie' with that group," Tony drawled.

"Well, technically," Stephen replied, "Godfather does cover Christmas."

As their answers bounced off each other, Steve looked between them with a lopsided smile. "I know you said you two focus on different sorts of enemies, but do you share missions, anyway? I remember what a good team was like with the Commandos and you've got that dynamic."

Cutting off, Stephen and Tony smiled awkwardly at each other. They knew Steve's survey of the modern world had been cursory, but boy this felt like something that should have been at the very top of the articles about them. "Right," Tony whispered toward the table. "Let's explain 'us' to the guy from the forties." Then he downed the rest of his frappuccino.

Stephen frowned as he watched Tony spend far too long drinking the rest of that small bottle. This was a blatant delay tactic, and delaying just made them look like they were doing something wrong. "No," he then told Steve. "There's some overlap, but we do tend to cover different missions. We... argue over movies at... home."
"Oh. A team headquarters, then?"

With a tight smile, Tony corrected, "Nope. Home home. Office, living room, kitchen... master bedroom."

Steve stared back, blank, until realization struck. "Oh. Ah. Got it."

That ruffled Tony's fur again, of course. "That a problem?" he asked in a voice so pleasantly, absolutely neutral that it sounded downright dangerous.

Oh, Stephen hadn't seen this coming. Obviously the whole falling out, Winter Soldier, Stark parents situation remained a massive emotional tripwire. He hadn't been sure whether Tony would be able to start things off on the right foot with Steve, and keeping him in a good mood had indeed been tricky. But even though Stephen had once warned Tony about what 2007 military generals might think about a faked romance, he'd never thought on what a 1945 military hero might think about a real one.

"I was going to ask you two that," Steve admitted, which promptly deflated Tony's tension into confusion. "You work with S.H.I.E.L.D., right?"

"We're. Considering it," Tony said after a pause.

"And do you still do military work, like Howard?" Off Tony's tight nod, Steve leaned back against his chair, folded his arms, and nodded slowly. "That's a bigger change than the cars outside. During the war, it seemed like every month there'd be some commander who'd get the bright idea to 'clean things up,' only to learn he'd lose a quarter of his company or half his WACs. They'd back down, but they still tried to cover things up."

"Oh," Tony said shortly. Steve clearly picked up on Tony's lingering tension, and looked nervous over the possibility of angering Howard Stark's son. Grasping at the single home connection he'd found in this alien world made his explanation sound as sincere as a middle school Boy Scout. "I came from a real rough neighborhood in Brooklyn. There were a lot of people who lived there because those were the only landlords willing to sign a lease. When I was a kid, I remember some nice guys who helped out my mom now and then. It took me until I was older to learn what 'bachelors' meant, there." Steve leaned forward. "I've got no problem."

"Well, we're glad to hear it," Stephen said after a pause. "Things certainly aren't perfect, now, but in many ways they're better than they were." Oops, those words had just tumbled out. Dismissing this man's home was rather thoughtless of him, given the circumstances. But Steve picked up on his good intentions, and gave him the leeway of a respectful nod.

It was surely a defensive move for Steve, too; this way, he wouldn't wreck a conversation that treated him like a person instead of a living piece of history or military asset. "But then," Steve hesitantly ventured, "at least we didn't bottle up water for no good reason."

Stephen smiled more than the light joke deserved. Tony smiled at all, which was a good sign.

"So, ah." Steve looked at Tony, offered another awkward smile, and then went for what probably felt like the safest conversational path: one that touched on nothing of significance. "I don't know how long S.H.I.E.L.D. plans to keep me in this place. It sounds like they want to bring me on to do missions afterward, like one of their actual operatives. I guess I'll be local. Does the A line still run all through Brooklyn?"
"It does," Tony said after a considering pause. "And so do a lot of others. But, not gonna lie... picturing you in modern Brooklyn is kind of funny."

"Funny?" Steve repeated, and frowned.

"Hipster Steve Rogers. Tattoos, bikes, a weird mustache. Arctic Monkeys albums. It's funny."

Off Steve's confusion, especially at 'Arctic Monkeys,' Stephen cut in to suggest, "Just... see what your new salary is before you settle on a part of town. Unfortunately, Brooklyn's gotten pretty pricy by now. I have no idea how well S.H.I.E.L.D. pays."

"Brooklyn is pricy?" Steve repeated in disbelief. "Brooklyn? How pricy is 'pricy'?

Tony dug out his phone for an answer, and soon turned it around to show Steve the listing he'd found. Though by now he'd seen smartphones before, going by his lack of surprise at the device itself, it took Steve a moment to process what information was in front of him. His face paled when he did. Tony flipped the phone back around and recited, "A 'charming' one-bedroom, natural sunlight, not much room at all but Manhattan views... twenty-six hundred."

"Per year?" Steve asked weakly, though he clearly knew otherwise.

"Nope. And we're in a recession," Tony pointed out. "This'll probably seem like a real bargain, soon."

"Just... don't let S.H.I.E.L.D. lowball you on a salary," Stephen said.

"Not everyone has a billionaire genius sugar daddy, after all," Tony added.

Stephen looked at him flatly. Tony smiled back.

Nodding slowly, Steve looked between the frappuccino he'd barely touched and the curtains he'd drawn against an alien city outside. When his attention moved toward the door leading into the hallway, overwhelmed became exhausted. It was one thing to hear hypothetical bits and pieces about this new world. It was another to start thinking about actually living in it. "Hey, ah, this is a lot to ask, but..."

"Yeah?" Tony prompted in the silence. Impatience still flickered in his voice.

Swallowing, Steve flexed his hands around the glass bottle they held. "The agents have been nice, especially Phil, but they're agents. When they talk about 'what I can do for the world,' I feel like I'm practicing that talent show act again for Washington." He looked down and softly added, "But it's worse, really. The people I care about... they're not around. And never will be. Because I'm in the wrong year. The entire world feels wrong around me... but I've still gotta do the act."

A shiver of recognition ran down Stephen's spine, and he looked carefully to the side.

Tony's expression had finally settled into one clear, recognizable emotion: empathy. In a way that his first life never had, he understood the utter temporal isolation that had imprisoned Steve Rogers and affected every day that followed. Eleven years was lonely, yes; sixty-three had to be infinitely worse.

Tony still wouldn't want to hear about Howard, he'd tense up when he heard the Captain take over from Steve, he'd probably still fear deep betrayal... but right now, in this one moment, his heart was open and completely unguarded. "Yeah?" Tony prompted again, more gently.

"Can I reach out to you about... life? When I need to figure out how I'm going to fit into this new
world of yours? Not about missions, but about..." Trailing off, Steve shrugged helplessly. "They let me look up some menus, to see if I wanted something special delivered. For one restaurant, I saw that they don't take cash. Is that normal? How am I even supposed to pay for things?"

At the shaken, quiet tone, Stephen looked silently again toward Tony, for that was who Steve had clearly directed the question toward. Oh, Steve wouldn't mind making a new friend in the wizard straight out of Weird Tales... but a few short days after waking up in the wrong century, he'd somehow come face-to-face with an old friend's son. For Steve's raw, early emotions, Tony was a life preserver he'd never known to expect.

"Yeah, sure. Let me give you my number," Tony said after a long pause. "Call me about whatever."

Smiling, and squeezing Tony's wrist, Stephen turned back to Steve. "And I'll give you mine."

"I appreciate that. Truly, to both of you." Steve hesitated, then asked in a lower voice, "Have they made trading cards about you, yet?"

"Not that I'm specifically aware of, but they've made a lot of weird stuff," Stephen said. Pepper had directed company lawyers toward anyone foolish to use their actual names, of course. But that didn't stop things like 'Magic Fighter Bubble Guns' from being sold with a knock-off of his shield designs on the packaging.

Tony paused, then smirked knowingly and asked Steve, "Did Phil show you his collection?" The expression he got in return of yes, with great enthusiasm made him laugh, but he soon sobered. "Phil's a good guy. You can trust him."

Steve nodded. "That's good to know." With a lopsided smile, he added, "I suppose I'm trusting the two of you without anyone's recommendation."

"Should work out fine," Tony promised. "We're 'the heroes,' after all."

The conversation seemed to be naturally wrapping up. Just to emphasize that, a call came in from S.H.I.E.L.D.: Steve, it seemed, needed to undergo another round of physical testing to measure his daily progression after waking up from the ice. "Here are our numbers," Stephen said, and passed both over. "Call us about whatever. Really." If 'physical testing' bore the slightest similarity to 'physical therapy,' he now had an additional bit of empathy.

"Thanks," Steve said, studied the bit of paper, and stuck it into his pocket. "Talking with the two of you... it helped. Maybe things won't be as bad as they seem?" He didn't seem certain of that, but for a man who'd been living as a lonely castaway behind drawn curtains, any confidence was an improvement.

Maybe things won't be as bad as they seem. It echoed between them. Though Stephen recognized the lingering pain that had returned behind dark eyes, Tony's smile looked sincere, and he nodded. "Well. Fingers crossed."

Chapter End Notes

Regarding Steve's comments about the war, this is a good blog post that covers a lot of particulars about gay and lesbian life in World War II. Johnnie Phelps is a particularly notable figure from the time.
Chapter 29

Chapter Notes

I needed a quiet set-up chapter where a few things happen to lay groundwork for others. Gotta get the boys all set up for the future, because there are some more people who will start appearing in the lead-up to Loki's arrival! (Some are expected, obviously. But some timeline ripples are also happening.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

S.H.I.E.L.D. seemed to be touchy about this sort of thing, and so they hadn't traveled to the midtown offices by portal. Happy waited with the car outside, which was a sight that Tony actually missed seeing in his day-to-day life. In recent months he'd been tasked with Pepper's security and keeping an eye on the Malibu house just in case S.H.I.E.L.D. (or anyone else) grew too nosy, but they'd spent too long apart. "Good to see you, Hap," Tony said as Happy opened the back door for him, and clapped him on the shoulder.

"It's only been since I dropped you off," Happy said with a befuddled smile.

"Am I not allowed to still think it's good to see you?" Tony wondered, to which Happy held up his hands in surrender and let Tony climb inside the town car. "Door, by the way."

Shortly, Stephen slid in from the other side and murmured, "Pretty sure he still doesn't like me."

"You did steal me away to New York," Tony murmured back, and smiled.

Tony's mind faded into contemplative static as Happy pulled out into traffic, and so he blinked when they steered back to the sidewalk. His distant, unfocused stare through the windshield hadn't noticed their arrival. "Don't head back to California, yet," Tony said as Happy helped him out. "Stay at least a few more days."

"Sure, boss," Happy promised, and walked around to get Stephen's door. (Of course he was the one whose side exited into traffic.)

Franklin the doorman greeted them as they walked through the building's front door, but Tony's nod in return was perfunctory. Stephen studied Tony and said nothing as they walked up the stairs. He stayed quiet as the door unlocked and they walked into the still-sparse living room. Although Tony would have happily collapsed onto their comfortable couch, it was now ash in a Hawaiian volcano, and so he instead leaned against Stephen and expected that he'd be supported.

He was. "You did it," Stephen murmured and steadied Tony with a firm embrace.

Yep. He did it. Tony had sat across the table from Steve Rogers babbling cluelessly and cheerfully about Howard Stark, and he'd (mostly) maintained a chipper mood all the while. Now that he was home, though, Tony could bring down those walls and let the contained stress come pouring out. Like he didn't do in front of Happy, and he certainly didn't do in front of Phil or Steve, Tony could let himself look tired.

"I'm used to seeing Rogers like some police dog," Tony sighed against Stephen. "A fun-hating,
serious police dog who follows orders, or picks targets after he gets a sniff of something. He has his missions, and damn everyone else." His sigh deepened. "But that, just now? That guy we saw? That was a puppy."

It was the same face as the man who Tony had started off terribly with on Fury's helicarrier, who viewed the world through completely different eyes, who had Tony Stark so far down his priority list that he'd pick practically everyone else he knew first. But look behind that lantern-jawed, ice-eyed face a little earlier, and there was a friendly, lonely man who didn't understand bottled water.

How was Tony supposed to distrust some potential future traitor... who was confused by bottled water?

Even so, it'd been hard to keep up a cheerful expression. He didn't know if he'd always managed it, especially when Steve started talking about Howard. Tony suspected that he'd visibly retreated into his own mind a lot, and he knew he'd come close to snapping more than once. But in the end, what had truly kept him chugging along in that room hadn't been puppy dog Steve, or the damage control Stephen was blatantly trying to run. It had been...

"I wanted to kill him," Tony admitted just above a whisper. "I nearly did."

Stephen's arms tightened. "Oh. Well. If it helps, that didn't show. I'm sure it'll get easier."

"Not Rogers."

Confused, Stephen pulled back far enough to meet his eyes. "Who, then? Coulson? That can't be right."

"The man who almost killed you."

Confusion soon morphed into deep shock. "What?"

"At KT. Mordo took me there while you were at the library. Skinny guy, angular face. I was left alone with him, and I..." Shaking his head, Tony admitted, "I nearly killed him. God, I wanted to. But I knew you didn't want that... and so I stopped. Barely. I was a second away from doing it. Half a second."

Stephen stared, mute.

"And if I didn't kill the man who did that to you with his own hands, then there was no excuse for..." Off Stephen's still-stunned expression, Tony hesitantly asked, "Should I have?"

Stephen needed another few silent seconds, after which he blinked, shook his head, and insisted, "No. I don't want anyone dying for my revenge, and I especially don't want you killing them." His grip tightened again, firmer than it'd been before, and he placed a kiss on Tony's temple. "Thank you."

Just as Tony had suspected, killing the man on that metal throne would have been like breaking Stephen's medical oath by proxy. Tony's own heroic perspective was to solve all problems, no matter how those problems needed to be fixed. Sometimes, solving problems meant blowing enemy encampments into piles of component parts. Bombs and missiles were terrific at protecting the good guys, so long as his went off before the bad guys' weapons did.

But with that oath to do no harm, Stephen had taken some easy solutions off the table as he fought his own deadly foes. A saint or a serial killer could end up in an operating room and doctors were oath-bound to heal both. Of course, Stephen had spent much of his medical career choosing not to
help some people, all because their maladies weren't sufficiently interesting. After his change of heart, the guilt from that era probably made him even more determined to live up to his lofty ideals.

Yes, Tony was glad he'd decided not to kill that man. When he'd sat across from Steve in that S.H.I.E.L.D. apartment, he'd thought back to the subterranean torture chamber. He remembered his cold, certain rage toward the angular man with the blank stare. He remembered the way his soul screamed for revenge. And he remembered lowering his hand.

It didn't make him happy to hear Howard's name keep coming out of freshly-thawed Steve's clueless mouth, but how could that compare to seeing a knife standing above Stephen's chest as he lay dying in a pool of his own blood? Right in front of Tony, just two weeks earlier? Feeling his jeans absorb the wet heat of that black pool, feeling Stephen's lifeblood go cool against his skin? If Tony could pull his palm repulsor away from a murderous stranger in the shadows, he could deal with clueless puppy Steve Rogers who looked startled when the air seal popped on his frappuccino.

Most of Kamar-Taj had been oddly enjoyable, but the ending to that trip sucked. If the Ancient One's Time injection gave her glimpses of the future, she could have seen the Steve meeting coming. She could have given Tony a break. She was the one who'd shared the news about the killer's capture with Karl, after all, even though Tony could have learned about his presence after he'd dealt with the Rogers stress. It wasn't like creepy murderer dude was going anywhere in the meantime.

Tony went very still as the full implications of the day sank in. Then he rolled his eyes and pulled back from Stephen. "Seriously?"

Looking like he'd done something wrong, couldn't figure out what, and didn't particularly appreciate that confusion, Stephen frowned. "What?"

"Your boss had Karl show me that guy just before I left. Because it put me in the right headspace to deal with Rogers." Tony grumbled. "I'd put money on it."

Stephen hesitated, then smiled faintly and admitted, "That would explain why she didn't tell they'd captured Kaecilius."

"Weird name, now that you finally told me it." Stepping completely away, Tony shook his head again and added, "Anyway, I'm glad we left. You may follow Captain Picard, but I don't want her planning my life."

"And I'm glad you didn't call her 'Picard' to her face."

"Nicknames help me cope," Tony said airily.

"Are you coping?" Stephen asked after studying Tony. "Not in some kneejerk way, and not about a man who's apparently being dealt fair justice by Kamar-Taj. You barely touched on Rogers before you changed the subject. How are you handling him? Tell me the truth."

"Right before we left KT," Tony began, and held up his hand when Stephen began to protest him changing the subject again, "your buddy Karl and I talked about making choices. I decided I was going to give this Rogers a chance to be his own man. Having met the guy... I'm still going to do that. Well." Tony tilted his head to the side, and amended, "I'll let him be his own puppy."

"What happens if he mentions your father again?" Stephen wondered.

"I don't know," Tony admitted. "But I handled this first meeting, which had to be the worst. So, I figure that I should be able to cope. Really, honestly, truly cope." He let out a deep breath in a whoosh of air. "I think."
After waiting to make sure he meant that, Stephen smiled. "Would it be patronizing to say that I'm proud of you?"

"Incredibly so, yes."

"I will not do that, then."

"Good." Tony exhaled again, then clapped his hands loudly together and announced, "Vincent, send those real estate listings to my phone. Assuming I don't need to go kick some bad guy's ass tomorrow, we are going to give me something else to think about."

Tomorrow, he did need to go kick a bad guy's ass. Someone had tried to reverse-engineer Vincent's artificial intelligence to create his own fleet of killer robots. He'd done a shit job at it, since Tony had foreseen that exact thing coming and so the software contained phenomenal anti-hacking measures, but the attempt still ended up with those would-be threats holding their creator in protective custody on the MIT campus. Between Vincent's involvement and his alma mater, Tony needed to make an in-person appearance. He did, the story became "no one can overcome Vincent's security" instead of "Vincent was used to power killer robots," and he called it a good day.

That was fine by Stephen, since he had his own responsibilities to cover. In the morning, he met with Chuck Findlay about organizing the donated surgical suite and grant implementation. In the afternoon, he stopped cultists from summoning a demon with their empowered occult artifacts. Apparently, the 'energy vortexes' that Sedona, Arizona liked to brag about were real.

"These look like some top-tier tamales," Tony said happily when a plate was passed to him that evening. New York didn't have many culinary failings compared to what he remembered from Los Angeles, but Mexican food was one of them.

Later that night, as he mused on Rhodey's final suit design while Stephen read one of the books borrowed from Kamar-Taj, Tony looked down at his buzzing phone. It took him a second to realize what he was seeing. Despite himself, a faint smile grew when he did. "Someone apparently gave Rogers a smartphone. Can't imagine that he already taught himself to text, though."

After inspecting Tony's expression, Stephen wondered, "And you're fine with him texting you?"

Based on the content of Steve's message, yes, Tony was fine. Steve was trying to figure out this 'television' thing, which made sense; though it'd been invented during his time, it certainly wasn't common when he'd gone into the ice. He now had access to several hundred channels, but had no idea what any of those channel and show names meant. To avoid breaking his analog brain in this digital world, Tony suggested staying in the the handful of major networks—the lowest numbers—to use whatever they were airing as a glimpse into 2008.

"Damn," Tony mused as he tucked away his phone. "Should have sent him to one of the softcore porn channels. I bet we could have heard his outraged Eagle Scout screech from here."

"You might be surprised. He was in the Army," Stephen countered.

That was true, but it was Tony who knew how uptight Rogers could be. He'd screech. He'd definitely screech.

"Tomorrow, we really will check out some places," Tony later promised as he pulled off his shirt. "Hey, do that thing with my head again. The one where we can feel each other."

Maybe so, but Tony was in the mood for something decidedly not softcore.

The next morning, Tony stretched, then winced as he wondered if he'd actually strained a muscle. Now he was even more determined to spend the day inspecting real estate. That would involve walking, but better than fighting a group of baddies. His suit could correct for and hide most signs of weakness, but he'd still feel the pain. "You could have pulled back a little," he complained as he, yes, limped slightly into the living room.

"You literally told me not to stop," Stephen said without looking up from the coffeemaker.

Tony opened his mouth to argue, but blissful, disjointed memories of the night before filled his mind. Then he shut his mouth and shrugged, and winced again as he climbed up on a stool at the counter. Yeah. Worth it.

Fortunately, there were no imminent signs of the world ending, and so Pepper was able to make plans with realtors and Happy was able to meet them with the car. "Are you all right?" Happy wondered as Tony walked to the car with a slightly stiff-legged gait. That odd walk helped to cover the twinge that ran through his left glute with each step.

"I'm fantastic," Tony promised, a little too emphatically.

Happy hesitated, then helped both him and Stephen into the car, resigned.

"And he continues not to like me," Stephen noted with amusement once the car was in motion and the privacy screen was up. "Him still being here reminds me: how are your civilian expansions going?"

Excited by the reminder of all that new construction, Tony tapped his watch and had a holographic map bloom into existence. Each new idea had sparked the need for its own operations team, and based on what had turned out to be the unfortunate rigidity of Stark Tower, Tony wanted to go modular and flexible. A warehouse had been successfully converted and so "Consumer Household Electronics" now took up half a block in Long Island City. "Energy and Environmental Research" took up a full, larger block near the river. That building was nearly done, and the profit would be enormous. The company board was practically vibrating with excitement over the imminent introduction of Stark Industries' clean energy solutions.

But things didn't stop there. A deepening recession was doing wonders for their buying power. The medical research division was likely to sell bulky products, like MRI machines and surgical robots, so they'd bought up another full city block near the train tracks to the east. Pepper had found a beautiful building in Elmhurst to host "Consumer Handheld Electronics" (software research), and the nearly-bankrupt owner of a collection of buildings in Forest Hills was happy to sell them for "Consumer Handheld Electronics" (testing and manufacture). Finally, Pepper had secured a positively enormous warehouse in Maspeth as general flex space, because Tony was never short on ideas.

Everything was either already operational, being remodeled, or under construction. It would be hugely rapid progress for most companies, but Stark worked fast. "They're making the civilian division officially official," Tony proudly proclaimed. "Vincent alone convinced them of the profit potential."

Stephen sighed, then asked with exhausted humor, "Do I even want to know how many of the stupid things you've sold already?"

Tony smiled broadly. No. Stephen didn't.
As Stephen rolled his eyes, but relented into his voice's inescapable role as global assistant, Tony continued, "With that official division launch, I think it's time to bring my full team to New York. I'll sell the Malibu house." If he didn't, it'd probably just get bombed, anyway. He might as well recoup the money he'd spent on it. "I'll have Happy and Pepper move out here, and anyone else I need." Leaning back, Tony let his hologram vanish and instead gestured toward the window. "And in New York, you and I will put together our new, permanent place."

The first building they tried that morning was definitely not going to be their new, permanent place.

"How many poodles can one family own?" Tony wondered as they watched a whole pack of the things emerge from an elevator, lead by their hired dog walker.

"The Upper East Side could not be living up to its reputation any more," Stephen noted as the canines left the luxurious, staid lobby. This building had all of the formal restraint of the Sanctum's design without any of its weirdass mystic artifacts to mix things up. Clearly, this was a place for boring people. Neither of them were remotely in the vicinity of boring.

The second option did not have decor aimed at uptight grandparents. That didn't make it a better match.

"I thought we were planning on Manhattan," Stephen said as they studied the aggressively minimal room in which they now stood.

Tony frowned at the employee overseeing the lobby, who was making a show out of how unimpressed she was by the billionaire and the (modern) world's first superhero. It wasn't like Tony needed to be fawned over—constantly—but being treated like he was boring was unacceptable. With how he'd made fun of the place to Rogers, he shouldn't have even considered this place in Williamsburg. Brooklyn's hipster central at the height of its navel-gazing might be a hot real estate market, but it wasn't one for them.

The third place was too close to Wall Street. Tony felt like his stock price would be affected based on whether he turned left or right coming out of his front door. The fourth place's neighborhood was too touristy. The fifth place was right by an arts college, and those pretentious students were clearly going to make a habit out of deconstructing their public images. That'd get annoying.

"I promise, I screened these beforehand. Well," Tony added, "Pepper did."

"It's fine," Stephen promised and watched the city blur past. Although they could have simply hopped from listing to listing via portal, doing so ran the risk of divorcing them from the world they were supposed to protect. They didn't want to buy a place that was only ever left and entered via portal, or from a suit launchpad on its roof. That meant that the surrounding neighborhoods mattered. "How many people find a home on their first day spent looking? We can try again tomorrow."

Tony frowned through his window. That was true, but 'tomorrow' meant failure for today. He wanted Stephen to have an actual library instead of a few shelves in a bedroom office. He wanted that medical research lab now that the grant was officially happening. And he wanted training areas, because Stephen had been too slow with blocking his trial strike at Kamar-Taj. Tony wanted those things for Stephen right now, and he'd never been very good with delayed gratification.

His frown deepened, and he pulled up the Wooster Street listing he'd looked at before. "Hey," Tony mused as he studied it. "There's a pretty good looking place on Wooster, near Houston."

After the needed pause to picture that location, Stephen turned away from the window. "That'd be... what, just two blocks from the Sanctum? Three?"
"That's why I didn't bring it up. I know you miss that place." *Even if I don't*, Tony amended silently.

"No, it's fine," Stephen promised. "I'd actually like to help keep an eye on it. God knows we don't want the Sanctums falling and leaving Earth vulnerable. That wouldn't help anything we're planning. Let me take a look."

Tony passed it over. A few seconds later, Stephen looked back up at him, silent and startled.

"What?" Tony wondered.

"We've been looking at penthouses. Not the oversized condo of that beige Time-Warner box, but actual penthouses that cap off a building. That have their own roof decks for your suits to launch from."

"Uh huh."

"This isn't some penthouse. Like I thought we were looking for."

Tony shrugged. "We're not required to get one."

That didn't seem to be his point. "This is the *entire building.*" Stephen gestured at the listing for an eight-story building on a charming, tree-lined cobblestone street. Its elegant pale stone facade was dotted by dozens of huge, loft-like windows. It looked airy inside, with flexible open space and a ground floor that was perfect for a workshop conversion. Blending both of their tastes together for its remodel would be easy, Tony was sure.

"Uh huh," Tony slowly repeated, and waited for whatever the problem might be.

Stephen stared back at him, and when Tony didn't continue, added, "It's listed at eighty million dollars."

Now this was actually a fair problem. "Yeah, it's seriously overpriced in his economy. They'd take seventy."

"They'd take seventy," Stephen echoed faintly.

Ah, Tony abruptly realized. Stephen had been one of the wealthiest members of a profitable profession, but still, that didn't remotely compare to Tony's accounts. Anything in this price range had never been imagined, let alone actually considered, and so Stephen needed to recalibrate. That was no reason not to buy it, though, now that it was under discussion. "So," Tony prompted, and tapped the listing on his phone. "Wanna check it out?"

"It's a little excessive."

"Says the man who wears a Dracula cape to work. *You're* excessive."

Stephen still wasn't giving Tony the enthusiastic reaction he wanted, and so Tony went silent and studied him. If he offered this opportunity to that abrasive, self-centered man who'd been plucked from 2007, he probably would have taken it (and more) as his due. But although this Stephen certainly still appreciated the finer things in life, he also thought nothing of living in ascetic conditions at Kamar-Taj. Just as he'd hoped from that trip, Tony did better understand where Stephen's life had taken him.

Even so. "I want to get this for you," Tony then insisted, and took one of Stephen's hands in his. "We'll go look at it, and assuming you like it... I do. I want to get it for you." He squeezed the hand
he held. "Remember how Pepper got that extra warehouse just for my invention flex space? I have everything I'd ever need. I want you to have the same."

Stephen still needed convincing, and so Tony turned to him as best as he could inside his seatbelt. "We've got the biggest fight imaginable coming up, but the world's going to keep throwing all sorts of other challenges at us. Someone tried to kill you, and—" He swallowed hard. "And he nearly did. When you heard that I could have killed that guy in return, your first thought was to hope that I didn't. That's..." Trailing off, Tony admitted, "That's being a better person than I've ever managed." Tony Stark's big heroic moments had very bitter cousins.

Stephen's lopsided smile said that he appreciated that compliment, even as he deeply wished that Tony would give himself more credit. But still, he looked uncertain.

"I shape the future, you save lives. If you ever come up with any idea that can help save more lives, you'll have room for me to build what tech your idea involves. Say... you get some crazy medical plan that uses one of those weird relics. You know Chuck's lawyers wouldn't ever sign off for that research inside the hospital." He waited for Stephen's reluctant acknowledgment. "Well, whatever. Do it at home. You wouldn't just have a single medical lab like you planned on. You'd have whatever med space you want, for whatever you need."

"That would be nice," Stephen admitted.

Tony grinned. *Got him.*

"I will look at the place," Stephen relented. "And if I can figure out a way to not be massively in your debt—"

"Wait, what?" Tony blinked. "Debt?"

"You saved my life in the luxury condo you bought for me," Stephen said after a significant pause. "And now you're talking about an eighty million dollar building. My recent unique contribution has been to ask Steve Rogers a couple of distracting questions."

Tony blinked again. "Where'd this come from?" They were a team. Teams worked together. (Hell, he had still had a sore muscle from them working *totally* together last night.)

"Didn't really come from anywhere, except for hearing you suggest an eighty million dollar listing."

In absolute befuddlement, Tony turned back to his window. This was like Pepper protesting his offer of the Saleen and its half-million price tag before she accepted a less spectacular Audi. Why did people care? He had more money than he knew what to do with and most bank accounts had been filled by pursuits he now disowned. He liked spending money on people he cared about, and he especially wanted to turn his *current* money—the results of Obadiah's negotiations—into positive, productive things.

*He got touchy when I joked about him not buying me a condo, once,* Tony abruptly remembered. As things clicked into place, he kept his gaze trained on the window. Just because they got along now—just because they loved each other—didn't mean that their spectacular egos had shrunk. Once Stephen's medical school debt had been paid off, he could have afforded their current condominium. He never could have bought this full building.

(It was probably for the best that he'd never realized that Pepper had arranged for the repayment of all of those student loans.)

*And I got touchy when he said Kamar-Taj would be way harder for me than him,* Tony reluctantly
added. Stephen had been completely right in his assessment. Something that had been difficult for him would have been essentially impossible for Tony. That didn't matter. Tony had still snapped at him over it.

They were a team, united against the world and all threats to reality, but they were both Type-A and then some. A sudden realization of love hadn't done anything to change that. Hmm. It was easier to have a third party running damage control, like what Stephen had so clearly done between Tony and Steve, but for this tension there was only them. Well, Tony had better step up and handle this, then.

"I mean," Tony continued after that long pause, "this won't make up for what I owe you, but I figure the building could be a decent start."

Seeming to recognize the conciliatory shift in Tony's tone, Stephen looked over to him. "What you 'owe me'?"

"I was a total idiot in that ER on Christmas Eve. Because I screwed up and you had to save me, you've only been able to operate once since then. You love operating, and you're the best at it." Tony shrugged. "It'd only be fair if all my old weapons contract profits went into your med labs, huh? It could help make up for the people I stopped you from helping."

Like an offended cat lowering its bristled fur, Stephen relaxed and his bruised ego retreated. Once that was accomplished, he dryly noted, "That was incredibly, ridiculously blatant."

Tony gave him a half-lidded smile in return. "No more so than you telling Rogers to ask us about sports and movies." They weren't an easy, sedate match. That had always been apparent in every variant of relationship they had. But truly trying made up for so much. "So, will you look at the building?"

Stephen opened his mouth, but then closed his eyes. Instead of saying whatever he'd planned, he sighed. It sounded like realization, and so Tony obligingly waited. "In the new place, whether this building or another," Stephen continued, "you can... install... Vincent."

Tony took that offer with all due grace, meaning that he cackled and pumped his fist. "I knew I'd wear you down."

Eyes opened to narrow slits.

Immediately, Tony took his hand again and cooed, "I love you."

Stephen opened his eyes enough to roll them, but a smile accompanied the expression. It had all the affection of their recent epiphany plus all the ease they'd developed over months in temporal isolation. They were already good at this, when they weren't going Type-A to complain over real estate or act like a jealous jackass toward Karl Mordo.

Tony's phone buzzed again as he stepped out of the car on Wooster. "Rogers has started checking out other channels," Tony said as he studied his texts, and tried to adjust his stance to a more comfortable one. "And he found the more... interesting ones." His strained muscle still hurt.

"Did he screech?" Stephen asked wryly.

"He does not appear to be screeching," Tony noted, "but he is a little stunned that Cinemax and company is just streaming into people's houses like that, in full color. I think he's wondering if it's some special arrangement S.H.I.E.L.D. made for him. Which would be kind of weird, yeah." Hey, welcome to the Twenty-First Century. Our introductory package includes porn.
"Not screeching, but surprised." Stephen considered that as they watched Happy greet the realtor, and run down the security needs this building would require before they even considered it. "So... we were both wrong about Rogers, then?"

"I prefer to think of it as us both being right," Tony countered.

Stephen smiled at him sidelong, then looked back up to the white facade of the building as it towered above them. "Yes. It's probably for the best if we aim for that."

Chapter End Notes

I looked at some listings to get inspired as to what they might find, and actually found a specific building I wanted to use! This listing is just for one floor, but I wanted the whole building. And here's the streetview to see how charming that is. Anyway, it's not necessary to picture that actual real building (before they completely redo the interior), but if you like doing that, you can!
Chapter 30

Chapter Notes

This chapter and the next should be the last before some serious timeskipping begins to kick in, to move through more points in the MCU timeline. Some will be pretty much the same as what happened before, while others will be wildly different. (Did Tony really think he could avoid Civil War?) But before that future takes off, I first needed to have a perfectly happy, well-adjusted relationship launchpad.

Also, writing some indulgent hurt/comfort is always fun.

The building was annoyingly perfect. Tony's abilities as a visionary were unmatched, and so he was able to turn each open, airy floor into an aspect of their potential future home with a few precise words and sweeping gestures. The top two floors could be the personal residence, with additional windows punched into the back wall to keep an eye on the sky over the Sanctum. A medical floor, an artifact and library floor, a training and meditation floor. Fabrication workshops. Engineering labs and computer servers. Suit storage. Backup suit storage.

"And I'll put in a curb cut," Tony said, and pointed through the windows on the bottom floor where they now stood, "so I can also turn this space into my garage." Stephen might not drive anymore, but Tony still enjoyed it and clearly missed having his fleet of cars out uselessly there in Malibu.

"They'd let you do that?" Stephen wondered. The charming, old-fashioned street didn't have any driveways, so far as he'd noticed. It certainly didn't have anything to equal Tony Stark peeling out of a building in a Ferrari or Lister, or whatever flashy car he'd pick up to celebrate the move.

"Know the right people, and you can get a permit for anything."

"Huh," Stephen murmured, and walked up to the plate glass windows that lined the building's first floor. He rapped his knuckles lightly against one pane, then stepped back before any of the people on the sidewalks noticed who was inside. "If someone wants to kill either of us, all these windows would make for an easy assault." Their current condo wasn't exactly reinforced for a full attack, but there was much less exposure and no street-level access.

"I thought of that," Tony said as he walked up next to Stephen. "I've got some transparent high-tech polymers that can replace the glass. They'd block anything short of a suitcase nuke. I'll do energy shields, too. It'd look too modern if one actually needed to go off, but—"

"But better than the two foundations of this timeline getting wiped off the map," Stephen agreed. Folding his arms, he studied the cobblestone street outside, and then the open, bright loft space inside. The building and its setting neatly blended the minimalist tastes of Stephen Strange, M.D. with the more traditional tastes of Stephen Strange, master of the mystic arts. "And it'll need to be a multi-step process, but I can redo those magical wards to block surveillance."

With a knowing look, Tony turned away from the windows. "Is that a yes?"

Though Stephen said nothing, a smile accompanied his shrug. Tony spending so much money on him was still awkward. That hadn't changed, and he didn't know if that dynamic ever would. But he
really, really wanted this building.

Grinning, Tony turned to Happy and gave him a thumbs-up. From across the room, they could see the man's demeanor change as he spoke to the realtor with fresh purpose. "I'll call my interior designer for a remodel."

"You have an interior designer on call?"

"I will have Pepper find a good interior designer," Tony amended, "she will tell him what we want, and we'll pick from the options they come up with."

Yes, that did make more sense. "Speaking of Pepper," Stephen mused as he studied the plate glass windows again, and wondered if Tony seriously planned to have his workshop visible to any passing pedestrians. "Are you really going to have her move to New York?"

"Okay, if you get jealous over Pepper again, I get to be jealous over Karl." Tony rolled his eyes at Stephen's protests. "Yes, I know you didn't date."

"I am not getting jealous," Stephen said after a measured pause, during which he made sure to communicate impatience through his sharpened gaze. "I am trying to be considerate. So please shut up." He paused, then nodded at the silence. "Thank you. Are you prepared for her likely suggestion of double dates?" Between being tasked with overseeing Rogers and investigating Tony, Phil would surely earn a permanent New York posting, too.

Tony didn't quite grimace, but it wasn't a pleased expression. The two of them were in this for good; not even Tony Stark would drop eighty million (seventy million?) on a relationship he expected to ever fall apart. He'd done better recently with the mention of Pepper's name, too, and appeared genuinely happy that she was happy. Still, there was a fair distance between that and being able to sit across from her while ignoring smiles from Phil's leg brushing against hers, or his hand resting on her thigh.

"I'm just saying," Stephen added when he got no other response.

"Yes," Tony announced after another pause.

"You're lying."

"Fine, yes, I'm lying, but I need to get over every single part of this." Tony straightened, eyes alit with inspiration. "I'll suggest a dinner."

"Really?" Stephen replied, surprised. He supposed it made sense, to both rip off the band-aid and feel a sense of control by setting the timeline. Still, it was unexpected.

"We're coming up on our three week anniversary and I just bought you a whole building," Tony wryly replied. "When I do something, I move fast."

"We've been living together for four months," Stephen replied, just as wryly. "And 'dating' for nine."

"Catching feelings did come all out of order, yeah," Tony laughed. "Anyway, it's not like it'll happen right this second."

That, it did not. Their official, public nine-month anniversary almost passed without note, because a cult had to be rooted out of rapidly growing power in Seoul. Stephen was able to spend scant time at home during the week-long effort, and so all they were able to manage for a celebratory dinner was a night with pizza. Not very romantic.
That didn't matter. Their perspective on each other spanned not just months, but multiple lives. As the malfunctioning Time Stone tried to correct its errors, the two of them stood at the center of its redone timeline. There probably weren't any other couples out there for whom "life partners" was an accurate label of their greater role in the universe. Short-lived arguments aside, that really helped them to keep a sense of perspective.

They would still argue and their egos would still battle, because they were Tony Stark and Stephen Strange. But once they finally, completely accepted how closely they were tied here, a relationship felt like as much of an unshakeable truth as that Horkos oath Stephen had made. That meant that Stephen was able to collapse into bed at the end of his cult battle, even though he'd barely been able to acknowledge Tony recently, and get an idle, affectionate brush of his hair as he succumbed to exhaustion.

When their roles reversed a week later, Tony made it harder to welcome him back. "I'm leaning toward board four," he said, gesturing five holograms into existence. Each one displayed an inspiration board put together by their interior designer. These were the final options developed under Pepper's guidance, and now it was time for them to select one.

"Sit still," Stephen said and flicked the holograms out of his way.

"He's really hoping for a selection ASAP."

"Sit still," Stephen repeated more insistently and sat next to Tony on the edge of the bed. A cache of weapons had gone missing from terrorists Tony had been tracking. His efforts to follow the cache's trail took him to Pakistan one day, India the next, and then to a port in Mombasa that turned into a protracted campaign where Tony saw his own company's old weapons being used against him. The final fight had been a brutal one, and his body bore its injuries.

Once Tony realized that Stephen really wouldn't let him use the building remodel as a distraction, he changed tactics. "At least there are fewer of my black-market missiles left on the market, now. Take that, Obi. I should really check in on him. See how miserable he is in that cell in Atwater."

Speaking to Tony would just give him the excuse to babble back, and so Stephen instead lifted a sterile wipe and carefully dabbed at a cut on Tony's cheek. Though Tony flinched, it was mostly for show. Stephen knew he was working with the most delicate medical touch any person could offer, and right now he was making an extra-special effort.

Put bluntly, Tony was a mess. All of this dirt, sweat, and blood just seemed to annoy him, but the sight of his ragged return through a requested portal had stolen a few beats from Stephen's heart. Tony had moved slowly after stepping out of his suit, and though nothing appeared to be broken, the mission left him battered. "I want a home with a real medical suite," Stephen murmured as his efforts cleaned Tony's face.

Tony seemed to recognize that, now that doctor mode had taken over, Stephen was in control and he should do as instructed. Accordingly, his words came out quietly and the rest of his head stayed motionless as Stephen worked. "All of the remodel plans have one. You've mentioned it a lot. It was a tip-top priority."

"Then I want whatever remodel can be done as fast as possible." Anticipating Tony's comment in reply, Stephen said, "I will pick my favorite option as soon as I finish with you."

Tony smiled silently, a quick curve of his lips that didn't interrupt Stephen's delicate work, and said nothing.
"I'll look forward to you having more help," Stephen said regretfully after cleaning away a patch of blood-speckled dirt revealed a bruise blooming underneath. Tony would come out of this mission with a brilliant black eye, a long cut under it that would want to scar, and countless smaller lacerations and abrasions. One of Tony's own missiles had gone off near him and the suit wasn't a total shield. "Rhodes would have been good backup for this."

"Once I've got the home fabrication unit," Tony promised, "and we're sure that Hydra won't get something they shouldn't, I'll suit him up." Off Stephen's silent dismay, he pointed out, "You worked alone in Seoul. Could've brought in Wong, or Mordo."

"And we knew I'd be fine," Stephen countered, referencing that safety oath. Pausing, he let his work fill the silence for a while as he cleaned more of Tony's face. "What would you think of doing the same? An oath to keep you safe?"

"Why, Dr. Strange, is that concern I hear from you?"

"You haven't totally paid off the new building, yet," Stephen instinctively joked, but sobered as soon as he'd said it. So many of these wounds marred Tony's handsome face. Unlike that amusing limp Tony had taken away from their experiment in bed, each injury tugged at Stephen's heart. He had no idea how he'd deal with a truly severe wound if it was this hard to see Tony bruised. Reversing their roles from that night with the black knife would have him beside himself. "Yes," he then admitted. "It's concern."

"This really isn't that bad," Tony promised. Thankfully, he followed it up with, "But if you want, I could do something with the stick like you did. We've both gotta make it to that last fight, after all. Anything else can't take priority."

"Good," Stephen said, lightly kissed the tip of Tony's nose, and tried not to react to the taste of sterile cleanser that flavored it. "Let me bandage you up, and then I'll stitch the big cut."

"I've never had something like this before," Tony noted as Stephen precisely placed a butterfly bandage over a smaller wound.

"Something like this?" Stephen echoed. This wasn't exactly cutting-edge medicine.

"All of my hospital visits were pretty to-the-point. I've needed doctors, obviously, but they weren't the people who cared about me afterward. I was just another patient." Tony's large, expressive eyes met his. Gratified warmth filled them. "It's nice. Having you take care of me as a big, total package deal."

"I'm just returning the favor." Off Tony's complaints to stop trying to balance their emotional account books, Stephen placed his fingertips on Tony's lips until his attempts to talk quieted. "I'm still working, and I don't want you moving."

This mission really had brought a beating with it. He supposed that was only to be expected, with how Tony engaged in physical struggles that were heavy on the explosives, but seeing aftereffects like this still caught him by surprise. That sort of vulnerability hadn't been on the nightly news, back home where he only knew Stark as a distant media figure.

"I want to be careful to avoid scars," Stephen murmured as he placed another precise bandage over a smaller cut, tightly enough to join the edges but not so tight that the healing flesh would rise up as it knit. "You've made a mess of your face, and I want to make sure it heals properly." Smiling, he brushed the pad of his thumb over that bandage's edge to smooth it down. "I like your face, after all."
"Do you?" Tony wondered, grinning faintly, as Stephen sat back.

He rifled through the small medical kit. "Very much so."

"Good. I like yours." Pausing, Tony then added, "We probably could have told each other that before sucking dick."

"Well, we already established that we did everything out of order," Stephen laughed, and turned back with a few tools and a spool of suture material. "Let me go disinfect these, and I'll be right back." Once done, he walked out of the bathroom, the scent of rubbing alcohol still clinging to his skin, and set the tools down on a clean cotton cloth.

"You're going to numb it, right?" Tony asked warily, looking around for a syringe that wasn't there, or at the very least a topical gel. Although he could fearlessly face down an entire terrorist cell in battle, receiving a long line of stitches just below his eye was apparently a different matter.

"I'll knock you out," Stephen promised and gently guided him down to the pillow. "Do you want to watch or not? I could eject your astral form."

"It sounds unbelievably creepy to be standing over my own body as you shove that needle through me," Tony said, but there wasn't a hint of stress as he blinked up at Stephen. Even though Stephen's hand was trailing lightly along Tony's temple, capable of any of the horrors he'd visited upon Obadiah Stane, Tony was as relaxed as if he were going to sleep for the night.

"Just unconscious, then."

"Yeah."

Nodding, Stephen placed his hand on an uninjured stretch of Tony's face, then pressed his fingertips hard against a series of pressure points. A jolt of mystical energy accompanied the motion and Tony fell obligingly unconscious like an unpowered android. He was a perfectly still patient for Stephen to work on.

That exposed wound was far easier than even the simplest brain bleeder to repair. Even so, Stephen worked slowly, with incredible caution. He was going to be looking at this face for a long, long time; the rest of his life, hopefully. If he couldn't minimize this scar to near invisibility, each time he looked at Tony's face would fill him with guilt. That would be unfortunate. As noted, he did like Tony's face very much. Looking at it was fun.

At least Tony would also do one of those protective Horkos oaths, Stephen reassured himself as he worked on a line of small, precise stitches that stretched from under Tony's eye nearly to his ear. Although Tony's demonstration of the staff had been hilarious, there were far more important uses than being forced to kiss the back of Stephen's hand. The universe needed them both to be available, to make sure that a paradox wouldn't break reality.

The memory of a bruised, bloodied Tony coming back through that portal made Stephen swallow hard before tackling the next suture. And... I need him.

That brat of a freshly-minted surgeon—the one who'd broken the universe in the first place—probably wouldn't have deigned to lower himself to facial sutures. That was scut work, fit only for residents and interns. Even if someone he loved was hurt, he wouldn't injure his own pride by stitching up anything but the walls of vital blood vessels inside the brain. He'd just been named a fully-fledged attending neurosurgeon, after all; everyone else should recognize that prestige and fall in line accordingly. The best residents in the hospital should have jumped to help someone he cared
about, hoping to curry favor and get in on his most exciting surgeries.

Now, he was just grateful for being able to tend to Tony's injuries himself. That assured that he was getting the best care possible.

"There you go," he murmured as he woke Tony with another gesture. "All done." The cut across his cheekbone was now closed with a line of tiny stitches precise enough for neuro work.

"Ow," Tony sighed as his eyelids fluttered open, but he made no other movement. Seeing Stephen leaning closer to check on his work, he clarified, "My cheek feels better. But now that I've laid down, I'm finally feeling everything else. I don't want to get up."

"Then don't. I'll go get some ibuprofen and water, and you can fall asleep early."

Tony obligingly swallowed the two small pills when offered to him, and tried to shuck his pants until the developing bruises on his abdomen ruined the attempt. Stephen took over the removal, then moved to his shirt, and then placed a blanket. But as he turned to leave, wanting to give Tony peace and quiet to get the sleep he clearly craved, Tony called out, "We have to pick a remodel design."

"Well. You said you liked number four."

A bleary smile answered him. It faded a moment later and Tony softly said, "Thanks." Clearly, he wasn't talking about his interior design question.

The thanks was for dealing with those injuries. And they had been dealt with, to Stephen's relief. Tony would be sore, but fine, and soon he'd swear a protective oath to match Stephen's. Exhaling, and letting his stress leave with it, Stephen nodded from where he stood in the doorway. "You're welcome."

Before Stephen could slip into the hallway, Tony continued in a soft but certain voice, without lifting his head from the pillow, "I'm good at making money. Like. Really good. It just happens. I solve problems, people write giant checks to say 'thank you.'"

Stephen studied him, curiously but with no offense, and wondered what had prompted this. Clearly, this referenced Stephen's tension over the new building, but he had no idea why a discussion was happening now. An interior overhaul was another big step, yes, but most paperwork had already been signed and most checks had been written.

"I have so much money. It comes in faster than I can spend it." Tony's smile returned, this time wide enough to tug faintly on his sutures. "Although I tried to practice that." Humor faded. "Back in the first world, me and Pepper needed more than one try to make things work. Eventually she asked me if I'd go to a relationship counselor. I didn't want to. It seemed like a waste of time. I knew I loved her."

Stephen folded his arms, leaned against the doorway, and let Tony talk.

"When we went, it turned out that she felt like I was just trying to shut her up. She had real problems and handing her a credit card made her feel like I was trying to buy her off. Distract her." Sighing, Tony amended, "And I thought she could be a control freak trying to run my life, like I wasn't responsible enough to do it on my own. But she was worried, could only worry from a distance, and so she'd try to keep me safe the only way she could."

"Like when she bugged your suit here."

"Yeah. And I don't care about my money, so why wouldn't I want to spend it on anything that might
make her happy? Then it could do some real good. Once we figured out what each other was really trying to say, we made things work. The counselor called it 'love languages.' Mine was spending money, and hers was worrying, but those were just two different languages to describe the same thing."

Clearly, Tony was going somewhere with this besides describing the particular relationship dynamic of Pepper Potts and Tony Stark. Stephen continued waiting in silence, with an open, expectant expression.

"I don't think you spend money," Tony concluded as he studied Stephen. "I bet the old you did spend money, but that wasn't about love. That was all about how great you are. To show off that you had money to flash around."

"Hmm. You did spend a while in counseling," Stephen said dryly. It was a critical assessment, but a fair one. He'd previously shared with Tony how his relationships had ended because he expected a partner to be a supporting player in his oh-so-impressive life.

His path toward greatness hadn't been a flashy, abrupt sequence like young Tony's, where he'd barely known anything else and treated the markers of his success with an accompanying lack of concern. Stephen's had come at the end of a lengthy, deliberate sequence of degrees, internships, and residencies. He'd wanted to celebrate the end of that marathon, and expected everyone else do the same.

"Yeah. We needed a few rounds with the counselor." Tony smiled lopsidedly at him from the pillow. Even through bruises, the expression was affectionate. "I think your language is treating someone like they're more important than you. Which I totally get. I try to do that, too, but money's so much easier."

Stephen smiled lopsidedly in return, and thought again on the oddity of doing facial sutures without complaint. "You might actually be right on that one."

"I know that I'm right. Like when you told the press on Christmas Eve that you'd hid your magic from me. It made my life easier, but yours harder. You still prioritized me over you."

"That was... God, half a year ago," Stephen countered, bemused. Everything had been fake back then. A supposed 'love language' didn't matter for those months.

But he turned to study the doorframe he leaned against, and then the elegant master bedroom in which Tony rested. Though Tony had later moved in here, that was never their plan. This had been a gift for Stephen alone, even before their world irrevocably changed on Christmas Eve. "And... back then, you were already buying me a condo." Tony occasionally wanting a room to spend the night certainly hadn't demanded three bedrooms.

They hadn't called it 'love,' then, but they still felt the weight of existence shared between them. It was a heavy load, and one that demanded total trust. Maybe their subconsciouses had noticed things before they saw where they were headed.

"Huh. We really just did everything out of order, huh?" Tony laughed, only to wince as the movement jostled his bruises.

"Shh, lie still. And I suppose we did." Last, lingering unease about the ridiculous, expensive building purchase faded. Their egos could—and would—fight about other things, but he'd let Tony spend money on him and appreciate every dollar.
Stephen walked across the room to lean down, then kiss an unmarred spot on Tony's forehead. "Go to sleep. But before you do, send those design boards to the living room. I really will consider them." Standing, Stephen added with an impish smile, "I suppose I'm glad I got you after your romantic knots unraveled. I should thank that counselor."

"You should be glad," Tony said and smirked up at him. "At least one of us knows what we're doing."

"Go to sleep, Tony," Stephen ordered, smirked back, and walked out to investigate their remodeling options.

Number four was actually the best one. That was fortunate, since it was also Tony's favorite; no more discussion would be needed. Except for some additional electrical capacity, any construction was minor. It was still spacious and open, which they'd both loved upon first walking in. Laser-etched glass made up the walls between most functional areas, somehow looking beautiful and airy instead of harshly corporate.

Noting an addendum at the end of the file, Stephen raised an eyebrow at the anticipated construction timeline, then decided to take it as a sign. "Design plan four it is," he sent to Pepper. "We're both in agreement."

Once this building was theirs and they'd moved in, Rhodey would be actively on board, courtesy of Tony's fabrication facility. With a full research floor of his own, Stephen could work more with Wong to assist the Ancient One in her plans. They would be in their permanent home, together, steering a changed world and leading a very different sort of team than what Nick Fury had brought together.

Not bad for a planned timeline of mid-September, 2008.

With any luck, they'd be in their new home by the 15th. That day was an anniversary that demanded more than a box of pizza.
Chapter Notes

Before the timeskips that will allow for a lot more major players to arrive, a couple of emotional confrontations needed to happen. But also... our boys needed to be wrong about a few assumptions.

Bruises intensified over time, and so Tony felt worse for two more painful days before improving on the third. By then his black eye was as dark as it'd ever be, his cheek was the worst possible combination of deep purple bruises and shallow ones that had already yellowed, and his stitched and bandaged cuts still had scabby bits. Even so, he was practically perky when he woke up and felt even slightly better than the unpleasant day before. "I want seafood," Tony announced as Stephen handed over a mug of coffee. "Let's do Seattle tonight. We can get the Pepper and Phil dinner out of the way."

Stephen stared back at Tony. "You cannot be serious."

"Why wouldn't I be?" Ow, his abdomen still ached when he took a seat on the barstool. Core muscles were always a bitch to bruise; so many movements used them.

After a long, pointed scan from Tony's feet to hairline, Stephen answered, "You still look like you're on death's door."

Rude. "I thought you liked looking at my face."

"I do," Stephen patiently said. "Everyone else would just be looking at your injuries. They would photograph those injuries. The tabloids would get those photographs. Obnoxious stories would follow."

"So glamour me." Shrugging, Tony added, "You've hidden the Cloak. I know you've changed how you look to avoid being noticed on the sidewalks. You could hide these bruises, right?" Stephen didn't look happy about it, but he couldn't argue against that logic. He answered Tony with silence as he continued making breakfast.

Which meant that Tony had won, and 'I love being right' had proven its durability as a core relationship dynamic. While stirring in sugar and then sipping his coffee, Tony smirked sharply enough to tug at the stitches on his cheek. He did love knowing that remodeling was underway for their new building, but being right was an equally good way to start his day.

Later that day, well into Eastern Time evening, Pepper was pleased by something different. "I love doing that," Pepper said as she and Phil followed them through a portal into Pacific Time late afternoon. Seattle bloomed around them, breezy and relaxed in comparison to a swampy Manhattan summer. "Every time, I love doing that." Her wide eyes reflected the portal's sparks as they spun into nothing.

"It is pretty nifty," Phil said with a smile, and turned that smile onto Tony. "I saw you were recently involved in quite a fight in Mombasa, Mr. Stark. The Kenyan government was pleased that you kept things contained like you did. It could have turned ugly."
Tony smiled back. The expression looked bright and healthy behind the glamour spell that Stephen had woven around him. "Call me Tony. And I'm glad you two were able to make this dinner work tonight." This emotional checklist item needed to be handled, ASAP. He was a man who pursued progress, and yet he'd been letting this to-do sit idle for far too long.

"Tony," Phil obligingly said, still with his same smile. He looked as bureaucratic as ever, even in a thin cashmere sweater to cut the surprisingly cool winds coming off the Puget Sound. But behind those placid eyes was an observant mind, Tony knew, and he must be trying to figure out why Tony and Stephen had recently decided to cozy up to S.H.I.E.L.D. after keeping them so firmly at arm's length. "Well, for my part, I'm glad to see that you got out of Mombasa unscratched. Some of those explosions had me fearing the worst."

"You and me both," Stephen said emphatically, and with a polite nod to Pepper that she returned, gestured them all down the sidewalk toward their destination. A small crowd had already gathered on the opposite side of the street, for half the world now recognized his portals. He clearly preferred not to give that crowd a chance to approach. "How's the captain doing?"

"Captain Rogers seems to be doing well," Phil said, brightening. His fanboy nature hadn't diminished with extended exposure. "He's been keeping up with the news, reading history... staying engaged, basically. It's a better outcome than we'd feared after his initial reaction. I understand he's been reaching out to you, Tony?"

Tony shrugged as Stephen's gaze flicked to him. "Nothing fancy. I taught him about TV. Movies. Pop culture stuff. God knows the man wouldn't understand anything, otherwise."

Rogers had been so damned clueless after the first time he woke up, and Tony was determined not to suffer through that annoyance again. Fortunately, S.H.I.E.L.D. had access to basically every piece of media ever produced and so Steve was able to take Tony's recommendations to heart. In-between his S.H.I.E.L.D. responsibilities, he was working through box office titans and the top Nielsen TV ratings. That should sidestep some of the blank stares that Tony's witty repartee had earned on Fury's 2012 helicarrier.

"American Idol will probably try to get him for a 'classic standards' night," Pepper giggled, and greeted the host at the restaurant's doors. Their table was promised shortly. "Ford, Coca-Cola, and Captain America."

"That does sound amazingly patriotic. He's actually requested some recent Idol seasons," Phil confirmed with a faintly bemused look. "He said it's a 'good overview of the past few decades of music.'"


"So, you're not a fan," Pepper guessed, laughing.

Stephen was still unhappy about Tony's glamour. They were both stubborn about facing danger, and although Stephen's danger couldn't be mortal and Tony's soon wouldn't be, danger could still be painful. While the good doctor made a habit out of pushing through his own pain, he was a full-on hypocrite of not wanting Tony to do the same. Because of that hypocrisy, Tony hadn't felt the need to even slightly coddle Stephen's concerns.

"I love it when he gets grumpy like this," Tony said with a grin, and followed the host to their table.

The flat look he earned in return actually made Pepper shoot Tony a worried glance, but Tony just grinned wider in return. It's fine, that grin promised. This is normal. He truly did love it when
Stephen got grumpy, because he was just so damned fun to tease. Even better, it felt so damn satisfying when Tony was able to pull him back into a bright mood with sheer charismatic willpower.

That ebullience quieted as they were shown to their table and Phil stepped aside to pull out Pepper's chair. Ah, right. This wasn't just socializing with a woman he still loved—if now (mostly) platonically—but watching her on a date with Phil Coulson. This wasn't a social outing, it was a confrontation. Just like his glamoured injuries, he needed to stitch up a few last lingering wounds that no one else could see.

At least his visible uncertainty eased Stephen's grumpy mood. With concern obvious, he stroked lightly down Tony's arm, then pulled another chair out just a few inches. The nod Tony gave him in return said *I'm good, but thank you*, and he pulled his chair the rest of the way to take his seat.

So, here Tony finally was: seeing Pepper and Phil together, up close and extremely personal. Theirs did not appear to be a relationship where emotional swings were a source of amusement, nor where they kept tallies of who'd been proven right most recently. Just as he'd expected, they were a steady and affectionate pairing who tackled a relationship with the same cheerful skill as their careers. It was like watching two friendly service Labradors inspect the menu.

Sighing faintly, Tony turned to his left to peer through the wall of windows separating them from the Puget Sound. Its water reflected the brilliant blue of a summer sky rather than the drizzle he'd so often dealt with when traveling to Seattle, and a few sailboats drifted idyllically through that perfect scene. It was like the setting was determined to drag him back into a bright mood. Quite frankly, he resented it. Perhaps this was how Stephen felt when Tony tried to cheer him up against his will.

After giving their dinner orders, they were left with little to do but talk. Sunlight glinted off the water, occasional gull cries drifted through open windows, and Phil Coulson still looked far too interested in the other two men at the table. "So, I hear you're making your move to New York official and permanent, Tony," Phil said, then sniffed his glass of wine.

"Officially official," Tony confirmed, and tested his. "Permanently permanent."

"Which means I'm also officially moving to New York," Pepper cut in. "Honestly, I've been wondering when this was coming. But I talked with Phil and he's able to request a transfer."

Tony's smile faltered, though he struggled heroically to return it. "So... already making career plans based on this, huh?" A leg brushed gently against his as Tony gestured between Pepper and Phil, but it didn't feel like a warning or chastisement. Stephen was simply reminding Tony that he was there. "Seems like a good sign."

A pleased smile flickered between Pepper and Phil, but both covered it before they turned back. They were keeping some secrets, then. People as professional as them wouldn't discuss some things with Pepper's boss, after all, and... and Phil was the one with Pepper's heart. Of course she'd keep things private for him, things that she would never share with Tony.

Boy, this sucked. It was important, he needed to do it, and seeing them would sever those very last emotional ties from a timeline that the Stone had forever abandoned... but this fucking sucked.

"Where are you thinking of looking for a place?" Stephen asked Pepper with a careful, sidelong glance toward Tony. "After our hunt, we could certainly suggest some places not to try."

"I'm still debating—" Pepper began, only for Tony to cut in.
"You could take the condo." Everyone blinked at him, and so Tony clarified, "Give our new building a few months for its remodel, and we're going to have an empty three-bedroom in Midtown. Doorman, garage space, walk-in closets..." It wasn't like he needed an additional suit facility, not since committing to that hulking behemoth on Wooster. It'd actually be a challenge to fill all of that space.

The men all looked expectantly at her. Pepper, startled, needed a moment to find her answer. "That is very kind of you, Tony," she began, in a way that suggested she absolutely did not intend to say yes. It was difficult for Tony not to sigh, for she'd surely had the same kneejerk response that Stephen offered when Tony wanted to spend tens of millions on their housing. But then she continued, and her answer was not what he'd expected. "I'm going to be bouncing back and forth between all of those new offices, though, and so I should probably be on the other side of the river."

"Oh. Good point." And it was: for someone who couldn't travel via portal or suit, a Midtown Manhattan home would set her up for a long commute, every single day. A long commute was time wasted, and Pepper could scarcely afford to waste a minute. Ah well. If someone had an actual reason beyond "that's too expensive," he'd let it go. Temporarily.

Until she started making noise about a place she did like. Then, all bets were off.

The distraction of Stephen's question worked, and Tony's regret eased back toward the acceptance he'd spent months practicing. When Phil moved to take the conversation's reins, Tony was again able to look at the man with with only familiar labels: friendly. Good-natured. Trustworthy. Kind. Someone he could believe would make Pepper happy, have her best interests at heart, and live up to the standards of a truly excellent woman.

All of those well-practiced labels soon faded into surprise, though, when Phil asked about something that Tony had never expected. "If it's not prying too much, Doctor," Phil began, "I'd like to ask you about Kamar-Taj."

"Fury's already tried to drag that out of me." Stephen smiled, not in apology. "Not about its location, don't worry," Phil said genially, like he hadn't expected any differently. "But about what you actually do there. Is it..." Trailing off, frustrated, he changed his approach. "Do people go there to get away from things? Escape their past, I guess you could say?"

Clearly, that didn't soothe Stephen. And no wonder; it sounded like Phil wondered whether they were operating a hiding hole for convicts on the run. "I can't speak to whether people have criminal records," Stephen said after a pause. "If that's what you're asking."

"I'm actually not, sorry," Phil immediately clarified. Pepper sipped her Pellegrino and eyed him curiously as he continued. "I'm just trying to understand what the mental state is when someone comes there, and by the time they're able to do the things that you can do."

"No one is going to pick up their entire life and relocate without good reason," Stephen said after a considering pause. "From the conversations I had, most people were trying to find fresh purpose after their lives had gone off-track." His gaze fell to the table, and his voice grew distant as he added, "Spiraled out of control."

Tony pressed his leg against Stephen's, to snap him out of whatever flashing, disjointed car crash memories were bubbling up into awareness. Physical reminders of the present had always helped him.
It seemed to work. "Others are just too intrigued by all of that collected knowledge," Stephen continued in brighter tones, and tried to make it sound like he'd been in that group. "A few even belong to bloodlines with long histories of serving a mystical purpose."

"Quite a family business to join," Phil chuckled. His gaze also dropped, then, and consideration lined his forehead when he looked back up. "So, those people who show up because things got out of control. By the time they're able to..." His hand gestured in vague circles, mimicking spells being cast. "Are their lives back on track?"

"Discipline is necessary for everything we do," Stephen replied after another pause. Tony understood his hesitation, for it still felt like Phil was laying some sort of trap, like he wanted to prove that Kamar-Taj was letting empowered loose cannons out into the world. Answering too freely might give S.H.I.E.L.D. justification to do God only knew what. And worse, that information would likely feed straight to Hydra. "No one advances past the most rudimentary levels without gaining mastery over themselves, their thoughts, their emotions. Yes, it does force people to confront themselves."

Phil nodded again, and his gaze went once again distant. Ugh. What sort of report was Fury going to hear? The man might be distracted by his ongoing Hydra hunt, but that didn't mean he couldn't split his attention if needed. Depending on what Phil shared, 'necessary' might be Fury's judgment. "Interesting. Thanks." Surprisingly, that seemed to be all Phil wanted to know. He let Kamar-Taj die as a discussion topic, and as their food arrived, the conversations turned to much lighter topics: restaurants to try, now that they were moving to New York, and what they'd thought of In The Heights.

By the end of the meal, Tony was again able to see how easily Pepper and Phil bounced off each other, and view that as a good thing. Assuming this worked out between the two of them, her life would be comfortable, well-protected, and... honestly? It'd be a little boring. Responsible, pleasant, friendly, and a little boring.

But there were far worse things than 'a little boring.' Pepper could be safe and happy inside a little boring.

The post-dessert world seemed much steadier than it had an hour earlier. "You're good?" Stephen murmured as Tony mused on the ideal tip to add to their check.

"I'm good," Tony said as he added a characteristically generous amount, then signed the bill with a flourish. Glancing at where Pepper and Phil had stepped away from the table for a conversation, Tony added in an even softer voice, "He's going to make her really happy."

"And you're..."

"Okay with her being happy." Realizing something, Tony smiled with apology and turned back toward Stephen. There had been a little too much wistful reminiscence in his voice.

Stephen held up one hand before Tony could get out a single word. "She meant a lot to you. And I broke your universe. I'm glad you are okay at the very end of this, however it happened."

"Well... great, then." Tony exhaled. "Let's never, ever do this again." The statement earned an emphatic nod, and both men turned to greet their returning companions.

"Thank you so much for dinner, it was wonderful. But can I go on ahead?" Pepper wondered. Her hands already flicked through smartphone screens. The world's busiest personal assistant could never stay idle for long. "Phil says he needs to ask you some Captain America things. I got the feeling I was not invited to the show."

"I'm not invited," Pepper confirmed. Once they were outside, in a niche around the corner, she stepped obligingly through a portal into Malibu. "I will start the moving arrangements," she promised with a farewell wave.

"Can we find somewhere quieter?" Phil wondered the moment the sparks faded. One hand indicated a crowd inspecting them from further down the hill, getting ready to work up their collective courage for an approach. Though they'd chosen a restaurant in a quieter section of town, Stephen and Tony drew people anywhere they went. "I don't want to stop your loyal fans from getting their autographs, but your location is known by now. That crowd would be a good place to embed someone with a directional microphone and I'd prefer to not have our conversation recorded."

Even though dealing with the public was obnoxious, it wasn't wise to so blatantly dismiss fans, and so Stephen gestured at a small tree lining the sidewalk. Its thick green leaves shimmered, then twisted somehow into crystalline hummingbirds and butterflies. A roar of "oohs" and "ahs" swelled as the crowd grabbed at the shimmering flock.

"Huh," Phil and Tony said in inadvertent unison.

"That'll fade after about five minutes," Stephen said quietly while waving to the crowd, and then opening a portal behind them. "But they'll happily take their selfies in the meantime. So," he added once they were through the portal, in what Tony saw was the same British Columbia meadow that the Ancient One had once chosen. "You had questions about Captain Rogers?"

Phil smiled somewhat sheepishly before replying, "Sorry. I actually just wanted to confirm that I should be looking at Kathmandu for Kamar-Taj."

Tony had no idea what his own expression was like, but there was no chance of coming up with a cover story after seeing Stephen's stunned one.

"That's a yes," Phil concluded.

Stephen's eyes closed. "Shit." Exhaling, he demanded, "Who else have you told about this?"

"No one."

"I don't believe you," Tony bit off. "You're going to take this straight to Fury. We knew S.H.I.E.L.D.'d figure it out eventually, but just knowing the right city doesn't do you any good if—"

Phil had been increasingly trying to talk over him, and his final shouted Tony! did the trick. "Tony," he said one last time, more calmly. "Director Fury will probably find this out, but it won't be from me. And quite frankly, I hope he takes a long while to discover it."

"Why?" Stephen wondered after a long pause.

"It feels like Fury is involved in something very deep right now," Phil replied. "He hasn't shared anything with me just yet, but I get the feeling that this... Kathmandu, I mean... is knowledge that shouldn't be spread inside S.H.I.E.L.D. until Fury's finished whatever mission he's on."

"Do other people know that Fury's doing something that makes S.H.I.E.L.D. seem... uncertain?" Tony wondered after an even longer pause. As irritating as the man could be, the world needed Nick Fury like it needed few other people. If he dug too deeply, too quickly into Hydra pockets, the two of them might need to make a move to assist, despite the temporal headaches it would cause.
"I don't think so," Phil said delicately. "I'm his right-hand man and all I've noticed is that I've been given some tasks that he'd normally handle himself. Yet, he hasn't been spending more time on location anywhere; he's spending that extra time still working inside S.H.I.E.L.D. facilities. Hill's been working closely with him, too, but I don't yet know if she's noticed the same thing."

"All right," Stephen said grudgingly. "Why are you asking, then?"

"Another reason I don't want Director Fury looking in Kamar-Taj's direction just yet," Phil began, and actually sounded slightly worried, "is that I don't want him stopping this. Assuming she wants it."

Both Tony and Stephen frowned in confusion.

"Earlier this year..." Trailing off, Phil shook his head, looked at the distant trees, and began again after a sigh. "Earlier this year, a mission with one of my closest friends went extremely south. Melinda hasn't been the same ever since Bahrain and each day's worse than the one before. She's falling apart in slow motion."


"Right. Her plan is to stop doing field missions and contribute to S.H.I.E.L.D. in other ways, but I don't think that's going to fix things." Sudden, desperate sadness swept Phil's eyes, and he added, "I don't think it's going to fix her. But, now that I know about Kamar-Taj..."

"Now that I've been on the news talking about how people can find fresh purpose there," Stephen concluded.

"Yeah."

Before Stephen could add anything more, Tony pulled him aside and whispered, "Should we get the stick?"

"No, I don't think so," Stephen whispered back. "Other people will inevitably find out about Kathmandu, but let's keep that secret between us. And definitely avoid discussing it with Fury's right-hand man."

"Point." Turning back, and regaining a normal volume, Tony said, "So, let's confirm the situation: if you help your buddy get to Kamar-Taj, but Fury finds out..."

"He'd try to get her back. I'd be held accountable for making the great Melinda May walk away from S.H.I.E.L.D. She's one of the best agents we've ever had." Nope, Tony concluded in the middle of Phil's explanation; he really didn't know a 'Melinda May.' "With that in mind, I'm really not going to pass this along to the director. Or anyone."

"Then... yes, it's Kathmandu," Stephen confirmed. Reluctance still tightened his stance, but Phil's argument was sound. And, if his view was anything like Tony's, there was just something trustworthy about Phil that was hard to dismiss. "I can't tell you where in the city. She'll find it if she's right for it. But if you're concerned about whether she'll need some help in her early days, send me a photograph of your friend. I'll pass it along to someone there. He's a good guide."

"He's a good guide," Tony repeated solemnly. Was she single? Maybe Melinda could hook up with Karl.

(He needed to stop this, after Stephen had been so good with Pepper.)
"Thanks. I'll do that once I'm back in the city. I'm sure S.H.I.E.L.D. is wondering why my signature is suddenly in—" Phil checked a readout. "Canada, but best not to send any data to you, and make them even more curious." His professional veneer began to crack, just a hair. Emotion turned his eyes glossy. "Really. Thank you. It's been hard to see her hurting like this, and I've been trying to find any way to help. I hope this does the trick."

"I hope so, too," Stephen said, and got a wobbly smile in return. Even though Phil barely knew these men, and had reason to be wary of their masked intentions, none of that seemed to matter so long as he could help his friend. For that was what Phil Coulson was like: loyal, loving, and trustworthy, and perhaps those words didn't deserve comparison to a service Labrador.

Tony had spent years brushing this man aside, treating him as an entertaining annoyance. In the first go-around, he hadn't acknowledged what a good man was wrapped up in those boxy, poorly-tailored suits until it was too late. But he truly was a good man, in every way that could possibly matter. His dedicated concern wouldn't stop here, with that friend of his. "Make her happy," he announced and swept Phil into an abrupt, crushing hug.

After a significant pause, Phil said, "Mr. Stark, this is awkward." Stephen cleared his throat.

"Your friend," Tony clarified, and stepped back. "I mean... your friend. She'll be happy in Nepal. I've been to Kamar-Taj. It's nice. Good food. I sped up their Internet."

"Nice to know," Phil said, brow still furrowed.

"We should probably get back," Stephen said pointedly, like he could make the moment slightly less uncomfortable through sheer willpower. "Coulson, California or New York?" Phil did have some responsibilities he could address before making a permanent office transfer, and so after opening a Los Angeles portal for him, they stepped back home.

"Ow," Tony whimpered and thumped a hand dramatically over his heart, only for a rush of physical pain to follow. "Ow," he repeated as his bruised muscles protested the blow, and showboating turned into real discomfort. Once reminded of his injuries, while safely at home alone with his partner, he felt his energy reserves wane as abruptly as Stephen's had after the black lake.

Sighing, Stephen dropped the glamour. "Do you just want to go to bed?" he prompted after taking a deliberate, pointed survey of Tony's black-and-blue form. Those injuries, just visible in the window's reflection, made Tony look as battered as his emotions felt.

Going to bed early was the smart move, yes. Tony still hurt, he'd pushed himself more than his short recovery warranted, and this had been one one of the most painful remaining to-dos on his emotional checklist. But, as Tony looked up at the darkened bedroom ceiling, now feeling the injuries he'd spent all evening ignoring, he couldn't help but think on one of the other big to-dos: Steve Rogers.

That wasn't simply tying up a loose end that he could then mostly ignore; it was totally rebuilding a foundation for future construction. He needed to be friendly with the man. He had to be friendly with the man, if any of them were going to steer the world toward happy, heroic outcomes, and simply offering more media recommendations wouldn't rebuild foundations. "Okay. New to-do," he promised himself. "Buddy up with Rogers."

When Tony tried to buddy up a week later—really, he tried!—he found himself recommending Star Wars, but not the prequels. Unless Steve got drunk. Then the prequels were fair game.

Not exactly the heartfelt moment he'd been aiming for.
Two weeks after that, he had to explain that no, Stark Industries did not make glossy white robots like the ones Steve had seen in Wall-E commercials. Pixar wasn't ripping him off. That question was cute, but not cute enough for Tony to suggest a movie date to see the movie for themselves. Getting along with the man didn't yet equal spending one-on-one time together, in public, where they'd each get asked about the other.

He was trying to make an effort, Tony told himself a few days after that, as he lowered the Horkos Rod and felt its magical compulsion settle into his being. He'd spoken much the same protective oath as Stephen, but once that was done, his focus immediately returned to the offer Steve had made that morning. Tony was still rooting out the illicit buyers of his war tech, Steve had heard, and Steve had years of practice making assaults on hostile encampments. If Tony wanted, they could team up and knock a bunch of them out in one go.

"Welcome to your life-changing oath," Stephen said dryly, and Tony realized that he'd been absent-mindedly holding the rod like it was some ballpoint pen ready to tap against a desk.

"I've gotta start really working with Rogers," Tony realized, and handed the relic back to Stephen, whose annoyance lingered as Tony's mystical process was mostly ignored. "He's getting to the point where he can suggest some of his own missions, and we should be friendlier by now. If I keep turning down his offers, we're not gonna be any better than last time."

"Wait. I thought you were getting along."

"I am! We are. I would never have bothered explaining Monty Python to Rogers, last time."

Bemused, Stephen wondered, "And how'd that go?"

"Terribly. But the thing is, it's one thing to introduce him to movies, and another to trust him with my back in a live firefight. He sees one moment of unexplained distrust there and it'll ruin our new dynamic." Grimacing, Tony shook his head. "I've still gotta do it, though. Because avoiding him will ruin things, too."

When Tony didn't continue his personal pep talk, Stephen replied, "You faced down Pepper and Phil. You can do this." His hands reached out, caught Tony's, and squeezed them.

Yes. Yes, he could. Tony had confronted that demon, patched those cracks, and done every other metaphor he could think of. And he currently had a solid relationship with this Steve, right? There was no reason that the two of them wouldn't get along, for the only threat to their dynamic came from memories of a different, frownier Ken Doll. "I will do this," he promised. "I will assault those camps with Rogers, I will..."

"You will...?" Stephen prompted.

"I will... will... will you come?"

Stephen rolled his eyes. "Really?"

"Yes. Please." It'd helped with Pepper, and during the first meeting with Steve. Maybe he just needed his favorite backup again.

"I face down mystical threats. Incorporeal beings threatening to puncture the mystical veil of our world. Not angry men yelling at each other about illegal bombs."

Tony raised his eyebrows hopefully, and ignored Stephen's protests.
Flatly, Stephen asked, "And will you and the Captain agree not to kill anyone on this mission?"

"What? Absolutely not, it's a base assault. Killing is the whole point." Hesitating at the dark glare that earned, Tony bargained, "If you came, you could aim for disabling some people that Rogers and I would just kill? You'd be saving lives? Yeah?" Not that these lives needed to be saved, but that wouldn't be a winning argument with his stubborn doctor. Sometimes, they had to give each other their way, as much as they could manage.

"If it'll help you two over this hurdle," Stephen sighed. "Fine. I suppose you're right; you can't just keep telling Rogers to check out the top-ten primetime shows and expect that to get you anywhere meaningful. I will go as your safety net." His throat cleared, pointedly. "Again."

That earned a quick, firm thank-you kiss. "Once is all I'll need, promise," Tony said as he whipped out his phone and started texting a reply.

"Tell him he'll make a detour here, first," Stephen added. Off Tony's uncertainty, he clarified, "In case S.H.I.E.L.D. puts spy tech on him, I'd like our wards to fry it before we say anything unfortunate into S.H.I.E.L.D.'s ears on a mission."

"You think he'd spy on us?" Tony wondered as he mentioned that detour in his texts, though not the rationale. (And here he'd thought he was the one with the Rogers issues.)

"No, but he's still naive, and Fury is not."

Point.

"Wow," Steve said twenty minutes later, in full (hideous, poorly-cut, oversaturated) uniform as he stepped through a portal and landed in their living room. Awed, he watched the portal fade away, then turned toward the floor-to-ceiling windows that lined the living spaces. Unlike their first meeting, he now seemed able to see the modern city outside and appreciate the sight. His bright blue eyes practically glittered with the city's reflection, from modern cars on the streets below them to towering skyscrapers like his world had never known. "Quite a view."

Tony opened his mouth, paused, and closed his mouth again. He needed to offer a bigger expression of trust toward Steve than simply suggesting movies? Well, here was a bright idea. Stephen seemed to suspect something, but before Tony could second-guess himself, or let Stephen do the same, he asked, "You want it?"

Two startled stares answered him.

"I'm serious," Tony clarified. "We're moving soonish, and I already tried to give this place away once. If you're doing work with S.H.I.E.L.D., then their office is pretty close. There'd be a garage spot for your bike. It all makes sense." And Fury would lose his mind trying to figure out why his spy tech keeps breaking whenever Steve comes home for the night.

"You really are one hundred percent serious," Steve said after a blank, stunned pause.

Stephen gawked as Tony casually summoned his suit from its mount on the wall. While stepping into it, he answered, "Yeah, it's all yours. I am..." Tony hesitated. "Making an active effort to patch some personal cracks." Not that he was the one who needed to make an effort, but this dumb, friendly puppy Steve had no idea that Bucky Barnes was out there, waiting to turn the Steve Rogers 'pompous jackass' dial to maximum.

(...Yes, it would be for the best if Tony kept trying to make determined, active friendship efforts toward Steve. These kneejerk reactions were just too tempting.)
Noticing that Steve still looked too bewildered to respond, and that Stephen was much the same, Tony shrugged and clarified, "You can't afford most of New York, no matter what they're paying you. We're the top dogs of the hero world and we look out for the team. You could perform best in a central location, and we want the second-tier names to live up to their full potential."

"We." Stephen swallowed, then seemed to catch up with Tony's bright idea. "We should be in our new place by mid-September. I agree, it's a smart move." When he turned back to Tony, the surprise in his expression had shifted into something distinctly more approving.

"I don't know what to say," Steve admitted with a weak laugh. "I mean... thank you, Tony. Getting out of that S.H.I.E.L.D. building would help it seem like I've actually found another home. I feel like Howard's still looking out for me, almost."

Tony tried to cover his grimace by focusing on adjustments to his suit's glove. "Don't mention it. Seriously. Do not mention it."

"I would love to be able to just... breathe. Not have agents stopping in each evening for updates. It's already been so much to take in," Steve said, turning to inspect the apartment's clean, minimal lines. Clearly, he was imagining himself safely behind its doors, operating on his schedule instead of S.H.I.E.L.D.'s. "When I'm not going through even more medical tests or geopolitical debriefings, I'm trying to catch up on everything else I've missed. The music. Movies." Smirking faintly, he shook his head, looked at Stephen, and said, "The doctors with hand tremors."

Both men from the future went absolutely still, and the temperature in the condo seemed to drop twenty degrees.

A second later, Tony lunged forward. One armored forearm pressed hard into Steve's throat. "Who the fuck have you been talking to?" he demanded in a murderous hiss. Steve clawed uselessly at the arm cutting off his air.

"Who," Tony repeated, voice pitching toward a shout as his helmet sealed around him, "have you been talking to?!" Steve's readings filled his HUD, but he didn't see the S.H.I.E.L.D. tech that he'd surely brought to this meeting. Even fried by Stephen's wards, there should have been some indication of the spy gear they'd outfitted him with. This was a surveillance mission, clearly, and Rogers had been spying on them worse than they'd ever suspected might happen.

"Tony," Stephen said, his voice shaking. "Ease up a hair."

Red-eyed and purple-faced as he was, that 'hair' of freedom was still all that Steve needed to throw off Tony's arm, bash his helmet with the side of his shield, and stumble a few steps to safety. His shield instinctively lifted again when he saw energy bloom on the far side of the room, but somehow he seemed to know that his physical, vibranium shield wouldn't make it through that mystical shield, no matter how powerful it was. "What the hell," Steve demanded, and coughed, "is going on?"

"That's our question. I suggest you start talking about how you know our true histories," Stephen said in an icy voice. His shield rippled with growing power, like an energy weapon about to fire. "Immediately."

"Your... what?" Steve took another step backward, but flinched when he realized he'd run into the wall. His eyes darted frantically between Tony and Stephen, looking for his best escape.

"The tremors, dipshit," Tony said, glad for the harsh edge his suit speakers lent.

"The..." Trailing off, fresh bewilderment filled Steve's expression. "I was talking about Grey's
Both men from the future went absolutely still. Again.

"You." Stephen swallowed. "You were talking about Grey's Anatomy."

"It was on the list." Steve's gaze darted again between them. "Tony told me to watch it."


"Doctor Burke got hand tremors," Steve said, clearly wary that they might snap and attack him again. "And for months they've been wondering if magic could work as an experimental treatment. Because of you, Stephen. They didn't say your name but they were clearly talking about you. I just thought it was funny how I was trying to catch up with this show Tony suggested, and then it tied into another hero I met, and then Tony tried to kill me!" Teeth bared, he lifted his shield again in frantic self-defense.

For half a minute, there was silence. No one dared to move, to speak, and barely to breathe. Panic faded into a deeper, more deadly tension that could boil over into something truly violent. A sneeze could startle them into murder and a cough could leave someone maimed.

Unable to take it any more, Tony gestured in disbelief toward the ceiling and demanded, "Oh, go get the goddamn stick again."

Steve Rogers just lived to cause him trouble.
"Wong, I need the staff again."

Disbelieving, Wong looked up from the book spread before him, his concentration ruined. Spidery, faded Aramaic script filled its pages. He was probably attempting to determine what the missing sections in torn corners might have contained; another fun day at the Kamar-Taj library.

"Long story," Stephen added, "but I'll bring it back today."

"It is an incredibly powerful relic," Wong replied, and did not get up. "And despite what you might believe, it's not yours."

It was just so useful, though, and it wasn't like he'd borrowed it all that frequently. Stephen had only needed to oath himself, Rhodey, Tony, and Wong. And now Rogers. Over the course of just a few months.

All right, they'd been using it a lot.

"Timeline risks," Stephen said with an unapologetic smile, and shrugged. "I have full appreciation for its power and that's exactly why we've needed it."

Grumbling, Wong stood, and gestured for Stephen to follow him. Stephen did, and tried not to look as impatient as he felt. They were on a "Steve Rogers holds onto a sliver of his sanity" deadline, but it was best not to share that urgency with Wong, nor the Kamar-Taj novices glancing at him in the hallways.

As he led them toward the relic lockbox chamber, Wong continued, "If not for how the Ancient One described the situation, telling you to just tolerate some risks would be acceptable. But..." Indeed, if they were facing any other time manipulation that had sent them back through history, then they could roll the dice and deal with whatever outcome resulted. 'Changing' history usually meant fragmenting another new facet of the infinite multiverse of possibilities, and if that fresh facet happened to crack and shatter, well... that was regrettable, but these things happened.

Unfortunately for existence, however, the Time Stone itself had reversed the flow of time like an author deleting a few troublesome paragraphs from a draft, then trying again. As it was the force that powered their reality's timeline, and had since creation, it was also the only thing powerful enough to overwrite itself. Stephen had personally witnessed that reversal power, many times. If they ruined the Time Stone's desperate efforts to clarify its own confusing story, the collapsing paradox wouldn't simply kill them; it'd take a decent chunk of alternate possibilities with it.

Since Wong knew all of that, he complained and he frowned, but he did hand over the Horkos Staff. Yet again. "Try to be more careful, so you don't need to use it this much. It can be dangerous."

"Only for people who resist its powers," Stephen blithely said, accepting the offered relic. Rhodey, Tony, and soon Rogers would be totally constrained inside their oaths, and for non-mystics it'd be like being safely in a padded room with zero path of escape. "And I don't think either of us plans to do so."

"Mmm," Wong replied, noncommittally, and shot a flat look at the Cloak.
When the Cloak tilted back at him in shared judgment, Stephen frowned at them both. "I saw that," he said archly. These two needed to stop acting like he was a foolish risk-taker. That was Tony, and Stephen was the responsible one. "Thanks for the stick. I'll get it back here soon."

"The Horkos Staff," Wong corrected with annoyance as Stephen left the chamber and swept a portal open, then stepped back into the Mirror Dimension sphere he'd set up inside his living room. That sphere was important to keep Steve safely in place until this crisis had been dealt with, but it was even more pressure on his vulnerable psyche.

"—So again, I'm real sorry about the throat and all," Tony continued in whatever explanation he'd been giving in Stephen's absence, "but I swear this'll all make sense."

At the sight of the opening portal, Steve took an instinctive step toward his first chance at an escape, but stepped backward again at Stephen's return through it. Visible disappointment filled his eyes when the portal closed, leaving them once again locked inside an inescapable dimensional bubble.

"So, we learned something fun today," Tony said dryly once Stephen returned to his side. "Vibranium cannot break the walls of the Mirror Dimension."

Stephen blinked, considered the shield Steve clutched in a defensive stance, and only then noticed a couple of shallow gouges on Tony's suit that looked like they'd been made by random rebounds. "Is everyone okay?"

"You tell me," Steve said, backing up as best he could in the small space and keeping both of them centered in his vision. "Tony's been telling me about you two needing to keep secrets to protect the world, but I've gotta tell you, that sounds an awful lot like Fury. Except that Nick Fury never tried to strangle me."

"I overreacted," Tony agreed, and spread his hands. "I do that. It's best if we move on."

"Did Tony tell you about this?" Stephen wondered, holding up the Staff.

A cool, flat gaze answered him. "He said you're bringing something that'll stop me from sharing any of your secrets." That prospect did not appear to thrill Steve.

"I'll stop you from doing whatever you decide to promise," Stephen corrected, "and we'll ask you to promise not to reveal anything we tell you here today. Once you do that, I will happily drop these walls. We could make coffee and relax before we continue. Order pizza."

"Pizza," Steve repeated. Off their attempts to explain it to him, he rolled his eyes and said, "I've run missions in Italy and grew up in Brooklyn, I know what pizza is. But what I don't know is why I'd want to sit down with the man who tried to kill me."

Tony opened his mouth to answer, then raised his eyebrows and wondered, "Hey, do you think this is the—" His finger gestured between him and Steve. "The fight? Are we already getting that out of the way?" Stephen simply offered him the Staff in response, knowing that a demonstration was once again needed, and so with a dramatic eyeroll Tony removed one glove and slit his thumb on the provided energy sliver. Once his blood had activated the relic, he said in a bored tone, "I moderately deserve this, so: I will salute Captain America until he tells me I can stop."

That jerked Tony instantly into place, of course, and Stephen had to catch the Staff as Tony's opening hand dropped it. "Careful."

"Sorry, should have used my other arm," Tony agreed, with his hand held rigidly against his forehead and his gaze locked in Steve's direction.
Flummoxed, Steve blinked back at him.

"Try moving around a little," Stephen suggested.

Steve did, and his suspicion soon fell away into bemusement, and then open amusement. No matter where he moved, Tony rotated to follow him and his hand remained in a perfect, unchanging salute. "And you're not just acting?" Steve wondered after making a full loop around the dimensional bubble's perimeter.

"How long could you keep your hand absolutely still?" Tony wondered dryly. He'd shuffled obediently in a circle to follow Steve's path. "When it's lifted like this?"

Steve's brow furrowed as he studied Tony's hand. As promised, even while the rest of Tony's body twitched with natural muscle adjustments, that hand remained still as a statue. Eventually Tony spoke again, but it wasn't directed at the target of his salute. "Stop smirking," he ordered Stephen.

Even in Tony's peripheral vision, that must have been obvious. "I'm not the one who keeps choosing these humiliating examples." Being oath-sworn to kiss Stephen's hand had convinced Rhodey, yes, but that excess had hardly been necessary.

"Salute. To a captain. I thought it was funny."

"I'm certainly laughing." Stephen said, and smirked again.

Their easy banter seemed to further ease Steve's nerves, but being trapped in another dimension like this, outnumbered by men who'd suddenly betrayed his trust and wielded greater firepower, wasn't a recipe for total comfort. "All right. I know what you want from me, Tony... but if I let you go, will you try to hurt me again?" Steve wondered.

"I said I was sorry."

"And you didn't totally sound like you meant it."

Things still weren't settled between them, then. Considering matters, Stephen sliced his own thumb open to activate the Staff and intoned, "I swear that everything I say for the next fifteen seconds is the absolute truth." Compulsion rippled through him. "We thought you were seeing an alternate timeline. If you had access to that information, the universe itself might be at risk. That's why we reacted like we did." Compulsion released, and it felt very slightly easier to breathe.

Steve eyed him uncertainly. "Well... if I trust that Staff, then I suppose that explains things a little more."

Stephen extended it toward him. "You know how to get the complete explanation."

For a long moment, Steve considered it. Their sudden hostility seemed to have hurt him more than he'd let on, especially when it came to Tony. They were the only two people in this new world who saw him as a person, instead of a legend or military asset. And then, after he offered to put himself at risk to help Tony with a personal struggle, his reward was nearly getting his windpipe crushed flat.

Then Steve looked back up at Tony, and at the hand that remained rigid even as its elbow and shoulder faintly trembled. "It's physically impossible for someone to do that," Tony pointed out, grimacing.

"And by now it hurts a little," Tony pointed out, grimacing.

"The only explanation is that your wand—"
"Staff," Stephen corrected. He refused to be associated with a _wand_ like some Vegas stage magician.

"That your staff really can compel people. Which means Stephen was telling me the truth after he used it." Exhaling, Steve kept his gaze trained on the relic. "Tony, you can drop your hand." Tony did, and immediately rotated his arm in its socket with relief. After energy bloomed conveniently near him, Steve followed the example they'd set: slitting the pad of his thumb, activating the Staff with his blood, and waiting for that magic to settle in. "I promise not to share anything you two tell me before I leave your place today."

That was done, then. As the Mirror Dimension dome fell away, Stephen smiled with renewed friendliness and said, "All right, thank you. Tony can get you started on an explanation, and I'll order us some food."

"We're not from now," Tony soon explained, over coffee and with all of them comfortably in armchairs. "There was a crisis with time magic at Stephen's super secret clubhouse, and our... spirits, I suppose, got sent to 2007."

Startled, Steve said, "Wait. You got sent forward in time? Like—" _Like me?_ 


"2018?" Steve repeated. "Another whole decade from now?" Overwhelmed, his slumping arm nearly let his coffee mug tilt before he remembered himself and placed it safely on an end table. At first, he'd clearly been intrigued by the idea that there were other people like him, cut loose from their native past. Instead, they were even bigger reminders that he was facing an awful lot of future ahead.

"We woke up in these younger bodies, but with our full memories," Stephen continued. "There's an incredibly dangerous fight coming at the end of all of this, and if the world isn't in a position to walk through to the other side victorious..."

"All existence breaks," Tony concluded. "Permanently."

The pause that earned was expected; the thoughtful reply after it was not. "That's how you knew that S.H.I.E.L.D. could find me out there," Steve murmured. "You'd already seen it happen."

Perhaps they should have expected this, but Steve accepted their explanation far more readily than Rhodey had. Yes, fine; Tony had tried to strangle Steve. But prior to hearing about 2018, Steve had faced down a super-powered crimson mutant, stopped him from using an Infinity Stone to fuel impossible Hydra tech, and woken up after six frozen, forgotten decades. His weirdness calibration had started on a much different scale than Rhodey's.

"So," Steve continued after they'd let him sit in contemplative silence. That allowed him to work through many subtle emotional shadings, and his frequent glances toward them became less wary and more intrigued. "What's the deal with hand tremors, then? Since that's what made you both flip your lids?" Though he wasn't smiling, precisely, there was some buried amusement as Steve added, "When it's not a plot on Grey's Anatomy."

"I actually can't believe you didn't remember that," Tony said before Stephen could reply. "Your big fancy memory totally blew our cover."

Turning to face him, Stephen asked archly, "And why would I know a plot on Grey's Anatomy in the first place?"

"It's a stupidly popular show about doctors, you'd obviously watch it."
"I have seen exactly three episodes, from when someone put it on at work so we could mock it. That woman should have been arrested after cutting an LVAD. It was infuriating."

"You are annoyingly inflexible about the med stuff."

Sighing, Stephen turned back and explained, "In that first timeline, I was involved in a car accident about, oh, seven and a half years from now. It resulted in severe nerve damage and loss of fine motor control. I got these—" His hand, healthy and steady, gestured an energy shield into existence. "—Trying to find any way past that injury. So, you can imagine our surprise when, from our perspective, you referenced an event that didn't happen until 2016."

"Makes sense," Steve murmured, and sat back again in contemplation. "If you came from 2018, you guys are both surprisingly good in a fight, from what I've seen in your files."

Frowning, Tony demanded, "Surprisingly? What's that supposed to mean?"

Despite Tony's short tone, Steve offered no apology. Whatever his reasoning was, he was certain in it. "Stephen must have needed a while to master what he does, right? It doesn't seem like something that'd come easily." Off Stephen's nod, Steve continued, "So, there's a delay after a 2016 accident until he starts fighting. Then Tony gets worried about him being in combat... and makes his... suit... all right, why am I getting another weird look? I thought I had this all figured out."

With all offense gone, Tony shook his head. "There's where you're tripping up. No, in our timeline I was the first big hero since, well... since you. A couple of years from now, Obadiah Stane would have arranged for my kidnapping. It all starts from there: a suit to escape, Iron Man—"

"Iron Man?" Steve repeated.

Tony's gaze flattened again. "Do you have a problem with that, Captain America?" He inhaled, seemed to acknowledge that perhaps he'd imagined more judgment in Steve's voice than actually existed, and continued. This hair-trigger sensitivity toward Rogers was understandable, but unfortunate. Hopefully it cooled over the months to come. "But here, an emergency at his hospital flipped the script early."

It took Steve a moment to respond, for his eyes narrowed at Tony's hostile response and a few seconds were needed to relax. He was still the marooned, vulnerable man who craved human connection like oxygen, but he was also a soldier with a temper of his own. "So here, Tony jumped into being a hero to help you fight," he said to Stephen, with the satisfaction of someone who thought he'd teased apart a complicated mystery. "But there, when he was a hero first, you didn't need to jump into heroics to help him, because being a doctor was helpful on its own."

"Oh, we weren't together," Tony and Stephen said in accidental stereo.

Steve blinked at them, then looked frustrated anew as his certainty was once again shattered. "You're kidding. Seriously?"

They shrugged, again in accidental unison. "We barely knew each other, there," Stephen said. "We had to deal with being stranded here, and everything about us started out as a cover story. During a crisis in May, we finally—"

"In May," Steve interrupted, disbelieving. "You're on every newsstand as the biggest love story of the decade, and you didn't even actually get together until May?"

"Is the Rolling Stone out?" Tony demanded.
"I... yeah, I go every morning to pick up a newspaper. They had you out today for the first time." Their abrupt impatience to go pick up a copy made Steve sigh; clearly, not all of his questions had been answered. "Just tell me: who all have you told this information to? From the sound of it, you're used to implementing that white rod to handle these debriefings. It seems like you've had a lot of practice. I want to know the team composition for that big 2018 fight you're talking about."

"Colonel James Rhodes, yourself, and two staunch allies from Kamar-Taj have been totally filled in on the situation," Stephen said.

"That's all?" Steve asked in clear surprise.

"We're trying to avoid fractures to the timeline. There are things that are better left in the dark until a few more years have ticked by, lest reality break." Uncertain, Stephen looked toward Tony, and hoped his question was clear in his gaze.

Wait, Tony's flat gaze said in return. A tiny twitch of a head shake emphasized his certainty. No, then: Steve should not yet know that Hydra still infiltrated S.H.I.E.L.D. like mold spreading behind walls.

And, Stephen realized a moment later, there was another question being answered: no, Steve shouldn't yet know about the Winter Soldier.

That silent exchange had been noticed, even if their meaning was masked. "Are there things I'm going to learn later?" Steve wondered. "Things you can't tell me now?"

"Yes," Tony said simply.

"Is it related to a fight the two of us apparently had?" That, Tony hadn't seen coming, and so Steve continued, "You wondered if this was already getting a fight between us 'out of the way,' so one clearly happened in the timeline you call home."

"It's related," Tony said grimly after a few uncomfortable seconds. "But it'll go better this time, because we'll learn some things on our own terms. Nothing will take us by surprise."

"All right," Steve said after a longer, equally awkward pause. "I'm trusting that the two of you are telling me the truth. I hope I'm not wrong to do so."

"You're not," Stephen promised. "We swear it."

"You can trust us," Tony also promised. Then, like it was an active decision he was making, he finished, "And we're going to trust you."

A slow nod said that Steve appreciated that, but he had something more to add. "And I trust that the two of you will tell me things in advance, so that I won't be taken by surprise any more than you are. I know you'll need to wait until... until I don't even know what sign you need to see. But once you see those signs, you will tell me more about what's coming."

Tony nodded. Steve didn't appear to notice the way his fingers twitched with a surge of stress before his hand relaxed, but of course Stephen did.

Steve exhaled. "All right. Then I'm ready to put a pin in this conversation. I'm assuming our delivery should be here soon, and I'd rather act like I'm just having lunch at the home of a couple of friends." Steve's gaze was still wary, but an urgent edge of hope colored it. He really didn't want to lose the only people who saw Steve Rogers, not Captain America. "Can we do that?"
Tony nodded again, more deliberately. "We can do that. Stephen, go pick up a few Rolling Stones before the pizza gets here. Then we'll all relax."

With that promise of a return to normalcy, Steve did relax. "Thanks. Oh, uh... so, what would you two have done if I hadn't let Tony drop his hand?"

"What would you have done if I never let you out of the Mirror Dimension?" Stephen replied as he grabbed his keys.

Eyebrows raised. "Fair enough."

Since he didn't know how long he had before food arrived, Stephen gestured a glamour spell into place before reaching for the door. He wanted to make this trip as efficient as possible, with no irritating interruptions from random pedestrians. The rippling shift in his appearance drew a surprised start from Steve and a loud 'boo!' and thumbs-down from Tony.

"I'm specifically trying not to look like me," Stephen replied from behind a magical facade of freckle-dusted, boyish features. It was perhaps an odd pairing with his height, but certainly no one at the newsstand would connect him to the man on the magazine cover.

"That's why I'm booing," Tony said. "Hurry up, pizza should be here soon."

Already, the nearest newsstand was down to a handful of remaining Rolling Stone copies. "I didn't know people still bought magazines," Stephen murmured as he grabbed three, only to notice a few customers frown and look around curiously. Right, then; he needed to stay silent, even with this glamour on. He was still getting used to being one of the most familiar voices on Earth.

Someone ahead of him was trying to pay with an awkward handful of change, and so he had a chance to study the cover. Damn, we look good, he noted with pleased surprise. Stephen was anything but a humble man, but that cover shoot had been a hundred unique shades of irritating. It didn't seem as if anything positive could have come from that, yet there they were: bold and graphical as they smiled defiantly out at the viewer, eye-catching in a dramatic color scheme and impressively heroic despite their close, affectionate stance.

Careful not to actually speak out loud, Stephen mouthed the oversized headline to himself: Power(s) Couple. Below it, smaller headline text added, Stephen Strange and Tony Stark: Heroes for a New Age.

Oh, this was going to be good.

He paid in silence and hurried back inside the building. "It's me," he explained to Franklin the doorman, who'd professionally ignored his departure but protested a stranger's arrival, and dropped the glamour before jogging upstairs. "I got three," Stephen announced as he opened the door. "We look great."

"Of course we do," Tony said, and accepted the copy he was handed. As Steve also accepted his, and studied the cover as he likely tried to figure out what sort of journalism 'Rolling Stone' did, Tony added, "Pepper did text me about this hitting the stands today, but I missed it with planning the camp assault. She'll get us a bunch of backup copies."

"Good," Stephen said, distracted again by the cover, and settled back into his chair. He'd never experienced anything like this before. Despite his initial publicity complaints for this timeline, being on the cover of Rolling Stone was a heady experience. Seeing all of those silly themed children's toys was amusingly inconsequential, television stories were blips among other news, and short blurbs
in newspapers were soon left crumpled on the sidewalk. Headlining a full, famous magazine like this felt so... so tangible.

As he read Ethan Weiss' words, and remembered a private interview given next to a beautiful beachside vista, he tried to imagine the rest of humanity encountering these words for the first time. What would they think of these heroes saving the world from incredible threats?

No, he soon realized with mild surprise.

Facing down super-powered villains wasn't the angle that opened Ethan's piece.

_Doctor Strange doesn’t look like a sorcerer_, said the words just under the interior headline. _Nor does he look like a world-renowned neurosurgeon. In a t-shirt and jeans, with no flowing robes or sanitized scrubs, he looks like nothing more or less than a man in love._

_The magic, however, is entirely real, as I discover for myself when Strange and Stark meet me for lunch._

"Is there something else you’re in the mood for?" Strange asks, and five minutes later, I’m walking through a golden circle of sparks to a beach grill in Rio de Janeiro and the best meal I’ve never been able to reproduce at home.

So how did a sorcerer-surgeon and the world’s most notorious technocrat fall in love? The story is familiar by now: a chance meeting, recalled when Stark was injured at one of his many fabulous parties, and an instant connection, almost immediately announced to the world.

A notorious playboy billionaire, with a long history of sexual exploits with some of the world’s most beautiful women, suddenly head over heels for someone—for a man—he’s met twice? No wonder the conspiracy theorists went wild.

But it’s unquestionably real. They exchange glances like a couple who have been together for years. Strange holds his boyfriend’s hand throughout the interview. Tony Stark’s voice is absolutely sincere as he says, "Nothing in my life actually means anything without him in it."

"He’s meant to change the world in spectacular ways," Strange says, and their eyes meet and hold.

The two men seem baffled that I ask first about their relationship, rather than the mysteries of the universe or the wonders of engineering. It’s entirely possible they don’t see what they represent.

A storied place in some secret location where you can learn to manipulate reality? A set of flying armor? Sure, why not.

But two famous men, neither of whom is in the entertainment industry, in an open, loving relationship that isn’t just tolerated, but celebrated? That’s groundbreaking.

The rest of the lengthy article had multiple other paragraphs about them as a couple, written in a tone that was perhaps a bit too fawning to meet proper journalistic standards. According to Ethan, they seemed to be in permanent honeymoon mode. They’d barely gotten together at that point, so that made sense, but from their clueless interviewer's perspective it just made them unspeakably adorable. "He did ask us about dating a lot," Tony mused as he went back to re-read the many bits about their relationship. "He's making a big deal about it."

"Should it be a big deal?" Steve wondered, still uncertain about the 2008 social climate. By then the pizza had arrived, and he folded one oversized slice in half like Tony showed him. Both of them dove enthusiastically into its full, original greasiness. Stephen blotted his with paper towels, and
ignored Tony's eyeroll as he did.

"I hadn't expected this much... celebration," Stephen admitted. The friction in their rebooted lives had come first from Obadiah, and later from heroics and all the complications it brought. Whether they were faking love or actually consumed by it, Tony and Stephen being two men had stopped mattering almost immediately. During their public playacting, they had the fate of the world to worry about, and those long months gave true love a chance to stealthily worm its way into every corner of their psyches. There was no hope of resisting once it emerged, nor any desire to.

As Stephen looked up their interviewer, he realized that perhaps he should have phrased that differently: Tony and Stephen being two men had stopped mattering almost immediately... to them. "Well, that explains it," Stephen said, and flipped his phone around. Before Rio, they'd looked up Ethan's list of previous articles to see what sort of approach he might take with them. They hadn't read the man's website biography, though. If so, they might have seen that Ethan lived with his boyfriend and a very old, very small dog in Chelsea.

"Huh," Tony said after studying Ethan's biography, but then he shrugged and continued eating. Once they'd both seen that Tony Stark leaving behind his infamous world of Playboy bunnies and supermodels wouldn't upset the military buyers (too much), their very last relationship concern had faded. But the two of them apparently mattered more to others than they'd expected, in good ways.

No wonder Ethan had barely asked them about heroics until he'd returned from his mid-interview bathroom break. This might have been the first time he'd seen so much of the public celebrate a relationship like his.

"Power(s) Couple," Stephen eventually repeated as he flipped the magazine back to its cover, and smiled lopsidedly at Tony. "I'm rather fond of that, actually. It's clever."

On the cover, Tony's hand blaster looked ready to take out the viewer, and the camera had managed to capture the beautiful intricacy of Stephen's shield along with its shimmering glow. The confidence in their sharp gazes looked just as threatening to anyone who would challenge them, and Stephen's arm resting on Tony's shoulder reminded those challengers that they'd be an unshakably united front. They were a power couple.

"It's a top-notch cover," Tony agreed. "I'll have Pepper frame a copy that we haven't been touching with greasy pizza fingers."

"This is why you blot with paper towels."

"Hey, Steve," Tony cheerfully said, for he could never let a taunt go unanswered. "It's so quiet in here without the TV on. Wanna put on an episode of Grey's Anatomy?"

"Uh," Steve replied. His brows dipped as he presumably tried to figure out whether Tony was making fun of him, Stephen, or both.

"I'm bugging him," Tony explained, after cluing into Steve's confusion. "It's how we bond."

Shaking his head, Stephen said nothing in response and reached for his other oversized slice of pizza. (He hated that Tony was right about that.) "So, are you still giving Rogers this condo?"

It was a big enough question that it demolished Tony's attempt at a topic change, and the look Tony gave him said that he recognized that effort. But then he turned back to Steve, shrugged faintly, and said, "It's still yours if you want it. Call it a 'sorry I strangled you, I thought you were a time assassin' present."
"Can't say that I've ever gotten one of those, before," Steve said with a faint smirk. It soon grew into a genuine smile. "I really would like to feel like I'm in a real home."

"So there you go. Our building's scheduled to be ready in a couple of weeks, and this place is all yours afterward." Tony paused, then added with a bit too much emphasis to sound natural, "I do this sort of thing for my friends." He might not ever have been real friends with the soldier who'd calloused over by their first meeting, but he truly was making an effort with the vulnerable puppy version. (Guilt over an attempted strangling seemed to help, too.)

"Thank you, Tony. I appreciate it."

When they moved into their new home sixteen days later, Pepper did have a beautifully framed copy of the Rolling Stone issue for them to hang. It went in the private sitting room that adjoined the bedroom, where they'd also hung some of Tony's framed magazine covers, the medical and technology awards they'd won, and the most prestigious articles Stephen had yet written. (The latter had been Pepper's idea.) The top two floors of the building had been turned into their private residence, and its expanse still toed the line between 'sleek' and 'empty.'

But as Stephen studied that spacious sitting room, and the awards that were featured beside the framed cover of the Power(s) Couple, he realized that emptiness was for the best. There was still so much to do, and the next decade would bring them many more accolades. There was more in that Rolling Stone article than just their romance, after all. All of their heroics would earn them many more rewards, and eventually this empty sitting room would be filled.

Watching them talk about heroism is a little like attending a recruitment drive and a little like watching a tennis match; both men are passionate about what they do and its potential to make the world a better place.

They don’t agree on everything. Do they like seeing their faces on shirts and action figures? Stark says a prompt yes, Strange a firm no. Which is better, magic or technology? The argument takes us through dessert.

It’s possible for you to join them. Kamar-Taj, Strange promises, is accepting new recruits. "People are training right now to save lives," he says.

From what?

For the first time that afternoon, Strange looks uncertain. He clearly has answers, and just as clearly isn’t willing to hand them over. I wonder if I’ve stumbled upon something only the initiates of Kamar-Taj can learn.

But his partner steps in. "My dad worked with the Allies in World War II," Stark says. "There was this creep named Red Skull who was building Nazi cult weapons that were as much magic as technology."

Speculation about the Red Skull’s occult contrivances fill the pages of many war histories, and just as many fevered what-if-the-Nazis-had-won alternate universe fictions. That the Red Skull was viewed as a dire threat to Allied forces is evident from sources on both sides of the conflict; that the powers attributed to him were a mix of propaganda and superstition has long been the accepted school of thought.

But many scholars, including several prominent historians, still argue that there must be some truth to the stories. The old SSR files on the man have never been declassified. Any history of Captain America and the Howling Commandos must grapple with the apparent impossibility of the deeds...
attributed to that most secretive of Hitler’s lieutenants, not only by his allies, but by his foes.

Is Stark merely speculating, or is he revealing the truth behind one of the 20th century’s greatest mysteries?

“There are going to be more Red Skulls,” Stark says, with complete conviction. “The worst people can organize easier than ever. The world's standing on the brink of something terrible, but get the right people together and we can hold the line.”

“It's only going to get worse unless people fight to make it better,” Strange puts in.

At the time, the threat of more power in the hands of evil men sounds like a good enough reason to send people to Kamar-Taj and dress them in high tech armor.

Five days later, Captain Steven Rogers is reintroduced to the world, and I have to wonder what they knew. If this is becoming, as some of my colleagues are dubbing it, an age of heroes, then where are the monsters they must slay? Are they also stirring, in the dark and hidden places of the world?

“Fate,” Stark says. “Sometimes you can just feel it happening.”

I thought he was talking about falling in love. Now I’m not so sure.

I’ve never believed in fate. But a year ago, I didn’t believe in magic, either. These days, we may have to grapple with both.

In their smaller condo, now left empty for Steve's arrival, Stephen and Tony had never been far apart. Even with just half a year spent there, they'd grown used to that closeness. It was an adjustment to look around for Tony and realize that he wasn't nearby, and might be anywhere on that span of eight full floors.

Vincent directed Stephen to the appropriate location: a design workshop on the second floor, which already seemed like Tony's main draw inside the building. Stephen headed down there, and on the way noted the clean, airy remodel that had left their new home feeling simultaneously modern and grounded, palatial and comfortable. Descending through those floors took him past a medical floor, library space, suit storage, and everything else they'd need to live up to what Rolling Stone had written about their spectacular heroics.

It was no surprise that Tony had enthusiastically pitched himself back toward those heroics the moment he had a full design facility at his fingertips. Of course he'd dive right into suit improvements, and when he and Steve did go to root out the last of Obadiah's buyers, he'd have technology even more advanced than they'd bargained for. But when Stephen walked into the workshop, Tony wasn't in front of a computer.

"Perfect," Tony announced and stepped back from the wall. On it hung the framed vintage album cover that Stephen had once surprised him with, and next to it was another copy of the Rolling Stone cover. Hearing Stephen's arrival, Tony grinned as he indicated the decor. "It feels like home already."

"It does," Stephen agreed, and walked over to drop a loving, comfortable thank-you kiss on Tony for the beautiful building in which they now stood. Once he'd gotten over his own hang-ups about its expense, there was a lot to appreciate. It had all the space they could ever need for the next ten years, and so long as the other man was there, it really did feel like home.

But they could think about heroics later. They could think about preparing for more incoming heroes, researching the Pegasus facility where Loki would debut, and bringing Rhodes and Rogers into the
loop later. Right now, it was time to focus less on 'powers,' and more on 'couple.'

"Your workshop can wait," Stephen said. "Come on, they're expecting us."

Tony glanced at his watch, jolted, and nodded before heading for the stairs.

Appetizers were ready for them on a docked yacht, and as it set sail into the Hudson, a fine dinner would soon follow. They were the only two passengers and theirs was the only table on its deck. An uninterrupted view along Manhattan's southern skyline accompanied their meal. This had been Tony's idea, to give them privacy away from any crowds and showcase the city they loved.

"Well," Stephen mused as he watched the Battery glide along the shoreline. "A lot certainly has changed."

In what would have shocked them a year earlier, they were actually, passionately together. Theirs was one of the top-selling Rolling Stone issues ever, for it seemed like the entire planet was hungry for the two of them. They'd moved in to a permanent shared home, that included a meeting room for the other heroes they were recruiting. Soon, James Rhodes would have his own power suit and Steve Rogers was moving into the home gifted to him by a determined (if tempestuous) friend.

In that Manhattan park, under a brilliant blue sky, children were likely pretending to be mystics. Kamar-Taj had gotten more than a few crumbs of recruitment, by now; there was an actual steady trickle, including Phil's friend. The world had indelibly changed, and so had the two of them. Turning away from the sight of the city, Stephen smiled at Tony and added, "It's changed very much for the better."

Tony smiled back. "Happy fake anniversary."

Stephen laughed. A year and a day ago, his life had seemed like it would be a very different thing. He didn't miss it, for he was so glad to be here, with all the changes they'd already made.

And September 15, 2008 was truly a beautiful day.

Chapter End Notes

And with that, the foundation for this new timeline has been (very) thoroughly established. One year in! It's time for some timeskipping, to start hitting some key timeline points and see what the outcomes of some of these changes are.

Also, thanks to Emeraldwoman, who wrote the Rolling Stone article sections. She did a gift follow-up fic to If You Want Blood (You've Got It), and so I asked her if she'd consider doing those bits to add a different voice to Ethan's writing. Thank you so much!
Chapter 33

Chapter Notes

I'm so freaking excited about the movie announcement, ahh! Messed-up multiverse, here we come.

Ahem.

Two things for this chapter. One, I meant to include this at the end of the last one, but here's a gallery of Rolling Stone covers. You can see the sort of sharp, challenging, graphical style they tend to take with their subjects. And two, I've added a 'character death' tag. It's nothing that anyone will particularly care about right now... but I won't make any promises for future chapters.

(I mean... the Ancient One knows she's dying from the Time energy, right? Surely, that's all that will go wrong.)

ANYWAY. Fair warning!

Two years later, Tony tilted his head as he tried to make sense of the document Rhodey handed to him. Outside their vehicle, government offices with intriguingly official facades rolled past, but his attention was consumed by the printout in his hands. After the first page of text, he flipped to a second and kept reading. "Why do I have wings?" he eventually asked.

Smirking, Rhodey handed over another story.

"Well, that's just physically impossible," Tony concluded after scanning the author's summary. The post sure had gotten a lot of comments, though.

The third story that Rhodey passed over gave Tony pause. It was less inventive than the others, yet far more explicit, and he found himself flipping to a random page and reading a paragraph there. "This is wildly inappropriate," he said as he tried to visualize the body positions involved. "And... intriguing."

Rhodey's smile vanished. "Wait, that's not why I brought these." As Tony tucked away the third story with his other, work-related files, Rhodey's grimace deepened. "Oh, geez. Now I'm." He looked to the side, sighed, and finished, "Imagining."

"So, you read it," Tony concluded with a smirk. "You're hunting down dirty stories about us, huh?"

"Only to embarrass you," Rhodey grumbled. "And that should have been embarrassing."

"You know damn well I burnt out all shame by the age of twelve," Tony said cheerfully, and unbuckled his seatbelt as the car rolled to a stop. In a dark suit and his typical shades, Tony circled around the car to join Rhodey in his full military ensemble. They walked up the journalist-lined steps in determined unison, and answered no questions along the way.

"Sorry, no can do," Tony soon said into a microphone at the Senate subcommittee hearing. Senators filled a long table, and other politicians, members of the military, and even more journalists filled its
audience chamber. Despite strict orders to stay silent, that audience sighed at his response.

"Let the record show," Senator Hinkes dryly said, and tapped her notes into rigid position, "that Mr. Stark has once again told this committee 'no can do.' For the fourteenth time."

Tony shrugged. Their attorney had said to pick an answer and stick to it, without variation in wording.

"Colonel Rhodes," Senator Hinkes instead tried. "You have been using experimental technology outside the control of the United States Air Force, to conduct missions not originating from its command." When he stayed silent, she prompted, "Do you deny this?"

"Of course not," Rhodey mildly said. "I thought that all was established." He'd never gone against USAF orders, of course, and performed all his normal duties admirably. But by now, he'd done an awful lot of work with Tony during his off-duty hours. Since they were sure to only involve Rhodey in the more pristine missions, he'd done nothing that anyone could penalize him for. Even so, tension had still built too high for Washington to ignore.

Hinkes waited for Rhodey to add more. When he didn't, she asked with a bit of irritation, "And yet, you still haven't acquired any of the involved technology for the Air Force?" Her sharp gaze turned toward Tony.

Tony simply shrugged again and leaned back to his microphone. "No can do."

Rhodey's suit was kept locked alongside Tony's on Wooster Street, completely protected from outside inspection or interference. Unhackable technological shields surrounded it, for Tony knew how to block absolutely any 2010 online assault. And, just in case someone tried to somehow slip a physical bug inside their building, Stephen re-applied energy wards on a regular basis. Whenever Rhodey assisted Tony with a mission, he was portaled into the suit garage, and that suit only left their building while Rhodey was wearing it.

Much to the government's annoyance.

"Is there an official problem with my extracurricular activities?" Rhodey blandly asked, interrupting Hinkes' glare toward Tony.

Senator Hinkes directed another surge of annoyance in Tony's direction, then returned her attention to Rhodey. "Officially... there is no problem," she admitted. Everyone at the senators' table matched her frustration; many surpassed it. "But both of you are well aware that the military is extremely interested in your power suits. Mr. Stark, you flatly refusing to work with your former clients is causing a lot of discussion here in Washington."

Former clients, yes. By now, Stark Industries had gotten out of the business of war. The existing California and Europe facilities had been converted to clean energy manufacture, to produce the large-scale pieces he designed in New York. There was profit in war, yes, but with each 'new' piece of tech that Tony introduced, he'd convinced the board that there was even more profit in improving the world.

Over the next five years, a company goal was to produce a full line of zero-emission cars that incorporated his clean energy solutions with the self-driving technology he'd debuted a month earlier. The consumer home division was thriving, too; his tablet computers were a huge hit, much to Apple's annoyance, and employees competed among themselves to come up with the next bright idea for a Vincent module. Medical was just as promising, and integrated well with the research grants Stephen oversaw through Metro. Between those doctors and Tony's engineers, they were on
the cusp of a huge breakthrough in spina bifida treatments.

Of course, the Pentagon did not give one single shit about spina bifida treatments.

They wanted to weaponize the arc reactor, which Tony refused to do. They wanted to adapt Vincent or J.A.R.V.I.S. into a militarized AI, which Tony utterly refused to do, and also directed a significant amount of yelling toward General Ross for good measure. And, of course, they wanted to mass-produce the power suits, and slap one on every special operative the Air Force, Army, and Marines had on call.

"Sorry," Tony said, and leaned back to his microphone. "No can do."

A senator broke his pencil. "It'd be a real good idea," seethed Senator Stern as he set that pencil aside, "for you to give us something."

Tony met his gaze. So you can give it to Hydra, he mentally finished. He held a unique distaste for this man, who had made Tony's life so very troublesome and nearly gotten both Rhodey and Tony killed. When the scope of Hydra's infiltration hit the media in 2014, Stern's arrogant team-up with Justin Hammer became retrospectively sinister. It wasn't just that Stern wanted power out of a civilian's hands and into the government's; he wanted a Hydra-run government to be able to use Hammertech-suited goons to enforce their martial law.

"And if you say 'no can do' again," Stern added, "I'll hold you in contempt."

Rhodey frowned, and answered before Tony could. "Our meeting with you today is voluntary, Senator. Technically, Tony could say nothing at all and he'd be living up to his obligations."

"This man," Stern said, and pointed in Tony's direction, "is wielding a weapon of mass destruction without any formal military training. He poses a clear and present danger to the people of this country so long as he's playing the loose cannon, and it is an outrage that one of our own Air Force colonels is furthering this behavior."

Okay, 'no can do' had run its course.

Tony hadn't specifically been aiming for him, but Stern now lacked almost all of the power he'd had in the first timeline. The rest of the world was desperately scrambling to catch up with Tony's technology, and the calendar hadn't yet reached when Hammer had launched his (inferior) suits. Washington simply couldn't come in with their own models, just yet.

Even better, Tony had made this debut with nearly a decade of experience behind him. As Tony was now an expert fighter with refined, reliable tech, the collateral damage from his missions had been kept to an absolute minimum. Shrapnel had never hit his chest, so there was no old-model arc reactor that would slowly poison him and prompt him to act out in what seemed like his last weeks alive. Rhodey wasn't available to be used as Hammertech justification; instead, he was Tony's visible battlefield ally, as was national icon Steve Rogers. Tony himself had been a committed, loving partner for three public years. That romance hadn't just kept public interest high, it'd also helped to erase "irresponsible playboy" in favor of "beloved, grown-up hero."

And, just as he and Stephen had once promised Obadiah over a steakhouse lunch, getting involved in medical matters made Stark Industries look enormously trustworthy. It had been one thing to be questioned on his sole control of the Iron Man armor when Tony was still best known as a boy who made bombs. But in this timeline, he was already a true icon of a man who was most associated with clean energy solutions, helpful technology for people's everyday lives, and medical research that saved vulnerable babies and grandparents.
There wasn't any public push to rein him in... except from the people who Hydra could force to make such statements. They were clearly desperate to get their grubby hands on his precious armor as Fury slowly but inevitably whittled away their power base.

"Let's talk about 'clear and present dangers to this country,' Senator," Tony levelly said, and tried to ignore the mental image of Pepper and his legal team groaning as he broke script. "Let's talk about the F-22 Raptor, whose manufacture you secured for your state in one killer sweetheart deal. Every single one of those planes costs the taxpayers of this country three hundred and seventy-seven million dollars." He leaned closer to his microphone. "Three hundred and seventy—"

"They heard you," Stern said tightly. Both senators beside Stern eyed him sidelong; that deal must not be popular with the other states.

"It's a taxpayer boondoggle, you did it to suck up to your constituents... and yet, they still hate you." Tony smiled thinly. "You should check how the two of us each poll, by the way. I'm..." His finger glided toward the ceiling. "And you're..." That finger took a nosedive.

"You're dangerous, Stark," Stern said, and seethed.

"I believe that I have the right to bear arms," Tony said with an impish smile. "And the people of this country have the right to the pursuit of happiness, which you think is best served by spending a billion dollars on three planes. For a billion dollars, Stark Industries could cover the energy needs of the state of Delaware for the next twenty years." That was the expected lifespan of a full-sized commercial arc reactor, with proper servicing, and Delaware didn't have many people. "Let me cover more states, and not a single American soldier would ever die again for oil."

Stern leaned in, like he thought he'd trapped Tony. "Die for oil? For oil? That is incredibly dismissive of our brave troops, Stark. Which just goes to show that you shouldn't be wielding that suit and... Colonel Rhodes, do you have something to say?"

"I have nothing to say, Senator," Rhodey mildly replied, though his incredulous expression had clearly given him away. "Everyone who's served knows what we're fighting for." He paused, then added with what seemed like sincere apology, "Sorry. I forgot that you never did."

Tony fought back his smirk, somewhat successfully. As he felt the room's mood tilt firmly his way, he continued, "There are a lot of 'clear and present dangers,' and I'm ready to fight them all. Give me a billion dollars, and Seattle's off the energy grid for two decades. Give me a billion dollars, and hospitals in every state will be outfitted with the world's top tech for cutting out brain cancer. Or... give you a billion dollars, and we'll get three planes." He waited one perfect moment, then added, "I understand one of those F-22s crashed last week."

Stern's fellow committee members said nothing in his defense, and a few popped their eyebrows. They'd all come there to chastise Tony Stark, but Stern must be unpopular enough on the Senate floor to be an acceptable substitute target.

"I'm keeping my suit, and so is Colonel Rhodes," Tony finished. "If you want to seriously have this discussion, bring some actual evidence for your side. And do look at the polls before you try this again. Because I'm more popular than every person in this room."

Ten minutes later, in the back of Happy's car and safely behind a privacy screen, Tony chuckled, "Well, that went a hell of a lot better than last time."

"You really don't like Stern," Rhodey noted.
"Yeah, last time the guy tried to use you against me, teamed up with Justin Hammer to screw me over, and is probably one of the most powerful members of Hydra." Tony paused. "Hydra would explain how he keeps winning Pennsylvania with those polls of his."

Boggling, Rhodey demanded, "Wait, hold up. A U.S. Senator is a member of Hydra?"

"Yep, it goes straight to the near-top. That's why Fury's needed so long to tackle this," Tony easily said. "Speaking of, let me give Happy these coordinates. I want to install a few bugs before we grab lunch, to make sure nothing gets built under the Potomac."

Rhodey still stared at Tony.

"We've got this handled," Tony promised. "I'm not even being cocky. This time. We've put a lot of time and effort into Hydra extermination and I'm pretty sure I just avoided one gigantic Stern-shaped pain in my ass. Now, we can start worrying about bigger matters."

"Bigger matters," Rhodey repeated dubiously. "What could be bigger than a Hydra Senator on the Armed Services Committee?"

"Something... green," Tony said cryptically, and checked his phone to make sure that all alerts were properly set. He assumed that the news of a military strike on Culver University would be thoroughly censored, but one signal flare was all he needed. They'd be prepared before Blonsky attacked Harlem, so that the Hulk could make a public debut with a minimum of collateral damage. Bruce would appreciate that.

"Something green."

"Trust me, it'll all make sense." Then Tony reached into his briefcase, and retrieved a stack of papers.

A few seconds later, Rhodey sighed deeply and looked out of his window, trying his best to act like he was alone in that back seat. "And he's reading the story again."

This intriguing paragraph was totally doable, Tony decided. He just needed to stretch, first.

"People write extremely weird shit about us on the internet," Tony later announced as he walked through a portal and into their seventh-floor dining room. Stephen had promised to have lunch there after Tony and Rhodey finished their morning work, and the sight of him plating fresh moussaka and stuffed grape leaves, with delicate baklava waiting in pastry boxes, said that he'd more than lived up to that pledge. "Oh, nice. I'm guessing the museum raid needed more follow-up?"

"I've got wards set up at Delphi," Stephen agreed, and nodded to Rhodey in casual greeting, who easily returned it. Some foolhardy people had stolen artifacts from a museum in Athens, believing that the ancient jewelry could unlock the wisdom of the ages if they wore it while sitting where the famous Oracles had once preached. There'd be an effect, all right; they'd be driven instantly insane as the gemstones unlocked the spiritual prisons of a variety of lesser demons.

Ooh, souvlaki skewers.

"You were saying something about the internet?" Stephen wondered as he set three plates down, following each with a small glass of wine.

"Yeah, you have seriously weird fans," Rhodey drawled. Tony nibbled delicately on a lamb skewer. "Thanks for lunch, by the way."

"I know we have fans," Stephen said, eying him sidelong. "We've had fans for years, and so do you."
"Why are we in 'extremely weird shit on the internet' territory, now?"

"It's only you two for the weird shit," Rhodey clarified. "I want to make that very clear. I have looked, and I do not have wings."

"Wings?" Stephen repeated. "What, like the Falcon gear? Neither of you would need that." Without the context of their earlier discussion, he was still trying to analyze this logically, to his detriment.

_Falcon. I should really look up Sam,_ Tony mused, then shook his head and focused. "No. Rhodey found stories that people wrote where I had, y'know. Wings. Feather wings."

Stephen's confused stare turned utterly blank. "You don't... want wings, do you?"

Tony's return stare was just as hollow. "Uh. No."

"Well, good." Stephen still eyed him with suspicion, like he didn't believe their innocent intentions. "It's supposed to really hurt."

As he waited for the punchline, but realized that there wasn't one, and that Kamar-Taj apparently contained the knowledge of how to (painfully) grow a pair of wings on someone, Tony took a larger drink of wine than good manners would suggest. "Your work is so——"

A small stone near Stephen's wrist lit with a rippling glow, and with barely a word of excuse he disappeared through a portal. Apparently, it was time to go stop a bunch of Greek demons from escaping.

"Goddamn weird," Tony finished toward Stephen's empty chair, and forked in a mouthful of moussaka. This was a man who had zero right to complain about anything on the internet.

"No arguments here," Rhodey snorted, then reached for a stuffed grape leaf. Although he'd always be more Tony's friend than Stephen's, the two did get along quite well by now. That didn't stop Rhodey from finding magic any less bizarre, even after two years spent as their mutual ally. "Although... hearing about wings does feel slightly less implausible than knowing that Stern is Hydra."

"Speaking of Stern," Tony said a few minutes later, as he saw a call coming in. "There's someone else who should know about that."

"That was quite a show at the subcommittee hearing," said a familiar baritone voice. Though Tony had given Nick Fury a direct line on his phone, as protected as he could make it, it was only used for emergencies and critical info. The two of them didn't enjoy chatting, and seldom did. "There's some real pushback on your suit by now."

"It's that sort of insight that makes you the world's greatest spy," Tony drawled. He could imagine the flat, irritated look Fury gave him in response, but the man kept his focus. "Did you get the feeling that anyone was too interested?"

"Stern," Tony said easily. "I've heard rumors that he's going to give a very shady contract to Justin Hammer, by the way. Check him out, too." Hammer wasn't Hydra, but Tony would still enjoy it if Fury hassled him. (Unfortunately, he couldn't get away with casually mentioning Vanko, but he'd take what he could get.)

"A shady contract, huh. Would that shady contract cause you trouble, or cause everyone trouble?"
"Stern wants to cause everyone trouble," Tony confirmed, hitting each word hard enough to dispel Fury's suspicion that he simply wanted to have a rival targeted. "Hammer's probably just a gun, but Stern wants to aim him at the world. And you know who'll pull the trigger."

Even though this was a protected line, they still avoided mentioning the word 'Hydra' over it. Fury was taking a massive risk and he'd managed it with delicate efficiency. He didn't want Tony coming in to help, he (apparently) hadn't brought Phil into the loop, and although Steve had been sent on missions against Hydra forces, he had no idea of his targets' true allegiances.

Fury had been taking out the trash for nearly two and a half years, and he was still alive. That didn't happen by accident. Nick Fury built contingencies upon contingencies, and surely there was an infodrop that could call his allies into informed position if such a move ever proved necessary. But until such time, Fury apparently wanted to keep this vital mission in the only hands he trusted: his own.

"Stern is the most visible troublemaker you've ever mentioned," Fury said after a considering pause. "All of those ties to power he has could be awfully tricky to manage."

"You know," Tony began, took a bite of baklava, and kept talking as he chewed. Rhodey made a face at him, but stayed silent. "A month ago, Stephen removed a glioblastoma from a soldier at a classified base, who works on classified missions with classified materials. They wouldn't tell him why she'd grown that tumor in a week, or why he could see it moving when he cut her open. Those are apparently really tricky tumors even when they're quote-unquote 'normal.' They shoot out feeder tentacles into the brain and grow like crazy, but this was unprecedented."

"I'm glad to hear that you appreciate your partner's work," Fury drawled. "Does this have a point?"

"Since magic could keep her stabilized, he was able to keep her safely under until he was sure that he had gotten every single cancerous cell out of her brain. With that thing's growth rate, leaving even that much would see a fresh tumor in a week or two. And, well. It's been a month."

"Does this have a point?" Fury repeated.

"No matter how dangerous something is, and how much it wants to take over... dig deep enough, and dig smart enough, and you can cut it out."

Fury took a moment to respond. "If you're comparing me to the world's best neurosurgeon, I suppose you really do think I'm 'the world's greatest spy.'"

Tony paused, too. "Yeah, I didn't mean to give you any compliments. Can we strike that last bit from the record?"

"I'll look into Stern, Stark. Fury out."

"He believes you a lot more, by now," Rhodey noted once the call was done. "He just accepted that you knew the truth about Stern."

Setting his phone aside, Tony reached for the rest of his baklava. "I've given him a lot of names to check into, by now. So has Stephen." Tony clearly remembered weapons suppliers, technological leaders, and some prominent New Yorkers who'd been on the online list of Hydra members. Stephen remembered more names, naturally, but lacked context on many of them to know who to suggest first. Between the two of them, over the past two and a half years, they'd provided a lot of effective tips to Fury. "Those names struck gold, apparently."

"You could have just brought him into the Weird-Ass Order of the White Stick," Rhodey said. "And
told him the full deal about the future."

"One, there is not a chance in hell that Fury would agree to magical compulsion. Two, there is not a chance in hell that KT would want a guy like that experiencing a relic's power. And three... I don't want Fury in my clubhouse." With perfect timing, a portal re-opened, and Tony turned toward Stephen as he re-appeared from Greece, unharmed but dusty. "We don't want Fury in the Horkos Club, right?"

Stephen grimaced, and went to wash his hands.

"He called you the best neurosurgeon on the planet, by the way," Tony loudly called after him, and let his voice follow Stephen to the kitchen.

"I am," Stephen agreed from the other room, "and we're still not giving him the Staff!"

Chuckling, Rhodey leaned over to pour himself more wine. "I probably shouldn't have another of these, but our afternoon meetings are going to be a lot more relaxed than that inquisition earlier. I've earned this. You should have another one, too. That was quite a speech you pulled out on Stern."

It had indeed been a good speech. Tony poured himself a new glass.

"I've got some updates," Stephen said when he settled back in, and began to rattle off findings from the research that Stark Industries funded through Metro-General. It had quickly turned into one of the most attractive and prestigious medical grants in the world, supporting experimental treatments that few other places ventured to try. He'd just approved applications for robotic prostheses research, further studies into infant anesthesia via dimensional manipulation, and a memory therapy that seemed like magic. Not all of it was immediately promising, but everything was intriguing.

Both of them were keeping more than busy. They'd spent the past two years polishing their heroic credentials and securing the public's fawning affection. By 2010, they were even more of a power couple than they'd been on that magazine cover, and their public goodwill could scarcely be overstated. New heroic faces would start showing up soon, and some of those heroes would need to be awed into compliance. For others, they'd make a poor public launch and would need the protective umbrella of Stephen and Tony's popularity.

So long as no would-be troublemakers like Stern succeeded in tarnishing that glow, their plan should work just fine. Hopefully, Fury would do his backstage work before the Senator could give any more whining, pouting interviews. Tony did very much enjoy seeing his fabulously high approval ratings, and he didn't want that jackass hurting his numbers.

"Well," Tony said nine days later, as he stared at the breaking news story on CNN. "That's different."

Officially, there was nothing to tie this to Nick Fury, but it was clear that the man had indeed worked fast. Senator Stern had attended a dinner arranged by one of Washington's wealthiest lobbyist groups, where he'd mingled with some of the country's most influential people. There, he would have been fawned over by all of D.C.'s ladder-climbers who wanted access to a Senator on an important committee. It'd certainly started off as a great night that soothed his wounded ego. But halfway through the party, he'd suffered a heart attack while sitting on the toilet, and never rose from it again.

Stephen looked at the screen, frowned, and then turned that frown on Tony.

"I had nothing to do with this," Tony promised. "I only told Fury that Stern was Hydra. I expected
the guy to be hauled off to prison like Obadiah, not to pull an Elvis on his porcelain throne."

"This looks bad," Stephen murmured. "We don't want enemies randomly dropping dead. We both know Fury planned this, and if he starts arranging hits on anyone else we point him toward, eventually those coincidences are going to point back toward us."

"The media seems to be giving a cover story, though," Tony mused as he changed the station and landed on more gossipy coverage. "Look."

Stern's wife had been back home in Fox Chapel, Pennsylvania, watching their teenaged children and helping to arrange fundraisers for a local Pittsburgh women's group. She was a pleasant-looking woman who had probably sacrificed every last personal goal to support her husband's political career, and then he'd suffered a fatal heart attack at a Washington party rumored to contain illegal drugs and barely-legal women.

She was a sympathetic figure and Stern was a believable fatality. He'd been under so much stress recently with his humiliation at Tony's hearing, his re-election campaign that had suffered from it, and the lingering fallout from that F-22 crash. Add in the stress of supposedly dallying with a younger woman behind his wife's back, and some rumored cocaine to speed his pulse, and it was no wonder that an unhealthy man's heart had given out.

At least he'd kicked off before he left the party with that young woman, Tony thought grimly as he watched the story play out. He'd never judge anyone who simply wanted to take a new friend home for the night, but his wife didn't deserve to be cheated on and no woman deserved a Hydra partner. Both of them had dodged one mighty big bullet.

"I guess that's that," Tony concluded at the end of the day, and shrugged as he turned off the television. Foul play was not suspected, according to any of the stories he'd seen, and they were waiting on the results of drug testing to confirm everyone's unspoken cocaine suspicions. So far as the world knew, an unhealthy man's heart had failed. "Good work, Fury."

"That man is flying awfully close to the sun, by now." Stephen considered the darkened screen, but didn't get up from the couch. He couldn't, not with how Tony had taken his typical sprawled position on him as he read. "Should we offer for me to have a 'mystic revelation' that brings Hydra into public view? Then Fury could make use of more allies."

"I can offer," Tony said, and adjusted his comfortable position against Stephen, "but I doubt he'll take it."

"Then make it a standing offer."

"Will do," Tony murmured and sent that message. He doubted it'd even be acknowledged, let alone agreed to, but at least they'd tried. "Oh. Hey. Speaking of 'flying close to the sun,' that reminds me of the wings. I need to ask you something."

Stephen frowned. "It's a bloody, gruesome process used by a cult to form an avatar of Minokawa. And the wings don't work, anyway."

"...You know, you deal with a lot of cults." Tony shook his head and tapped his fingers on his tablet, and soon found the original version of the story Rhodey had printed out. "But no, that's not what I meant. Being reminded of the wings reminded me of—" He handed the tablet to Stephen. "This."

"What exactly am I reading... ing... oh dear God." As Tony twisted around to take in Stephen's expression as he experienced the explicit and intriguing story for the first time, he was rewarded with
astonished horror. "This is—"

"Hot."

Stephen boggled at him. "I was going to say 'massively inappropriate and invasive.'"

"Keep reading."

"Keep reading?" Stephen repeated with disbelief. "Why? So I can see more of what a stranger has made up about what we do in the bedroom..."

Yeah, he'd hit that paragraph.

"I. That's." Stephen blinked. Offense fell away into shock, and shock turned to interest. His head tilted slightly and held there through a weighty pause. "All right, I do have to admit that I've never thought of using magic like that."

"You wanna?" Tony asked, grinning.

"I doubt you'd be coherent tomorrow," Stephen murmured, and kept blinking too frequently as he read further.

"For once, I've got nothing scheduled." Tony held a lazy smile until Stephen looked back over to him, and all through the considering study he then made. After scanning Tony from socks to hairline, their gazes met and held.

"Come on," Stephen said suddenly, and they both scrambled off the couch.

Tomorrow, Tony was not coherent. "Sure," he mumbled into his phone. Everything Pepper had just said to him sounded reasonable. He thought. Probably.

"Great, I'll set up the meeting." Pepper paused. "Wait. Tony, are you still in bed? You sound... um, sleepy."

He laughed, and rolled flat onto his back.

"It is two in the afternoon!"

He laughed again.

"Well," Pepper said dryly. "I hope you had fun. Are you seriously going to be ready for this meeting tomorrow morning, or should I reschedule?"

He'd been progressively handing over more CEO-style duties to Pepper and bolstering her pay to match. He didn't want to officially give Pepper the title until Hydra was eliminated; it helped him keep a tight grip on the technology and made her less of a target. But even so, she had already gotten used to challenging his behavior more than she did before.

"I'm good," Tony promised, and tried to focus as he sat up. "Or... I will be good by tomorrow morning. Really."

"Is that a really, or a probably?"

"It's a really."

"All right. Ms. Roberts will meet you tomorrow to get a few quotes about Stern. Play it safe, because
the story is dying down. Keep the topic to how Stark got out of military contracting, and let yourself sound happy with all of the civilian stuff, all right? So far as you're concerned, it was unfortunate what happened at that party but you haven't had much reason to talk with the man for a year, now."

"Except for the subcommittee hearing," Tony added.

"Yeah, definitely don't bring that up. I'll ask you one more time, Tony—"

"I will be on top of my game tomorrow," Tony promised.

"Okay. Good." He heard a smile enter her voice. "Try not to have too much fun tonight."

Tony was good, and made sure that he was on his best, most responsible behavior when he walked into a cafe the next morning. It had become his favorite one for interviews and the owners did their best to maintain that relationship. If he wanted a long, serious chat with someone, they gave him a nearly hidden table in the back; if he wanted to limit his time with a journalist, there was a table near the waitstaff's path. Their constant presence put subtle pressure on the discussion, and he'd never had such an interview last longer than twenty minutes.

Pepper had asked for a twenty-minute table. That was fortunate, because when Tony walked into that cafe and saw the 'journalist' waiting for him, coherency fled.

"Hi," said Natasha Romanoff in a business casual ensemble, topped off with wireframe glasses and a large barrette in her hair. She stood and extended her hand. "Nicole Roberts, Washington Post. Thanks for meeting with me, Mr. Stark."

"Natalie Rush' doesn't sound nerdy enough for a journalist, huh? "What can I do for you? I thought I'd already talked to the Post."

"You have," Natasha confirmed as they took seats opposite each other. "I was just asked for some clarifications, follow-up, that sort of thing. It shouldn't take long."

"Oh, so you're not writing a story. You're... what, a fact-checking intern?"

"If you want to boil things down to that," Natasha said dryly.

"I bet it beats covering garage sales and cow tippings at your hometown paper, though. Where are you from?"

"Findlay, Ohio."

"Can't say that I've ever heard of it."

"There were garage sales and cows," Natasha admitted, "and not a lot of interesting stories. So I'm glad to be here. Do you mind if I get straight to my questions? I don't want to take up much of your time."

"Sure," Tony promised, and answered her 'questions' with all the sincerity he could bring to bear. Apparently, with a person of Stern's prominence, Fury wanted to double-check what Tony truly knew. The questions sounded natural enough, and anyone who saw a harmless assistant journalist would never think anything of them. But to Tony's ears, they were designed to probe for any hidden knowledge that he had yet to share with the good director.
I'm an idiot, Tony thought as he abruptly realized who the 'young woman' was that Stern had been seen with. Of course: Fury had tasked Natasha with his assassination, and she'd done it in a way that played on Stern's desperate need to once again feel manly, powerful, and in control. She'd shown up at that party in a cocktail dress, hair loose around her shoulders, and convinced Stern to live a little... right up until when he died.

"Mr. Stark?" Natasha asked.

"Sorry," Tony said, and tried to focus. "I started thinking about medical grants. I have a meeting later today at Metro to see if they like my robots." That was the truth, actually, and he was sure that she would verify it.

Natasha smiled. "Well, I've gotten all of those facts checked by now, so I won't keep you. Thanks so much for meeting with me, Mr. Stark. I know you're busy."

"You are extremely welcome, Ms..." Not Romanoff. Not Rush. Damnit, what name had she given? "Miss," Tony finished, and left it there. "Let me get you a biscotti for the road."

Phew. I should have been more prepared for that one, Tony thought as he put in an order for another latte and then summoned Happy to the cafe's address. He'd (mostly) covered any suspicious behavior, but he still liked to know what was coming.

Unless I'm wearing a magical blindfold, Tony thought, and tried to hold down his sudden smirk. In the right situation, not knowing what was about to happen could be intriguing. Very intriguing. Very... distracting.

When the barista called out his order, it took him a few seconds to notice.
Chapter Notes

It's a plotty chapter, because things are going to happen relatively rapid-fire until we're through the first Avengers date. I needed an almost-crisis to kick things into gear and decided to go for just about the biggest threat imaginable. Things are very much in motion, now, and a lot more people are about to make appearances.

Somewhere in the Kamar-Taj library was the book that Stephen sought, and he would stay there all night if that was what it took to find it. "I'll be done soon, Wong," he lied without looking up from the shelves. "It won't take me much longer."

"You said that an hour ago."

"An hour is not long. And—wait." Smiling, he slid a book free of its companions on the shelves, and took the hefty volume to a reading desk. That symbol on its spine looked like what he needed. But the characters on the pages soon stymied him, as a first glance had him expecting Sumerian only to realize that none of the sentences made any sense. The grammar was all off, and what had initially looked like familiar characters became meaningless. "Wong," Stephen said thoughtfully, and brought it over to him. "Do you know what I'm reading?"

Wong glanced at it. "Ancient Akkadian."

"Well, that explains it. I figured Sumerian."

"They only share a basic script, and—" Suddenly wide-eyed, Wong grabbed the book, scanned its pages frantically, and demanded, "Why did you need this volume?"

"Because I need to know more about its topic? That is kind of the whole library deal."

"Is this—" Looking around, Wong dropped his voice furtively. "Is this the true power behind the fight that caused the Time Stone to malfunction? In the future?"

What in the hell had Wong so upset? All Stephen had wanted to do was research his suspicion about that operation he'd performed on the classified soldier from the classified facility. It certainly couldn't have been too impactful on the timeline. In the first go-around, he hadn't been available for that medical/magic hybrid, and so the woman would have simply died. "No," Stephen said, bemused. "This is totally unrelated. I just wanted to verify the shape of that tumor growing inside her head, to prove to myself that it wasn't simply a glioblastoma."

To Stephen's growing surprise, Wong grabbed him by the hem of the Cloak, and then grabbed his shirt collar more roughly after the Cloak slapped him away. "You say you removed this from someone," Wong demanded, and turned the book around to show Stephen a silhouetted illustration.

"Yep," Stephen concluded after making a close study of the book's etching. "That was definitely the one. Those specific nodules that intruded into the parietal lobe were unmistakable."

Still tense, Wong set the book down and disappeared toward another part of the library. He's going
toward the restricted books, Stephen noted with surprise. Really, what had Wong so worked up? This had all resolved in the first timeline without Kamar-Taj's assistance, for better or for worse.

"Akkadian?" asked a voice at his side, and Stephen turned toward the woman there. It took him a moment to realize who he was seeing: Melinda, Phil's friend who'd come to Kamar-Taj in search of purpose in a life that had suddenly lost its moorings. She was a stern but beautiful woman, who still had the whip-slender, steel-tough appearance she'd brought there from her S.H.I.E.L.D. days. Her black hair was pulled into a loose braid, which laid over the shoulder of what he belatedly realized was a purple shirt, unique to her. In this dim part of the library, her holding master's status hadn't been obvious at a glance.

"Akkadian," Stephen confirmed. "You're apparently better at languages than I am." He could learn one when needed, through rote memorization and sheer willpower, but it wasn't something that enthused him. He preferred the implementation of magic to its organization and history. That was one reason why he and Wong paired so well.

Melinda smiled, and set down the books she'd apparently come there to return. "I knew nine before I came here. That helped with running missions, but it also gave me a lot of grammatical experience for understanding new ones." Her slight smile actually entered her eyes. It hadn't, before. Either she was still getting over whatever deep trauma had led her to Nepal, or she was just that restrained of a person. "I passed my tests three days ago. You were looking at the style of my shirt?" she added at his confusion.

She was observant, then. He supposed it was unlikely that a non-spy could get away with examining who Phil had labeled one of the best S.H.I.E.L.D. agents ever. "Congratulations. Only needing two years to get to this stage is impressive." For some people, coming here while traumatized would require a decade before they could master any mystic powers. For others—for him—it was a lifeline that promised a fix to the unfixable. Throwing one's entire desperate being toward that fix made things happen far faster than usual.

"How long did it take you?" Melinda wondered. "I've tried to look into your history, but it's been hard to find anything."

"You have?" Stephen replied after a brief but significant pause.

"You know Phil." She shrugged. "He lives with a woman who talks to you practically every day. It seemed like I should know who you are, in return."

That was an unfortunately reasonable justification, for he didn't have a believable cover story to offer. This woman who was apparently Phil Coulson's best friend would naturally want to know about another mystic in his personal orbit, and who'd provided the key to unlocking her own new life path. "I spent a significant time in another dimension," Stephen settled on. "It was a real trial by fire. And energy, and blunt force trauma, and..." "The Ancient One asked me not to provide too much detail. Otherwise, people might think it was a shortcut when it very much wasn't."

"Hmm." Melinda nodded slowly, then let a small smile return. "From everything I've heard, you can handle far more energy and higher-level spells than I can. But I'd trust me in a fight."

One eyebrow raised. The words sounded like bragging, but her tone didn't.

"You're the recruiter," Melinda said simply. "And whenever you show up, the Ancient One pays attention. That doesn't happen for anyone else, so I'm guessing that you're in some sort of charge. Chances are, you're going to need to run more missions in the future. You should be aware of your assets."
No wonder she was friends with Phil. This woman was practical and efficient, and Phil was unlikely to be knocked off-balance by her obvious intimidating streak. "Good to know," Stephen said, and decided to take advantage of this new resource. "Can you start working on alien linguistics? It'll be needed."

"I'm not sure how, exactly, but I will try," Melinda said, picked up a book to replace the ones she'd returned, and departed with another faint smile.

_Huh_, Stephen thought, and watched her leave. He'd never before thought about what it would really mean to have a top S.H.I.E.L.D. agent empowered with mystic abilities. As he envisioned the famous Romanoff or Barton with them, it seemed like a good match, and Phil placed her on their level. There was a very specific challenge that would present itself in the years to come, and he might have just found the best possible solution for it.

"Come with me," Wong abruptly demanded, and Stephen jolted with surprise.

"Where the hell did you come from?" Stephen grumbled, wishing that he hadn't shown such a visibly startled reaction. Wong knocking him off balance would be gloating material for a month.

"Come with me," Wong insisted, and stared at Stephen until he sighed and followed him through a small side door, which was then closed and locked behind them. "No one else can read these words. The risk is too great. Before I open this book, ward yourself against mental intrusions of interdimensional forces, and be prepared to close any external rifts that open."

After a long pause, Stephen hesitantly replied, "You know, I'm actually good. I can head back. I got my answer." This was a significantly more intimidating visit than he'd expected, during what should only have been a medical research expedition.

"You haven't," Wong grimly insisted. "We have to discuss that thing you found in the woman's head. Have you warded your mind against intrusion?"

Frowning, Stephen then did as requested, and nodded slowly. "I have. What's this all about?"

"Be on guard," Wong said, and opened the book he'd carried in with them.

Its characters, whatever they were, did not look like Sumerian or Akkadian. They were rounded, grotesque things that bulged obscenely like a body left to rot in standing water. Reading them brought anxiety without any understanding, and as Stephen's gaze locked onto the page, he became distantly and uneasily aware that those characters were beginning to move in front of his eyes. Unknowable black lines roiled on the page like countless glistening centipedes feeding on each other, biting and tearing and crawling... toward... him. Soon, he would comprehend the words their shapes formed, and when he spoke those sounds into existence, the universe would—

Gasping, Stephen activated the ward around his mind and stumbled backward from the table. Characters settled back into mere ink on the page. "What in the hell was that?"

"You saw it move?"

Blinking, Stephen turned his blank stare onto Wong. "You didn't?" He looked back toward the book, shaky. "Seriously, what the hell is that book?"

"The one book on this planet that describes the summoning of Shuma-Gorath." Wong's expression was as serious as Stephen had ever seen. "The Lord of Chaos is an unspeakable and ancient being of destruction. Mortal minds are broken by mere echoes of him, and the sheer unstoppable force of his presence can destroy galaxies. He may be summoned into a mind to begin the process of creating an
avatar in that dimension. Should he be successfully welcomed, existence would end in an instant that lasts a horrific eternity."

"So, Lovecraft is real," Stephen summarized as he tried to regain some dignity. Once that had (mostly) happened, he exhaled and asked, "I suppose this is a bad time to say that I kept the tumor for future study?"

Wong paled.

Five minutes later, the two of them and the Ancient One stepped through a portal onto Wooster Street. "You truly saw the words move?" the Ancient One asked as they walked out of the empty back room Stephen kept for portal entrances, shielded from the delicate equipment elsewhere on the floor.

"I did," Stephen said, and tried not to shudder. (Seriously, his previous Lovecraft references had been jokes.) "Wong, you really didn't?"

Wong shook his head. "Only someone whose mind has already been exposed to Shuma-Gorath will see the truth of that book reveal itself. Which yours apparently has, after that operation. For a year and a day, your mind would be vulnerable enough to summon him." Sighing tightly, Wong looked around the sleek, modern medical facility in which they now stood. "Had you spoken the full incantation, he would have started growing inside your own brain."

Stephen swallowed. "Right, then. Let me show you what I cut out of her."

Fortunately, the tumor's behavior had been peculiar enough that Stephen had kept the thing on total lockdown. It was inside a secured system that needed four separate biometric readings, and when the chilled tube emerged, two more readings were demanded before it ejected. With exquisite caution, he moved the tube containing the small, pale thing onto a lab table and turned on the spotlight above it.

"This is how you've conducted your research?" the Ancient One asked as she bent down and studied the tumor inside the tube.

"Yes. I haven't opened it. Tony's scanners have given me so much, already, that there wasn't yet a need."

"That's fortunate. And that bright light is anathema to him." Troubled, the Ancient One stood. "What was the woman doing before she had this grow inside her head?"

"I don't know," Stephen admitted. "The military got in contact with me and asked if I could come out one morning for an operation that would potentially happen that afternoon, if I felt confident enough. I got the feeling that if I'd been unavailable, the patient would have been terminated. I've never experienced anything so secretive."

"Were you aware of this event in your first world?"

Stephen shook his head. "In my first 2010, I was practicing mundane forms of medicine." Younger him would have been outraged at the description. It was fair, though. A challenging case there had been a man whose nerves misfired to pain him whenever a nearby cell phone rang. Here, he apparently operated on Outer Gods in zygote form. "And it certainly wasn't something that hit the evening news, or medical literature."

"So if this did happen in your original timeline," the Ancient One mused, "the host would have been safely killed by her superiors before the summoning completed itself."
Stephen shrugged, and studied the tumor with continued unease. "I suppose so. There certainly wouldn't have been a single doctor in the first 2010 who could handle that operation."

"For the sake of both universes, it's fortunate that they killed her there," Wong said darkly. "Whatever the military did to cause this, they nearly consumed all reality. Everyone on that Earth would have died screaming long before you ever had reason to find Kamar-Taj." He bent down, too, and his expression was like cut granite as he stared at the tumor, unblinking. "We need to know what they're doing, so we can stop it from happening again."

"The situation resolved in the first timeline," Stephen said uncertainly. He didn't disagree with Wong, but they hadn't seen the absolute iron-fisted control that had steered him all through the day of that operation. The military wouldn't tell the mystics what they'd been up to, if asked; they probably wouldn't even return his call. "They seem to have only tried the one time."

"That's not good enough," the Ancient One sighed. "This isn't something that can be left up to chance. And in your first world, the military wasn't being inspired by your mixture of magic and science. They might have reason to try again here when they would not have, before."

That was unfortunately and inarguably correct. "I really don't think they'll tell me," Stephen murmured as he leaned back and forth, studying the small white lump from different angles. "So... we probably shouldn't ask."

Shortly, Tony walked uncertainly out of the elevator taken from his second-floor workshop. He seldom intruded here unless he needed post-mission medical attention. They'd learned it was important to give the other man space, and let them each rule their own particular kingdom. "You rang?" he asked as he saw Wong and the Ancient One waiting there. "Stephen, why is there a magician convention on the sixth floor? And why does everyone look like Merlin just got some very bad news?"

"The military very nearly ended all existence. By accident."

Tony hesitated. "I believe it, but how?"

"It turns out that tumor I removed was some sort of embryo for a being from another dimension. Had the woman become his avatar, our existence would have shredded." Stephen straightened, pointed at Tony, and added, "Avatars are always a bad idea."

"I don't want wings," Tony retorted, annoyed, and ignored the confused looks that earned from Wong and the Ancient One. "So, what's my part? Why'd I get called up?"

"I have no idea what branch of the military I was even working with, let alone what they did to cause her condition. And if I asked, they wouldn't tell me," Stephen smiled, and waited for Tony to pick up the inevitable conclusion.

"Let me see what I can do," Tony obligingly replied, and turned to the nearest computer. It took him a few minutes to find the communications that had invited Stephen to that operation and learn more about the man who'd made the request. Once done, he looked over his shoulder and smirked at the study being made of him by Wong and the Ancient One. "Impressed?"

"Your technology is very impressive, yes," the Ancient One obligingly said. "It seems to work within relatively few limits."

Tony frowned and returned to work. His silent retort of 'relatively?' echoed between them, regardless. "Navigating the military system is a little tougher than I'd like," he eventually admitted. "I
could definitely break through in an instant if it was just a matter of getting the intel, but I'm needing to tread lightly. We do not want to be noticed."

"Do you even know which division to focus on, yet?" Stephen asked. "They never did tell me which organization that soldier belonged to, let alone her missions."

A moment passed. Tony sighed, then tapped his holographic keyboard. "Now I do."

As Tony worked, they'd been staring at a floating headshot and most basic details of the serious, grizzled soldier who'd arranged the surgery. So much of it was classified that nearly everything but his face was masked from them. But when Tony tapped his keyboard again, information came into view: Henry Reginald Stine. Partner: Emily. Children: Brian and Amanda. Medical conditions: arthritis (mild), allergies (cat dander, shellfish). Date of birth: 2/25/62. Rank: Major. Affiliation: S.H.I.E.L.D.

"S.H.I.E.L.D.," Stephen repeated tightly. If there was one division that would pursue inventive studies inspired by his magic, that'd be the one. There really was a chance that these tests would go further than they had in the first world, then. "Is there an clear explanation for how this happened, or do we need to go tell Fury to stop any and all attempts to duplicate mystic powers?"

"Yeah, that's... actually not what they're doing," Tony murmured after a thoughtful pause, and tapped a few more keys. "And we do have an explanation." Now, Major Stine's specific project affiliation revealed itself: he was an assistant director for Project Pegasus.

"You've mentioned that before," Stephen said after a moment of consideration.

"You're familiar with it, Stark?" Wong asked. "What is it?"

Unhappiness filled Tony's voice when he replied. "Unfortunately familiar. If Pegasus is officially up and running again, then they're researching the Space Stone as we speak." Annoyed, Tony folded his arms and glowered at the screen. "I mentioned that weird tumor straight to Fury's face and he played totally dumb. I can't trust that man at all."

"We are in the middle of hacking his system," Stephen pointed out.

"Yeah, because we can't trust him."

Wong sighed, and turned to the Ancient One. "Well, at least the Space Stone explains how a dimensional gateway bridged our world and Shuma-Gorath's. S.H.I.E.L.D. had no idea what they were doing and had the worst aim imaginable."

"Indeed," she said softly, and stepped closer to the screen as Tony revealed more information on Pegasus: its location, the blueprints for that facility, and a list of assigned agents. "People with no idea of what they were doing attempted to use an Infinity Stone, and caused dimensional gateways to bloom without their knowledge or understanding. One pinpoint portal must have opened directly inside that poor woman's brain, and Shuma-Gorath's presence began to grow inside her."

"We can't take that risk again," Stephen said gravely, remembering the creeping horror of those black, grotesque characters as they moved about the page. "We can't assume they'll make the same decisions as last time and stop while it's safe, because the Space Stone makes it way too easy for clueless people to open portals. If S.H.I.E.L.D. slips up one more time on this level, we'll never even get a chance to worry about other Stones. We have to tell Fury."

"Tell Fury that I hacked into his system? And downloaded the blueprints for his secret base on double-plus mega lockdown?" Tony shook his head. "Nah. Bad idea."
"A threat on this level far outweighs any concern of S.H.I.E.L.D.,” Wong said, and frowned.

"You would think so, but we're still helping Fury pull up all the weeds on his lawn. He's gotta trust us for that to happen." Seeing Wong's deepening scowl, Tony clarified, "We're directing him toward the Hydra spies he needs to get rid of, before they get rid of us."

"You're talking about spies, Stark. I'm talking about the end of all reality."

"So is Tony," Stephen sighed. This was an extraordinarily frustrating situation. Everyone kept chiming in with fresh opinions, everyone had a good point, and all those good points conflicted. "If Hydra catches the two of us off-guard, and takes us out, reality will break as surely as if things go full Cthulhu. Until the fight with all of the Stones has resolved, we're caught in a very delicate dance. We have to let S.H.I.E.L.D. research the Space Stone enough to welcome in Loki and the Mind Stone, but stop them from pushing it too far and doing something... unexpected."

For a minute, the four mused on their situation, though the Ancient One's attention still appeared mostly captured by the tumor and its infrequent twitches. She'd been ready to attack it if needed, and so had left the debate to the three men. "Phil is Fury's right-hand man," Tony said after that considering pause. "Maybe we can use him to bridge the information gap, somehow?"

Ah, yes, Phil was an obvious solution. He knew them well enough to trust their warnings, and obviously had Fury's ear. But when Stephen turned to Tony with pleased agreement, he instead sobered. Though he'd been the one to make the suggestion, something about it still left Tony hesitant, his expression grim. "Is there some reason not to get Phil involved?" Stephen prompted.

"I would like to keep him out of any major developments," Tony said reluctantly. "If at all possible."

"Why?" the Ancient One wondered. "Do you not trust this man?"

"I trust him as much as I can trust anyone who hasn't held the stick. I trust Phil as much as I trust Pepper, or Happy." As Tony studied the hologram for Major Stine, assistant director of Pegasus, something in his gaze turned very sad. "But Pepper and Happy didn't die because of this project."

"How did that happen?" the Ancient One asked in the aching silence.

"Things went to shit on Fury's helicarrier," Tony said, his voice heavy with memory. "Loki got inside people's heads, got us arguing, and got out of his cage. Phil tried to stop him." His gaze drifted slowly downward like an autumn leaf, and he said nothing more.

"And you're imagining that end again," Stephen supplied.

"Yeah."

"You're imagining Pepper, afterward."

Tony hesitated, then nodded again.

Somewhat surprisingly, it was Wong who spoke up with encouragement. "You've downloaded the blueprints for the Pegasus facility. Tell us as much as you know of Loki's behavior, and we'll imprison him upon arrival, before he can hurt anyone else." Off the mild surprise he got in return, Wong said, somewhat defensively, "Masters of the mystic arts are duty-bound to protect Earth against mystical threats. Your friend is as much a part of Earth as anyone, and Loki is a mystical threat." When he frowned again at everyone, this time it said, Of course we'll keep him safe. How can you think otherwise?
"Thanks," Tony said with a lopsided smile, which Stephen echoed. The first timeline had Stephen finally earn a friendship with Wong after bringing him back from the literal dead. It was no wonder that, without such drama, they'd needed longer to connect. But they'd all get there eventually.

As the room settled into agreement, the Ancient One nodded and stepped back toward the embryonic avatar. "Stephen, I think it best if I destroy this. However, your work on it will be invaluable, to add to our understanding of Shuma-Gorath and similar threats. Have you researched everything important?"

He'd run an awful lot already, yes, but Tony had installed a higher-level genetic sequencer just two months ago. That had yet to be put to use. "Let me do one more thing," Stephen said, moving toward the controls in question. "We'd be able to track the emergence of similar creatures anywhere on Earth. Even genetic hybrids or offshoots would set off our warning signals." His fingers danced across holographic keys, inputting the specific scans he wished to conduct.

Tony had constructed this based on Stephen's requests and the insight of his medical engineering division, but it was only Stephen who had the slightest idea what to do with it. While Tony could look at software code and have truths revealed to him at a glance, he was clueless about the base code for living organisms. That was Stephen's territory, and he knew exactly what data on Shuma-Gorath's genetics would be most necessary for future planning against such threats. He input those directions into the machine with rapid precision, then told the sequencer to begin its work.

Above the tube, a long, glossy, white-and-stainless scanner descended. Its projected light rippled across the specimen container, and a moment later, a scan of the avatar tumor appeared in three-dimensional model next to Stephen. "All right," he said, and tapped the key for the next stage of analysis. "This should only take about twenty minutes, and then you can—"

The lights went off. Fear jolted Stephen as memories of the moving text filled him, but he felt the deep thrum of the emergency basement generator kick on a moment later. Electricity returning made him sigh with open relief, his typical bravado forgotten.

"Uh," Tony said, and stared at another screen as it flickered back to life. "Whatever that thing is made of, my genetic sequencer flipped out so much that it crashed every system in the building. Even though I specifically isolated all of them. So... not sure how that's possible."

"Do not try to analyze Lovecraft DNA," Stephen muttered, and tapped off the rebooting machine before it could restart its scans. "Noted."

But Tony wasn't done. "And... uh... yeah. Power just went down for the whole island." He swallowed. "The whole city." The mystics went very, very still, like they could somehow prevent any more of the modern world from falling. "The entire grid." After another few aching seconds, Tony nodded. "Okay. It stopped." Shivering, he let his full concern reveal itself for a half-dozen shallow breaths, then forced out a long, steadying whoosh of air. "It stopped."

With an uneasy smile, the Ancient One stepped forward. "I'll just take this now, then," she quietly said, and reached for the specimen tube. No one argued.

As the Ancient One left with the tube, Wong frowned at the monitor Tony had been watching. "I thought you said it stopped at this power grid?" The entirety of the northeastern United States was marked in crimson, as were Quebec, Ontario, and the Maritime provinces of Canada.


Hospitals would turn on their own generators, but power would have cut out mid-surgery. Patients
on life support would be dying until those generators fired. Through the windows, they could just barely hear honking as every traffic light in the city failed. In stories about such horrific creatures as Shuma-Gorath, Stephen grimly thought, even looking at those cosmic beings drove characters insane. Apparently, real-world technology didn't fare any better.

Tony raked anxious hands through his hair, then looked over at Stephen. "I fight angry men with energy whips, and terrorists, and killer robots. Can we stick to that, please? Possibly? Can we steer clear of the eldritch abominations who collapse civilization with their presence? Because that would be really super."

"Trust me, I want nothing more to do with that thing," Stephen promised. "When a comet nearly strikes Earth, you're just happy that you were lucky that day, and you don't call for a repeat visit." To think, S.H.I.E.L.D. had very nearly called that creature to Earth, without the slightest clue of what they were doing. He turned to study the power monitor, shook his head, and reached for his phone. "I'll handle the Phil call. I'm the person who had reason to be studying the damn thing.

"Phil," Stephen said a moment later. "Hi, yeah, it's me." Tony and Wong both listened in silence. "I'm afraid I know why your power just cut out."

"I have a feeling I'm not going to like this answer," replied Phil.

"You're not. A month ago, I was brought in to operate on a soldier working at a classified facility. No one told me anything about who she was or what caused it, but trying to run a genetic sequence on her tumor just now did... well, this."

"How did running a genetic analysis in your own house knock out power to fifty million people?" Phil sputtered.

"I have no idea." Stephen hesitated. "I've got no way of warning anyone, since I don't know if she was Air Force, NASA, or what. But I thought that Fury could learn what project she was affiliated with, and send that commander an alert?"

"His clearance is a lot higher than yours," Phil agreed. "Or... than anyone's. Good idea."

"Fury needs to tell that commander to change his frequency, or aim, or whatever this project was up to. Don't duplicate whatever process landed this woman on my operating table. All right?"

"I'll pass it along. Thanks. Whoever oversaw that, you can be sure they'll end that part of the project."

Relief swept Stephen, and he nodded. "Thanks, Phil."

"Thank you for letting us know. I'll follow up."

After ending the call, Stephen turned to Tony and Wong. "He'll follow up." Relief swept them, too. They wouldn't be left wondering if S.H.I.E.L.D. had actually stopped their dangerous exploration. And then, those scientists could focus only on whatever research would eventually draw Loki to Earth.

"It's done," the Ancient One said as she walked back into the room, empty-handed. "That bit of Shuma-Gorath has been consumed in the heart of a star. While that's not strictly necessary, I felt it best not to take chances."

"We're in a different stage, now," Wong slowly said as he continued studying the map of the downed power grid. "Stark, Strange, I know you've been preparing the world for heroics. Those
heroics have arrived. This threat emerged because of an Infinity Stone. It's time."

"It's time," Tony murmured.

They'd spent years cultivating their public image, making the world fall in love with them, and training people to accept heroes. By now, hundreds of people had found Kamar-Taj, and dozens were accepted last year into actual training. But that had just been ground work. It was the same thing as spending these two years on Wooster regaining combat physiques in their expansive gym. They hadn't just been working out for the hell of it, then. They'd been getting ready to fight.

"Tony," Stephen said after a ripple of icy acceptance slid through him. "Bring up those blueprints you downloaded from Pegasus. Tell us what you know of Loki's arrival. I know it's another year and a half, but we're reaching the stage where we can't afford mistakes. Let's plan early, and often." Years earlier, Tony had given him and the Ancient One an overview of the assault on Earth, but it had been a broad discussion, only supported by what he himself had encountered. These specifics were new.

"Right," Tony said, and retrieved those blueprints in holographic three-dimensional projection. The three mystics studied the facility with curiosity, but so did he. According to what Tony had said, he'd only learned about Pegasus afterward, from stolen files. Hopefully, after-the-fact knowledge would be enough. "They were researching the Tesseract in this basement lab. The entire facility collapsed from a power overload. Most agents got out through the top exits. Loki and the Stone escaped through these."

Stephen nodded thoughtfully at the few tunnels emerging from lower floors like new, thready roots shooting out from a plant. "After that?"

"He went to a museum in Germany to yank out someone's eyeball."

Wong grimaced at Tony. Behind him, the Ancient One still studied the basement facility, her gaze shadowed in thought.

"Hey, don't blame me, I smacked him around for it." Pursing his lips, Tony narrowed his eyes before continuing. "Thor'll show up and demand his brother back. That dynamic's going to make things dicey, but it'll help to have Steve totally on my side. He and I can talk about things beforehand, and plan how to deal with He-Man's family drama."

"I imagine we have to let Loki be taken back to Asgard," Stephen mused. He'd read the histories of Infinity Stones, and knew at least an overview of how all of them had become available for collection. "He helped Thor when the Reality Stone was being targeted."

"So, we can't just kill the guy," Tony grumbled. "Well. I'll be extra-sure to keep Phil in a different room, then."

"That is one security measure you could take, yes," the Ancient One murmured. Only then did Stephen realize she'd never spoken since the blueprints first appeared, despite knowing more about the Stones than anyone and despite Time energy giving her glimpses of the future. "Security measures. Hmm. That lab for the Tesseract did appear to be quite protected, if not for how portals came into play."

"Yeah, well." Tony shrugged, and zoomed in on the basement room. "That's Fury for you."

"That is the impression I've gotten of Director Fury, yes." The Ancient One's gaze shadowed again. "I have a question for both of you, then. Stephen, Tony... if Nick Fury is so particular about his
security, and if he has his plans within plans..."

"Yes?" Stephen prompted after she trailed off.

"Why did he let you take that tumor?"

"I..." Frowning, Stephen looked over to Tony, who'd clearly been struck with equally confused realization. The Nick Fury they knew didn't hand over weapons to anyone, didn't trust other people to answer his questions, and didn't open security holes for no good reason. If a Pegasus soldier had grown something dangerous and inexplicable, he would bring in the only doctor on Earth who could save her... but he wouldn't let that doctor take home the side effects of Tesseract exposure.

"I don't know," Stephen then finished.

"Neither do I," Tony added, and shook his head.

"You should figure that out," Wong gravely said. "We're past the time for uncertainty. The stakes are too great, now. This Shuma-Gorath incident resolved, but others will not."

Concern swelled within Stephen. Had Melinda researched him even more than he'd assumed? Had his energy wards failed, and were there now S.H.I.E.L.D. bugs in the Wooster walls? Did Phil feel more tension between competing interests than he'd let on, or did Pepper share information that she'd promised not to?

Or... was Fury even Fury?

"It's time," Tony abruptly said, and looked at something on his phone.

"It is time," Wong agreed. "The age of the Infinity Stones has dawned."

"Yeah, but that's not what I meant." Turning the screen, Tony showed them a news alert: while the northeast was trapped in its power outage, a university in Virginia was being targeted by the military. Some unknown threat was on the Culver campus, and the response was huge.

Hulk would soon be seen by the public, who'd be sent running through icy streets. A hammer would soon fall from the sky in New Mexico. Loki would soon arrive, and dominoes would begin to topple as inevitably as today's power outage had spread through streets and states.

It was time to get to work. After years of steady planning, the world was about to change.

They'd best be ready.

Chapter End Notes

Though it's safe to assume readers are familiar with film characters, AoS characters might not be known to everyone. Melinda is going to serve a couple of specific purposes in the story, and since Phil is a significant character, it wouldn't make sense to ignore her if he's around. Here is a good clip that shows her in combat action, and here's another fight that has her taking on a duplicate. Finally, here's a clip that's a good glimpse at the dynamic she had with Phil, from a time when they had to go undercover together as a couple.
"Someone extremely large and extremely mean has hit Harlem," Tony said, and turned his scanners to the skies. "And from the look of it, someone less large and a whole lot less mean is about to..." His helmet-enhanced gaze tracked Bruce Banner falling from a helicopter above. Tony flinched as Bruce's dive ended hard against the pavement. "Hit. Harlem." Sick with worry, he murmured, "Sure hope that was supposed to happen."

A few seconds later, the Hulk climbed into view. Tony exhaled with relief.

"Everyone, come this way," shouted Steve. Magic carried his voice across the frantic crowd better than any loudspeaker, and a few thin lines of sparks guided the civilian crowd toward safety like emergency lights in a theatre. "That green fellow will keep you safe, but you don't want to be standing right here." Raising his shield, he let himself be a beacon to keep the local residents of Harlem calm, together, and on the move.

"Steve's got the civilians," Tony said to Stephen, who watched the developing violence with fierce concern. "Rhodey's handling official comms."

"I'm talking with Ross right now," Rhodey confirmed. "He knows we're getting involved."

"He happy about that?" Tony smirked, expecting a 'no."

"Yeah. He is. Because if we're here... he doesn't need Banner."

Inside his helmet, Tony's expression dropped. "Shit," he groaned, then glared up at the helicopter from where General Ross watched the developing crisis. "I really don't like that guy."

"Get your footage, Tony," Stephen said tightly, his attention torn between the military aircraft and the brutal battle developing in front of them.

Nodding, Tony sent his drones into motion. They darted forward, armed with countless cameras, and began filming footage of the Hulk bravely standing against the exceptionally ugly grey thing that was trying to bash his way through the neighborhood. That heroic footage would be Bruce's shield against whatever asshole move Ross tried to play in the media. "I think that'll do it," he soon said. "Stephen, go."

"Right. And—" Though Stephen had raised his hand to open a portal, it instead jerked upward and formed a shield parallel to the ground, above Bruce's head. A small missile exploded uselessly against it.

"That son of a bitch," Tony snapped, and glared again at Ross' helicopter.

"He just launched a missile against Harlem," Rhodey sputtered.
"He really must think we'll clean up after him," Steve said across the comms. "Have you got this handled? The crowd heard that explosion, and they're not happy."

"I've got it," Stephen said, and successfully opened his portal. It was oversized for what they were used to, taking up the full width of the street, and revealed a dim, empty landscape beyond its spinning light. "Tony, go."

"Bruce," Tony shouted across his speakers as he rocketed forward, and hoped the man wouldn't question a stranger using his name so comfortably. "There's a safer place on the other side of that light show."

Confused, the Hulk looked up, only for the Abomination to punch hard enough to send him rolling. "Don't distract the big green man," Tony said to himself. "Noted. Rhod, mind giving me a hand? Grey and Christmas." His red suit could adequately target Bruce's green form, and Rhodey's larger, gunmetal grey suit was better suited for the bigger fighter.

"Got it," Rhodey said as they took a spot a block away from the fight. After one sharp nod, both men angled toward the two irradiated, impossibly strong monsters, then accelerated. Behind the fight spun Stephen's portal, waiting patiently for their arrival.

Tony struck the still-disoriented Bruce hard enough to send him rolling again, and followed him through the portal to somewhere they knew to be safely free of potential victims: that meadow in British Columbia, open and empty below the early winter night. Bruce scoured a deep gouge in the powdery snow when he landed, kicking up dirt and rocks from underneath.

A second later, Rhodey's larger, brutally powerful suit impacted Blonsky's corpse-colored form. It wasn't enough. Rhodey staggered him, but didn't send him rolling, and he overshot his mark without capturing his target.

They'd all underestimated the Abomination's unbelievable strength. Tony, Bruce, and Rhodey were now all in Canada, but the Abomination was still in New York City, one city block away from Stephen. Fear lanced through Tony's heart. The scene through that portal was a nightmare, and he wouldn't make it back in time to stop it from playing out.

But Stephen wasn't bothered. As the Abomination turned toward him and roared, his hand twitched again. Regardless of Rhodey's failed attempt, the portal glided forward to claim Blonsky. Oh, that big ugly tendon monster did not like his escape route closing, Tony thought as he listened to the Abomination's primal scream.

The last spark died and the four of them were left alone in the freezing dark. "We're on your side, Banner," Rhodey promised Bruce as they took up spots behind him. "We'll explain later, but let's get this guy handled." Ballistics snapped into position on Rhodey's shoulders. "And let me tell you, Blonsky: I don't miss twice."

The Abomination roared again.

"Light 'em up," Tony ordered, and raised one hand to take aim.

The brutal battle Tony remembered from television was now decidedly lopsided. That monster would have been dangerous while focusing on any one of them, but the overwhelming power flowing through his veins made him instinctive, primal. Bruce couldn't stand up to Blonsky pounding on him, but those punches didn't have a chance to crescendo. Rhodey's heavy artillery unloaded along Blonsky's spine, and when he turned his attention, Tony's mini-missiles honed precisely in on his eyes and mouth.
Blonsky screamed in agonized rage, clawing at one injured eye. That left his other eye open, a perfect target for another round of mini-missiles. A black, bloody void bloomed in his face when they hit. With vision hindered, he didn't see Bruce coming in for another round.

"Eyes on me, soldier," Tony ordered as Blonsky stomped forward. "Or... 'eye,' anyway. Boy, you're an ugly one."

The Abomination roared at him, enormous and threatening on his zoomed-in camera. A [recording] alert flashed in one corner of his vision. This would be a downright terrifying sight for anyone who hadn't seen the things he'd lived through, and he knew any audience on Earth wouldn't blame him for what happened next. Nodding once to himself, Tony released another round of mini-missiles, and cued some nifty plasma laser attacks that he hadn't yet debuted to the public.

Those lasers lopped off Blonsky's right hand, and his left leg below the knee. As directed, the mini-missiles went straight down his throat as he screamed. That probably hadn't killed him, Tony thought coldly as he watched the grey, ugly thing topple, choking and coughing from the explosion in his gut, but now not even the World Security Council would try to use Blonsky for anything but a life-term prisoner. And then, Tony cut his recording.

"Bruce," Tony said after a moment of studying their fallen foe, and turned to the man who'd be his friend. "You all right?"

Frowning, the Hulk took a step away from Tony and Rhodey. "Who robot men?"

Oh boy, they were starting off in full caveman mode. He'd forgotten how simple the Hulk was on very first arrival. "We're friends."

"We're... friends," Rhodey confirmed. (Tony had told Rhodey and Steve about Bruce, sure, but second-hand knowledge was all they had.)

"If you head back to the city, you'll be back on Ross' radar," Tony continued. "You need to lay low for a little bit, all right? We're gonna run some PR on you, massage the narrative, and you... do not have one single idea what I'm saying."

The Hulk frowned, then looked around for a portal that no longer existed. "Betty."

Betty. Betty? Yeah, Bruce had mentioned a Betty. They obviously hadn't worked out, but at the moment he cared for her. "You can catch up with Betty later," Tony promised. "But soldiers are gonna come real soon to get him." He pointed at Blonsky's silent, bleeding form. "And Ross tried to knock you out with a damn missile once he saw you could be a target again. He's still going to want to make this capture."

Conflict filled the Hulk's eyes, deep and shadowed in the starry night. For a few heaving breaths, he was still. Abruptly he leapt away, vanishing into the distance. Great, bounding arcs carried him through the empty meadow, leaving footprints in the snow each time he hit, but soon he reached the distant forest and grabbed for its top. Trees wobbled and cracked with his departure.

The friends were left alone, then, standing over a mutilated Abomination as their suits spat status feedback into their ears.

"That guy's your friend?" Rhodey asked, and turned to Tony.

"Nerdy scientist version. Not the Jolly Green Giant."

"He did not look jolly," Rhodey snorted, and called back to New York to arrange collection for the
Abomination. He didn't bother calling medical as part of the retrieval; it was already clear that it was practically impossible to kill these things.

Tony, however, did call for his own version of medical. Unlike most days, Stephen's voice didn't relax him, because there wasn't supposed to be an audible explosion in what should have been a safe city. "What's happening?" Tony asked with sharp concern. He wouldn't outright fear for Stephen unless he sounded worried, which he did not, but hearing that deep, booming roar near him couldn't be a good sign. "Are you all right?"

"I am. The city's not. Come on back, we could use your help." A portal bloomed as he said it, revealing a crimson glow that spilled onto the rumpled snow and dirt of their Canadian battleground. It looked like blood.

Frowning, Tony turned toward that portal. Soldiers rushed past him and Rhodey, their eyes on Blonsky, but his attention was only on the chaos still spreading through the Harlem streets. "What's happening?" he repeated as he returned to New York. Rhodey followed a few steps behind.

Stephen looked dusty but uninjured, and didn't stop what he was doing as they approached: containing a small diner inside a spherical shield, along with the gas fire that had exploded inside it. "If the fire hits the main line, this whole block will go. Can one of you shut it down?"

"On it," Tony promised, and activated his scanners. Aha, there was the gas line feeding that fire, tucked snugly underneath the street. "Afraid I need to turn you off," he announced before plunging his armored fist through the pavement, then clenching it around the metal tube. Steady pressure cut the flow of gas, and once he was sure the feed was nearly nil, he sealed it for good with a blob of solid metal.

"Thanks," Stephen said and let his shield drop. A smaller blaze still burned in the diner, but without the threat of imminent explosion, he appeared content to let the fire department handle things. "Rogers was steering the crowd, and things sounded in control, but injuries can still happen in a panic. I'll go check on that. Can you two scan for any life signs buried under the rubble?"

"Will do," Rhodey promised. After watching Stephen fly off, he began a steady, sweeping survey of the Harlem streets. Comms flickered open again. "This is what happens when you drop a bomb in the middle of a city, General," he said tightly.

Ross needed a moment to reply. His helicopter still hovered overhead, unhurried. Medical and police aircraft gave it a wide berth as they approached, as it apparently had priority in the sky. "The threat we faced was far greater than the damage a rocket launcher could do to one block. Especially one that had already been cleared of civilians. I was protecting the entire city."

"I'm betting you wouldn't have been so quick to drop a bomb near Wall Street," Rhodey muttered, and continued his hunt for any injured residents who hadn't been successfully evacuated as part of Steve's group.

"What exactly are you implying, Colonel?" Ross hit the rank hard, to emphasize his own rank of Lieutenant General. Although they weren't in the same branch of the military, he could still give Rhodey orders and expect them to be followed, especially in a crisis situation.

"He's very politely calling you an asshole," Tony replied. "Banner's gone, by the way. You'll never catch him. Not that you would try to catch someone who just threw himself out of a helicopter to save Harlem, right? Since you obviously care so deeply about the tens of thousands of people who live here, and would want to reward their protector? And not lock him up in some lab for slow dissection?"
Thaddeus Ross was indeed an asshole, even if he cared about the nation's defense. He'd tried to cozy up to the Council, who would willingly launch a nuke toward the city he'd just tried to bomb, and he'd had his sticky fingers all over the implementation of the Sokovia Accords, somehow getting everyone into an even worse mood in the process. He and Tony had butted heads at every possible opportunity, and by this point Tony was happy to do so on purpose.

"If you just helped a target of military concern escape, Stark," Ross said tightly, "then we're going to need to have a serious discussion. And Rhodes—"

"Colonel Rhodes backed me up in taking down the creature assaulting New York City," Tony cut in, and uploaded the drone footage to Pepper, along with the first-person view from his helmet. She'd edit out any troublesome bits, then send it on to all relevant media. "As did Banner. And all of it's on film, and out of my hands."

After a significant pause, Ross promised, "We really are going to have a discussion, Stark." His comms cut.

"And it's going to be so. Much. Fun." Tony sighed, then hovered high enough to locate the civilian evacuation area three blocks to the east. J.A.R.V.I.S. alerted him of sufficient emergency services, which was one load off his mind, and so he flew to take care of the other. "I did not like seeing you face him down," Tony announced at the end of his short flight. His helmet retracted.

Stephen looked away from inspecting a cut on someone's temple. "And you think I liked watching you disappear through that portal?" His attention returned to the injured girl, and his frown deepened. "There's blunt damage around the laceration. You may have taken a harder hit than you think. Let's get you to a hospital." The crowd in the evacuation area was in far better shape than this night could have gone. Steve had rounded people up successfully and kept them away from danger, and directed emergency workers as best as anyone could. Injuries were still inevitable in a fleeing crowd, though, and Stephen now clearly worried about all of them.

"Okay," the girl giggled, and looked up at her mother like she was asking permission. Now that the threat had passed, sitting a foot away from superheroes had turned her night from terrifying to amazing. Her mother nodded, her face sweaty and shaken, and murmured something that was probably thanks as she stroked her daughter's hair.

"I imagine the nearest hospitals are going to be overwhelmed, so let's try to spread the load a bit." Stephen swept his hand through the air to open a portal, then called to the nearest EMTs. They looked up from the patient stretched on the road before them. "This goes to Metro-General in Midtown. Take patients through it. When they're full and you need a new ER, tell Captain Rogers and he'll pass it on to me."

"All right, Doctor," the nearest EMT said with a broad smile, then exchanged a whisper with his partner.

"Come on," Stephen said and picked up the small girl. One corner of the Cloak gently patted her back. She giggled again at her mother, even as another trickle of blood glistened its way down her cheek, and then tried to pet the cloth that was petting her. "I should really go tell Gurdeep what's coming. I'm sure he can handle a dozen or so incoming without issue, but he'd appreciate the heads-up."

Tony followed, for he could definitely push Dr. Bhatt to take more than a dozen incoming patients. The girl's mother tagged close behind. Even though the portal was unmistakable, stepping from Harlem to the Metro-General driveway still startled her, and she turned to stare in open disbelief at the path they'd taken before hurrying toward her injured daughter.
Inside, all televisions were on the local news. The sight of Harlem seemed to traumatize the shaken woman all over again, and so Tony did his best to distract her while Stephen hunted down help. The girl's name was Kiara Coleman, the mother shakily explained, and hers was Ronnie. She hadn't been able to find her husband Will in the chaos and he'd forgotten to grab his phone while evacuating. He had to be alive, she was sure of it, but...

"I'll have Cap find him for you," Tony promised, and sent that message. (Code names weren't a thing, really, but Cap would always be Cap.) "Keep your phone on. I bet you'll hear from him real soon."

Ronnie nodded her head, teary, then turned to where her daughter had been laid on a stretcher for a hopefully unnecessary MRI. Kiara still seemed to think that everything was a delightful game, now that the immediate threat had passed. She even pouted adorably as the Cloak slipped free of her tiny fingers. Tony couldn't help but smile lopsidedly at the sight of her; he'd treated some of the danger they now faced as a bit of a game, too. "Thank you, Mr. Stark," Ronnie said, shaky, and clasped one armored hand in hers.

"It's what I'm here for," Tony promised, then bent down for the group of children who'd been waiting impatiently to take photos with his power suit. It was rewarding to mingle with the people they'd saved, to be reminded of the human factor behind all these big moves they made. Whenever things got tiring, they'd always been able to look to faces like Kiara and Ronnie. That made all the stress worthwhile. (And to think, in his first go-round, 2010 Tony had barely come to the realization that other people existed.)

"They found Will," Ronnie abruptly said, and let out a noise that was probably supposed to be happy, but came out all choked through an hour's worth of tears.

Tony smiled, and gave her a thumbs-up. Yeah. Things all worked out. Bruce would be fine, too. He was sure of it.

"Gurdeep," Stephen called when he saw Dr. Bhatt, and waved him over as he rejoined Tony. The elderly man started at the sight of him, then hurried through the Emergency Room in their direction. The waiting room was as hectic as it would probably ever be before the Battle of New York, and in most emergencies Gurdeep would miss being waved at, but Tony and Stephen did stand out in a crowd.

"That is... really quite an outfit, Stephen," Gurdeep said as he approached, and made no effort to hide his inspection.

"Thanks. We're trying to spread out the victims of the Harlem attack through the city. The closest rooms are overloaded. You could take—"

"Twenty, right?" Tony interrupted. After what he'd paid for this place, it could definitely handle more than a dozen victims.

"I... of course," Gurdeep said, and looked over Tony's armor with similar amazement as Stephen's outfit had earned. "Yes, bring them in."

Tony smirked faintly at Stephen, who did not appear to appreciate or even notice his victory.

It didn't take long for those twenty slots to fill. Few critical patients had been identified, thankfully, but broken limbs needed to be x-rayed and set, head injuries needed MRIs, and cuts needed stitching. All of those would need time, and available doctors. "I'd stay and help with the MRIs," Stephen said as Gurdeep directed his staff toward patients, "but I can help more people by doing the dispersals to
different ERs."

"Of course." Gurdeep looked ready to add something else, then paused and shook his head. "Things certainly have changed."

Stephen shrugged. "Same basic triage principles as ever. Just call me an extremely effective ambulance." Tony, meanwhile, scanned the waiting crowd to see if there were any obvious declining life signs that the triage team had missed.

"Not you," Gurdeep chuckled, then paused. "Well, yes, you. Not only you, though." Something like sadness entered his voice. "Sometimes, I think of that Christmas Eve. The one with you. They've put in metal detectors since then. Did you know that? It makes me feel like I'm working in a prison."

"I'm sure it's safer," Stephen offered.

"Yes. In exchange, every patient gets to feel untrustworthy when they walk inside my ER. Treated like a criminal." Gurdeep sighed, and shook his head again. The man who'd first welcomed Tony to this timeline looked very old, suddenly. His very limbs seemed to weigh him down. "Perhaps the world has changed even more than I imagined." His gaze turned to again take in the two heroes and their flamboyant costumes.

He was a kind, dedicated man, and Tony felt duty-bound to help the man who'd helped him. But as soon as he opened his mouth, Stephen laid a hand on Tony's wrist and said, very seriously, "The world really has changed, Gurdeep. Unfortunately, I don't imagine that pace will slow."

Weary acceptance settled into Gurdeep's dark brown eyes. "I'm sure you're right." He heaved out another sigh. "Well, you'd best get back to Harlem, Stephen. Help get the injured where they need to go. And very nice to see you again, Mr. Stark."

Once they'd left the emergency room to walk toward the portal still spinning in its driveway, Tony muttered, "And why couldn't I give a pep talk to the nice ER Santa Claus?"

"Because he's supposed to retire early next year," Stephen whispered. "And if you convince him to stick it out for any longer, Christine won't be on the job market when they hire a replacement. She liked this place. I don't want to ruin it for her."

Oh, whatever. "Fine, fine. Throw out the nice old man to clear a path for your girlfriend. I see how it is." Tony softened the complaint with a sidelong smile. With the 'girlfriend' joke, he wondered if Stephen remembered all those jealous jabs he'd made about Karl. Though Karl Mordo had never been brought into their closest circle, as Stephen worried about him judging some tough decisions in the wrong light, he was a trusted ally. Emphasis on trust, which wasn't something they had in excess. It was good to have more people to depend upon.

At least some things are steady, Tony sighed as they stepped back into Harlem and sudden, brutal change confronted them again. Yes, they were officially in the thick of things.

Two days later, as the last dust settled in Harlem, Tony sought what steady comfort he could. Greenwich Gardens Cafe wasn't just Tony's favorite place for an interview; it had also become a regular spot for Tony and Stephen to take breakfast together, before daily duties pulled them apart. The restaurant lived up to its name more during warmer months, when tree leaves filled the place with dappled light and overflowing flower planters lined up outside the door. It was cozier during winter, though. It wasn't yet time for a holiday soundtrack, so Fleetwood Mac's 'Landslide' played quietly from the back of the half-filled cafe. The space was full of heavy wooden furniture, plush cushions, and charming art from local artists. And really good muffins.
"Mmmrph," Tony said with approval toward the employee behind the counter, and offered a thumbs-up as he reached for his coffee. That spiced pumpkin-apple blend with streusel crumbs had him ready for truly cold weather. "Tell Missy the recipe worked."

"It does look good," Stephen admitted as he stirred blueberries into his healthy steel-cut oatmeal.

"Here," Tony said, ripping off a small chunk. "Try it."

"Good," Stephen confirmed after plucking it from his hand. "I assume you don't want..."

"I don't know how you even eat that stuff," Tony snorted. "So no." They were nearly two and a half years into actually being together, which was plenty of time to develop the sort of boring, comfortable habits that sustained a relationship. At least three times per week, they came to Greenwich Gardens, where Tony would pretend to consider options besides pastries and Stephen would immediately regret his lofty, healthier choice.

Even with the Bruce crisis, they made sure to find time for their habits like this. They were as warm and comforting as the hoodie Tony wore, or the sweater Stephen had chosen (that Tony sometimes stole at home). Before their always-hectic days began, it was nice to start on a stable, steady foundation of predictability.

"General Ross doesn't like you two very much."

After a frozen pause, Tony looked up at Nick Fury standing next to their table. "Do you mind?"

"Are you always going to interrupt our meals?" Stephen added, and sipped his coffee.

"It's a good place to catch you off-guard," Fury said without apology and pulled over a chair. He turned to the barista. "White chocolate mocha and a raspberry scone, thanks."

Tony raised an eyebrow at the sugary order.

"They're good," Fury said. "So, do you have a plan for dealing with the fallout from that Harlem showdown?" He was really going to stick around and ruin their pleasant breakfast, then.

"What fallout do you anticipate?" Stephen asked mildly. "Since you've clearly come here to scare us, in some sort of way."

Fury smiled, and got to the point. "The two of you have been living on the government's good graces. You've just barely toed their lines, and played your fans like fiddles to keep the public pressure on. It's been a lot easier to let you do your thing than try to rein you in. But I'm hearing word that things might change after you stuck yourself right in the middle of a military op."

"Yeah, and I stopped that military from launching a missile against Harlem," Stephen said, and precisely extracted a blueberry from his oatmeal. "By now, I imagine Ross has realized how terrible those optics would have been."

"Maybe," Fury admitted. "He was pretty gung-ho about keeping Banner under his control, no matter what it took. I'm sure his adrenaline was running real high that night. But if you're injecting yourself into those decisions, you're saying you're facing down the military and you damn well know it."

"Meaning?" Tony prompted.

"Meaning they'll try to get you under control." Fury accepted his order as it was delivered, and gestured to Tony. "He'll cover the bill."
"I always love having you around," Tony drawled.

With another knowing smile, Fury took a bite of his scone, chewed, and sipped his drink. Only after making them wait did he continue. "You two need to pick a side, gentlemen. Colonel Rhodes is having his record combed through for the slightest mistake. He didn't get authorization from anyone in USAF command for these missions he's been running, and now there's a Lieutenant General complaining about him."

Tony shifted his weight. Yeah, they'd been picky about the previous missions that Rhodey had run, but the Abomination appearing was too dangerous to risk him sitting on the sidelines.

"Now, Ross doesn't have much direct leverage over you two," Fury admitted. "He would have if Stark Industries still did military work, but he can't do too much to your pursestrings any more. But he knows people who knows people. You could say goodbye to any FDA approval for any piece of medical research that comes through your labs, Doctor."

Stephen eyed Fury over the rim of his coffee cup, and said nothing.

"Same with those government purchases you're hoping for on your arc reactors, Stark," Fury continued. "It's still untested technology. It'd be easy enough to convince state leadership to not drop a billion dollars on something that might not last the two decades you've promised them."

"You really think Ross is that powerful?" Tony asked, and snorted. Maybe he would be after he became Secretary of Defense, but he sure wasn't in 2010.

"No," Fury said simply. "He's not. But like I said... he knows people who know people."


"You didn't mention Rogers," Stephen said in the lengthy silence, after he waited for an argument from Tony that never came. "He's military, too."

"I didn't," Fury agreed. "Because Captain Rogers works for me. He shields people, and so I shield him. I can say that he's working under my orders, that S.H.I.E.L.D. has a vested interest in whatever he's doing, and he's covered. And I do that. Because it's important," he continued, looking pointedly at each of them, "to have a good working relationship."

"You're asking us to pick sides," Tony summarized. "You or Ross."

"I know you're not picking Ross." Fury toasted them with his paper cup, and scooped up his half-eaten scone in a napkin as he stood. "Think it over, gentlemen. You've had a wild ride for a few years, now, but it might be time to turn this into a more formalized situation. I've got some ideas we could talk about in greater detail."


"You did turn me down in Santa Monica." Fury smiled yet again, and sipped his coffee. "But I keep my powder dry. You know how to reach me if you want to continue this discussion." With his characteristic flair, he strode out the door. Winter winds whipped his coat as he left, a ripple of shadow around him.

"He probably has a point," Stephen admitted as soon as they were alone. "Things have ramped up, and they're going to ramp up even more. It might be time to reassess the situation. Can we trust Fury, though?"
"No one can trust Fury," Tony snorted. "I bet he doesn't even trust himself." Damnit, this had completely ruined his pleasant morning. Even the remnants of his muffin didn't taste as good. They really might be trying to keep too many balls in the air, he admitted to himself: Rhodey's pristine military reputation, S.H.I.E.L.D.'s wildly dangerous research with the Space Stone, keeping Steve's friendship strong enough that he'd understand the eventual Hydra reveal... and far more.

That alien tumor had shown them that they couldn't anticipate everything headed their way, but at least that discovery had been in private. The Bruce situation was extremely public, and apparently, even more controversial than expected. More than three years of growing roots in this timeline meant that those roots were strong, but right now, winds were kicking up from every direction. Storms could rip out even the strongest tree.

"It's about a year and a half more until we've got two Stones under control," Tony murmured after a lengthy pause. "Think there's any chance of treading water until then?"

"Honestly? No."
Tony sighed. Yeah, probably not. "Let's say that we deal with the PR fallout from Harlem first, all right? Nothing big happens until next year. I'd like Pepper to calm things down a little before we take sides in Fury vs. Ross, because you know our names'll get dragged through the mud when that happens."

Both men sat back in their seats and indulged in a bit of quiet frustration. It was more pleasant to see themselves in charge of the world's destiny, directing its fate like an orchestra. Up until this point, the only person to challenge that view was the Ancient One, and she was completely aligned with their ultimate goals. The same could not be said of Nick Fury. And yet, he might be the next best ally to bring into the mix, so long as they could make things happen on their terms.

"I'm making my New Year's resolution early," Tony eventually grumbled. The remnants of his muffin were ignored; his appetite had fled. "We figure out a way to convince Fury to hold the stick. As soon as we've got an angle on that, we can have the big talk with him."

"Great," Stephen drawled, but didn't argue. Convincing Fury to swear by the Horkos Staff was completely impossible, and yet they still had to do it. Somehow. "That'll be a fun way to spend the holidays."

For Christmas, Tony bought Pepper and Phil a housewarming gift: the standing balance on her mortgage. They'd traded in her luxurious but small apartment for a brownstone in Crown Heights, and he wanted it in her name, free and clear.

Except for that, December passed without note. Presents were given, dinners were held, and Tony and Stephen completely failed to think of a way to convince Nick Fury to swear a mysterious magical oath to a mysterious magical stick. "He knows that magic exists," Tony began during another breakfast at Greenwich Gardens. It was January, and so their soundtrack was back to Fleetwood Mac. "Can we lie to him about what the stick does?"

"Unfortunately not," Stephen sighed. "If you don't know what you're promising, it's not consent. And the Staff doesn't work without consenting to your oath."

Ugh. Fine. "Can we get Phil in the loop?"

"Maybe. But who would Phil be more loyal to: us or Fury?" Stephen's eyebrows raised, suggesting the answer they both knew.
"Okay." Tony held up a hand. "Okay. We get Pepper in the loop, and she gets Phil, and Phil convinces Fury... Stephen, I need you to look more enthusiastic."

"Come up with a good idea, and I will."

Tony rolled his eyes. Spoilsport. His phone buzzed before he could answer, and the message on its alert screen promptly wrecked his day a little bit more. "Steve's bailing on me," Tony read, frowning. "We were supposed to go raid an iffy workshop in Atlanta. Rude."

"S.H.I.E.L.D. mission came up?" Stephen guessed.

"Like always," Tony said with a nod, and glanced back at his screen as a second message arrived. "No, no, no no no no! Fuck!" Tony yelped, only to realize the entire cafe was staring at him. "Spilled my coffee, sorry!" he weakly said, and then gripped his phone with both hands and stared at it.

"What's wrong?" Stephen demanded.

"Steve is being sent," Tony hissed, "to New Mexico."

It took Stephen a second to realize what that meant. His eyes widened when he did. "Oh no."

"Steve cannot get involved," Tony said with frantic urgency. "Thor has to learn an afterschool special lesson on Earth, so he can stop being a total douchebag, so Loki can somehow meet up with Thanos, so he can come here with the Mind Stone! This is the single most important thing that's happened since we first landed here, and Steve is going to fuck it up!"

"Can you tell him not to go?" Stephen suggested, although his weak tone suggested he knew the answer already.

"No. He'll need to follow orders." Feeling increasingly ill, Tony scooted his chair to the side to let an employee mop up his coffee spill. His voice quieted even more. "So... we get those orders changed."

"Guess we're meeting with Fury, after all," Stephen muttered, and downed the rest of his coffee.

"Gentlemen," Fury said with flawless manners twenty minutes later, inside his office in the midtown facility. "I don't normally respond to 'it's urgent, goddamnit,' but I have to admit that you intrigued me a little."

Stephen turned a flat look on Tony, who shrugged. Hey. It'd worked. "Director," Stephen then continued, and shut the door behind them.

"Director," Fury repeated, pleased. "Listen to you, all formal."

"Director. It is absolutely imperative that you do not send Steve Rogers to the mission in New Mexico."

"And why is that?" Fury wondered.

"If he goes on that mission, a catastrophe will unfold," Stephen intoned. Before leaving the cafe, they'd agreed that a vaguely explained but terrifying magical vision was the best possible approach. It wasn't a sure thing, true, but it was the best chance they had. "Hearing that news sent a shiver of magical energy through me like I've never felt."

Fury frowned. "You can just... do that? Know how things'll turn out?"
"Important things, yes."

Fury looked over to Tony. "He tell you the lottery numbers, or is that not important enough?"

"Not for a billionaire, no," Tony said dryly. "But seriously, Fury. Listen to Stephen. I have never seen him react like that. Whatever's going to happen on that mission, Steve should not be involved."

"This does sound serious," Fury said, and sat up a little straighter. "What do you think will happen, Doctor?"

"I told you: catastrophe. I can't say where, when, or how, but... catastrophe."

"Huh." Fury's frown deepened, and he sat back to study them. His good eye roamed between them, making a sharp examination of each man, and then he sat fully back against his chair and folded his arms in thought. "I almost think that you mean that."

"I completely mean it."

"All we're saying," Tony cut in, "is to not send Steve. We're not trying to end the rest of your mission, whatever it is. Just... don't send Steve." Because Steve would easily overcome a de-powered Thor, and then the Mind Stone would never make it to Earth for safe capture, and then existence would almost certainly end in slow, agonizing motion as they tried and failed to recover that scepter without it being delivered to their doorstep.

"I'll consider your request, gentlemen," Fury said after a silent moment. "You've done a lot of good for this world, so I believe I can extend you a bit of trust."

A tiny bit of tension seeped out of them, and Tony brushed his fingertips against Stephen's wrist. Thank God.

"Just answer me one more thing, first," Fury added. He sat forward again, propped his elbows on the desk, and folded his hands below his chin. And then he waited.

"Yeah?" Tony prompted.

Fury smiled. "Before I call off Steve Rogers from this mission... I just want to know what year you're from."
Neither Tony nor Stephen replied immediately. When Stephen did, it came out a half-octave too high. "I'm sorry, I don't understand what you mean?"

Fury snorted. "You could have tried to make that sound a little more believable, Doctor."

"We're just." Tony blinked and swallowed. "Confused. Is all."

"Confused," Stephen echoed. "It's a bizarre question."

"Is it?" Fury wondered innocently. "It seems like a pretty straightforward one to me. I just want to know what year the two of you are from, because it sure as hell isn't 2011."

"And why do you think that?" Tony wondered. He'd kept his voice at the right pitch, at least, but picked his way through each word with exaggerated caution like he was walking on an icy sidewalk. Neither of them sounded anywhere in the remote vicinity of confident.

Fury waited to see if they truly wanted to hear his reasoning. When no protests came, he nodded and tapped a button near one elbow. The door Stephen had closed earlier now thunked as it locked.

"Before I begin, let me say this: Captain Rogers got into the air eighteen minutes ago. In approximately two hours and thirty minutes more, he will land in New Mexico and be escorted to his mission site. I just wanted to establish that timeline. Because you seem to think it's important."

Numb, Stephen nodded. "It is."

"And I'm sure you two will tell me why that is, but first, I will tell you what I know." Fury's eye narrowed slightly. "What I've observed." His hands lay flat against his desk.

"One," he began in the silence. "Doctor, you stole one of my best agents away from me. Agent May and Agent Coulson think that her disappearance went unremarked upon. They think I believe that she just quit. That Bahrain was too tough for her to deal with. No. She's in Kathmandu right now, and Agent Coulson congratulated her on reaching 'master status' in only two years. It's apparently very impressive."

Stephen swallowed silently at the casual mention of Kathmandu, and felt the situation spiral further out of his control. If Phil had figured it out, of course Fury could have. Of course. Of course. He should have expected this.

"When you turned three years old, your parents enrolled you in a fancy preschool called Whitmore. You had to show promise to be accepted there, and even back then, you did." Fury's eye further narrowed. "I proceeded to look up and verify the enrollment of every school you've been in since Whitmore, and doctors need a lot of school. Your presence was accounted for in every single year, and then during your internships and residencies. Once you became an attending, you were at work for eighty or ninety hours per week. I know you weren't sneaking in trips to Nepal, then. So tell me, doctor: if two years is an impressive time to master magic, did you do those years before preschool?"

"There was an alternate dimension," Stephen said after a lengthy pause. Obadiah, Rhodey, and Melinda had all looked into his past. Of course Fury had, too. Of course. Of course. "Time passed there, but not here. It wouldn't show up on any record. I do learn quickly." Tony kept glancing at him, and said nothing.

"I see," Fury said gravely. "I suppose that does make sense. Stark learns quickly, too. That must
explain why he keeps introducing inventions out of nowhere, that had no development pipelines in his company. No R&D needed. He just makes new tech like he already knew what the final version needed to be like. We saw that happen with his power suit, which behaved perfectly on initial manufacture. In that Malibu workshop, you made adjustments without running a single simulation. You entrusted your life in Philadelphia to a suit that you'd never taken on a single test run.

"I'm just that good," Tony said, and very nearly sounded believable.

"You beat Apple to the punch on tablets. They'd been working on one for years, and you swept in and stole that whole product sector out from under them. Needed less than a month to move from proposal to manufacture."

"I'm really just that good. And I had my own version, already."

"You must have anticipated that they'd built up a lot of expectations for that tablet launch," Fury continued like Tony hadn't spoken. "Because when you bought tens of millions in stock in January 2009, right when it was as cheap as you could ever get it, you somehow knew not to buy what'd been the world's hottest company. But you did buy from twelve different companies, and every single one has since made smart moves that the public didn't expect. That portfolio you put together has wildly outperformed the market. But you steered clear of the one company whose secret project you were about to ruin."

At the news that Tony hadn't only snapped up some cheap pre-Elsa Disney stock, as he'd promised, Stephen closed his eyes and exhaled. Silent apology practically radiated off Tony, for he'd inadvertently made a move as obvious as the Back to the Future sports almanac. "You're talking to one of the world's richest men," Stephen then cut in, trying to move on. "He's got a sixth sense for other companies. Especially in tech."

"I see. So explain how you two know who's Hydra, inside my organization and otherwise."

"Magic. I already said that."

"Explain how you knew that Steve Rogers was still alive to be found, Doctor, when no one else on this planet suspected as much."

"Magic. Again, I already said that."

"Explain why you have been consistently using surgical techniques that have never been written about. At most, they were under confidential peer review at the time of said operations."

After a short pause, Stephen echoed Tony. "I'm just that good." Jesus. How did this man know everything? He was like a walking, scowling algorithm.

"I see," Fury said neutrally, and turned his attention back to Tony. "When I watched you hack the systems for the Pegasus facility a couple months back—"

Tony slumped into his chair with increasingly heavy defeat.

"There was something fascinating that happened. You pulled the facility blueprints. The location. The list of agents assigned to that project. But what you didn't do," Fury noted with mock confusion, "is pull a single piece of data on what Pegasus actually is. Which seems like an awfully big oversight for someone who's 'just that good.' Unless he already knew the purpose of the project."

When Tony said nothing, Fury tilted his head and asked, "What was the name of that Washington Post reporter you met with a while back? At your favorite restaurant?"
"Don't remember," Tony said dully. "Bad with names."

"I'm not talking about her cover story. I'm talking about her real one. I bet you remember that."
When Tony didn't confirm his suspicions, Fury continued, "I didn't send her to interview you, Stark. She asked you questions, sure, but they were irrelevant. A distraction. She'd gotten her real answer two seconds after you walked into that cafe, because I sent her there to see if you recognized her."

Fury leaned forward. "Now. What was her name?"

"Natasha Romanoff," Tony said, and began to study the floor.

"Thank you for your cooperation. It's appreciated." Fury's dark satisfaction turned back toward Stephen. "I've had my eye on you for a long time, Doctor. I thought you could be the founder of a new team, and so I showed up to speak with you about the Avengers Initiative. And you told me that you didn't want to join my team, and that you wouldn't work under S.H.I.E.L.D.'s oversight. Which is funny. Because I hadn't said that's what the Initiative was."

Stephen slumped down like Tony, and also began studying the floor.

"So yes, I kept my eye on you. You tried to distract me with Hydra, and to my shock you were right. Every single name you two have provided has been right, including some of my most trusted agents. Finding those suspicious behaviors can't possibly happen by chance. Learning how those people operate can't possibly happen by chance." Fury leaned forward. "Because the two of you may be the world's greatest geniuses in your own corners, but otherwise? You can be a couple of damn morons."

"That's. Usually not true," Tony mumbled.

Stephen just felt too ill to argue.

"So I started thinking about what could explain that lucky streak. What could explain Stark knowing exactly which stocks to buy, Strange knowing all about my very secret initiative. And over time, every explanation but one fell away. A few months back, I gave you each a final test, to prove to myself that I was right. I sent Agent Romanoff to see you, Stark, because you'd never met her, but I had every intention of putting her on the Avengers when it finally launched. And sure enough, you knew who she was."

"And me?" Stephen sighed. To his side, Tony rubbed his hands down his face and said nothing in his own defense.

"That tumor had every military doctor within a hundred miles of Pegasus terrified. They said they could see it moving in the scans. The Council had pushed that one stream of research further than I wanted to go, and then they told me to kill my own agent when it all went wrong. So, I brought you in to a surgery that every single doctor under my command said was impossible, and gave you just three hours to figure it out. Because I suspected you'd already done that impossible surgery. And you proved that to me."

The world went very still and peculiar, like a DVD paused on an awkward, blurred frame. It took Stephen a few seconds to respond. When he did, it was with laughter.

"Oh, great," Tony sighed. "Thanks. He'll never let this one go."

For the first time, Fury let his control loosen. "Something's funny?" he prompted, looking very slightly baffled.

"You finally slipped up. You assumed wrong. I'd never done that surgery before." Despite
everything, Stephen managed a lopsided smile as he finished, "But I'm just that good."

Despite visible surprise, Fury seemed to accept that explanation, but then leaned over to support his weight casually on one arm. "If I 'finally' slipped up, then I suppose I was spot-on about everything else. Thanks for the confirmation."

"Look," Tony said after a heavy pause. "If you let us go grab something from Kamar-Taj, then we can tell you everything you want to know. It'll just take a minute."

"And what would that something be?"

"It's an oath staff," Stephen began, "that will make sure nothing is shared—"

"No."

Stephen tried again. "Make sure that nothing dangerous is shared—"

"No." Fury's eye narrowed again. "You don't appear to understand the situation you are in, gentlemen. The two of you have been misrepresenting yourself to the world, while proclaiming yourselves as its greatest heroes. You've been misrepresenting yourself to me, while expecting me to trust your intel." His eye widened. White showed around his iris. "Which hurts my feelings a little."

Stephen had faced down some of the most powerful beings in existence, and yet Nick Fury still managed to be intimidating. To think, they'd once stressed over Obadiah Stane. "We can't tell you everything," Stephen said. "Look. We're sorry. We literally can't. The risks are too great. So unless you hold that staff, we've said as much as we can."

"Then, since I have no reason to trust you, I suppose Captain Rogers will continue flying to New Mexico."

Tension grew, a bubble reaching its bursting point. If they told Fury, the universe could end. If they let Steve reach New Mexico, the universe could end. This was a paradox as surely as the Time Stone, and they seemed locked deep inside a no-win scenario. "You know," Tony abruptly said. "If you'd put together a technical test for me, instead of that Natasha thing, I could have passed it like Stephen handled his surgery."

Stephen turned to him. "Is that really important at the moment?"

"I'm just saying." Tony shrugged. "You did great on Fury's impossible test. Fine. Afterward, to figure out what was going on with that tumor, you needed me."

"Yeah. And Fury caught you looking at his system."

"Remember what I was saying about the two of you being a pair of absolute dumbasses?" Fury interrupted. "Focus, please. Stark, I accept that you are the greatest with technology. Strange, I accept that you are the greatest with medicine. But both of you know fuck-all about human behavior, which I happen to be the expert in. And the two men I see in front of me have been a valuable font of Hydra-hunting intel, which is why I haven't challenged you before today, but it's time to come clean. Talk. Convince me to trust you, or Rogers continues his mission."

Stephen's eyes closed. He inhaled, then murmured, "Tony. We have to." Steve's mission was too certainly dangerous, and Fury's danger was a 'maybe.' Maybe had to be good enough.

"We have to," Tony agreed, heartbroken. "Fury. Nick."
"Nick?" Fury repeated with surprise.

"What we're about to tell you... you can't share it. Please," Fury promised nothing, and Tony eventually continued, "Our minds got ejected to September 15th, 2007."

"The day you two debuted to the media together," Fury noted. "And from when were you ejected?"

Tony stayed quiet for long enough that it felt like a baton was being handed off, and so Stephen said, just above a whisper, "2018." His gaze slid off Fury, and fell back to the floor. "After half the universe died."

The room grew quiet enough to hear the sound of his own heart. Fury said nothing again, and barely even blinked, and so eventually it felt like Stephen should continue. "It resolved. But the side effects from that sent us back here, because the solution was unsustainable. We have to win again, not like we did before, or a paradox will consume all existence."

Fury still didn't react. "Tell me why you already knew about Pegasus."

Tony answered this one. "The object inside the Tesseract was one of the items used to kill everyone."

"So, I should stop the research?"

"You absolutely cannot."

"Or a paradox consumes existence," Fury guessed. Off their mutual nods, he returned the motion. "We appear to finally be engaging in a mutually respectful discussion. You two have roped in Rhodes and Rogers for a lot of missions. Do they know all this, too?"

Stephen and Tony nodded again.

"Who else does?"

"Two people from Kamar-Taj," Tony continued, still sounding too exhausted to put up any further resistance. "All told, there are..." His eyes closed, and a short laugh escaped him. "Six of us."

"Which apparently means something to you." Fury studied them. "How is the thing inside of the Tesseract used to kill half of the universe? It's powerful, we've seen that in our research already, but it's not that powerful. And you said it was 'one of the items.'"

"Yes. It's one of them. There are five more like it, with different uses." Stephen exhaled. "If they're brought together..."

"What plan have you been operating under? I have to imagine you've been moving with some specific sort of purpose, given that you're keeping all these details in mind."

"Collect the items," Tony sighed. "Get them to Stephen's boss. They'll be handled. There are more details, but it gets real complicated, real quick."

"Let me get this straight," Fury said, with a deeper frown. "We are talking about items that, if united into a set, can kill half of all creation. And so your plan is to... unite them? And hand that set to someone I've never heard of? You expect me to trust this man, just like that?"

"Woman," Stephen corrected. "And yes. She is the most powerful force for good associated with this planet, and is duty-bound to protect reality at the eventual—and certain—cost of her own life. The
items will be given to her. She has a plan, and it's being implemented."

A slow smirk spread. Once again, Fury looked like he'd outsmarted them. "Well, gentlemen, we might need to edit that plan of yours a bit. Because your boss is not 'the most powerful force for good associated with this planet.'"

Tony brushed off the complaint. "Look, Baldie can warp reality, see the future, and knows more than the Kamar-Taj library. I'm not even part of the whole Hogwarts crew, and I know she can handle a bigger variety of threats than Danvers, so..." Trailing off, Tony blinked. Stephen did the same, for this sight was something they were completely unprepared for.

That sight was Nick Fury looking stunned to his very marrow. "Say that again."

"What?" Tony asked, then realized. For the first time since they'd walked in there, confidence entered his expression. "Are you talking about the fact that you have a woman named Carol Danvers ready to page for an assist? If things go very, very south?"

"Why, Colonel," Stephen slowly said in the silence, and also felt confidence trickle into his heart. "Is that not something that people should know?" He leaned forward. "How terrible of a situation would need to happen before you decided to page her?"

Before hearing that name, Nick Fury knew that they didn't belong in 2011. But after mentioning his highly classified backup plan, to be used in only the most dire of circumstances, he now clearly believed that they actually had come from the other side of the apocalypse. Concern replaced confidence. The tension in his body turned inward, and was no longer a tool to intimidate them. "We still have quite a while until Captain Rogers lands in New Mexico," Fury said after a significant pause, during which his forehead wrinkled in deep thought. "There is someone that I would like to speak with before I make a decision."

Now, Stephen did need to make a detour to Nepal. He didn't ask Wong for the Horkos Staff, nor did he ask for a lockbox to be opened. His target was not a relic at all.

With the personality she'd already shown to him, it was no surprise to find Melinda May in the library, reading through archaic books on alien linguistics. Of course she was dutifully tackling the task she'd been assigned. "Agent May," Stephen said, and waited for her to look up.

"It's not 'Agent' any more," Melinda said emphatically. "Hello, Doctor."

"Unfortunately, I greeted you with that title for a reason." He paused, then took a chair on the opposite side of the table. "I am the bearer of bad news. But on the upside, you get to participate in your first round of assisting with our world's continued existence."

Melinda exhaled. "That's one nerve-wracking way to phrase an upside."

It seemed best to be blunt in return. "Our time is limited, so I'm afraid that any emotional response you have will need to be compartmentalized for later."

Dark eyes studied him, unblinking. "I'm good at that," Melinda promised.

Best to come right out with it, then. "Director Fury is completely aware of where you are, and has monitored your communications with Phil Coulson." Her jaw set, her eyes narrowed, and Stephen continued in her silence. "He's not asking you to return to S.H.I.E.L.D., but he disbelieves the Ancient One's capacity to protect this world. He knows nothing about her. He doesn't trust me to tell him the unvarnished truth. But he trusts your judgment."
Exhaling, Melinda nodded, and stood. "What office is he at?"

"Midtown Manhattan. We do have two hours, if you need to take a moment—"

"There's no point in waiting," she said and swept her hand in a precise circle. Her movements were sharper than Stephen's. As a surgeon, his hands glided elegantly through the air like sliding a scalpel through delicate tissue; as an agent, hers attacked the air like a target to take down. Regardless, her portal looked the same as his, and they both strode through it to return to a conference area at one far end of Fury's spacious office. Apparently, Melinda was familiar with the room's layout.

"Melinda," Fury said after a weighty pause, and stood to greet her. "Good to see you."

"Director Fury." She folded her arms behind her back. Melinda was in the same outfit as Stephen had first seen her wearing: a rich purple shirt in a style similar to his blue one, and deep, almost black plum leggings that he now saw were embroidered in curving vines. It was quite a difference from the uniforms worn by the S.H.I.E.L.D. agents outside that office door. "It's good to see you."

"You didn't tell me that you were pursuing other interests," Fury said to her as Stephen retook his seat next to Tony. "I was disappointed to see you leave. Personally disappointed. There aren't many agents I'd say that for, and yet you left, anyway."

She didn't take the bait. "I submitted my resignation through proper channels."

"She's fun," Tony whispered. Even though only Stephen would be able to hear him, he elbowed Tony's arm, anyway.

Melinda hesitated before continuing. "Doctor Strange says that you distrust the Ancient One. You can trust her for this, Nick. She's incredibly powerful and completely dedicated to the security of this world. You two wouldn't get along, but ignore that. You can trust her."

"Oh? Why wouldn't I like her?" Fury asked mildly.

"Because she has the best interests of the world at heart, and pursues those efforts with absolute, justified certainty that she's right," Melinda said, just as mildly. "She holds secrets within secrets, and hardly anyone gets to know her truths. She's you. And you've always been an easy person to respect but a tough person to know."

Stephen and Tony raised their eyebrows, and otherwise managed to control their expressions.

Fury needed a moment to respond, but when he did, he actually sounded faintly amused. "That's a rather critical assessment, Agent May."

"Master," she corrected.

"Master." Fury nodded once. "But a fair one. I should kick out some of my other best agents. See what Coulson or Hill have to say about me when I'm not their commanding officer any more."

"You can trust her for this," Melinda insisted again.

"Do you know what 'this' is?" Fury wondered, and looked back over to Stephen and Tony. They'd stayed silent, not wanting to ruin the momentum that had built. "The situation we're discussing? Are you one of the people at Kamar-Taj they've brought into the loop?"

"I'm looking up alien linguistics. Beyond that, I don't have any idea," Melinda said. She didn't sound bothered by that.
Fury studied her for a moment longer, then pursed his lips and nodded. "All right. It is very good to see you, Master May. Don't be a stranger. Because I know you can come visit at any time, so there's no excuse."

"I may do that," Melinda said, and nodded to the other two men in farewell. "Doctor, I'll get back to work with those books. I would appreciate being brought up to speed, when that's doable." Off Stephen's promise to do exactly that, she walked back to the conference area, neatly sliced open another hole in reality, and closed it after returning to Kamar-Taj.

Fury watched that portal until its last sparks were gone, then turned back to Tony and Stephen. "That woman's one of the sharpest minds I've ever met through S.H.I.E.L.D., and positively allergic to nonsense." It took a few moments of consideration longer, but he eventually nodded to himself, walked to his desk, and tapped a button there. "Flight 283, this is Director Fury. Return Captain Rogers to New York City."

"Sir?"

"He is no longer needed for the New Mexico mission."

Exhaling with almost painfully overwhelming relief, Stephen and Tony clasped each other around the wrist and squeezed. "Oh, thank God," Tony laughed. "I've barely been able to breathe ever since Steve sent me that text."

"Which he shouldn't have done," Fury pointed out as he retook his seat behind his desk. "The mission is classified. But I suppose I can forgive the good Captain, considering that you diverting him from this mission will apparently avert a catastrophe to all existence." The words were level, but their tone suggested an unspoken question.

"The events of this mission will ultimately result in an assault on the Pegasus facility next year," Stephen said. "That assault brings another one of the items to Earth. Another 'Infinity Stone.' If that didn't happen, the Stone would remain in the hands of the man who wants to wipe out half of existence."

"Which would be unfortunate," Fury agreed.

"Okay. Since you're good with all this, now," Tony began, "can we get you to hold the oath stick, just to be extra sure that..." Off Fury's flat expression, he sighed. "It was worth a shot."

"I will work with you, gentlemen. I will even let you set your own terms. Some terms, in a limited scope. But in return, you will make me three promises."

Stephen closed his eyes, exhaled, and nodded. This was so much better than things could have gone, and so they'd do what was necessary to keep the peace. "Which are?"

"One: you keep me in the loop. I believe that you bring knowledge from this future of yours, but I refuse to be left in the dark as you try to direct our future. I do have knowledge that you two lack, and as you attempt to make your plans, let me remind you: you two can be a pair of absolute dumbasses."

"You can..." Tony spread his hands like a tired shrug, and sighed. "Stop saying that at any time."

"I could. I won't. Two: introduce me to this 'Ancient One' boss of yours."

"I don't believe I will want to be in the same room," Stephen said dryly, "but I will certainly try to arrange that."
"Do more than try, Doctor. And three: my life has gotten very complicated, and you two are not helping. General Ross and the World Security Council challenge me on everything. Both think that they are in control of this world as chaos emerges from every corner of it, and completely ignore the many times their plans did not unfold as anticipated. You have been part of that chaos."

"That's... fair," Stephen sighed. Tony was forced to nod. "So. What's promise number three?"

"If you would like me to listen to your tales of the future. If you would like me to support your efforts, rather than outmaneuvering them. If you would like me to hold a serious discussion on that upcoming assault on the Pegasus facility, gentlemen..."

"...Yes?" Tony eventually prompted.

Fury smiled as broadly as he had when he first asked them what year they were from. "I'd like to talk to you about the Avengers Initiative."

Stephen looked back at Fury, whose smiling face was still and absolutely unblinking, and then rolled his eyes and threw himself back against his chair. "Oh, fine."
Chapter 37

Chapter Notes

This is a bit of a breather chapter after Fury's confrontation, intended to show how some things have developed over the past two years. With this done, 2012 and Pegasus can continue to loom increasingly large.

"So," Stephen spat as he and Tony walked to the curb. Since S.H.I.E.L.D. did prefer to limit the number of portals inside its facilities, and there was no longer a pressing deadline, they were waiting on a pick-up from Happy. "I guess I'm an Avenger, now."

It was difficult not to smirk, and Tony didn't make much of an effort. By the end, that meeting went so much better than they'd feared. "A founding member of the Avengers," he corrected. "Who'll be on team merchandise." Team enthusiasm would surge even higher than their individual enthusiasm had been. Being able to steer that enthusiasm was quite a card for Fury to play against the Council.

"I'm already the world's personal assistant," Stephen griped. "Might as well be a mousepad, too."

"Oh, you've already been a mousepad. Now you'll be a team mousepad with me, Rhodey, and Steve."

Stephen sighed, a bone-deep sound that ended with him staring blankly at the skyline. Tony knew what this meant: he was legitimately stressed enough to want it addressed, but not so stressed that he'd actually admit to it. While Tony was open about his feelings, even when they were wild and contradictory, the language of Stephen's heart had taken a while to learn. He had not made it easy. Remotely.

"Drinks with lunch, and Six Feet Under?" Tony suggested in the silence. Although it was a fun point to tease Stephen on, it wasn't only that team membership had been forced on him, Tony knew. Stephen had to be infuriated with himself for putting time at risk. They both felt responsible for the world, but only one of them had failed at their official duties of reality guardianship. That'd take a bit to get over. Alcohol and a favorite show would help.

Stephen looked over to him, and finally smiled.

Tony smiled back. Their world might have just gotten rocked, but the two of them were steady.

An hour later, Tony speared a fork through his baked rigatoni with one hand. The other massaged the back of Stephen's neck, for the stress over their near-miss with the timeline still tightened his muscles. And although an episode played on the television, much of Tony's attention was on the holographic screen that hovered a few feet away, showing the goings-on in Puente Antiguo, New Mexico. He was great at multi-tasking.

"Is it happening right?" Stephen wondered as he stole another bite of Tony's pasta. His sandwich sat to the side, forgotten. As soon as Tony opened his food, Stephen had decided he wanted a hot lunch, after all.

"So far as I know." Thanks to their agreement with Fury, Tony was able to pull directly from a
certain number of S.H.I.E.L.D. reports and see those updates. The previous night, Thor had assaulted the camp they'd built up around Mjolnir. Erik Selvig had just arranged for his freedom. "This should be on track. All pieces seem to be on the board."

"Thank God." Now Stephen really let himself melt against Tony's hand as it worked on the stress still locked inside his muscles. That work became suddenly more productive.

"And there's Clint," Tony said with a lopsided smile as he saw the list of assigned agents. "Hey, buddy. Say hi to the kids." How many kids would Clint have now, anyway? Two? He thought two. The third would come a little later, right? "And... okay, wait. You've had enough. Stop eating all of my food."

Without apology, Stephen passed over his sandwich.

"I don't want this, but I'm still taking a bite," Tony announced, and promptly did, right in the middle. To ruin it.

By that evening, Stephen had completely relaxed, for he'd just needed enough time to process the day's crisis. Avengers acceptance followed in short order. Tony had expected that. This was one of his longest two relationships, by far, and by now they were well-acquainted with how the other operated.

"Hey," Tony said, and adjusted heavy blankets against the chill.

Stephen looked over from where he was propped up against pillows, holding a tablet. New Mexico did seem to be on track, but until it was over, they both kept watching that progress. "Hey?"

"It's all gonna work," Tony promised, and leaned over for a quick kiss. He didn't pull back once it was over, but stayed there to study the glint of a snowy night off Stephen's pale eyes. One enormous window took up nearly a full wall of the bedroom. A blizzard streamed past it. Silver light skimmed through the darkness and highlighted each edge of them, and the flakes' constant movement made the dim illumination ripple like water.

That promise earned a smile. "I think it just might." Pausing, Stephen then forced himself to set aside the tablet with a deliberate motion. It was the first time that day that he hadn't one eye on the news from New Mexico.

Soon, Tony sighed happily and let himself descend flat against the bed, Stephen's mouth hot against his neck. This always seemed to happen when it snowed, like some sort of cabin fever. (Tony loved snow, now.) Tonight, it was an especially perfect distraction from their stress.

The next morning, his garage door ascended to welcome an approaching SUV, then descended immediately after. It wasn't that he thought anyone would rush the building, especially with that blizzard keeping most people off the sidewalks, but better safe than sorry. "Hey," he said without looking up, and continued fiddling with the monitor in front of him. "Give me one more second. Traffic went faster than I thought."

"You're gonna put Happy out of a job with that," Rhodey said as he climbed out of the driverless SUV's back seat. "I didn't know it could handle so much snow."

"Version 1.1," Tony said, still working. "Stark Industries driverless software officially accounts for severe icy conditions. And Happy's with Pepper most days, now. She doesn't like watching her steering wheel turn on its own."

"Yeah, I'm still not used to that," Steve said as he extracted himself from the SUV's front seat where,
like usual, he'd sat nervously ready to take over from a steering system that never needed him. Below the car, hot air jets melted the snow prior to its undercarriage being rinsed.

They'd arrived for the first Avengers meeting; not that either of the newcomers knew that, yet. Tony's programming efforts were something that could debut just as soon as the team was brought up to speed. "All right," he eventually murmured, and checked the time. "Yeah, you guys are definitely early. Stephen's got at least ten more minutes. Want coffee?"

"Sure, thanks," Rhodey said. Both guests let themselves be guided through the spacious garage, past Tony's heavy generators, fabrication devices, and computer servers, and to the elevator. "So, where is he?"

Tony needed a second to remember. Those odd names didn't stick easily. "Katharta."

The elevator began to ascend, its hum barely audible. Steve frowned in thought. "That's... India?"

"Nah. Another dimension."

"Should've guessed," Rhodey drawled to Steve, who smirked a bit.

Grumbling, Tony admitted, "I haven't figured out how to communicate between different ones, yet, or I'd double-check on the time." His tech not being able to follow dimensional hops had annoyed him ever since he couldn't punch through the Mirror Dimension to call Stephen (and Obadiah). It wasn't a problem that had ever topped his priority list, and with so many energy signatures for each new dimension, it was quite a challenge. Ah, well. Some day.

The elevator opened at their destination floor, with an arrival announcement sound that mimicked his arc reactors snapping into place in his suits. Tony gestured them through, grandly. Rhodey did a double-take as he passed. "Might want to." He cleared his throat, and adjusted his own sweater's collar. "A little."

The seventh-floor landing centered upon an intriguing sculptural piece that Tony insisted on showcasing, for Pepper had said it was sure to increase in value. Because of that spacious layout, it took Tony a while until they reached a mirror. Steve had inspected him by the time he did, and shot a significant look to Rhodey.

"Oh, look at that," Tony murmured as he inspected the skin where his neck met shoulder, which had apparently been thoroughly marked by Stephen's mouth the night before. "Could've worn a different shirt." But then he shamelessly continued on to the kitchen, and did not make a detour to his closet. It wasn't like this was new information to either of them.

Cued by Tony's coffee question in the garage, Vincent had Rhodey's and Steve's favorite brews waiting for them, with precise amounts of cream and/or sugar added. Rhodey accepted his mug with thanks and another pointed look. Apparently, it was awkward to be welcomed into their home and then be visibly reminded that oh yeah, these two friends of mine are fucking.

"Jealous?" Tony asked with a smirk, and reached for his own mug, which Vincent had also anticipated.

Rhodey sipped his coffee and said nothing.

He probably was a little jealous, actually. if not of their particular relationship composition. Steve might be, too. It was an exceptionally chilly day to wake up in an empty bed. "Well. Could always go read more fanfics."
Steve frowned, clearly not recognizing the term. "Which are...?"

"Oh, I have got to introduce you to these," Tony laughed, and began a search for the best possible way to blow Steve Rogers' midcentury mind. He'd learned a lot about the so-called modern world already, but remaining areas of ignorance still occasionally raised their amusing heads. "Here."

"People are writing stories about me," Steve soon concluded as he scrolled through the tablet's text. "About... us." His brow dipped. "What's... ABO?"

Rhodey sipped his coffee, and still said nothing.

"Wait. Why am I..." Steve's expression grew increasingly disbelieving as he read on, and he turned that look onto Stephen's portal as it erupted near them. "According to our fans, you turn people into werewolves."

"Wouldn't be the weirdest thing they've thought of," Stephen said, unbothered, and brushed past their visitors to give Tony a quick kiss. He tried to adjust Tony's sweater collar as he did, to no avail.

"Romantic werewolves," Steve added meaningfully.

"Again, would not be the weirdest thing."

"I remember when my life was normal," Rhodey said to no one in particular.

"So, how'd Katharta go?" Tony wondered, and handed over Stephen's coffee and a bagel.

"It went well," Stephen said, accepting both. "The clan put off their invasion of Earth for another year."

Steve blinked, startled.

That concern earned a dismissive wave. "No need to worry, we've been soothing their egos for centuries. Someone heads over there each January, promises that we're still completely awed and terrified, and they go back to fighting with their neighbors." Stephen settled in to eat, and ignored Steve's continued baffled frown.

Rhodey took another sip of coffee, then repeated, "I remember when my life was normal."

"Unfortunately," Tony interrupted. "It's going to get even less normal. Everyone, finish up. I wanna use the real room for this."

'The real room' meant a conference space on the fourth floor, surrounded by smaller breakout niches and lined with holographic projectors. Through a glass wall was a training area, including everything from gym equipment to a force field-bounded combat simulation arena. It'd been invaluable for getting back into fighting form, even if neither of them needed to reach Steve's physical level, or that of their currently depowered friend in New Mexico.

Very deliberately, Tony had made this floor feel like the old team facility. It was time to be an Avenger, again. "So," he began as they settled into chairs around the conference table. "We have some exciting news."

"What definition of 'exciting' are we using, here?" Steve wondered dryly, earning an amused glance from Rhodey.

Stephen sipped from his second cup of coffee. "An ironic one."
"Sighing, Tony shot him a sidelong glower. Even if Stephen still wasn't enthused about the team, they should be getting the others on board. "A very slight complication emerged yesterday," he began, "which turned into another slight complication."

"Does this have anything to do with my plane turning around in midair?" Steve wondered. "I never did get an explanation for that."

"It does. Because right now, Asgardian gods are playing out a hissy fit in New Mexico. We need to let them work through their family drama." Off Steve and Rhodey's curious frowns, Tony added, "Imagine if the Kardashians had universal implications."

"It is a lot of drama," Stephen confirmed. "Anyway. New Mexico is going to ultimately result in us locking down two Infinity Stones next year. We had to visit Fury to make sure that necessary outcomes weren't interrupted by your arrival, Steve."

"Was Fury the second complication?" Rhodey guessed.

"He. Well." Tony sighed. "In our defense, that man has a massive array of spy gear at his disposal."

Rhodey and Steve looked at each other. Each raised an eyebrow. Tony chose to ignore that. "And the two of us are world-class experts in our very particular fields. Fields which require focus. That precludes dabbling in Fury's area of interest. So when you think about it, it really isn't fair to expect us to also be able to out-maneuver a man who clearly watched way too much Get Smart growing up—"

"He knows we're from the future," Stephen interrupted.

"Oh. Well. That's not good," Rhodey said. Several blinks followed. "It is extremely not good," Tony said, and sighed again. "But we negotiated."

"You 'negotiated' with Nick Fury," Steve repeated. His head tilted. "That a cover story for 'and here's what he demanded to not blow your cover'?"

After a silent, significant pause, Tony replied, "The two of us get no respect, considering we're the foundations of this universe." Even so, it was reassuring to have built up a better dynamic with Steve Rogers over the past two years. The smooth operation of the Harlem mission hadn't happened by chance. In this world, they avoided Harlem fatalities during a well-oiled mission, even as civilians screamed and the Abomination raged; in the first world, simple conference room banter like this could have swelled into a real argument. "Anyway. He wants us to be a team."

Rhodey blinked. "Which we... haven't been, already?"

"An official team," Stephen corrected. "That can be officially called upon by S.H.I.E.L.D., to have official status during an official crisis."

"With an official logo," Tony cut in, and tapped a button. Above the table, the familiar uppercase A appeared as a slowly rotating hologram.

Rhodey studied it, then turned to Tony. "We're the A-Team?"

"What?" Tony blinked, then frowned. "No. It's the Avengers logo."

"Avengers," Steve repeated, and leaned closer. "Sounds fine, I suppose, but what are we avenging?"
"Phil. Tony didn't say that, of course, and only shrugged. "Ask Fury. This is his idea."

"And his logo?" Rhodey wondered.

"No, Fury didn't give us a logo," Stephen said. "This was the one used before, so I imagine Tony just recreated it." He didn't appear wholly taken with it, understandably; Tony was the one with emotional attachment to the Avengers identity. But at least he'd stopped complaining.

"Sure, whatever," Rhodey said with a shrug, and reached again for his coffee. "We're the 'Avengers.' If it means Fury'll go to bat for me, I'm all in. I've already gotten grilled more than a few times by command."

Steve needed longer to get on board, and so still frowned thoughtfully at the spinning logo. The leather of his jacket squeaked against itself as he folded his arms tightly across his chest. "You know," he eventually said, and looked back to Tony. "We could bring back the 'Howling Commandos.' Now that's a name with a lot of history behind it."

"We're not..." Tony held up his hands. "Look. We're the Avengers."

"I'm just saying: the Commandos are in textbooks. Documentaries. No one knows what an Avenger is."

"I'm not saying you're wrong, Steve," Rhodey said, "but 'Howling Commando' is quite a mouthful." His mouth worked a few silent times, like he was trying the name out to verify that.

Stephen cleared his throat. "Fury's rather complicated plan is actually called the 'Avengers Initiative.' He's taken with the name, for whatever reason. I think we're stuck with it."

"Thank you," Tony said to him, and then turned back to Rhodey and Steve. "We are Avengers. Accept it. And let me show you something."

When they'd first bought this building, its first floor was used for retail. The Wooster Street sidewalk had been accordingly lined by storefront windows. Plate glass windows made sense for showcasing merchandise, but became less appealing when they instead revealed secretive details of Tony's technical equipment. The windows did need to be blocked, yet they didn't want to totally cut off the bottom floor from the city outside. They were New York's heroes, after all. It wouldn't do to turn their home into a fortress.

Tony thought his solution was an inspired one. Along the sidewalk, their building was still lined with windows. But instead of allowing a potentially dangerous view into his workshop, those windows were backed with a series of opaque electronic displays programmed with news stories, photographs, and information about Tony and Stephen. (Mostly Tony. He liked publicity more, after all.) A four-foot gap between the windows and their screens also let him display a few outdated power suits in a variety of heroic poses.

That was all it took to turn their home into an official tourist attraction. On most days, the sidewalk was filled with fans visiting their museum-slash-shrine. Tony could call up his sidewalk security camera and see a fan taking selfies with his old armor directly behind them, or attempting the proper pose to mimic Stephen's spell-casting.

Today wasn't most days, though. The blizzard left the city nearly empty. Because of that, the four men were able to exit onto the street and study Tony's window displays in peace.

One of Tony's suits was gone, removed while they'd held their team discussion in the conference room. In its place, an older version of Rhodey's gear had been added. Holographic versions of Steve
and Stephen's shields hung in place between the suits. Should a fan tap a window in the right spot, those holograms would be projected onto their own arms. "It's a full team line-up, now," Tony said with satisfaction. The news stories on the background displays featured the Harlem fight instead of his individual victories. And in the very center of the wall the A logo appeared, bold and unapologetic and ten feet tall.

"It's a decent look," Rhodey allowed after a few seconds of studying the display, with an especially close inspection of his own suit. Steve tried summoning his shield in hologram form, and chuckled faintly when he was able to rebound it off a building across the street before it faded away.

"We'll have merchandise, interviews, the whole shebang," Tony continued. "And eventually, we'll be able to find more Avengers to join up." There: one item on Fury's agenda had been taken care of, for the Avengers were in motion. Keeping him in the loop would be an ongoing affair, and as for arranging a visit between him and the Ancient One, well... that was Stephen's responsibility. He was more than welcome to it.

When Stephen glanced at his buzzing phone, though, it had nothing to do with Nick Fury. "Excuse me, gentlemen," he said with an odd smile, and stepped toward the narrow garage door. "I need to call Metro."

The snow restarting drove them all reluctantly back inside, once Rhodey had thrown Steve's holographic shield a few times and they'd both waved around Stephen's holographic mandalas. Stephen hadn't finished his call when they did, and sounded to be deep in a dull discussion of ER facility minutiae. It didn't seem like a topic worthy of that quirky smile he'd directed toward his phone.

"Great. Thanks," he eventually said, and hung up. Off their curious looks, he explained, "Gurdeep Bhatt has officially filed for retirement. I've insisted on interviewing the applicants for the new position. Our grant does a lot of work with emergency services, after all. They should have the right perspective on what we're trying to accomplish."

Tony nodded slowly. Ah. Now it made sense. That grant explanation was completely believable, and it was also total bullshit. "So... it's not nepotism if you want to make sure your ex-girlfriend from another timeline gets hired over any other applicant, but... help me find the right word. I feel like 'favoritism' isn't specific enough."

The annoyed look he got in return told him that his assumption was correct. Stephen cleared his throat and pointedly replied, "Christine's great in the OR, but the size of that grant is going to bring in a bunch of vultures who are better with spending money than saving people. I want to make sure she's still picked despite a bigger applicant pool." Rhodey and Steve also gave him a 'it's totally playing favorites, don't fool yourself' look, and Stephen harrumphed. "For the sake of the ER. For the sake of our patients."

Steve looked to Tony. "So... a little Grey's Anatomy, huh?"

Tony smirked back. He didn't know just what romantic hospital shenanigans had played out in Timeline 1.0, but there'd been something. It'd probably been a bit of Grey's Anatomy in those halls. "So," he said cheerfully, and sidled up next to Stephen. The way he tilted his head revealed the marks on his neck again, a fact of which he was completely aware. "Do I get to meet her?"

"I don't see why you'd need to," Stephen said, clearly uncomfortable with being the target of everyone's amused attention. "I'm just making sure Christine gets hired for the ER."

"Pretty name," Steve said. "Christine."
"Her name is Christine," Rhodey said to Tony. "The woman Stephen's trying to keep hidden from you is named Christine."

"It does feel like you're trying to hide things a little," Tony said, with blatantly mock concern.

"I'm not trying to..." Stephen exhaled. "You all make me want to go back to Katharta, to bargain again with a barbarian chieftain."

"Bet that chieftan's not as pretty as Christine," Steve said with a thoughtful frown. Stephen rolled his eyes.

"So," Rhodey chuckled. "Is this what your Avengers were like the first time?"

Tony opened his mouth to reply, but paused. His head shook, and his smile was rueful. "You know... sometimes. But just because you're all pointed in the same direction doesn't mean you're all really friends." And, if people worked together because they were pointed in the same direction, that didn't speak very well of what might happen when any of those directions changed.

"Huh." Rhodey nodded, and looked toward the backs of those window displays. Though they were only blank pieces of plastic from this angle, from the other side, the city was now seeing their four-man team as an unshakeable group, officially named and officially committed. "Well. It's like your driving software. Version 1.1."

Tony smiled lopsidedly. If they'd made it through that Fury confrontation, then anything else would be easy. They'd slid. But they hadn't slid off. "Yep. Updated for icy conditions."
So," the Ancient One said, and lifted her teacup for one delicate sip. "You allowed yourself to be discovered." In the distance, a soft rolling bong summoned mystics to the dinner hall. As doors were opened for that exodus, Nepal's winter chill seeped into the air. Delicate curls rose off her tea when she set it down.

Sighing, Stephen spread his hands. "He used that Shuma-Gorath operation against me. From the way you reacted to it, I know you wouldn't have wanted me playing dumb. Even though the surgery convinced him that I was more than I seemed, it had to be resolved."

"Quite so." Another sip. "Funny. I would have imagined he'd discovered the truth when you freely told half of Kamar-Taj that you were from another timeline."

Stephen opened his mouth to defend himself, but noticed Wong smirking with poorly concealed satisfaction. He frowned at both of them. "Look."

Wong, too, sipped his tea.

"Look. I apologize for this, but Fury wants to meet you. He doesn't trust your plan. Which is stupid, of course. Since it's a." Stephen paused, and eyed the Ancient One. "Brilliant plan. ...What is your plan for the Infinity Stones, again? Exactly?"

"It is a brilliant plan," the Ancient One said with her damnable half-smile. "Of which you will be fully apprised after it has been set into motion."

That was all he was getting, then. "Fine. But will you consider meeting with Fury? It really would help with my whole juggling act if you would give him this."

Looking pointedly back to Wong, Stephen added, "Because life gets a lot more complicated if you ever step outside of these walls. Not that you would know."

Wong sipped his tea again, and didn't bother to respond.

"Very well," the Ancient One agreed. "I can see Nicholas Fury's role in this world, and it's a..."
Trailing off, she chuckled and changed to, "An important one, if not necessarily a noble one." Green energy glimmered again under the thin skin of her wrists, suggesting that her visions of Fury's future were in the present tense, and not something for which she'd previously used the Time Stone.

"You couldn't see mine, when we first met here," Stephen said after a considering moment, as she murmured some incantation that she didn't bother to explain. "You had no idea who I was. You just showed up in that condo and attacked me, like I was a threat instead of your ally."

"You were an alien to this timeline, still," she said. "You were as ill-fitted to our world as the tumor you excised from that poor woman."

"The one that could have completely unwritten reality if it kept growing unchecked," Stephen said. "That's. Thanks. For that."

"Fortunately," she continued without apology for describing Stephen as a Lovecraftian embryo, "that's all resolved. I can see potential paths of your future life, and now they lead toward our world's continued existence."

"Oh. Well. Good to know," Their efforts all seemed to be paying off, then. He and Tony might not
have been able to successfully blend into how they thought reality should play out, but at least this new, edited version of reality now smoothly integrated them. "So, when will—"

The Ancient One brushed her hand across the room, and a moving portal exploded into view faster than he'd ever seen one form. It swept across the three of them too quickly to react, and left the trio of mystics standing in a S.H.I.E.L.D. office with which he was unfortunately familiar. "Please," the Ancient One then politely said, and lifted her other hand. "There's no need for that."

An agent was in there, but her gun fell away into a wisp of smoke even as she smoothly raised and aimed it. Her breath caught. She shot a tight, panicked look toward Nick Fury over his desk.

"Apologies," the Ancient One then said toward Fury, "but we're both very busy people, and I saw that you weren't currently in a meeting."

It took Fury a bit to respond. First left off-balance by her unexpected appearance, he then turned his attention toward Stephen to glare with a clear air of you knew this was coming? You let her interrupt me? Not once did he look panicked, though, not even when his agent's gun disappeared like fog. "Yes. Agent Hill and I were just wrapping up."

"Nick," Hill said. Her voice trembled, but she controlled it admirably. "Want me to call someone?"

"I do believe we're fine," Fury said after another significant pause. "Why don't you go debrief our magical visitor out in the hallway, and measure his intentions for this visit to S.H.I.E.L.D. The other magical visitor," he corrected when Hill moved toward Stephen. "My subordinate needs to remain in this room and answer for the rudeness of his intrusion."

"Your subordinate?" Stephen repeated with distaste as Hill and Wong left the room, both eying each other.

The Ancient One cleared her throat. It had the feeling of marking her territory. Stephen almost pointed to her in agreement. Yes, he wanted to say: I follow her, not you; I'm training to fill her role, not yours. Only just in time did he realize that he didn't want to actually admit to being anyone's subordinate, and instead stayed silent.

"My subordinate," Fury repeated with a smile. "A founding member of my team."

"Stephen does have many distractions he's allowed to build up around him, yes," the Ancient One blithely said, and settled into a chair without being asked. "Tell me: what do you know of the Sorcerer Supreme?"

Fury shrugged. "It sounds like an overpriced ice cream sundae at Disneyland."

Her eyes crinkled in what looked like a smile. It was not. "The Sorcerer Supreme is an ancient title, the holders of which have protected this world ever since its very first sorcerer, Agamotto. Threats unspoken writhe under the fragile veneer of our civilization. It's through our efforts that Earth has not succumbed to them and plunged into eternal chaos."

"Which is why you guys helped out when the Kree stopped by to attack Earth a few years back," Fury drawled. "Oh. Wait."

"Simply dying hardly counts as eternal chaos, Mr. Fury."

"I bet it doesn't help with your to-do list."

Stephen hated himself a little for thinking this, because it was courting trouble like few moments in
his life, but... it was fun to watch these two argue.

"So. Can I get you something to drink?" Fury asked after a weighty pause. His intention could not have been more clear; if he gave them refreshments, then he was the host. They were reminded that this was his office, in his building. He was in charge.

"No, but thank you," the Ancient One replied, and stuck her hand through another small portal that bloomed next to her. Her teacup came with her as she retrieved her hand from Kamar-Taj. "I wouldn't want to let this go cold."

Ego posturing or not, a drink was a drink. And this wasn't currently his battle. "I'd take something," Stephen said with a shrug, and got handed a bottle of water.

"So as I understand it," Fury eventually continued, once they'd all settled in with their drinks, "I currently have in my possession an 'Infinity Stone.' Which seems to be a very big deal."

"It's an item of universal importance," the Ancient One agreed. "And one which you are completely unprepared to defend, given the scope of what looms before us."

"The Tesseract," Fury said sharply, "was under the control of some Norwegian monks for God only knows how long. But when some bad guys got it and tried to use it against the world, it was people involved with the founding of S.H.I.E.L.D. who got it right back, studied it, and kept it protected. Against entire alien armies, we kept that thing safe. The most powerful thing on Earth, and S.H.I.E.L.D.'s the one who handled it. For decades."

The Ancient One sipped her tea, and said nothing.

Fury frowned at her reaction to his terribly impressive story. His gaze migrated to Stephen, and then back to the Ancient One. A long pause weighed on the room. "You've... got another one of them, don't you?"

Stephen opened his bottle of water, and sipped, and also said nothing.

"Hmm," Fury said, and folded his arms.

"You've done a fine job looking after one Stone for a few short decades," the Ancient One promised, "even if you did need to risk a flerken's involvement to assure that protection. Surprised?" she asked him, for that was indeed evident. "They're dreadfully dangerous creatures. The Sorcerer Supreme would of course be aware of such a monstrosity lurking on Earth."

"How long have you had yours?" Fury said, after his startled reaction had been once again contained. "S.H.I.E.L.D. doesn't have any records of any item of comparable power. We've been looking for anything with as much promise ever since we got the thing in the first place."

"Agamotto determined how to properly use an Infinity Stone during his tenure as the first Sorcerer Supreme. During humanity's..." An ironic smile crinkled her lips. "Stone Age."

"Stone Age," Fury repeated blankly. "You mean to tell me that there's been another one of those things here for tens of thousands of years?"

"Yes. And you had no idea, and would have continued in ignorance if not for the situation radically changing. The Masters of the Mystic Arts are far better suited to protect the Infinity Stones than S.H.I.E.L.D. could ever be, Mr. Fury."

It was a good argument, like she always made. But Nick Fury was no easy punching bag, and he
seldom relented when he had his eye on a target. "You didn't protect them the first time," Fury pointed out. "This guy says he came from the other side of the apocalypse."

"This time," Stephen replied, "we know what's coming years in advance. And so this time, you're not going to let Hydra get ahold of a Stone."

Fury's smug look flickered, then dropped into a frown. Ah, he seemed to realize: everyone had screwed up, to tremendous consequence. "Hydra got a Stone again? How'd that play out?"

Stephen shook his head slowly. "Ultimately, because Hydra held that Stone, the whole world faced imminent destruction. A nation was actually destroyed. Tensions grew. Trust strained. In the end, Earth wasn't left ready to defend itself. I doubt we ever could have been, without sufficient and specific warning... but that sure didn't help."

Realizing that he should add something, Stephen turned to the Ancient One and reluctantly added, "Ah, Fury refused to hold the Horkos Staff."

"That the oath thing you mentioned?" Fury snorted. "Yeah. Not happening."

The Ancient One studied him. She said nothing about the fact that he could choose to share all of this, if he so desired.

In the continued silence, Fury leaned forward. Though he was never a man to wholly lose his bravado, it was at least turned down to its minimum. The dedicated director of S.H.I.E.L.D. looked back at them, instead of the man who'd been doing his own power play against the Ancient One. "I have someone extremely powerful on call. Extremely. I've always known that if Earth faced some terrible threat, that I had that backup waiting."

"She won't be enough," the Ancient One promised.

"I've gotten that feeling, yeah. But you come in here, expecting me to turn all my plans over to you, and I don't even know who you are. All I know about your 'mystics' is this guy," he added, and pointed toward Stephen. "who did not especially impress me with his powers of foresight and planning in our last meeting."

Stephen sighed.

The Ancient One's wrists extended before her, and although she didn't twist her hands to manipulate the Time Stone energy that flowed through her, her eyes alit with green light. It faded in an instant, and she said, "Call that agent back into this room and ask her any question that you wish. This will be her answer." She leaned forward, scribbled something on a piece of paper, and folded it before sliding it into Fury's eyeline.

"All right," Fury said slowly, and pressed the intercom to summon Agent Hill back into the room. "Hill. I have something to ask you. Don't think, just give me your gut reaction. The unvarnished truth."

"I... all right," she said uncertainly.

"What's your favorite ice cream flavor?"

Clearly, she'd been expecting something more serious. The oddball topic knocked her off-balance, as Fury had probably intended. Unable to figure out what she was supposed to say, she could only stammer, "I. I don't actually like ice cream."

Fury frowned and pulled back. "How can you not like ice cream?"
Her gaze darted around the room. "It's." She sighed. "It's too cold."

"Thank you. That will be all," Fury levelly said, and Hill hurried out with a faint blush darkening her cheeks. After exhaling, Fury leaned forward and unfolded the paper. From it, he read in an absolutely flat voice, "It's too cold." He didn't move after reciting the words. He didn't even blink.

"I promise you, Mr. Fury," the Ancient One said. "My foresight is excellent."

Though the rest of his body remained still, Fury's eye rotated up in its socket to study the woman in front of him. "Here is what we will be doing, Ms..."

"The Ancient One."

"I'm guessing that doesn't really go with 'Ms.'" Fury paused, then started over. "Ancient One. Here is what we will be doing. You may have a whole magical army at your disposal, but I am the representative of the U.S. military with whom you are currently dealing. I promise you: if you appear to be working against me, Kathmandu is gonna have a real rough time."

If he'd been hoping for a reaction by name-checking Kamar-Taj's location, like he'd gotten from Stephen, the Ancient One did not give him that satisfaction.

"We are friends with India. If needed, they would let us progress troops through their nation to the Nepalese border in order to deal with the issue you had caused us. And don't think that I'm threatening you. Not personally. If you're seen as a real concern, then this will be taken out of my hands. The World Security Council does not like people encroaching on their territory."

She blinked, and waited for him to get to his point.

"The way around that," Fury continued, "is for us to plan out whatever needs to be done from both ends. I can believe that you know far more about these Stone things than I ever will. But I know about the global repercussions. You can look directly forward through time, fine. Well, I can glance at Tony Stark's stock portfolio and know that he's from the future. I know about the ugly, tiny details of the real world, and how they intersect with the impossible. Work with me, and let's get this bastard hammered out."

After a significant pause, the Ancient One nodded. "Very well, Mr. Fury," she said, to Stephen's mild surprise. "We'll start with a discussion of the underground laboratory in which the Tesseract is being studied. Stephen, please let Wong know that you can both return to Kamar-Taj."

He didn't even get to know this much of the plan, then? Fine. She had better have one hell of a reason for keeping him so completely in the dark until Mind and Space were locked down, because this was annoying. "I'll go grab him," Stephen promised, and stood to leave them to their fascinating discussion. (There was more than a year before Loki arrived. Surely he'd be brought into the planning before then. Right?)

"Oh," Stephen remembered just before reaching the door. "How'd the situation in New Mexico turn out? Everything looked on track, but the feed of S.H.I.E.L.D. reports we were receiving stopped."

Thankfully, Fury didn't dodge this answer. "Angry furnace robot looked ready to win, but did not. Asgardian god looked ready to lose, but did not. In the end, all that's left there is a peculiar print on the ground, as we no longer have that Asgardian. We're bringing in one of the scientists involved and putting him to work on the Tesseract. That all sound right?"

"So far as I know," Stephen said with relief, and turned to leave. He'd have to double-check with Tony, but the world still appeared to be pointed in the right direction. "Wong," he said as he exited.
"Come on, let's go."

"What's your favorite kind of ice cream?" Wong asked him.

Stephen blinked.

"See, I told you it was a legitimately weird question," said Hill, who folded her arms and harrumphed. "It's not something you should just get sprung on you. No one's going to have a good answer."

The right-hand-assistants seem to have gotten along, by the end. Somewhat. "Come on," Stephen repeated to Wong. "We can head back."

Despite the secrecy, it was a relief to have the Ancient One handling this. It meant that he'd taken care of one important item on his positively packed to-do list. It was time to keep working on the rest of the boxes, then, and move to topic two on his agenda: addressing a looming staffing concern at Metro-General Hospital.

In the first timeline, Stephen had ignored any non-neuro hires the hospital made. Unless there were budgetary constraints indicating that they might get additional support over there but not here, there was no reason to bother noticing other job listings. After all, he was the king of the hospital, and that made his speciality its true kingdom.

When budget constraints did happen, he'd never held back with his opinions of the other departments. At least cardio was a worthwhile discipline, but their department didn't shine like his; why not continue turning Metro into a national powerhouse in neurological research, instead? Ortho and internal were brutal and inelegant fields, immunology and dermatology barely counted as doctors, pediatrics and obstetrics offered only a useless warm and fuzzy feeling, and emergency medicine? They were the biggest, least polished hacks of all, who consistently overreacted their way into ugly procedures that specialists would later have to clean up.

And he'd held that dismissive opinion of the emergency team right up until the Battle of New York. Then, he suddenly had to acknowledge the woman who informed him that she chose which head wounds needed to be prioritized, not him. No, he didn't get to override her decisions. The incoming patients were assigned to her department, not his. And if they wanted to save as many lives as possible, he needed to park himself in his favorite OR and be ready for as many patients as could be coordinated between them.

He'd (of course) saved every patient that Christine Palmer directed to him. It wasn't as many patients as that day had created, but as he reviewed the notes on the people she hadn't sent over, Stephen had to admit that she'd made the right decisions. No time had been wasted on anyone who could live for a day or two, and the critical injuries she hadn't sent over, well... they probably could have been saved only if the hospital put every other task on hold.

It was good to see her name in these applications for Gurdeep's replacement, for her application hadn't felt like a totally sure thing. Just in case things did go south when Loki arrived, or if there was another fight like Harlem, New York would have an excellent emergency resource available. "Here, Charles," Stephen announced, and handed over five file folders. Four filler applications hid his bias. "These are the clear choices for making best use of the grant."

Charles nodded, and flipped through them. His eyebrows dipped as he scanned the resumes. "Oh. Not Chicago?"

"Looked ready to spend a lot of our money, but not do much with it."
"Harvard? I did like the Harvard one." Of course he did; he was an alum.

Stephen shook his head. "Same deal."

"Mayo?"

"Look, a lot of people applied just to spend our money and play with robots." Stephen hadn't even glanced at those applications, and so this was probably a pretty harsh assessment of innocent medical professionals. Oh well. This was supposed to be Christine's job. Everyone else needed to get out of her way.

"You certainly appear to have a keen eye on their intentions," Charles murmured as he flipped again through the stack. Abruptly, he looked up. "Oh. Oh. Do you know their real motivations because of...?" He lifted one hand, and wiggled it like he was casting a very disjointed spell.

Stephen nodded solemnly.

Charles tapped the files into neat alignment. "These are our top five, then."

"I'll interview them," Stephen said immediately. "And I'll get Tony to do the same. Let Gurdeep be the third, to pick his own replacement, and I'm sure we'll come up with the right person." In other words: the people who knew the future would cast two votes out of three. Majority rules.

"We do certainly want to keep you and Mr. Stark happy," Charles agreed. "I'll have Vicky make the interview arrangements."

Stephen smiled. "Terrific."

"I have to interview doctors?" Tony demanded ten minutes later, and flipped up his protective goggles. Instead of working from home, today he was in the enormous Stark Industries flex space warehouse in Queens. The looming frame for what looked like a Quinjet explained that decision.

Dropping his voice to just above a whisper, to indicate that perhaps Tony should complain a little less loudly, Stephen replied, "Yes. To provide a believable cover story for when we cast two out of three votes to hire Christine Palmer."

"Ugh." Tony pouted toward the ceiling, but he did reply in a whisper. "I'm in such a great mood after New Mexico that I was getting into a real groove with building this. Since Fury knows everything about us, and Hydra's weakened, I can get his S.H.I.E.L.D. tech up to speed. We might need it for Loki."

"Tony..."

"It's like a twenty month tech jump over their current gear. Not 2018-level." In the silence, Tony shrugged and suggested, "I'll do your interviews if you don't complain about me improving his Quinjet."

"Fine."

Two days later, Stephen smiled as politely as he could, and asked meaningless questions of Dr. Marsha Greenhill, who'd driven over from Yale and was terribly excited about this opportunity. So were Drs. Kim, Lincoln, and Jauregui on days to come, and they remained enthusiastic when Stephen led them to their second interview room, with Tony. (Now, he felt very slight guilt about this charade they were putting them through.)
"Ahem," Tony announced after Stephen returned from escorting Dr. Jauregui away for his final interview, with Gurdeep. "Portal, please. Thank you," he said after one obligingly bloomed. Quick portal commutes between Metro and the Stark warehouse was the only way he would agree to five separate interviews on five separate days.

"Last one tomorrow," Stephen reminded him. "We should be done around two, so I'll portal you over at about five 'til?"

"She'd better be a good doctor," Tony grumbled as he stepped back into Queens, where his pet Quinjet project was still under construction. If not for constantly interrupting his workflow, he'd surely be done with it already.

There was an easy answer to that. "Well. She saved me the first time I got stabbed through the heart."

"That's. Well." Tony frowned, clearly aware that there was no flippant comeback he could make. "Five 'til two. Got it."

"Thanks," Stephen said, leaned through the portal for a quick kiss, and let it close. When Tony got home that night, a seafood spread was waiting, courtesy of a Portland restaurant that was apparently renowned all throughout New England for their lobster. Stephen really did appreciate his willingness to play along with the hiring process, and Tony was always a sucker for lobster with this much butter.

Most people in Stephen's life had been met again within a year of getting stranded. This world had been so much to take in, and he'd kept himself so busy, that there was little chance to think about what had been left behind. But when an executive assistant directed Christine Palmer through his door the next day, nostalgia swelled to a level he hadn't expected. He'd truly missed her.

Of course, he couldn't let that show on his face. "Dr. Palmer," Stephen said, and extended his hand for a highly professional handshake.

"Dr. Strange," she said, with an odd, quirky smile. That was a smile he recognized, by now: it was the one that said 'I can't believe I'm meeting that guy from the news. Who does magic. Which is real.'

In Timeline v. 1.0, she hadn't smiled at him in their first meeting, and he hadn't smiled back. They'd only had each other's professional and personal hospital reputation to go on. From her perspective, his reputation had probably been "incredible" and "intolerable," respectively. To him, hers had been "irrelevant" and "irrelevant."

"So," Stephen began, and settled back into his chair after gesturing at one for her. "Let's start with the obvious: what drew you to this opening?"

Christine's initial answers were likely akin what she'd said the first time she applied for this job. She loved the intense pace of a metropolitan hospital, and when Harlem had been on the news, all she wanted to do was help. But this wasn't quite the version of Metro that had existed in the first 2011, and so there were additional answers she could give. "I'll admit," Christine added with a sheepish laugh. "The Stark grant is a big attraction."

"What's a project you'd propose for the grant?" Stephen asked. "Since research is part of the job posting."

"I'm not saying this to suck up," Christine promised, "but I'm incredibly interested in those anesthesia-free ways you demonstrated to induce unconsciousness. I was at a conference where Dr.
Aziz presented your paper on that conjoined ependymoma surgery. It obviously worked great for those boys, but all I could think of were its applications on a crashing patient, where every second counts."

Well, now. Maybe they could get a Strange-Palmer (not Palmer-Strange) Technique published, after all. "Excellent choice."

"I'm honestly interested in it," Christine laughed, seeming to recognize his relaxed, friendly mood and responding in kind. "I mean, I'd hope I wouldn't need to leave the hospital like your resident did, to figure things out—"

"One of my residents left?" Stephen asked, blinking.

Christine's cheerful expression faltered, like being the bearer of apparently-bad news had hurt her prospects. "I, ah, yes? I was speaking with different departments, to see what their relationships were like with the ER. In neuro, they said that Dr. Gairola had left right after the new year."

"Priya left?" Stephen repeated, befuddled. How hadn't he known that? "Do you know why? Sorry, I was involved in a complicated off-site procedure, recently. I'm clearly out of the loop."

Slowly, Christine answered, "She wanted to research your approaches. At... Kamar-Taj, right? She thought it was the best possible way to improve her skillset."

"She only had six months left to finish her residency program," Stephen mused, sitting back. It'd probably cause all sorts of trouble with getting licensed, but he did have to admire her dedication. "That's a... bold move. I honestly didn't think she had it in her."

It took him a few awkward seconds too long to realize that Christine was smiling nervously, still wondering whether she'd torpedoed her interview. "Well," Stephen then said, "you seem to have a good rapport with Metro already, if you're able to update me on my own residents. Let me ask you the rest of my questions, and we can get you to your next interview."

The rest of the list contained mundane questions, and ate up a good twenty minutes without any more bombshells. Even so, it was so good to talk to Christine again that Stephen reached the end of their interview only to realize that he'd never portaled Tony. "Sorry," he said into his phone. "I—"

"I can't leave the warehouse or I will totally lose this groove. Come here."

Stephen blinked. "You want to interview Dr. Palmer in the warehouse? Now?"

"Yeah. Bring her over."

"That's fine," Christine mouthed, though her expression was anything but calm. From the news, she knew what to anticipate. It continued to be not-calm as Stephen hung up and opened a portal big enough for both of them. And when she walked through that portal and exited in a warehouse in Queens, Christine was so not-calm that she practically vibrated where she stood.

"Give me thirty seconds," Tony said without looking up.

"He's in a groove," Rhodey explained, chuckling, and extended his hand. "Hey, James Rhodes. Tony asked me to come by for some Air Force input on this thing."

"Christine Palmer," she replied, and shook his hand firmly. "And I did not expect to be taking a magic portal when I woke up this morning."
"They're handy." Rhodey glided his hand forward, to mimic his suit flying. "Once, I passed this big... monster... thing. He figured I was off his radar until I could head back, and kept his attention on Tony, but a couple of portals let me do an instant turn-around. Caught him off guard."

"Do you get any G-force issues in those suits?" Christine wondered. As Rhodey opened his mouth to answer, Tony poked his head up from working on the jet and gave her a curious look. Under his sudden attention, she sheepishly added, "When I was doing my residency, there was a big crash at an air show. A pilot pushed his plane too far and blacked out during a turn. Seeing you two on the news has always made me wonder what sort of G-forces affect you."

Tony studied her a moment longer, then flipped up his goggles. "Internal dampeners. You're right. It wouldn't work, otherwise." His level gaze looked Christine up and down, opaque enough that Stephen couldn't parse it. "Say I give you a three million dollar research grant that comes with full access to Stark Industries engineers. What medical innovation do you propose?"

Christine swallowed, for that engineering mention meant that she couldn't re-use her answer about mystical techniques. Her nerves flared, as they often did before she brought them back under control, and so Stephen looked at her with mild concern as he waited for an answer. "Well," she then said. "If we're talking about something to engineer, I think... the best use of your money and man-hours would be improved prosthetics. I've dealt with so many amputations and crushed limbs already. Harlem could have caused a lot more if things went south."

Tony said nothing for a long moment, then glanced at Rhodey sidelong, at an angle the other man wouldn't see. "She's good," he then announced, and flipped his goggles back into place. "Hey Stephen, hang around here. I need to ask you something."

"Wait." Stephen blinked as he realized that had been intended as a dismissal. "You can't be done, already."

Tony pointed at the Quinjet.

Stephen stepped closer and hissed, "You can't talk to her for thirty seconds and then kick her back to Manhattan. Apparently alone, since you want me staying here."

"She's getting my vote," Tony promised in a whisper, but spoke up louder after that. "Send Rhodey along if you think we're being antisocial. He can try out the updated remote summoning process on his suit to get back to Queens."

"That's..." Stephen sighed. Tony got positively antsy when he was being held back from completing a project, and that stress had been building all week. Christine being on the last day was terrible timing, especially since Tony knew this was all a pointless charade in the first place. "Rhodey, would you mind? Her next interview will be in about twenty minutes. I can give you the room number."

"Sure," Rhodey said, blinking.

Stephen turned to Christine. "Dr. Palmer, I'm sorry about this. I promise, your answers were very impressive." Despite his soothing words, Christine still looked nervous. She clearly wanted this job, and the interview process they'd sprung on her had been anything but typical. "Thank you again for coming in. You'll meet with Gurdeep Bhatt in about twenty minutes or so."

"Thanks," she said with another wavering smile, one that said I blew it. Somehow, I blew it.

Once Christine and Rhodey had left through another portal, Stephen turned to Tony after it closed and demanded, "Seriously?"
Tony needed nearly ten seconds to reply, for he was busy running some complicated tool over a complicated circuit board. "What?" he asked, without flipping his goggles back up.

Stephen leaned forward and took care of that for him. He wanted to look right into Tony's eyes as he said, "You could have been slightly less rude."

Tony raised an eyebrow that demanded, You're seriously telling me not to be rude? You?"

"Is this another Karl thing?" God, if Tony had been so ridiculous toward a man Stephen had never done anything with, how was he going to act about a woman who Stephen had dated?

"Another Karl thing?" Tony repeated, then clued in and shook his head. "No." He paused. "Although she was hotter than I expected."

Stephen frowned.

"Like, way hotter." Off Stephen's deepening frown, Tony demanded, "You promised me that she's good. You're serious about that?"

"Yeah," Stephen slowly replied. "We worked together on some papers. She's better with neuro lit than any other emergency doctor I know."

"That's good, because..." Tony's voice dropped to an almost inaudible level. "Her instincts went straight to prosthesis research."

"Yeah?" Stephen repeated.

Only then did the nervous, annoying energy in Tony's expression deepen into the real worry that must have been bubbling up inside him. "Rhodey hated how big and noisy his assistive walker was. He tried not to say anything, but I could tell. Just in..." Tony looked away, swallowing hard. "Just in case he. You know. Needs it again. Do you really think she could work with my engineers to have something better ready?"

Ah. The abrupt dismissal suddenly made more sense. Stephen's own tension abated as he realized that Tony hadn't prioritized Christine behind a Quinjet, but behind his best friend. "Maybe. But she's not one to promise the stars. She'd work with them to see what can be done, and what's possible, you'd get."

Exhaling, Tony nodded. "Okay. Good. I'll tell Chuck that I liked Palmer, so that'll be handled." Off Stephen's relief that things would work out, and this other large to-do item had been addressed, Tony's expression changed again. No longer fearful for Rhodey's potential future, he instead looked simultaneously intrigued and concerned. "Let me ask you something else."

Frowning slightly, Stephen nodded.

"You're okay? Seeing her?" It took Stephen a moment to realize that Tony wondered whether seeing Christine had caused emotional pain similar to what he'd gone through with Pepper. It was well-intentioned. It was thoughtful. Stephen probably shouldn't have rolled his eyes. The glower Tony directed at him was well-earned, as were his sharp words. "Hey. I'm trying to be considerate."

"Sorry, I know. I appreciate it. But I'm fine." Seeing Tony's incoming protests at his too-easy answer, Stephen raised his voice and repeated, "I'm fine." At a far quieter volume, he continued, "She wasn't my wife, like you lost. She wasn't even my girlfriend. She was an ex, and a friend, and someone to whom I had an absolutely massive debt. I just had to do this for her."
"You're sure."

"Yes."

"Okay," Tony said uncertainly.

The following week, after they'd all provided their recommendations to Charles Findlay and Christine had accepted the job offer, Stephen became suddenly less sure.

As Stephen re-read a text message for the fifth time, Tony intruded on Stephen's breakfast space to read over his shoulder. "Well, now," Tony said, and sipped his coffee. "This is interesting."

*Hey, man,* Rhodey had typed. *I know this might be awkward, but would you mind if I asked Christine out to coffee? We really hit it off.*

"You're still fine?" Tony asked with a smirk, taking in Stephen's increasingly discomfited look, and sipped his coffee again. "Everything with the surprisingly hot Dr. Palmer is still totally great?"

Stephen blinked too many times, then looked over to Tony. "I mean. She's literally my ex. From another universe. I am very happy in this one. And Rhodey is a great guy. It's obviously fine if they go out."

"Obviously," Tony echoed.

"Obviously."

Tony nodded, and took another sip.

Grimacing, Stephen admitted, "Okay. I'm experiencing a tiny, insignificant fraction of what you went through with Phil, and it's not fun."

Tony shook his head, and took another sip.

Before he could lose his nerve, Stephen picked up his phone and typed in a reply to Rhodey. *Of course. Have fun.* "There."

"Good for you." After yet another sip, Tony added, "Obviously, I get to bug you about still having a thing for her. And lying to me about that. Which is so rude."

"I do not—" Stephen closed his eyes. "A summoning ritual kicks off in forty minutes. I need to be ready to stop it. Which means that I need to focus."

"Have fun with the cult of the day," Tony said. "But seriously, you owe me for doing that favor for your girlfriend."

All right. Tony might not be as reactively, foolishly jealous as he'd been a few short days into their romance, when he'd imagined some ridiculous secret affair with Karl Mordo. But even after years of commitment, he was still possessive. "I will make it up to you," Stephen promised, just as Rhodey replied, *Thanks, man.*

Ugh. The meeting with the Ancient One and Fury should have been the harder item on Stephen's to-do list. "At least I didn't walk out of that meeting to find Wong kissing Agent Hill," Stephen muttered to himself.

"I don't think you need to bother stopping that cult," Tony said after a significant pause. "Because you have already brought something horrible to Earth today: the images currently filling my brain.
Nothing they can do will measure up."

"Just don't say that we have to start playing matchmaker for Rogers, next," Stephen grumbled as he poured out the remaining half of his coffee. He didn't want it any more.

Tony snorted, then paused. His gaze went too distant, and too contemplative. "Now and then, I did get the feeling that he and Nat maybe just needed a push. And some drinks."

"Good-bye, Tony."

"We could throw a party."

"See you tonight."

"I mean, Fury wants her on the team again, I'm assuming. A welcome party would have drinks."

"See you later," Stephen said, and did not acknowledge any of Tony's plotting before stepping through a portal into Auckland.

His life had gotten far too complicated, recently. It was nice to focus on something simple again, like stopping human sacrifices in a reality-warping cult's underground temple.
Chapter 39

From the outside, this Rhodey and Christine situation was far more entertaining than Tony's personal involvement with the Pepper and Phil mess. This change was seen from comfortably inside of a loving, secure relationship, rather than a single man watching his assumed future marriage crumble. Pepper had been lost to Tony as a wife, who he'd spoken to mere hours before the timeline imploded; Christine was only Stephen's ex, who he hadn't seen for years of temporal isolation.

And accordingly, Tony and Stephen's reactions were far different. Unlike Tony moping around Stephen's old condo for three miserable months, Stephen was determined to behave like nothing bothered him. At all.

He did not pull off that act.

The biggest tell was how he tried so very, very hard to show how fine he was with everything. This was a new history for everyone, and James Rhodes was a great man and a terrific friend and Stephen had so much work to do in places that weren't New York City! All the time. He had so much work to do, all the time. There was so very much mystical work to do, and he was so busy, and so he wasn't available for Avengers calls unless it turned into a legitimate emergency.

Eventually even Steve noticed, and Steve Rogers was not the most emotionally astute person in the world. "Is there some magical crisis on the horizon?" Steve wondered as Rhodey piloted their new Quinjet toward Paris, where the latest iteration of 'mad scientist, needs to be put down' had reared its ugly head. (Chemist named Duval. Could turn people to stone. Nasty stuff.) "It's been real hard to get ahold of Stephen, recently."

Tony considered Steve. "Do you like redheads?"

Steve blinked.

"I'll answer your question if you answer mine."

"They're... fine?" Steve said, befuddled, earning a frown from Tony. That wasn't the sort of reaction he'd hoped for regarding the matchmaking potential with Steve's future bestie. "Now seriously, is there some magical enemy we should be keeping our eyes on?"

Dropping his voice, Tony tilted his head toward the cockpit and murmured, "Rhodey asked out Christine. Stephen's currently 'it's fine'-ing his way toward anything that's mystics-only and Avengers-free."

Steve started, then shot an almost accusatory glower toward the cockpit.

"He did ask Stephen, first, and we are talking about my boyfriend," Tony said dryly. Rhodey wasn't a vulture swooping in on some relationship's fresh carcass, for in ten days it would be the three-year anniversary of his suit's debut. A few months more would mean the three-year anniversary anniversary. Three whole, steady, functional years together. He wasn't sure how they'd managed it, honestly.

Nodding slowly, Steve replied, "Right. I'm not totally used to knowing people who lived through a whole other timeline. Personal boundaries like this are a little weird." He still sounded slightly unsettled, like some friend code between the men had been violated, but that offense soon faded. When it wholly left him, he studied Tony with fresh concern and wondered, "So, is it fine? That your boyfriend is reacting like that?"
"Watching him dodge the issue that first week was mostly funny. This second week..." There had always been at least an uncomfortable, resentful sliver among Tony's amusement, and things were starting to get markedly less funny as the days went on. Tony shrugged, then finished, "He'll get over it, soon." And Stephen would. He would get over it. Or they'd have a conversation.

You lived in a state of depressive delusion over Pepper for three full months, his traitorous brain reminded him. Until you found Stephen with a knife through his chest. He tried to shove away the thoughts as soon as they arrived, but still saw a pool of black blood spreading. He remembered how unnaturally hot it was against his skin. The way Stephen's skin had felt even hotter, only to abruptly freeze.

"Want me to talk to him?" Steve suggested in the heavy silence, shattering Tony's painful memories in the process. "A third party can be useful. I could mention that I've noticed you getting a little hurt about this, or however you want me to play it. And at the same time, I could worry about him, and how he's been keeping to himself."

_Huh_, Tony thought with a lopsided smile, and studied Steve. Maybe Rogers was a little more emotionally astute than he'd given the man credit for. Not being kicked out into the world as an isolated, time-orphaned S.H.I.E.L.D. asset was apparently a positive influence on the good Captain. "I might just take you up on that. But, if I'm being fair—" Which was not Tony's favorite thing in the world to do. "—I probably owe him a chance to be stupid for just a little longer."

Steve frowned, and waited for an explanation.

"When Pepper started dating Phil, I was a damn wreck. He—"

"Pepper?" Steve interrupted, startled. "Pepper Potts? Phil's Pepper? That means that you and she were..."

Tony stared back, just as startled. "I never told you that?"

"Never," Steve said emphatically.

"I mean. Yeah. We were off-and on for... God, nearly a decade before we actually got married." Tony sighed. "And we got married right before I saw 2007 on the calendar again."

Steve said nothing, then eventually wondered, "Do you still love her?"

It took Tony a considering moment to reply. "I'll always care about her. A lot. But 'love'... well." He blew out a short puff of air. Love was an action, not a static condition, and they'd spent a long, long time apart in this new world. The action of love had been directed elsewhere, for years. By both of them. "By now, it's like she's my ex from a totally friendly breakup. Except that she doesn't even know that we broke up." Life was so much simpler when it didn't have multiple drafts.

Nodding, Steve replied, "So, you understand complicated feelings toward a friendly ex." And then his eyebrows bobbed upward, and his head tilted slightly toward Rhodey.

After a significant pause, Tony said, "You son of a bitch. Since when do you understand people?"

Rogers really was better with this sort of thing than he'd been before.

Fine. Maybe Tony should give Stephen more than a week to process this, before he got annoyed. Or, maybe he should actually talk to Stephen instead of just expecting everything to resolve on its own. That'd probably be better than sending Steve Rogers in to fulfill this mission for Tony's sake. "Huh," Tony slowly said, and studied Steve's faint, satisfied smirk. "Speaking of whole other lives."
"Yeah?"

"You and me? We wouldn't have had this talk, before." Tony leaned over and thumped Steve lightly on the chest with his armored fist. "Man to man."

Steve smiled back. "Well. I'm glad it can happen this time, then."

"So am I," Tony said with sincerity that surprised him, and sat back to consider the notion: him and Steve Rogers as genuine, true friends. Wow. After the team alert about that mad scientist's dangerous experiments, this day was really looking up.

Eighty-three minutes later, the day was looking down, again.

"We got the bad guy," Tony promised from his painful position on top of a medical bed, in Stephen's medical sixth floor on Wooster. Steve and Rhodey took up two other beds, where they unsuccessfully attempted to hide their discomfort. Stone shards were embedded throughout the Paris trio in sizes ranging from toothpicks to a jagged chunk that was narrow but a foot long. That chunk's long edge had sunk an inch deep between two of Steve's ribs.

Horrified, Stephen looked over. Alerts had sounded for the group while he was locked into his own fight in Kiev, and he'd immediately opened portals for the trio to retreat to New York. But Steve had ordered Tony and Rhodey not to take that exit, for Stephen couldn't see that their target was about to douse a tour bus with his chemical mixture. So they'd stayed in Paris, to keep fighting until they got their win. Duval had planned for a loss, though: in death, a broader wave of stone shard attacks had launched at them, including the gigantic one still embedded into Steve.

"Okay. This really hurts," Steve admitted after trying to shift to a more comfortable angle. He was sitting on the edge of his bed, for the shard buried into his side meant that he couldn't lie down. Blood stained the right side of his uniform's torso in a messy banner.

"At least you knew I was safe?" Tony murmured. The Horkos oath had assured that outcome. Unfortunately, Steve and Rhodey hadn't sworn a similar protection oath. Yes, Tony was fine, but today could have otherwise gone very south. The look he got in response from Stephen acknowledged both of those things.

"All right, everyone needs to stay completely still," Stephen sighed, and turned his attention to the customized medical devices he'd requested when the place was first remodeled. They hummed into activity over the three men's beds. "Tony, Rhodey, don't remove any of your suit pieces, yet."

The scanners worked quickly. (Of course they did; Tony had designed them.) As Stephen feared, the only places the stone shards had gotten through their suits were slivers that had penetrated the vulnerable joints, which were uncomfortably close to arteries and could be jostled as suit pieces retracted. "Stay still," he ordered the suited men, and turned his attention to Steve and the stone jutting from the side of his ribcage. "I doubt any of you will mind if I address this big piece, first."

"Please say that you don't mind," Steve said in a thin voice. Shortly, there was a soft squelching noise that earned a hiss of pain, and then a sigh of relief. As Tony's gaze was locked obediently on the ceiling above his head, he heard but didn't see Stephen's footsteps retreating to a far corner, and the stone shard being deposited in a specimen container.

"Use the nano bandages," Tony remembered when those footsteps turned back.

"Nanos?" Stephen walked into Tony's eyeline and frowned down at him. "A Quinjet update is one thing, but those are way too early to debut."
"Which is why I kept them here, in private, so you can test them out on our backstage medical visits for a few years." Tony smiled, and ignored the sharp throbbing in his elbow and knees.

Stephen grumbled, but did disappear from view. Shortly, Tony heard the faint hiss of the nano injector. "The nanos seem to be holding the wound shut better than surgical glue," Stephen mused as he (presumably) studied Steve's enormous cut up close, "but not as securely as stitches or staples."

"Staples," Rhodey repeated with distaste. "Ugh."

"Don't worry," Steve promised. "I heal fast."

As Stephen assessed their scans again to see which remaining shards needed priority removal, Tony frowned thoughtfully up at the ceiling. His nanos weren't living up to old-fashioned medical approaches like boring, painful stitches, huh? Well, that just meant that he had something to work on. When his nanos made their public debut, they'd be a reliable front-line tool for any emergency room.

_In emergency rooms, with emergency doctors._ Tony thought while Rhodey complained over Stephen extracting a few slender stone shards. Emergency doctors like the surprisingly hot Dr. Palmer. Having a conversation with Stephen was definitely the right move, rather than just hoping it'd blow over, or doing a hand-off to Steve. They were coming up on their three-year anniversary, after all, and love was an action.

"All right," Stephen said as he settled onto a stool next to Tony's bed. "I'm afraid this is going to sting. I'd handle the pain, first, but I need to know if this feels suddenly worse."

"It's fine. You can hurt me real good," Tony said, loud enough to carry across the room.

Stephen gave him the 90% really? and 10% embarrassed look he'd expected. Rhodey sighed. Steve cleared his throat. Tony grinned back at Stephen after getting the response he'd wanted, and kept grinning right up until a pair of surgical tweezers dug precisely through a hole in his suit, into his flesh, and retrieved a granite toothpick from near his knee.

"That was not hurting me 'real good,'" Tony complained after Stephen sat back, having removed four such shards from across his body. "That was just... hurting me."

"Those were the wounds near arteries," Stephen informed everyone as he deposited the shards into more specimen dishes, and brought up their scans again. "Tony, Rhodey, you can remove your suits to get more comfortable, but I've still got seventeen shards left to get out of all of you."

By the time a sixth shard came out of Tony, he was beginning to wonder if perhaps it would have been smarter to just let that tour bus get hit by the chemicals. That'd be quite a story for all those tourists, right? 'The time I went to Paris and had my arm turned to stone.' "Please say you're done," he whimpered as he heard Stephen set aside his gear with a clatter of stainless steel.

"I'm done," he announced. "You're all clear to go. Wait. Steve, Rhodey, take this."

As Tony sat, grimacing again as his body protested the motion, he saw Stephen dispensing pills into two bottles. "Painkillers," he explained, and handed a bottle to each of them. "You're going to see serious bruising around the punctured areas. Rhodey, gentle movement will help. Steve, don't push yourself until that big wound has closed up more. Let me know if you need the bandages changed."

"Right," Steve said, and winced as he slid off his bed.

Now that Tony was sitting up, he could see that Steve had stripped to the waist to allow for those bandages to be placed. That man's body was pretty gratuitous. Would Nat like gratuitous? She'd tried
dating the Hulk, after all. Did those green muscles-on-muscles count as gratuitous?

Steve moved to pull his uniform top back on, but soon paused and shook his head. "Uh. Doc." Twisting around enough to get back into that shrink-wrapped costume appeared to be beyond his current capabilities. "Could I get a shortcut back to my condo? It's a little chilly to walk around like this."

A familiar sight appeared through a ring of sparks; Steve really had taken a liking to the condo they'd gifted him. The decor was different than Stephen (and Tony) had selected, of course, and he'd settled into it more completely than they had during their limited stint. Assuming that the Chitauri didn't blow up his building, or something similarly unfortunate, he appeared content to stay in that three-bedroom space indefinitely.

"Mind making another shortcut?" Rhodey asked, and smiled with relief when one opened to his own apartment. (Tony had offered to buy him his own place, too. Air Force command did not approve, and so he remained a renter.) "Thanks. I just want to take these pills and—"

"No alcohol," Stephen said, and tapped the warning label on the bottle.

"Not have a beer as I put on a game," Rhodey finished. "Thanks for the patch-up."

"Glad to," Stephen replied, and closed the portal after Rhodey walked through. Exhaling, he shook his head slowly, then walked back to Tony and ordered, "Hands above your head."

This sounded intriguing, and so Tony complied. It became more intriguing when Stephen stripped off the bloodied t-shirt Tony was wearing, and then his shoes and pants. "Well, you're not wasting any time," Tony said as he looked down at his battered body, now clad only in boxers and socks. Soon, not even that much applied, for Stephen pulled Tony's waistband to its limits and inspected the skin underneath. "I appreciate the urge to celebrate life and all, but I'm still kind of in... pain. A lot of pain."

"I figured," Stephen said with a lopsided smile, let the boxers fall back into place, and put his hand against the side of Tony's head. "I just needed to make sure there wasn't a hematoma developing somewhere before I did this." His hand glowed warm, then warmer, and just before it grew hot enough to be unpleasant, he pulled it away. All pain left Tony. It was like he'd been hit with a high-powered morphine drip that somehow didn't bring a single side-effect.

Sighing, Tony let lingering tension leave his muscles. "Thanks."

"The injuries are still there, so move carefully," Stephen warned. "But I thought you might appreciate having that bit of awareness stifled for the moment."

Tony did, but he still used invalid's privileges to claim the couch, after sweatpants and a zip-up hoodie had been brought to him. He'd earned having lunch carried over, too. "Gimmee," he demanded as he smelled the bowl approaching. Lamb stew leftovers over couscous weren't particularly exciting, but boy it smelled good.

"Sorry I wasn't there," Stephen said as he settled in further down the couch, and poked a fork idly at his own bowl. "I'm sure shields would have helped."

Tony took longer than he needed to chew his mouthful of food. Yes, Stephen had been avoiding Rhodey, but he'd dealt with their medical procedures without awkwardness, even when handling Colonel James Rhodes. They could talk about this. But it was best to be careful with this conversation, because the situation was a little weird and opaque. After finally swallowing, he
answered, "Well, I'm sure you were busy in Kiev."

"There was a—"

"Cult?" Tony guessed.

Laughing faintly, Stephen nodded. "There was a cult. Veils were being weakened between our world and another. Piercing the veil would come next. And then... half of Kiev kills the other half."

Tony nodded back, then wondered, "Could that cult fight have waited an hour?"


Oh, this next part would be delicate. It would be like defusing a bomb with shaky hands, because Tony (still) made a habit out of choosing the wrong words and Stephen (still) made a habit of slamming up walls. "It does seem like you've been avoiding... well. Not me. And not Steve."

"Look, I'm sorry," Stephen said, and rubbed a hand across his eyes. "I won't go off and do my own thing again if there's a team threat." He didn't bother to deny the unspoken conclusion to Tony's observation: yes, he'd been avoiding Rhodey.

"That's not what..." Tony's mouth twisted into a rueful pucker, then he sighed and also sat aside his bowl. "Level with me. If there's a dial labeled 'feelings about Christine Palmer,' what number do you turn it to? Four?"

"Tony."

"Higher than four? Wow. Yikes." Okay. Tony needed to pause. Needed to rein himself in. (This sort of knee-jerking was probably why Steve had offered to be a third party.)

What they shared had hit like a bolt of lightning, stunning them both. And against all odds, the two men who'd once been barely able to stand each other made a romance work. Deeply, truly, and completely work. Tony had let go of Pepper in determined steps over the course of months, then years, and he'd assumed that was all the emotional baggage that would ever need to be handled.

Tony had not been prepared for Stephen to get so caught up on this woman, and he didn't like it. Jealousy prickled, inflaming him toward a bad outcome. Stephen had just been so shameless about this. Plus, his tantrum over Rhodey had ended up with stone skewers slamming into Tony. That probably deserved a bit of a tantrum in return.

Stephen took a while to reply, which didn't help Tony's bubbling tension. "She was the only person who cared about me. As a friend, I didn't realize just what a good friend she was until..." Stephen shook his head slowly, and finished, "Until I was dragged out of a pile of metal. Pretty soon, she was literally the only person I had in the world. No one else cared." His gaze further dropped. "I'd made sure of that."

Tony sat back against the cushions, and sighed faintly as he remembered coaxing Pepper into helping him swap out bits of the old arc reactor. What had he said to convince her? That he didn't have anyone else. "Well, see, you didn't tell me that. All I knew is that you two." His hand wiggled in a somehow suggestive manner. "Y'know."
"It took a lot to screw up a friendship with someone who cared that much." Stephen winced as memories hit. "But I managed to do it. I was furious at the world, but it was out there past my windows. That didn't do me any good. I couldn't be furious at myself, because I couldn't be wrong. I still wanted to be furious at someone, though. And she was there."

Regret felt palpable between them. "See, you didn't tell me all this, either."

"She was the best friend I had there, and yeah, this Rhodey thing made me feel awkward. With Christine and these repeating histories, awkward emotions could turn into something... dark." Stephen rubbed at the scar above his heart. "After all, things can go worse this time. I didn't want to take the risk of doing something wrong again, so I thought I'd just—"

"Ignore everything and hope that it'd blow over?" Tony suggested.

Stephen shrugged, and didn't argue.

"So, here's the thing," Tony said after a significant pause. "She was your friend over there, but she's not your friend here. Yet. If you don't ever spend time together, you're not going to be friends. Which you seem to want." He slung his arms comfortably over the back of the couch, glad for the pain relief Stephen had given. "Did you know that I am now actual, legitimate, honest-to-God friends with Steve Rogers? It's wild. And weird. And kinda neat."

"I'm sensing a plan," Stephen said after a short pause, and smiled faintly.

"We need to get more people involved. Because there will be days when you legitimately have to go fight your cults right that second, and three people won't be enough to fight the mad scientist of the moment. So, the Avengers need more than four members. And more friends are always good."

"I'm sensing a plan," Stephen repeated, and waited.

A week later, Tony and Rhodey had healed enough to put that plan into effect. (Despite his greater injuries, Steve was in better shape than them only one day after the fight. Show-off.) A week was also enough time to extend invitations, and let people fit those invitations into their schedule.

"We waited way too long to do this, before," Tony said as he tapped a few buttons and activated the new module he'd just programed for Vincent: home bartender. "Everyone went their different ways after Loki. By the time we got back together, it was time for things to fall apart, again."

"I suppose we have let all this space go to waste," Stephen said as he inspected the various security feeds for the seventh floor: its enormous living space, an expansive wet bar, a television den that was more like a studio executive's screening room. Occasional work visits from Pepper or Happy, or Steve or Rhodey swinging by to deal with team issues, hardly put all that socializing space to good use. And the visits from people at Kamar-Taj, well... they were even more professional and less fun. If they were going to solidify friendships in this world, they needed to socialize. They needed to eyeball new potential team members, to pad out the thin Avenger ranks. They needed a party.

"Be right back," Stephen said after glancing at a text. "Catering's ready."

Specifically, they needed a party with some of those mini crab cake appetizers that Tony had been craving. And they needed a party with new and exciting kinds of alcohol, Tony thought happily as he saw sparks bloom, too soon for Stephen to be making his return. "You came through in a pinch, Wong."

Sighing, Wong set the intriguingly old-fashioned bottles down on the wet bar. He did not give the
impression of someone ready to have fun. "The Ancient One told me to accept your invitation."

"She probably thinks you should be more sociable."

"No. She just thought it'd be funny."

"Whatever works," Tony laughed, and pulled a cork from one of the bottles to sniff its sweet, mango-reminiscent aroma. After he finished coughing from the astringent undertones, he wondered, "What is this?"

"Wine distilled from the fruit of a kevolan tree. It's native to another dimension, and has slight hallucinogenic properties."

"It's safe to drink, though?" Tony clarified. Once assured of that, he merrily added it to Vincent's drink menu. Someone would be entertaining after sampling that bottle, he was sure.

By the time Stephen returned with several platters of catered food, people less meticulously punctual than Wong had begun to arrive. Another portal brought Karl Mordo, who looked around the luxurious space with mingled appreciation for its comfort and judgment for what it must have cost. Yet another brought Melinda May, but only after Pepper and Phil had arrived; the latter texted to insist on her presence. Happy did not arrive via portal, but he did arrive among a selection of the types of beautiful women he clearly missed encountering in Tony's life.

Steve was there, of course, and Rhodey arrived with a faintly star-struck Christine. Her arrival prompted a sidelong glance toward Stephen, but a faint nod and smile answered it. Yes, Stephen was fine. He wouldn't act like a dumbass. (Tony might have editorialized that description.)

Among all those friends, there was one unexpected face. "Oh my God," Tony said, stunned, as he glanced up from the bar. "I was just trying to play nice."

Stephen followed his stare, then grimaced. "You've locked down the elevator to only this floor, right? I don't want him touching my stuff."

"Yeah. And you've kept the wards up to date?"

Stephen paused, then dryly said, "Yes. And I just felt them fry a S.H.I.E.L.D. bug, actually. Did you really have to invite Fury?"

"Gentlemen," Nick Fury said with a broad smile, and walked into audible distance. "Thank you so much for the invitation. It's downright hospitable of you."

Tony smiled back, just as broadly. "I'm a giver." After a slight pause, he brushed away the small robot arm had been retrieving the appropriate selections for each requested cocktail, and closed his hand around the long neck of an old-fashioned bottle. "Can I get you a drink, Nick?"

"I don't know what kind of alcohol that is," Fury said in dryly amused tones, "but from the look you're giving me, I know I don't want to try it. Just give me a daiquiri."

"A daiquiri?" Stephen echoed as the robot arm whirred into motion and Vincent began preparing the requested selection. "You have dessert for breakfast at the Gardens, and ask Agent Hill about ice cream, and now you want a daiquiri?"

Fury blinked, and mildly asked, "Is there something wrong with that, Doctor?"

"It's just." Stephen looked him over. Though he and Tony were both in jeans, with coats over tees,
Fury was in his typical black-on-black-on-dramatic ensemble. "An interesting combination."

"I am interesting," Fury agreed as he received his sweetened drink. "I contain multitudes." Then he smiled, sipped, and vanished into the crowd.

"Stop giving me that look," Tony said flatly when Stephen turned to him. "You invited the Ancient One."

"Because I knew she'd say no. I was being polite."

"I thought he would say no, too."

"Did Nick Fury seriously just walk away with a daiquiri?" Rhodey laughed as he came up to the bar. "And is Nick Fury seriously in your home?"

"My giving nature backfired on me," Tony grumbled.

"Well, then, give me some drinks." Rhodey flashed a quick grin. "I thought the whole reason you programmed a bartender mode is so you wouldn't need to stand here."

Tony lifted onto his toes slightly to survey the crowded, twilight-dim room. There were far more people than they were specifically eying as potential teammates, for this night should feel like a friendly gathering, not a job interview. "I will in a bit, but I like to make sure things kick off right. The bar did provide a perfect vantage point as new people arrived, and to inspect others as they settled in. His hosting muscles were able to freely flex.

Phil and Pepper chatted amicably with Christine and Melinda, and the group was apparently all waiting for Rhodey to return with their drinks. Maria Hill vanished through the television room door with Happy and a large group of Stark employees, to watch what was apparently a Knicks/Celtics game. Wong mostly tried to avoid people, but Karl chuckled and chatted with... "I'll be damned," Tony said, after leaning this way and that to make sure he was seeing who he thought he was. "I can't believe that invite worked."

"Seems like he's involved in a pretty neat project," Rhodey said when he saw who Tony's attention was on. "I bet he was happy to come show off at an Avengers party."

"The Falcon project," Tony agreed with a grin, and watched Sam Wilson answer whatever Karl had asked with big, bold gestures. Since Sam and Rhodey were both Air Force, they'd had an excuse to reach out. "Oh. I assume you want drinks, still?"

"That'd be nice, yeah," Rhodey laughed, and rattled off a list of five. Tony recognized Pepper's order as he watched Vincent's robot arm retrieve those bottles, and Stephen seemed to recognize Christine's. Phil's and Melinda's respective choices were mysteries, but Tony knew that Rhodey wanted the boring gimlet. And so, with a few taps, he moved it to the back of the queue.

"You know," Tony said, and reached again for the old-fashioned bottle Wong had brought. "We've got some liquor straight from Kamar-Taj, tonight. You always get a gimlet. Gimlets are boring. Wanna try something different?"

"Why not?" Rhodey said with a shrug, and collected that glass and its four companions. With careful intention, he carried the collection of drinks back to his seat and handed each to its owner.

"Tony," Stephen said flatly as he inspected the bottle Tony set down, and realized what Tony had poured for his friend. "Did Wong explain...?"
"Yes. Let me enjoy this." Tony hesitated, then turned to Stephen. "They're *mild* hallucinations, right?"

"Yes. They're mild."

"All right. Let me enjoy this."

"And here I thought we were trying to *make* friends, tonight," Stephen murmured as he surveyed the crowd. "Not lose them."

"Rhodey knew what he signed up for by coming to this party. And by being my friend, in general." Tony hesitated again when one last flicker of concern flared. "Define 'mild.'"

"People might look purple, suddenly."

"Oh yeah, that's funny. He can drink it." After a considering pause, Tony reached for a nearly-empty bottle and poured a tiny bit from it. "I'm not sure if you'll want this or not."

Stephen accepted the glass and sniffed at it. "Scotch?"

Laughing softly, Tony poured himself his own expensive sliver. "From our first night here. I didn't know if finally polishing off the bottle would be symbolic, or if we'd just remember the hangover."

"It's been three and a half years," Stephen said after a considering pause. "That hangover's long gone. Let's finish the bottle."

With a smile, Tony poured a bit more into each glass, back and forth, until the bottle was empty. Their very first greeting to this new life was being put away. Back on that night, they'd thought they needed to rigidly redo their lives. Now, changes came and they rolled with the punches. Pepper was sitting over there with Phil, Christine with Rhodey, Stephen's hands were steady and Tony's chest was uninjured, and now this fine liquor was a luxury instead of a poison.

"So," Stephen mused after they clinked their glasses lightly together. "Valentine's is in a few days."

"So it is."

"I've got a dimension all picked out."

"Do you, now?" Tony asked with a faint shiver. Stephen's voice had gone even softer, and a little deeper than usual, and *very* meaningful.

"Mmmhmm."

Tony sipped his scotch. "A whole dimension. Does that mean I don't get dinner, first? Dimensions sound... complicated. And time-consuming."

"This is an all-day sort of thing." Stephen smirked, tapped their glasses again, and pointed toward the seating area to which Rhodey had returned. "Well, we did throw this party to socialize. I should probably go make friends."

"Don't talk research with her," Tony ordered, and nodded toward Christine. "This party is for fun."

"Research is fun," Stephen laughed, in significantly brighter spirits than he'd been during his Christine-avoidant days, and walked over to that chatting group. When Rhodey turned to welcome him, he did a double-take. Boggling at everyone else around him, he then turned to glare at Tony, and then at his drink.
Tony scurried across the room before Rhodey could yell at him about the (mildly) hallucinogenic liquor that had probably just turned everyone purple. "Steve!" he said as he sighted the man, and pulled him away from what looked like a dull discussion with a cluster of military types. "I have someone I want you to meet."

"Oh?" With apologies to the group behind him, Steve asked, "Is this someone that I, er, should know?" Alternate histories still tripped him up, clearly.

"Yep," Tony confirmed, and frowned into the darkness as he surveyed the room. There Sam still was, and he should certainly introduce them at some point. But if Fury's invitation had been accepted, and Maria's, then somewhere there also had to be... aha.

A few steps in Natasha's direction told Steve where they were going, and he stopped dead in his tracks to ask, "Redheads, Tony?"

Tony smiled back, and sipped his scotch. "Redheads." In terribly bright spirits, he kept walking toward Natasha, who was a vision in a tight black cocktail dress that probably had a half-dozen knives stowed inside.

He'd tried to invite Bruce. He had! But Bruce Banner did not currently want to take social calls, and besides, Nat and Bruce had fizzled out. That probably wasn't the best indication that they were meant to be together in this second go-round. Meanwhile, Steve and Nat had gallivanted around the world for years, always sticking together in high-stress, close-contact situations. There had to be something there. Right?

(Hmm. If not Nat... maybe he could try Sam? Something had to work, and Steve had been on the run with him, too.)

"Agent Romanoff," Tony said as he approached, and tilted his glass of scotch in a casual salute. "I do not believe that you were totally honest with me the first time that we met."

"That might make two of us," Natasha said with a faint smirk, and raised her martini in response. Yes, Fury did still want her on the team, and so he'd been happy to pass along the party invitation to one of his favorite agents.

"Well. Now that that's out of the way." Tony gestured between them. "Romanoff, Rogers. Rogers, Romanoff. You two should definitely talk."

"We should?" Steve asked, increasingly at a loss over Tony's shameless behavior.


With poorly contained amusement, Natasha asked, "About what, exactly?"

Grinning, Tony sipped his scotch. "Russian-U.S. relations."

The look Steve gave him was faintly pained, like he had very mild gas. "Uh, Tony, this is—"

"Ridiculously blatant," Natasha offered.

"Yeah." Steve nodded. "That."

"Never let it be said that I displayed a modicum of restraint," Tony said, clapped Steve's shoulder
with his empty hand, and squeezed it. "You're welcome, buddy." Then, before either of them could protest again, he cheerfully spun on his heel and walked off to give them some much-needed privacy.

"Tony," he heard Rhodey snap, and promptly changed his angle of approach toward a different side of the room.

That choice was the wrong one, for he wound up next to Nick Fury and his daiquiri. "You know," Tony said, and gestured to the remnants of the scotch in his glass, "this is a man's drink."

"Hmm," Fury said, and shamelessly sipped his sugary selection. "Sounds like someone is compensating."

"That's." Tony scowled. "What exactly would I be compensating for?"

"Height, I'd assume." Tony's eyes narrowed, and Fury laughed, a long and boisterous sound. "Don't ask questions if you don't want the answers. So. Who do you want for the team?"

Though it took every ounce of restraint he had in his perfectly tall body, Tony answered. "In the first go-round, from this crew, Natasha Romanoff and Sam Wilson. Also, Bruce Banner and Thor."

"Thor?" Fury repeated with mild surprise. "Figured he'd come back. Didn't figure he'd actually join up."

"And Clint Barton," Tony added. Clint had already been assigned to the Pegasus project, and although his assignment had just started, he'd obviously prioritized initial security sweeps over flying two time zones away to party with a bunch of strangers.

"And Barton," Fury repeated, and nodded. "Good guy. That's really it?"

"Well, if we do our jobs right, some people won't even be available." There hadn't been any bombs going off near the Maximoffs just yet, and Tony had been keeping an eye on the area for any such threats. Stark weaponry wouldn't be used against civilians, this time. And obviously, they were going to try to keep Mind safely contained, rather than installed in Vision's forehead.

"Who else could there be?"

Tony sipped his drink and stared out the window. Somewhere in that direction was the Atlantic Ocean, and beyond that... "The king of Wakanda."

Fury boggled at him. "King T'Chaka? An Avenger?"

"T'Chak... no, no. His son." Tony waved away the confusion. "The old guy dies. Except... he won't, this time. Probably. So... huh. I wonder how Wakanda opens their borders. Anyway, he—"

Before Tony could get too deeply into a discussion of international politics, Fury held up his hand to interrupt. "Let me approach this from a different angle, Stark. You have already collected a wide variety of interesting people in this room. Let me ask you their suitability for this team. Hill?"

Tony shook his head. "Nat and Clint are probably better in a fight, and she's good back-up for all your very secret, very annoying ops."

"That magic man who showed up in my office?" Fury pointed toward Wong to clarify the description.
"He'll help us with Stone stuff, but he'd never prioritize the Avengers. And the Ancient One needs him."

"Other magic man?" Fury continued, and gestured in Karl's direction.

Tony considered Karl Mordo, then nodded slowly. "Honestly? He might be worth approaching, yeah."

"Good to know. In that case, I assume Agent May is a downright perfect selection. She's got Romanoff's fighting skills along with all that shiny, sparkly magic."

"You can be the one to convince her," Tony said dryly, as he'd gotten the sense that Melinda May had run at top speed away from anything to do with Nick Fury. That recruitment attempt should be entertaining.

"I can try. Coulson?"

"Phil?" Tony said after a long pause, during which he'd needed another drink.

"He's better in a fight than you'd think," Fury said.

"That's not..."

"Or you could make another power suit for him," Fury suggested. With a smirk, he added, "Theme it after Captain Rogers, and Coulson'll throw himself into the thing head-first."

Tony laughed once, but it was a shallow and sick sound. The scotch in his stomach began to rebel, and he let his hand fall to his side before he could take any more sips.

A significant pause hung between them, after which Fury demanded, "Tell me why you don't want Coulson on the team."

Tony rubbed his empty hand roughly along the other arm; he felt cold, suddenly. Standing next to this oversized loft window wasn't helping, nor were a few, thin snowflakes drifting idly through a February night. "In the first world," he said in a voice almost too quiet for Fury to hear, "someone stabbed Stephen through the heart. In this world, he tried to avoid it. Took all the right steps. It happened, anyway."

"That night after the twins' surgery."

"Yeah. Like... fate, or something." Swallowing, Tony looked over his shoulder toward the chatting group near the bar. Stephen and Christine were laughing, probably about some dull medical issue, and Rhodey had retrieved another, safer drink. Melinda was trying to gesture Wong over into the conversation, and Pepper... she was leaning up against Phil, cuddling in that way she had that felt so much more intimate than it looked. She loved him, and he loved her, and they were happy enough to fill the room with it.

Turning back to the window, Tony said in a tight whisper, "The first time Loki came here, Phil died."

Fury stayed silent for a few breaths. "And so you worry that'll happen again."

"I don't know. I mean." His voice grew even quieter. "What's the Insight status?"

"Aborted. Files destroyed, including one A.I. in a facility basement."
That wasn't a total guarantee that the project would never happen, but it certainly helped. Obadiah's bad behavior had been circumvented, and yes, just as Tony had once wondered, Gulmira had never been attacked. Ho Yinsen was still alive, as was his family, and they were presumably all very happy. Stern was dead, and the government had no interest in anything Hammertech. So far as Tony could tell, they had successfully avoided some terrible things.

Was Phil a Ho Yinsen, able to be saved? Or was he that scar above Stephen's heart, always destined to happen?

And if he could be saved... would sticking him in a power suit help reach that good ending? Or just send him hurtling toward danger?

There were so many happy people in this room, tonight. So many friends, so many lovers. So many relationships that were working out right before Valentine's Day, 2011.

Was Valentine's, 2012 going to be the last Pepper and Phil shared? The last he ever saw?

Phil had been stabbed, Tony thought with a flash of sudden clarity, and turned back to Fury. If Stephen had been inside a suit like Tony's, that relic knife never would have gotten through to him. Yes: the answer to keep Phil safe was to wrap him in a suit of armor as sturdy as Tony and Rhodey's. No: sturdier. Those rock shards had gotten through their joints in Paris, but nothing would get through the next models. By the time Loki arrived, those suits would be impenetrable. Untouchable. Safe.

"I want Phil on the team," Tony announced with absolute certainty. Even if a power suit pointed him toward danger, a good enough suit could handle any danger it faced.

"Good choice," Fury said, and lifted his daiquiri. "Now, aren't you glad you invited me?"

"Don't push it."

"Romanoff just left with Rogers, by the way."

Tony spun, his eyes huge.

"Either things are about to get interesting," Fury continued, "or they decided to mess with you. And I'd tell you which it was... if you hadn't made fun of my drink."

Tony glowered. "I'm going, now."

"I expect to be repaid for those security devices you broke, by the way."

"Don't bug my house, and your devices won't break."

At least that temporary awkwardness with Stephen had resolved. Whatever his plans for the day were, and wherever that chosen dimension was, Valentine's, 2011 had to be thoroughly celebrated.

By next year, it'd be a lot harder to relax. Lives would be on the clock.
A bit of breathing room and retrospection before the pace amps back up. Gotta appreciate the quiet moments they've earned, after all!

The dimension they visited for Valentine's didn't have a name. At least, there was no name that could be spoken by humans. Such anonymity helped it to stay secret, for few mystics had ever heard of the realm, let alone read the guide to its location.

Which made it a really great place for a date.

"That is literally a unicorn," Tony said, peering into the distance.

It wasn't; its body looked more like an Earth deer than anything, with a few alien tweaks that would ruin even that illusion up close. But it was graceful and beautiful, and its single twisted horn glittered like opal under the low-hanging trio of suns. It soon bounded over the gentle hills, splashing through small crystalline pools, and vanished from view.

Their position sprawled on one of those gentle hills made for great sight-seeing. The suns' naturally low angles had this world on the edge of perpetual sunset. Gorgeously golden late-day light wrapped them both. "I've had to see so many dimensions of living horror," Stephen said as he studied the landscape. "It's nice to remember that places like this exist, too."

It was like they were inside an oil painting. Tony Stark seldom stayed still, or quiet, but faced with all this grandeur, he was happy to lie there for nearly another silent hour and take in beauty that Earth could never offer. Occasionally, things almost like birds fluttered across the sky, their feathers like layered butterfly wings.

Prompted by nothing in particular, Tony rolled his head to the side on the soft grass. "My magic boyfriend can do some pretty neat stuff."

Tony's own 'pretty neat stuff' had paid for their spectacular home. Stephen wanted to do what he could, in return. Propping himself up, he scooted to the side until he could look directly down into Tony's eyes. "I try."

Their relationship had seen its share of ups and downs. They'd probably had the ups and downs of their steadier, less argumentative friends, too, but their tension came from a place of deep caring. And when that caring aimed itself in the right direction, this was so good. It wasn't only that they'd found themselves isolated in this rebooted universe, with no one else to rely on. For all of their aggravating rough edges that they had yet to smooth down—if they ever would—the two of them worked. Not easily, but spectacularly. They worked.

"So," Stephen said, and brought one hand up to trace the lines of Tony's face. On the night of that party a few days back, he'd noticed the very first, few grey hairs along Tony's temples. It suited him. "We're all alone in this dimension."
Tony smiled up at him. The trio of suns reflected brilliantly off his dark eyes like some special effect. "Well. Except for the unicorn, and the butterfly birds."

Stephen leaned down close enough for his breath to tickle Tony's ear. "I don't think they'll mind." And then he traced his hand down Tony's face again, to renew their skin-to-skin contact, and channeled some extremely precise energy.


"If I'm going to be inside you," Stephen said quite reasonably, "you'll need to be prepared."

"Oh my God," Tony said with another strangled laugh, and rocked his hips again. By now they'd explored every inch of the other man's body, but never had Tony abruptly felt himself begin to get worked open without even taking his pants off. "You'd better not do this to me in the middle of some investor meeting."

"Thanks for the idea."

"Don't you dare." Another shiver of energy along sensitive skin made Tony gasp in abrupt delight, and he bit down hard on his knuckles to try to contain a startled noise that tried to break free. "Or I'll. See how. Ngh. You like it."

With a considering smirk, Stephen said, "Oh, I'm sure you could get creative. Make something with your tech. But speaking of investor meetings, is this really the industry where Stark wants to move next?" His thumb brushed across Tony's cheek. He knew Tony's energy by now: the echo of life, heart, and soul that he'd grown so familiar with over these years. Right now, that energy was all pleasure, and no tension. He was ready for more.

A satisfied groan answered him as Tony was further stretched. He'd soon fumble for zippers and buttons, because clothing had to feel like a prison. Especially when an erection began to strain his pants, Stephen noted with satisfaction, and leaned down for a deep, passionate kiss. The fingertips against Tony's cheek danced with more delicate energy. Under him, Tony shuddered anew.

"Yeah, fine, sure," Tony panted as he reached down to undo his fly. "This can just be your thing. Should it be. He exhaled, his eyes losing their focus. "Tingling?"

"It is magic," Stephen said, in the most level voice he could manage. That facade was hard to maintain, because God Tony looked good like this, flushed and needy. Both of them hated to give up control in their daily lives, but in private, Tony often loved it. His typical frantic energy had nowhere to go. It could instead be directed toward intensifying his pleasure, but only if Stephen remained firmly in charge. "I'm sending energy directly into you. What did you think would happen?"

Tony nodded once in acknowledgment that fine, yeah, whatever, that made sense. "Can it tingle... more?"

Smirking, Stephen cupped Tony's cheek again.

Soon, Tony's growing need had him nearly frantic with desire. He met Stephen's newest kiss like a demand. When Stephen began to pull back, Tony's hand gripped Stephen's hair, hard, and he nipped at his lower lip. Yes, he was more than ready.

Years earlier, Stephen's idea to align their sensations had worked, but imperfectly. Now, as he sank into Tony, their pleasure heightened with a practiced hand. Without being told, he knew when Tony
wanted him further inside. He knew how long to wait for movement when they were fully joined, to best revel in intimacy without anticipation driving them mad.

And he knew exactly how to hit Tony's prostate with each thrust.

Under him, Tony arched. His hands clawed at the grass. Pleasure devoured him, and every muscle in his (wonderful) body tensed with anticipation. They moved in perfect unison, wrapped in sunset.

On the edge of orgasm, their mouths met again. Bliss, already intense, began to further swell and Stephen's rhythm sped to match it. Tony responded with his own, and after a half-dozen halting breaths, his half-lidded eyes locked onto Stephen and widened. Aware that they were about to crest together, their gazes held.

Shortly, pleased groans drifted on the breeze. Stephen collapsed onto Tony's sweat-slicked chest, and the quivering energy of their connection faded. Tony's shaky fingers stroked through his hair, earning a sigh. They'd gotten good at this. Well. We've practiced enough, Stephen thought with a slight smirk, and tilted his head enough to kiss the warm skin it lay on.

"That was good," Tony dreamily said toward the perpetual sunset. His head rolled lazily to one side. After a long pause and a few blinks, he laughed.

"Mmm?" Stephen wondered, and turned to rest his other cheek against Tony's chest, so he could see whatever Tony was looking at. As soon as he did, he laughed, too. The 'unicorn' Tony had seen before stood on the other side of a sparkling stream, across a small valley. It had finally noticed them in the distance, and looked completely bewildered at the sight.

"Your date idea traumatized the unicorn," Tony giggled, still sounding orgasm-drunk.

Stephen contemplated that sight, then turned back to Tony. "In a while, we could traumatize it again."

Tony looked at him consideringly, and grinned.

After that, coming back to Manhattan was a real buzzkill. Warm weather melted February snows into ugly slush and the sky was a flat, featureless grey. Their home was as comfortable as always, but its enormous loft windows looked onto a city that had assumed an aggressively off-putting appearance for Valentine's Day.

At least it'd be dark, soon. They'd spent most of the day in paradise. If they didn't have visual competition, those memories could keep satisfying them.

"That was nice," Tony said dreamily. He was a sprawled, boneless heap on the couch.

"Glad to hear it," Stephen said, leaned down for a light kiss, and then proceeded toward the kitchen. He'd worked up an appetite.

"You're gonna ruin dinner," Tony warned after he returned with a sandwich.

Stephen looked down at the sandwich, then back to Tony. "Does that matter?"

"We've got reservations."

"Do we care about going to another restaurant?"

The math of that played out visibly in Tony's expression. When this first started, they'd spent hours
each week at the world's best tables. That public show had fallen off as the years went by and their relationship actually began to mean something, but still, they'd probably already experienced enough fine cuisine. "Good point. Make me one, too." After a short pause, Tony flashed a smile that he knew was irresistibly charming. "Please."

He always turned so annoyingly adorable after he bottomed. "Sure," Stephen said wryly, and returned to the kitchen to put together a rather well-considered selection of a Cuban sandwich with pinot. That marinated and roasted pork was waiting to be used, and Tony did like mustard.

"A wine pairing with my sandwich," Tony said with approval, and accepted his dinner gladly. "I feel like I'm at a restaurant, after all."

Stephen settled back in with his own—cold, wine-less—sandwich and felt Tony curl up against him as he ate. They'd gotten better in the kitchen over the years. It was an easy way to show consideration, and if they were in the middle of some fresh argument, well, it was hard to gripe at each other while eating.

Eating also made it tricky for Tony to protest when Stephen put on The King's Speech, which Tony had consistently whined his way out of watching. "Crmm ennnn," Tony mumbled through a mouthful of food when he realized which film Stephen was cuing.

"It's one of my favorite movies and I haven't been able to watch it in years," Stephen said, and hit play. "Eat your sandwich."

By the time Colin Firth stood up to shout an unbroken string of hilarious vulgarity, Tony had stopped whining. "Fine," Tony laughed, and tugged a blanket tighter around them. The slush-melting warmth had faded as night rolled in, and the room was suddenly cold. "It's a good movie."

"It's a good movie," Stephen agreed, and adjusted his position to let Tony cuddle closer. A few scenes later, he turned his attention away from the television. Two hours earlier, they'd been in a magical paradise; now, they were wrapped in utterly unremarkable domesticity. He liked it just as much. Maybe more.

"What?" Tony wondered when he realized that Stephen was studying him, and also turned his attention away from the movie.

"I'm glad I'm here."

Tony took a few seconds to reply. A smile spread before he did. "Me, too."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. For everything we lost... we found a whole lot."

"A whole lot," Stephen echoed, and placed a kiss on Tony's forehead. This wasn't the public power couple that now had a dozen framed magazine covers, or even the heroes enjoying a passionate, super-powered private date. They were just two people contentedly in comfortable, reliable, well-worn love.

That might be the best Valentine's mood possible, and it was one that he'd never experienced before. Yes. For all of the arguments and posturing they still loved to pull out, they really had found a lot in this new world. This wasn't the first time they'd shared the basic sentiment, but back then it still had the distinct feeling of finding positives among negatives. By now, what they'd lost barely seemed to matter.
They rewound the bit of the movie they'd missed, then put on another after it was over. Eventually, they fell asleep against the warmth of the other man's body. Drifting off felt as perfect as that utopian magical dimension.

"I can't believe I stayed in and watched movies on Valentine's," Tony sighed the next morning, as they made a breakfast visit to Greenwich Gardens. An acoustic Coldplay cover crooned faintly in the background. "Yeah, fine, we did a different dimension first, but then I fell asleep on the couch. God. I'm old."

"But very well-preserved," Stephen said, smiling slightly, and then resumed studying his oatmeal. Okay. There had to be a way to make this dish appealing, and one day, he would find it.

"That's less of a compliment than you think," Tony snorted. "Wait until you turn forty again, and I call you 'well-preserved.'" He rolled his eyes at Stephen's chuckle, shoved in a bite of croissant that he washed down with a mouthful of coffee, and gestured back toward the Wooster building. "Did I tell you about the team rundown I did with Fury?"

Stephen shook his head.

"Yeah, I didn't think so. At the party, Fury had me pick out who I thought were viable team members."

"And you said...?"

"Nat and Sam, obviously." Tony took another bite, and another drink. "I mentioned Thor, Clint, and Bruce. But then he wanted to know any possibilities outside of... well, last time."

"And you said?" Stephen prompted again.

"He pointed to Karl. I said maybe."

Karl? Well, he was rational, skilled, and could keep a cool head in a fight. His intentions were always aimed at the protection of the world, and he played well with others. ...Usually. "Karl would be a good person to approach," Stephen delicately began, "assuming we don't present him with any major moral quandaries."

Tony hesitated, then sighed. "Okay, this sounds vaguely familiar. Remind me what went wrong."

"He did not appreciate my use of a certain green stone to save the planet." Reluctantly, Stephen added, "In fairness, it does have the potential to..."

"Shatter reality into a screaming, black, all-consuming void?" Tony finished dryly.

"His warnings do sound a little more meaningful, by now," Stephen admitted.

Tony's eyebrows raised, and he took another long drink.

Though Tony did seem to remember the basics by now, Stephen felt compelled to finish. "He stormed away, and stayed off my radar afterward. He's got quite a strict moral code and we'll run into issues if we force him to break that."

Snorting, Tony replied, "So, treat him like Steve. Handled."

Tony knew the Stark-and-Rogers dynamic better than Stephen did, and so Stephen assumed that was an accurate comparison. "Anyone else?"
"Melinda May."

"Seems like an obvious choice." According to her own assessment, she wasn't as powerful with the mystic arts as he was. That was fine, though; they had top-tier magic covered. Someone who could both hit 'pretty good' status with magic and was a world-class S.H.I.E.L.D. operative filled a different niche entirely, and it was one that was going to serve a key role in this plan. "Especially since Phil has such complete faith in her." By now, Stephen trusted Phil as much as Tony did. He was a low-key presence in their lives, but an unshakably reliable one.

"Yeah." Tony studied his coffee, sighed, and looked up. "Speaking of."

Over the rim of his mug, Stephen made an inquisitive noise as he sipped.

"I picked Phil, too."

Stephen hesitated, the mug still at his mouth, and needed a moment before he swallowed. "Well. There's an interesting choice. Does... all right, no offense to Phil, but does he even live up to Romanoff or Barton in a fight?" Everyone could serve their own unique role, yes, but there were already some serious strength differentials developing among the proposed roster.

"Not quite, but I'm going to make him a power suit." With determination, Tony nodded and continued, "I'll upgrade the suits to handle anything that comes at us next year. When Phil... when it happened, he was wearing normal clothes against an Asgardian. He never had a chance. This time, even if things do go south, he'll be stronger than who he's up against."

"Or he could just avoid the Avengers' enemies entirely, instead of joining the team," Stephen delicately countered. He knew that Tony assumed he could always invent himself out of a challenge, but sometimes it was wisest to avoid a fight in the first place. "That would keep him safe, too."

"Only if no one comes for him. And if that happens again, he's a sitting duck in his Brooks Brothers suit. We go with my plan, and he'll live in a suit of armor." Tony nodded tightly, his eyes alight with purpose. "It's the right move."

"Okay," Stephen relented. Tony knew all of this from personal experience. And so, like the Steve personality comparison, Tony was probably in the better position to judge. "If you say so. I'm sure that you can make something to keep him safe."

"Damn straight. I'm going to start analyzing mine and Rhodey's suits, to block anything else getting through the joints. I'll do other upgrades across the whole body. Once I've got our new models ready, I'll make one for Phil, too."

Tony was in full-steam-ahead Planning Mode, it seemed, and there was no stopping him when that happened. "I've got research," Stephen said, neatly side-stepping the Phil discussion. Tony was going to make Phil a suit, and Phil Coulson was going to join the team, and that was simply that. "So, that's my goal for the day."

"Research on...?"

"Christine wants to study consciousness manipulation. I thought I'd help her out."

A positive reaction from Tony wasn't a sure thing, and so Stephen was glad to see Tony smile over the mention of her. "Good. Go make friends."

Smiling back, Stephen echoed, "Good." After telling the full truth about that moderately-complicated relationship, everything was far less awkward. Now, he would go see if he could make friends again
with Christine Palmer, and not screw it horrifically up.

One day, the people at Metro would stop making a big deal about him. But until then, was it really too much to expect his co-workers to not ask for autographs? Patients were bad enough, and he expected them to be idiots, but it seemed like every time he stopped by the hospital, some employee had a fresh piece of merchandise that their son or niece wanted signed.

"You can escape through here," he heard, and turned to see Christine smiling from a doorway.

Stephen took that escape gladly after signing copies of a video game. (He didn't even know that Pepper had authorized their likeness for it.) "Thank you," he said emphatically to Christine, after slipping into the room and shutting the door behind them.

"You were looking a little panicked."

"I don't know if you've met Brad Waters, yet, but I swear his extended family takes up half of New Jersey. Once I started signing things, I might never stop." Now that they were alone, Stephen had a chance to look around and see where Christine had steered him: the emergency suite for the surgical robots Stark Industries had provided. The hospital already had three such robotics suites. The smallest, most specialized one was (of course) for neurosurgery, and its projects focused on improving the robots' precision. The largest had an array of more general robots which could be used for anything from general surgery to cardio to plastics, and were designed to be as flexible as possible.

This mid-sized suite was for emergency services, and was all about saving lives when seconds counted. Ideally, Stark engineers would learn lessons from all three suites and keep improving the medical technology. But, even if they never came up with that perfect, unified surgical robot, these specialized suites were apparently quite useful in the meantime.

"These have been so great," Christine said when she saw him inspecting the nearest operating room and its large, overhanging robot. "I'm still getting used to them, but I can already see the potential."

"Write up your experiences. Identify any step that was unclear. Whatever struggles you ran into, they can fix in the next upgrades."

"I mean, they're already so useful," Christine demurred, apparently not wanting to seem demanding right after she'd been hired.

"Really. Write up your experiences," Stephen insisted. A quick grin flashed. "I can bother the designer until it's fixed."

Laughing, she didn't argue any more, and directed them toward a back hallway. He recognized the path: it would eventually emerge in a small, seldom-used research niche. It wasn't the most modern spot available in the hospital, but it was private. After seeing him be harassed for autographs, Christine apparently prioritized their privacy. "Thank you again for the party invitation," she continued as they walked. "It's been, um. Quite an experience already, moving to New York."

Stephen thought through her city trek so far: interviews with two Avengers, one of which involved a mystic portal, and then being asked out to coffee with a third member of the team. After getting this job, which included access to some of the best tech available worldwide, she was then invited to a party with even more representatives from this flashy, mysterious new world. "I imagine that it has been an experience, yes." A few footsteps echoed in silence. "So, Rhodey hasn't talked about whether..."
She needed a few footsteps to answer. Stephen hadn't wanted to come across as intrusive; this Christine barely knew him, after all. But he was itchingly curious about where she and Rhodey might be headed, even if it was probably inappropriate to wonder and definitely inappropriate to ask. "He's really nice. But I just started work, and you and I both know what that's like."

"Sixty? Eighty?" he asked, meaning the number of weekly hours she'd been putting in as she got a handle on Metro-General.

"Good guess," Christine laughed. "About seventy. So it's been a little hard to fit in dates. I've actually never dated someone I didn't work with before James, which is... kind of sad, really." As soon as she said it, slight embarrassment entered her expression, like she'd shared way too much with the world-famous man whom she barely knew.

"I know the feeling, believe me," Stephen assured her. "If you're a halfway decent surgeon, you're not going to pay attention to anything outside your hospital. And I know you're better than halfway decent." He'd said too much, Stephen abruptly realized, and awkwardly finished, "Well, I... shouldn't talk. I paid attention to Tony."

"When he was in your hospital. And, well. I met James as part of a hospital interview. So, let's say we're both covered. We're officially better than halfway decent."

She was as easy to get along with as when they actually knew each other, Stephen was pleased to find. Of course... he'd been the one that underwent a personality overhaul. Their dynamic probably could have always been this smooth. It did make him feel rather foolish about trying to avoid her, for fear of a worst-case scenario. He really had improved himself over the years, hadn't he, if things were going like this?

"So," Christine said when they found the small research room she'd aimed them at. It didn't have a fully modern array of neurological scanners, nor access to larger equipment like a MRI machine, but it was a good, private place to conduct early work. "How should we start this?"

Might as well go with the obvious. "Stick the typical scanners on me," Stephen said as he hopped onto the table and laid down. "I'll knock myself out and you can see how it looks on the screens."

"I'd actually like to ask you some questions, first..."

"You'll still be able to."

"All right," Christine said after a significant, confused pause, and began securing the scanners' small pads precisely along his forehead.

Stephen waited to feel every pad placed and to see the readouts activated, then said, "Just a second." His eyes closed. With a practiced motion, he let his consciousness slip free of the physical constraints of his body. It stayed as abandoned baggage on the table, while he easily and invisibly rose to a standing position.

"Dr. Strange?" Christine asked, blinking, and looked at the nearly flat readouts on the wall before turning back to his motionless body. "Wow, that was really quiYAGH!"

Okay, her scream when his astral form appeared was just as funny the second time. "Sorry," Stephen said, and barely fought back a smile. "I could have told you what was coming."

Rapid, Morse code-like blinks answered him as Christine looked rapidly between his abandoned body and the visible astral projection. "Yeah," she then sputtered. "You could have."
Stephen laughed, despite himself.

She exhaled, tucked a lock of hair behind her ear, and went through other habitual steps that Stephen knew were stress coping mechanisms for Christine Palmer. (He'd seen her use more of those for him than for her life-and-death work in the ER, actually.) "All right, then. You can turn into a ghost. Apparently."

"It's actually an astral projection," he corrected. "I've removed my spirit from my body, but it's still in perfect health. I could have sent it anywhere, like I did to those infant boys. But I appeared here, since you wanted to ask questions about the process."

"Like you did to the infant boys," Christine repeated. "So... this really is the exact same mechanism?"

"Yep."

"Well, then. All right. Let's get to work." Nodding with renewed focus, she turned to the machines and started fiddling with the readouts they provided.

She was a curious sort, as Stephen knew, and so he slipped in and out of consciousness to improve her data. Next came journeys to other dimensions, as he'd done for the twins, rather than simply appearing in the research room. Collecting data on those possibilities ate up hours.

"All right," Stephen eventually said, and sat up, clutching his forehead. "That's enough for now." He'd visited dozens of different dimensions, each with its own power signature. Christine hadn't pushed him to do so; she would have been happy with the same dimension to which he'd sent the infants, and nothing else. But he'd wanted her to get the best data possible, and... fine, he'd wanted to show off. He hadn't broken all of his bad habits, yet, and probably never would.

"Are you all right?" Christine asked, and immediately left her research station to help him steady himself.

"Just a little dizzy. I probably should have stopped a half-dozen dimensions back."

"Let me get you some water," Christine said after studying him for any obvious signs of distress. Once back, she continued, "You really don't need to push yourself like this, Dr. Strange. I know you're in charge of the grant. You don't need to be its guinea pig, too."

"I haven't, before," Stephen said, and sipped the cool water. It did help with the bit of nausea that his rapid dimension-hopping had earned. "But you're interested in my specialty like others haven't been."

"I am," she admitted, but paused. It took her a long moment before asking, "Is it hard? Reconciling the oath we took with... that life?" Apparently, her curiosity had built for things other than instant, non-chemical anesthesia methods.

"Not at all," Stephen said with a faint smile. "Since I don't kill people. I save them, through an extraordinarily wide variety of methods." She nodded slowly. As he thought he knew the reason for her silent hesitation, Stephen added, "Watch some footage again, Dr. Palmer. The other men on the team might stop threats through offense. I prefer to play defense, and when I do attack, I don't go for the kill."

"I hadn't noticed that," she admitted. "I'll look again."

"I take the oath seriously. I am a healer."
"I wasn't trying to accuse you of anything," she quickly said.

"I didn't think you—" Pausing, Stephen inhaled. He didn't want to let this inadvertent miscommunication spiral into something worse, because an argument with Christine Palmer was the last thing his life needed. "I knew you weren't. But I do take it seriously. So I wanted to clear that up."

As he relaxed, she did, too. It'd been a long, hard path to gain the ability to care about people beyond himself. He'd be damned if he let that agonizing work go to waste, whether his newfound consideration was aimed at a partner or a former partner and (potential) friend. "I suppose it does make sense that three guys tied to the military would go for the kill more than the doctor," Christine agreed.

"Tony hasn't done any of that for years," Stephen promised. This was a good chance to follow up, and so he neatly circled back around to, "But of course, Colonel Rhodes is actively involved. Rhodey's a great guy, though. I've never had any problems with him."

"He is nice," Christine admitted. "I've just, well. I've been working seventy hour weeks." Her attention turned back to the readouts for nearly a minute, but at its end, she looked back over her shoulder. "So... it'd be worth finding the time?"

"It would," Stephen said, surprised at how easy it was. James Rhodes truly was one of the best men he knew. After this back-and-forth that suggested that yes, he and Christine could probably be real friends again, someday, he wanted the best for her.

When he got home that night, Tony was surprised at the deep, loving kiss that greeted him. "Wow," he said, not unhappily. "That almost feels like we're headed back to re-traumatize the unicorn."

"I encouraged Christine toward Rhodey," Stephen said, still proud of himself. "It was easy. I just wanted her to be as happy as we are."

"Really," Tony said with delight over the effusive description. "You're going that gooey on me? That's, well..." His already warm expression crinkled further with joy, and he pressed forward to close the gap between their bodies. "Nice, actually."

"It is nice," Stephen mused, and thought back on how he'd avoided so many personal landmines in that conversation. Every single one would have exploded during his (real) first years at Metro. "And I'm nice, apparently."

"Let's not go too far." Tony's laugh carried them into the kitchen, where he had dinner waiting.

Chapter End Notes

If you've never seen The King's Speech, it really is a fantastic movie and here is the scene being referenced. Enjoy Colin Firth monologuing entirely in swear words!
It was not yet clear if Steve Rogers and Natasha Romanoff were screwing with Tony, or each other.

"Can you just peek in on whatever they do after the date?" Tony wondered after receiving a text that Steve wasn't available tonight, as he and Nat were going to a show. Steve liked Broadway more than any of them, and had already seen most of the current productions. Tony supposed that live theatre felt comfortably old-fashioned.

Stephen blinked. He'd given up on attempting oatmeal today, but had instead picked an exceptionally dull egg-white omelette. "You're seriously asking me if I'll spy on Steve and Natasha in private, to see if they engage in sexual intercourse."

Tony hesitated. It did sound rather terrible, put like that. "Uh. Well."

"No."

"Fine."

It'd been five weeks since the party and Natasha's secretive instincts were driving Tony up the wall. Steve seemed to be doing whatever Natasha decided, which was no surprise; that'd been their dynamic ninety percent of the time he knew them. That was unfortunate. If Steve were driving this train, he'd have either derailed it by now or efficiently reached the station and made an announcement over the loudspeakers. But with Natasha in control, the "truth" and "fiction" options provided by Fury that night were still both maddeningly plausible.

These five weeks had also given Fury a chance to reach out to parties of Avenger interest. One particularly interesting party was the last approached, for good reason. Tony had needed this long to study the previous performance of the two power suits in operation, identify their slightest weaknesses, and make enhancements for the next generation. Until that happened, they didn't want to bring up anything to Phil.

Today, he was ready. Hopefully.

With perfect timing, Tony's elevator dinged open just as Phil's car pulled to a stop inside the Wooster garage. Though Pepper had come with him, Happy hadn't driven the pair there. Phil also liked sports cars, it appeared, and seemed to enjoy sitting behind the wheel of that vintage cherry-red Corvette. It was an odd match with his characteristically boring suit.

"Nice car," Tony obligingly said as their doors opened. "1961?"

Phil smiled. "1962, actually."

Close enough. Tony had some vintage cars in his own lineup, but he barely took them out on the road, and certainly focused on models more unique than a basic old Chevrolet. "Hey, come on in. I need to show you something upstairs. Want something to drink?" Phil wanted iced tea and Pepper chose mineral water, and both of those were waiting when they exited onto the fourth floor, courtesy of Vincent and a kitchen dumbwaiter.

"You never did tell me your logic for getting Stephen to record for that," Pepper said after she picked
up her drink and instinctively thanked Vincent. His polite reply had returned in a world-famous voice. "I can't imagine he agreed very easily. Was it a PR thing? Because people seemed to really like him already, by the time it launched."

_I was in an unbelievable depression over the two of you and it seemed funny at a time when nothing else was,_ Tony did not explain. "He has a very nice voice," Tony instead answered, and picked up his half-finished protein smoothie and sipped.

"True," Pepper admitted, to which Phil gave her a dryly amused look. "What?"

"You said you had something to talk about?" Phil asked Tony, and blatantly ignored Pepper. That reaction seemed to entertain her, and she walked off to review some of the proposals for licensed Avengers merchandise.

"I did." Tony gestured a holographic screen into existence. It hung in front of one of the glass walls lining the conference room. Instead of a glimpse into the expansive gym space, where a combat robot was assessing its data after Tony's morning workout, heroic headshots began to appear.

Phil watched attentively as the first four expected faces appeared next to a series of bullet points. Steve Rogers' physical performance was far past human limits, and he had excellent leadership skills in a live fire situation, but lacked field maneuverability or top-level offense and defense. James Rhodes was the reverse: a high-octane flyer who could blast away enemies, but whose harsh gunmetal appearance and visible artillery launchers would never guide or calm down a panicking crowd. Stephen Strange had peak maneuverability (portals were good for that), the most flexible attacks and the most flexible defense, but was utterly vulnerable if any attacks actually got through his bag of tricks. And Tony Stark...

Blinking at the screen, Phil then turned to Tony and asked, "Did you do these write-ups yourself?"

"Yeah. Why?"

"Just curious," Phil said, and sipped his iced tea. Tony's summary with _weaknesses: none_ hung there, unchallenged. "So, these are the Avengers." The follow-up of 'why am I looking at this?' went unspoken.

Fury had been able to simply order some people to join. At least, he'd made some very strong suggestions. Another headshot now appeared: Natasha Romanoff. Peak human agility and combat abilities, nothing more physically, but she also wielded world-class information gathering and infiltration skills. "It's time to diversify our brand," Tony said, loudly enough to catch Pepper's attention. She chuckled slightly at the wording, and began looking at them instead of product proposals.

"Romanoff's officially on the team?" Phil wondered, sounding both approving and impressed. "She's a real talent."

"Fury sure thinks so. And he's got another formal commitment from someone I'm finally meeting in a few days." Clint Barton was also at peak performance and combat ability for an unenhanced human, whose remarkably clear focus on any given target made him an ideal scout. Speaking of ideal scouts, Sam Wilson wasn't the secret agent type to sneak into a foreign embassy. However, his air maneuverability was the best anyone could hope for. He could slip under the radar for other types of secret missions, ones ill-suited for Natasha and Clint, and dodge bullets in mid-air if those missions fell apart.

Phil nodded at the screen. "I can't speak to Wilson, but Barton's a real talent, as well. I'll admit, I'm
glad S.H.I.E.L.D.’s getting more involved with the team. We all share the same goals."

"Speaking of S.H.I.E.L.D." Tony's next selection made no sense with that introduction, and Phil looked appropriately confused at the headshot. He'd only met Karl Mordo in passing at the party, and so actually needed to take time to review his strengths and weaknesses. He didn't have Stephen's raw firepower, nor quite the breadth of his spell selection, but was far more practiced with hand-to-hand combat and wielded relics that made him even more agile and harder-hitting than Rogers. And, to combine many of the various attributes they'd seen so far...

"You're kidding," Phil laughed as Melinda's face appeared. She was the weakest magically of the three mystics, with normal human defenses, but had combat skills to rival anyone on the team, more of that portal-granted maneuverability, and Natasha's ease behind enemy lines. "How did you ever convince her to sign up?"

"Ask Fury," Tony snorted. "The first time I met this woman, I knew I wasn't going to be the one to convince her of anything."

"It's quite a line-up," Phil said with approval as his gaze roamed across the roster. And it was: they had leadership and loyal followers, rapid travel, technology and magic, ranged and melee attacks, offense, defense, and everything else a well-rounded team might need. One day they could scoop up Hulk and Thor, and Fury would call back Danvers before the big fight, but even now, the Avengers looked like an unbeatable team. Turning away from the headshots, Phil wondered, "But why'd you want me to come over to see this?"

Tony paused before answering. If he was going to keep Phil safe in a suit of armor, this introduction needed to land right. "I did hear a rumor of one specific thing that Fury promised Melinda, though."

"Which is?" Phil obligingly prompted.

"That her best friend would also join."

Phil opened his mouth, blinked, and closed it with a confused frown. That confusion morphed into visible surprise when Tony tapped another floating button, and one last hologram shimmered into existence. This one wasn't a flat video screen, but instead appeared as a three-dimensional model of a power suit, clearly distinct from what Tony or Rhodey wore.

It was right beside Phil, and was exactly his height. The implications struck him immediately and his surprise morphed into deep shock. "You're... you're kidding." Phil said with a breathy laugh.

Tony slowly shook his head. "This is Fury's project. He needs people he trusts to be his hands in the field." That confirmation broke through Phil's amazement, and he began to circle the translucent, holographic suit to inspect it from all angles.

"Wait. You want him on the team?" Pepper said, and walked over. Concern filtered around the edges of her voice and tightened her expression. When Tony had heard about the very first romantic encounter of Pepper Potts and Phil Coulson, one of his immediate thoughts was that Phil would give Pepper less to stress about. Well. So much for that.

"It's Fury’s team," Tony reiterated, and casually shrugged to cover that twinge of guilt. "And he's Fury's guy."

"I..." Trailing off, Pepper swallowed hard. The deep concern of the woman who'd secretly bugged Tony's suit, so that he might have a LoJack tracking unit ready to send any needed help, was evident in full force. Tony was trying to give her less to worry about with Phil, but he couldn't tell her that.
She still had no idea about the Time paradox, and so she certainly had no idea that Tony did already know Phil the first time they’d met, and had lost him in a bloody, brutal stab wound through his chest.

"We've seen indications that there are bigger forces out there." Tony pulled Pepper to one side and further dropped his voice. "Things that might be interested in Earth, one day. You live with a S.H.I.E.L.D. agent, Pepper. If those things do show up, he'll be on the front lines to face down Darth Vader, no matter what. He could be in a wool-blend suit when that happens, or he could be in a metal suit like mine."

Tony seldom sounded so serious, and that clearly worried Pepper all the more. With real fear now lining her face, Pepper turned slightly toward Phil and studied him sidelong, so he wouldn't notice her attention.

"If Nick Fury hears that something ultra-bad is coming, he will call all his best agents to be there," Tony said with quiet insistence. "You know he will."

"He will," Pepper murmured. Nick Fury had been an occasional irritant to Tony, but he must be a constant presence in Pepper's life. She would have been there when Phil was ordered away on missions that kept him gone for days, or weeks. He'd return and couldn't talk about what he'd seen, but would surely bring along shaky nerves, or bodily injuries. Phil was a steady, stable rock compared to most people in the world, but he was as human as anyone else. He'd get hurt. If things went wrong, he'd die. And she knew that.

"My life was a whole lot simpler before that bullet in the ER," Pepper eventually sighed. "Everything spiraled after you tried to block a gun with your bare hand."

Tony smiled sheepishly back. "All the weirdness really kicked off because of Stephen's shield."

Her own smile was exceedingly thin. "No, I'm actually very comfortable blaming you." Then she sighed again, turned toward Phil for an achingly long moment, and returned her gaze to Tony. When she spoke, her voice was too quiet to carry to Phil's ears. "You have to promise you'll keep him safe, Tony."

Now, only sincerity filled Tony's expression. "I promise. I will keep him safe."

"Swear it."

His jaw set, and he nodded once. "I swear it."

"Okay." Gaze drifting toward the ground, Pepper nodded. "Go talk to him about the suit."

Before he did, Tony leaned forward and squeezed her wrist in gentle encouragement. *I know the risks,* he wanted to tell her. *I know exactly what he's up against. I'll keep him safe this time. I will. I'll fix what went wrong.*

But he didn't. The smart move was to keep the paradox information on a need-to-know basis. She didn't need to know.

Time to play recruiter. With an abruptly chipper smile, Tony strutted back into the center of the room and announced, "All right, you've gotta tell me how impressed you are. The scale goes from ten to ten."

"It is impressive," Phil admitted. He had a good poker face, normally, but it slipped for two things: extremely neat and unusual S.H.I.E.L.D. encounters, and Captain America. (Even after years, Phil
still used the classic code name, more often than not.) The chance to wrap himself in a power suit for Fury's missions and fight alongside Steve Rogers covered all of that territory, and so Phil looked very nearly as excited as Tony had ever seen.

"Here," Tony said, and guided one of the holographic arms over to Phil's real one. It settled around him, then snapped in slightly tighter as he moved around and it improved the measurements Tony had estimated. "Put the rest of them on."

Phil glanced over his shoulder toward Pepper, and smiled and shrugged with poorly-contained glee. She smiled back as sincerely as she could.

With Tony's help, Phil got the entire holographic suit locked into place around him. A video screen appeared at the other end of the room, showing him visible inside the ghostly outlines, but unmistakably wearing a power suit similar to the Stark or Rhodes models. "Wow," Phil said after a moment of considering himself onscreen.

"This is Rhodey's," Tony said, and tapped a few buttons. The video screen expanded its width, and next to the feed of Phil inside his hologram, a representation of Rhodey's suit appeared for life-sized comparison. "It's the biggest gun we have. Loaded down with heavy ordnance, at the slight expense of responsive maneuverability."

"What's that?" Phil wondered, and gestured to the onscreen text visible below Rhodey's feet.

The media used their real names, but Tony still needed project titles for these things. Of course he'd gone with the obvious ones, and so the War Machine project sequence was now on Mark VIII. "I just needed file names for the system. And this is my suit," Tony continued after tapping another button. The video feed expanded to its other side, now, wide enough for Tony's sleeker suit to appear. "Still great offense, but more maneuverable than the War Machine design."

"A jack of all trades approach," Phil noted. "And you've got quite a naming scheme going for these projects. War Machine, Iron Man. AC/DC, Black Sabbath." He went silent to study the lines of his own suit in the middle: sturdier than Tony's, but without Rhodey's obvious heavy artillery. His arm pieces in particular were bulky, with unexplained protruding surfaces. "So. What's my project?"

Tony exchanged a significant look with Pepper. Phil didn't notice that, as his attention was consumed by the sight of himself in his hologram, but Pepper's glossy eyes were on the edge of tears. Turning back, Tony tapped a button. Under Phil, the words SENTINEL: MARK I appeared. "You'd be our defensive powerhouse. You'd have shields that no one could get through. We didn't have that in Paris, and it tripped us up."

"Sentinel armor," Phil slowly said, nodding. A smirk grew, and he turned to ask, "Because of Judas Priest?"

"Yeah. Stephen helped me come up with a cool song name. Here," Tony added, and gestured toward the controls. Phil's hologram launched a new effect: energy shields that bloomed from those bulky arm pieces, and could be manipulated into the shape, size, and direction that Phil most wanted. "Play around with that, see how it feels. I might as well get your feedback before I actually build the thing."

As Phil obligingly started playing with the illusion hovering above his arms, with all attempts to cover his excitement abandoned, Tony drifted back over to Pepper. "You gave him shields," Pepper quietly noted, and smiled faintly. "Is that a Steve Rogers fanboy thing, or...?"

"It's a 'I know you worry' thing." Tony's return smile was just as faint. "But we really could use more
defense in the field. Unstoppable forces are great and all, but someone needs to be that immovable object."

Pepper studied Tony for a long moment, and then turned to look at the holographic headshots still hanging in front of the glass wall. Tony followed her gaze as she recited, "Vulnerable if anyone gets through his magic, huh?"

Okay, Tony thought as he re-read the strengths and weaknesses he'd listed for Stephen. That was a fair point. Stephen did have the magic stick's protection, but that oath only kept him from dying. Injuries could do an awful lot of damage short of 'mortal,' and Stephen knew that better than most people. "Maybe I wasn't only thinking about Phil with focusing on those shields," Tony admitted. It hadn't been a conscious act, but now that she'd pointed it out, it felt blatant.

"Well. If they're both out of harm's way, I guess that's fine," Pepper sighed. With a rueful smile, she turned her attention back to Tony. "Life would be so much simpler if you focused on those arc reactors instead of your suit. Three more cities are interested in energy contracts."

"I mean, it'd be great if I didn't have to, but the Avengers face threats to all existence. And cities like... existing."

"Clean energy helps fight back a threat to all existence, too," Pepper countered. "Even if you don't get to blow things up while fighting climate change."

Another fair point, annoyingly. Tony rolled his eyes in instinctive protest, but then sobered. Fury had said that Insight was stopped in its tracks, and just in case something still went down with Hydra, they had Nat, Sam, and Steve united. With Hydra crumbling, and with Tony wanting to focus on what was now a much larger team, this might be the chance to take a step that he'd been putting off for years.

Yes. It was time. (Again.) "You are going to do a wonderful job selling all of those city-sized arc reactors," Tony promised Pepper, "and telling me what other new product lines to develop. Because you're going to be in charge."

She blinked, confused.

"Officially," Tony clarified.

"I've always been officially in charge," Pepper laughed. "It's the only way you got anything done."

"No, like... officially officially. I've wanted to stop being CEO ever since Obadiah, but I needed to keep a handle on things while the world was doing supervillain donuts in the parking lot."

"CEO?" Pepper echoed. Her eyes began to widen.

"I hate businessy stuff," Tony admitted. "I only want to make things and help people. You were always the one wrangling the board, and our suppliers, and—" He hesitated, then reluctantly finished, "And the inventive, capricious genius behind Stark Industries' success."

"You can't be serious," Pepper slowly said. "Are you..." She leaned in closer. "Are you just trying to distract me over Phil?"

"Why wouldn't I be serious?" Tony shrugged. "I'm holding on to all my stock, and will also get a fabulous buyout package to move down into a design role. I want all of that stock to be worth as much as possible while I do the work that I'm actually interested in. Hence: you run the company and continue to pump up our price on Wall Street. I design new, nifty stuff. Everybody wins."
Pepper stared blankly back at Tony, and then loudly said without looking away, "Phil, Tony just said I'm the new CEO."

Phil turned, studied them through his holographic helmet, and asked, "Pardon?"

"She's the new CEO of Stark Industries," Tony cheerfully announced, and swept his arm in an arc before him. A draft layout of the upstate Avengers campus appeared, with some improvements made to the design he remembered. "I want to stop CEO-ing to focus on engineering and the team. And building this campus."

After a significant pause, Phil repeated, "Pardon?"

"There's a. There's. You." Pepper shook her head. "There's a process. You can't just say someone is the CEO, Tony. You need board approval."

Tony snorted. "Pep, I could text every member of the board to see if they're fine with the swap, and we'd get the votes in five minutes. You've been the one working with them on the boring stuff, anyway. Not me." She still looked dumbfounded, and so Tony cheerfully added, "You'll get the chance to tell me what to do. Fun, huh?"

A nervous giggle escaped her.

"I think he's actually serious," Phil slowly said, and fumbled for the holographic helmet to see if it'd come off. It did.

"One hundred percent," Tony assured them. "Big day for both of you, huh?" Pepper and Phil stared at each other, unable to find any response, and so Tony cheerfully clapped his hands together. "It's chilly out on the water, but it's still a pretty day. Want to take my yacht out, and talk a little in private about these two fantastic bombshells?"

"I think that's a very good idea," Pepper weakly said. "I'm just going to." Her hand gestured behind her, toward a bathroom. "Freshen up, first."

Smirking, Tony replied, "Sure. You're the boss."

Once Pepper had left the men, still looking dizzy, Phil turned to Tony and studied him like there was a secret to unlock. But as both of Tony's offers had been completely sincere, there was nothing to uncover. Phil frowned at that, then began, "Stark."

"Tony."

"Tony," he obligingly corrected. "You're really serious with this CEO thing?"

"If she can keep me in line, she can handle a Fortune 500 company just fine. And I really do hate the business stuff. I'm making robots now that can cut out baby brain cancer, but it was like pulling teeth to get approval for that new division. I don't want to deal with new divisions. I just wanna make robots."

"Huh," Phil said after a significant pause.

"So." Tony leaned forward and tapped him lightly on one shoulder, through his holographic armor. "Congrats. You're living with a CEO. Maybe she can buy you a new car."

Phil blinked back at him, rapid-fire. "I'm good with Lola."
"You named that car?" Tony asked, dubious. And you named it Lola?

Whatever answer Phil wanted to give to that, he held it back in favor of getting himself under control. Only when he looked like his typically level-headed self did he ask, "Is this building secure?"

"Uh. Yeah. Probably the most secure place on the planet, why?"

"I figured, but I wanted to double-check. Anyway. I know why you were so stand-offish toward S.H.I.E.L.D. involvement when we first met."

Hesitating, Tony suggested, "Nick Fury is a world-class douchebag, yes."

Phil didn't take the bait, and looked neither amused nor offended at Tony's attempt to deflect. "I mean Hydra." Tony said nothing, and so Phil continued, "Director Fury kept me out of it until two weeks ago. You can imagine my shock. We're moving into what he hopes is a final stage removal of their capabilities, now that cells are isolated. It'll be even slower and more measured than the first stages, but he finally sees a finish line in the distance. He needed backup, though, and so finally brought in some more people."

"You need to be really careful, Phil," Tony said after a significant pause. Shit. He could keep an eye on Phil during Avengers team stuff, but going off alone to face Hydra was putting himself in incredible danger each time. And when had Phil died, before? When he went off alone.

"I will be, don't worry. And since we're apparently on the same team, now, I just wanted to let you know that I understand what was going on, before. No hard feelings."

"No, you don't—" Inhaling, Tony corrected to, "Let me make you some shields that you can wear without the suit, too. Wristwatch and sunglasses projectors, or something."

"I'm feeling like James Bond," Phil said with a lopsided smile, "and I like it. But he sobered a moment later. "Is everything okay?"

"They're bad news," Tony said after a long pause. "And I don't want to have to pass along that bad news to Ms. Potts."

"I've faced down a lot of bad news in my day. I can handle this."

"Phil, Hydra killed my parents and I saw it all on video." Heat washed over Tony's face, and his jaw clenched as he tried to control his expression to simply 'unhappiness' instead of 'panicked misery.' He didn't even manage that. "They didn't know it was coming. You do. You'd better not make a video that she'll have to watch."

At that, Phil's easy confidence slid away. Clearly, Fury hadn't shared that information, even though Tony had used it as an initial search anchor for locating Hydra operatives. He supposed he appreciated the discretion. "I didn't know that. I'm sorry."

Tony said nothing. His eyes still felt simultaneously watery and scratchy, like tears were one blink away from spilling.

"I'll be really, really careful," Phil promised. "And I'll practice with the shields you make for me."

That was probably the best they could hope for. Control returned to Tony, and the heat in his face lessened. "Okay. I'll get right on them, then."
"Thank you." After another moment of silence, Phil added, "I'll make sure that I live up to the defensive role the team apparently needs. It's an important one." From his tone, he suspected exactly why Tony had designed the suit that he had, meant to stay back among the team and keep two particular people safe in the process.

"It is important. Whenever the whole team needs to come together, I want everyone coming out on the other side." Inhaling, Tony tried to let more of his stress go as he exhaled. It sort of worked. "Right. I'll get your James Bond gear started, and begin construction on the suit. I'll let you know when to swing by again."

"Thanks."

"Vincent," Tony added, raising his voice, "get the crew to the yacht. North Cove harbor," he added to Phil at a more reasonable volume. "West and Liberty, on the Hudson. It's yours for the rest of the day. Just request whatever you want from the chef, we keep basically everything in stock. And take whatever wine you want, too. I've got a lot of nice bottles."

Phil opened his mouth to say something, but an oddly conflicted edge entered his expression. It faded as soon as it arrived, and he simply said, "Thanks. We'll work out all the tricky bits. These are two great opportunities you've handed to us, Tony. It's just a big adjustment, but we will adjust."

"Wine's good for adjusting."

The same odd edge returned to Phil's smile. Instead of answering, he laughed and wondered, "So, uh, how do I get out of this hologram?"

By the time the suit again stood on its own, Pepper returned. She looked only marginally more composed than before, but Tony knew she'd process things further and settle down by evening. Just to smooth things along, though, it might be a good idea to emphasize the same offer he'd made to Phil. There were more than a dozen notably expensive wine bottles on that ship. Both of them could be so annoyingly practical, and so might talk themselves out of an indulgent celebration.

"So what I suggest," Tony began, "is asking the chef to fire up a couple of filets with that peppercorn sauce he's so good at, and pair it with the Case Basse Sangiovese. And asparagus is in season, so... okay, why are you both giving me that look, now?"

"Phil," Pepper said, and inhaled. "Can you head down and get the car ready? I'll just..." She gestured between herself and Tony.

Phil slowly nodded. "Sure. See you in a sec."

Once they were alone on the fourth floor, with Pepper still hesitant and Tony increasingly befuddled, Pepper picked at her thumbnail and did not begin the conversation she'd clearly intended. "What's up?" Tony eventually prompted. He'd turned her into a CEO and Phil into an Avenger. That should have been the big news for the day, and he didn't like not controlling whatever new information was about to flow.

"I just. Well." Pepper adjusted her hair over one shoulder, then laughed nervously. "I wasn't going to tell you this, yet, but today seems to be the exciting announcement day."

"Uh huh," Tony replied warily.

"I mean, it's very nice that you're letting us take out your yacht, Tony, and that you... that you made me CEO." She still sounded disbelieving about that. "But you just really seem to want us to pop that wine cork to celebrate everything, and... and I haven't had anything to drink ever since your party."
Tony's confused frown deepened.

"I wasn't going to tell anyone for another month or so. That's when it's supposed to be safe to... I mean, by then you know that things are going to be..." Pepper practically bounced where she stood, like all the nervous energy inside her needed some way out, and then finished all in a rush. "Tony, I'm not going to drink any of your wine today. Because I'm pregnant."

The world froze, except for Tony's pounding heartbeat. After a few stunned seconds he laughed, smiled hugely, and said, "That's amazing." It felt like something that had been programmed to come out of him, like one of Vincent's courteous lines.

"Yeah?" Pepper asked, and nibbled at her lower lip.

"Amazing," Tony repeated, still feeling like he'd been programmed.

"Oh, thank God," Pepper said, and laughed breathily. "You're always so busy, and then you said the thing about CEO-ing when I'll need to worry about maternity leave, and... and we can talk about all of this later. But I'm so glad you're happy, Tony. I mean, I've never taken that long off work, before. I was worried."

"Don't even worry about work. Just. Go celebrate." He held up a warning finger. "No wine."

"No wine," Pepper agreed with another relieved laugh, and practically ran to the elevator to rejoin Phil. The door slid shut behind her, and Tony sank onto a nearby stool and studied the elevator, unblinking.

Well.

Okay. He probably should have seen that coming. It was a hell of an oversight for someone who was trying to predict the future.

Chapter End Notes

Yes, I know "Sentinel" is already is use... but it works as a song title project name and the X-Men aren't in the MCU yet, yet. :)


"They really respond positively to you," said Karl Mordo with approval as he studied the groups of novices and apprentices working through their forms. "You're a very measured teacher."

Stephen opened his mouth to respond, only to see Wong eying him from a walkway. The man looked halfway ready to snort with laughter, for Karl was still ignorant of the Time paradox and so had no idea that Stephen had ever been anything but a mature, mystically-oriented leader inside Kamar-Taj's walls. "Thank you," Stephen then said, and ignored Wong. "I try."

His population concerns about the Masters of the Mystic Arts from years earlier, when he and Tony had found a double room so easily for their visit, had resolved. No longer were there beds to spare in Kamar-Taj, even though only a quarter of the newcomers actually stayed on the path to receive a crimson set of apprentice robes. Roughly half weren't suitable to enter even as white-clad novices, and of those that did join, half of those were eventually asked to leave, due to the Ancient One's concerns. They had enough novices to exercise such caution, and still have plenty to train.

Earth was on track to have far more mystical defenders than it had ever claimed in its history. Discussions had started about sending apprentices off to smaller temples scattered around the world, like an undergraduate's study abroad session. One day, most novices might deliberately choose a focused path after being handed their new set of robes. People concerned with the spread of mystical beings could study in underground caverns near Coober Pedy, Australia. (Not only natural evolution had affected Australia's dangerous wildlife.) Wanting to face down human threats might mean going to one of the many tiny temples that were scattered across Khartoum or Bangalore or Manila or New Orleans, and many other cities.

And for the most promising mystics, they could be asked to apprentice in the most valuable locations: the three Sanctums. Each building might soon end up with a dozen assigned defenders apiece, or more, rather than one master and a shifting handful of other help.

With how cautious the Ancient One now was, Stephen trusted that those selected for the Sanctums would be reliable. Kaecillius really had done a number on her willingness to extend second chances. He couldn't say that he minded, even if memories of the black lake were now like distant daydreams, but he did occasionally wonder what exactly had happened to the man. The Ancient One simply said he'd been brought to justice, and never explained anything more.

A bong rolled across the courtyard and the mystics' practice halted. It was time for dinner, or lunch if one was visiting from Eastern Standard Time. "When do you move?" Stephen wondered as he and Karl set a slow path toward the dining hall. The novices had built up an appetite and would rush to be first, so there was no need to hurry.

"Later this week." Karl was moving to the New York Sanctum. He still found the concept of the Avengers peculiar, but the Ancient One had encouraged him to join, and it made sense for him to be a part of the conversations in New York. Melinda might soon follow. "It's regrettable about Master Lin."

Stephen made appropriately sad noises of agreement, and did not act like he'd known that the woman would get herself killed in an unfortunately necessary failed negotiation. "Daniel will do a great job as the new Master, though."
"Oh, of course."

So long as Stephen used Kamar-Taj's wi-fi to get online, rather than futilely trying to connect to any cell towers, he could text Tony, who'd loved the exceptionally fresh, focused flavors here. That chicken tarkari did look like someone he'd want to try. Want me to bring home some of their food for lunch? he typed, and let the phone fall to his side as he continued chatting with Karl.

Feeling the phone soon buzz with an alert, he brought it back up and blinked at the message there. Can you come home?

"Karl," Stephen slowly said as he studied the words. "Sorry, I need to head back."

"Is everything all right?" Before he could answer, Karl amended, "You need to go find out. Of course."

A quick good-bye later, Stephen walked into the portal niche he kept clear on the fifth floor. "Vincent, where's Tony?" he asked as he politely gestured the Cloak free. Whatever had happened, it felt best to plan on a private conversation.

"Mr. Stark is in the fourth floor conference room."

Only a few artifact stands and bookshelves were between him and the door, and so he soon walked through the stairwell exit one story down. With all the glass walls on the 'team floor,' it was easy to locate Tony where he sat on a stool, slumped and sad-eyed. "Tony, what's wrong?"

All he got for an answer was Tony sighing and extending his arms. It didn't seem like a world-threatening emergency, at least, and so Stephen obligingly pulled Tony into an embrace and tightened until the grip seemed right for whatever situation he'd wandered into. Once Tony was securely held, making no effort to move off the stool and with his head resting against Stephen's chest, he sighed again in a way that sounded like the beginning of an explanation.

Tony needed a couple of those sighs before any words actually got out. "I told Phil about the Sentinel suit. Pepper came with him. She's pregnant."

Oh.

Back when they'd first realized that their temporal marooning was permanent, this was the loss that had gutted Tony more than anything. The loss of that future family had seemed the most painful thing suffered by either of them, even as Stephen found himself facing the (assumed) required re-living of his accident. By now, Tony had spent three and a half years carving out a new, wonderful life down a completely different path... only to get sucker-punched with that loss again.

"I'm sorry."

"It's..." Tony trailed off, then shook his head and tried to push free. Stephen let him pull back only far enough to make holding this conversation easier. "Sorry. I shouldn't have asked you back."

"Of course you should have."

"I shouldn't have asked you back," Tony repeated, with emphasis on just exactly who was supposed to listen to him mope over Pepper Potts' pregnancy. His efforts to move free of the stool renewed themselves. "I appreciate it, but—"

"Young me broke the universe and ruined your family plans," Stephen interrupted with a faint smile. "Be sad. It's all right." Magic was stronger than any escape attempt Tony could make, and so they
stayed close no matter how he struggled.

Soon concluding that no, he wasn't getting out of this hug, Tony sighed and relented totally back into it. His cheek practically burrowed into Stephen's shirt. "I'm not sad."

"Could've fooled me."

"I'm happy to be here," Tony said after a significant pause. The echo of their cozy night on Valentine’s sounded totally sincere, like before, but complicated like it hadn't been.

The reassurance was nice, and Stephen hadn't doubted it. Still. "You can be sad at the same time, though."

A few seconds later, Tony's arms tightened around him. "Yeah. I'm sad," he admitted.

"Yeah."

"Yeah."

More than a minute of sympathetic silence passed before Tony tried to pull away again, and this time, Stephen let him. "Thanks," Tony said, and roughly wiped down his face with his hands. "Really, I should have called someone else. Sorry. I wasn't thinking."

It was a little awkward, sure, but that hardly mattered. And it wasn't like either of them would ever wander off from what they had, no matter how deeply this temporary wound stung. "Of course I should be here. You needed me."

Tony opened his mouth to argue, but instead laughed faintly and shook his head. "So, you're treating me like I'm more important than you." The mention of Stephen's 'love language' he'd identified years ago let a genuine—if small—smile cut through his regret. "Did you eat at KT, or can I spend some money on delivery?"

A lopsided smile grew in return, for of course Stephen remembered how Tony used money as his own shorthand for feelings. "No, I didn't eat, yet." He leaned forward and thoroughly mussed Tony's overly-styled and poofy hair, like he knew Tony hated. "And I love you, too."

"Love you, too," Tony echoed, and didn't even protest his hairstyle being ruined. Today really had done a number on him. Obviously, Stephen wasn't heading back to Kamar-Taj after this, and he and Tony soon made as lazy a picture on the couch as they'd set during Valentine's Day. Tony was a cuddler, after all; contact helped.

Just to twist this knife, someone needed to move up his scheduled meeting. Such an announcement seemed initially meaningless to Stephen, but Tony's mildly better mood the next morning collapsed into another deep sigh when he saw Fury's message. "What is it?" Stephen wondered. They'd stayed home for breakfast, as he didn't want to make Tony put on a perky face for any fans on the sidewalk.

"Clint wants to swing by early and say hello."

As in, Barton? Hawkeye? What a bizarre thing to be upset about. "I thought you got along."

"Oh, he's great." Tony crammed half of a doughnut into his mouth, and spoke through the half-chewed remnants. "Great, great guy. Who lives on a big, beautiful family farm with his wife and, like, half a sports team of kids."

Ah. Tony was doing better today, yes, but that didn't mean he wanted to see who was apparently the
most fatherly figure he'd known, before. Stephen swallowed a bite of wheat toast and wondered, "Want me here? To keep the focus on the team? Keep it professional?"

Clearly, Tony wanted that, but hesitated. "Is there anything you need to be doing?"

"We're just planning which books and artifacts Karl might want to bring to the New York Sanctum. And we'll approach Melinda to move, after that. Nothing pressing."

Still, Tony hesitated. "Nothing at the hospital?"

Stephen shook his head. "Research-wise, Christine's just gotten drafted into ER leadership. She'll probably need weeks before she finds lab time again. And surgery-wise, that patient who kept ignoring her recommended treatment just landed in jail for assaulting a nun at her kid's school." He snorted disdainfully and sipped his coffee. "Maybe when she gets out, she'll finally believe me when I say she needs an exorcism along with an operation."

Amused affection filled Tony's expression, from the faint crinkles lining his eyes to the broad smile framed by that ever-overstyled goatee. For the first time since yesterday's lunch, he looked totally anchored to the here and now. "You're so weird," he murmured, and leaned across the table's corner for a quick kiss. "Yeah. Then be here for the meeting. Thanks."

It was good to see Tony in a better mood. The world felt off-kilter when he wasn't. The thought of that baby surely still stung, but it seemed to be background noise that would fade eventually out. Soon, Tony was able to watch the camera feed for the sidewalk museum, even though that crowd included children playing with the holographic shields, and smile at the sight. Even if his smile was smaller than it would be on some days, any sincere smile felt like a victory.

Somehow, Tony noticed Stephen watching him. As he glanced back over his shoulder, his spreading smile seemed to appreciate all of that continued concern that Stephen had offered. "I'm good," Tony then said, unprompted. "Really."

"Really?"

Tony turned fully, walked to him, and placed his hand on Stephen's shoulder. Just as he opened his mouth to begin what looked like a serious discussion, that hand was thrown clear of Stephen.

"Please don't," Stephen muttered at the Cloak, who'd made that aggressive ejection, and glowered at it. "We're trying to talk." This was exactly why he'd sent the Cloak off, yesterday.

The Cloak pointed one accusing corner toward a small plate. On it, crumbs of sugary glaze remained from a second doughnut. Tony hadn't yet washed his hand after eating, and so those fingers landing on the Cloak had apparently been slightly sticky.

Chuckling, Tony sucked sugar off his thumb. "I don't know why I'd be sad about no kids, anyway. We've got this brat to deal with." That earned an appropriately outraged twitch from the Cloak's collar, which only seemed to amuse Tony more, even as Stephen held up his hands to try to calm them both down. But then, Tony's expression returned to sincerity. "I'm good. When I was sad right after we landed here, it was because it felt like I'd lost everything. Because all I had was you, suddenly, and back then, the two of us..."

"Weren't anything."

"Right. But now, we're everything." A different 'everything,' but Tony didn't make it sound diminished in comparison. "So I'm okay."
Fortunately, that promise held through the arrival of who was apparently the Avenger's own resident patriarch. In-between his S.H.I.E.L.D. missions, Barton lived what sounded to Stephen like an agonizingly dull life. Stephen had only ever wanted to be in the heart of places that felt like they mattered, instead of deliberately seeking out a place that never would.

"I swear, the farm is really nice," Tony said as they watched the car pull into the garage. "And how can you make fun of 'quiet'? You love KT."

"It's still in a city. And Kamar-Taj holds one of the most important items in the universe. Not... cows."

"Snob."

"Says the man with a garage of sixteen cars."

"Okay, I know you just had the Lambo, but that's still hypocritical. And—Nat!" Tony said cheerfully when the passenger door opened, and walked toward the hulking black S.H.I.E.L.D. SUV as she emerged. "Didn't know you were coming, too."

Stephen rolled his eyes, then hid his smile. Tony's clunky manipulations to pair off Steve and Natasha had mostly served to frustrate him, so far. It was amusing to watch him try to out-scheme a master spy. "Natasha."

She nodded back to him, then smiled at Tony. "Thanks for snagging those reservations. I'd never been to La Grenouille, before. It was fun."

At the mention of the romantic French restaurant that had served as Stephen and Tony's (still-pretend) date for their first Valentine's Day, Stephen rolled his eyes again. When Tony got a goal in his sights, he aimed toward it and fired all engines. Well, so long as this scheme kept Tony distracted and happy, Stephen supposed that it couldn't be all bad.

A fresh face coming around from the driver's side of the SUV rebooted Stephen's professionalism, and he walked forward with an extended hand. "Agent Barton, I presume."

"Clint," he corrected, but obligingly shook Stephen's hand. "Hey."

"Stephen Strange. And—"

"Tony Stark," Tony cut in, and also leaned in for a handshake. "So, what'd Fury tell you about all of this?"

"That I should expect to see my face in that storefront window, for one," Clint said, and jerked his thumb toward the backs of the monitors visible to passers-by on the sidewalk. Soon, its showcase of four heroes would become far more crowded. "Same with Nat and Coulson. So, are we just not secret agent-ing any more, or...?"

"There are a lot of fights coming up that'll be out in public," Stephen said. "I can promise you that. And the first time that happens, you'd lose your anonymity, regardless."

Tony sidled up next to him and rested his hand on Stephen's shoulder. This time, the Cloak let his (washed) hand stay in place. "This guy didn't plan to show off those magical shields on CNN. We all know how that played out."

Natasha and Clint looked at each other and smirked.
"Let me show you to the Avengers floor," Stephen said dryly, and set a path for the elevator.

Once there, Clint and Natasha's inspection began. This was Clint's first visit to the building, and when Natasha came for the recruitment party, she'd been taken straight to the seventh floor without a chance to see the most impressive displays of Tony's tech. Even so, she still made an effort to hide her interest. Clint didn't follow suit. His survey was done with open curiosity and an edge of awe, especially when they walked past the conference room and into the training area.

"Should've brought your bow," Tony said, and studied Clint as Clint studied the expansive space.

"When I'm going to be walking into someone's private home, I usually try not to be armed."

Natasha shrugged. "He and I are different, like that."

"Tell me how this feels," Tony said, tapping a few buttons on the wall. A holographic composite bow glimmered into existence, and he picked it up and handed it to Clint.

Bemused, Clint accepted it, and studied the weapon in his hands as he tilted it back and forth. "Well, it looks like a bow. The balance is all off, though."

Obviously, Tony couldn't let his efforts be anything less than perfect, and so they had to spend the next few minutes getting his training hologram up to Clint's exacting standards. "All right," Tony eventually said, sounding more than a little grumpy at how nit-picky Clint had been. Stephen couldn't blame the man for having precise standards, though, not if he were as good an archer as Tony promised. One didn't get to be the best at something by accepting inferior equipment. "Try pulling the string back."

"But there's no... arrow," Clint said as he barely nudged the string back an inch, only for a holographic arrow to appear there. "Okay, then. Can I just shoot this at anything, or...?"

"And can I have a gun?" Natasha wondered. "Silenced? I doubt you all want to wear ear protection, if your simulation includes audio." That, Tony had programmed more accurately, and she seemed immediately pleased with the handgun that appeared next to her.

"Let me handle the targets, Tony," Stephen cut in. Off Tony's nod, Stephen explained, "All these walls are reinforced and there are energy shields completely lining this floor's interior. Even if these weapons were real, you could go wild with them. Just act like you're in live combat."

Natasha slid off the gun's safety. "Got it."

Clint rubbed his thumb against the string of his bow. "Do I get any custom arrowheads, or are we going pure vintage?"

"Let's stick with vintage," Tony said, and walked to one wall to lean comfortably against it. "We're all just showing off our basics, today." And then he folded his arms and smirked at the two S.H.I.E.L.D. agents, who were both holding his holographic weapons, inside a building he'd paid for, on a floor lined with his energy shields. Showing off the basics, indeed.

With a gesture, Stephen showed off with some basics of his own, and a half-dozen miniature energy spheres bloomed at the far side of the room. "Targets," he explained.

Natasha and Clint eyed each other, grinned, and instantly brought up their weapons. A handful of seconds later, four spheres were red and two were purple. "I like this game," Natasha said, for her hits had turned the targets that color. In other words: she'd won.
"I'm just warming up with Stark's weird bow," Clint grumbled. "Give us another round, Doc."

Next time, there were twice as many targets, and they moved. Then they started blinking in and out, letting ammunition phase through them unless caught at the perfect moment. Soon, they began dive-bombing Clint and Natasha in the guise of aggressive, demonic birds.

With unlimited holographic ammunition, the two agents had neither reason nor desire to stop their fun. Excitement sparkled in their eyes, and Stephen had fun of his own as he came up with fresh challenges for them to face. This was far more entertaining than directing those novices at Kamar-Taj. He'd always preferred to work with people at the very top of their game.

"That is cheating," Natasha gasped as a few tiny portals bloomed around the room, and Clint's arrow sailed through one to catch an awkwardly-positioned target at which she'd just taken aim.

Clint smirked, and notched another arrow.

Shortly, more than twenty more miniature portals bloomed at bizarre angles. Clint and Natasha boggled at the complex, almost distracting sight, then turned back to Stephen, who shook his head. That hadn't been his doing.

"Holographic ammo," Tony cheerfully reminded them, and lifted his hand from the keyboard on the wall, where he'd added these new complications. "And now that I've seen what kind of enemies Stephen's made for you..." Dozens more training targets sprang to sudden life as another flock of flying demons, screeching and clawing at the air. Clint and Natasha looked at each other, smirked, and turned their smirks onto their targets. Holographic ammo began flying through holographic portals.

A few minutes later, the last enemy vanished with a flicker of light. The portals followed it into oblivion, and then their weapons. Clint and Natasha exhaled. They seemed to suddenly recognize the sweat that drenched them, earned from the unending tension of that training session, but they grinned regardless. "Well, that was fun," Natasha laughed, and wiped a rapidly-growing droplet from her forehead.

"Really fun," Clint agreed, his breath coming quickly. Chuckling, he turned back to Tony and Stephen, and said, "So, I'm on your team? Cool."

This seemed to be going well.

"So, Clint," Tony began an hour later, and retrieved a cheesy slice of pizza from its box. In the interim, they'd taken Clint and Natasha through the full roster and Tony had explained his plans for a team campus (slightly) upstate. "Tell me about yourself. Say... got any family?"

Stephen said nothing as he chewed. But as he studied Tony, he was pleased to see none of the sadness he might have expected from another discussion of children. Tony really was doing better, then.

Clint glanced to his side, and Natasha barely nodded. Having apparently received confirmation to trust the two of them, he replied, "Yeah, I'm married. Two kids."

That didn't sound like "half a sports team." There must be at least one more on its way, then.

Regardless, Tony nodded. "Nice."

Nodding in return, Clint lifted a beer bottle like he was toasting his absent wife. "It is."

"It is," Tony repeated, and smiled toward Stephen as he lifted his own bottle. Stephen echoed that
smile, with genuine relief over Tony's continued good mood, and clinked the neck of his bottle in return.

"It's very nice," Natasha said, and instead of lifting her bottle to toast anyone, took an enormous swig of beer from it. She was almost certainly messing with Tony over his blatant attempts to hook her up with Steve, and Stephen didn't know why someone as clever as Tony hadn't figured that out, by now. "I'm 'Auntie Nat' to Clint's kids."

"We'll see if Lila and Cooper like Uncle Steve, too," Clint added before taking another huge bite of pizza.

Wait. Uncle Steve? Stephen blinked. In his peripheral vision, saw Tony do the same. Were Nat and Steve actually...?

No. Of course not. These two were best friends. Clint was apparently in on the joke that Natasha was playing on Tony.

...Probably.

After another drink of beer, Stephen concluded that he really needed to spend less time around S.H.I.E.L.D. agents. Between these two and Nick Fury, he was getting occasionally out-maneuvered, and he did not appreciate that sensation. He should spend time around demons, instead. Demons acted like they were supposed to. If they caused too much trouble, he could just banish them.

That annoyance aside, this had been an agreeable way to make Clint's acquaintance. Today had been more pleasant than learning about Phil only after he shattered Tony's heart, than first meeting Karl as a desperate near-invalid in the streets, and certainly far more pleasant than Rhodey's video call when they'd been naked.

The agents already itched to schedule their next training sessions, and did so before returning to the garage. When Tony did build that full campus upstate, they'd have to model the training facility after the improvised moves the two of them had made today. After the garage door rumbled shut in the wake of the agents' departure, Tony turned to Stephen and wondered, "So, what'd you think?"

"He seems like a great guy, just like you promised." Stephen's head tilted. "I actually didn't know that any Avenger could maintain such a... low level of drama."

Tony smirked, and leaned in to poke Stephen just below his collarbone. "Says the team founder."

"If there's one thing I've never bragged about," Stephen laughed, "it's being predictable." That earned a laugh in return. When they both quieted, a smaller, calmer smile trained itself on Tony. "It seems like you're doing a whole lot better than yesterday."

"Yeah. I just needed to get over myself."

"Oh, don't say it like that. You had legitimate reason to be upset."

Tony shrugged, and boxed up the leftover pizza.

Stephen studied him, but knew that it wasn't a good idea to push. When Tony said he was all right, but clearly wasn't, Stephen could force him into admitting his distress. But when Tony said he was all right and was doing an even halfway decent job of masking things, he got as stubborn as he could ever be.
Tony was doing better than before, but he wasn't quite okay. He'd never admit that. If Stephen tried, all he'd earn would be resentment.

Well, then. Perhaps it was best to see how he fared as Pepper's condition became impossible to ignore.

That chance came earlier than anticipated. Only a month later—and three and a half months into the pregnancy—Pepper invited them to her brownstone in Brooklyn. It'd been a productive month for Tony and Stephen, if not an especially exciting one, full of low-level missions and new training habits. For Pepper, though, this past month had seen her take official leadership of Stark Industries. Her month had been tremendously exciting.

She'd probably come straight from the office, because she was still in a flawlessly tailored dress. Its fitted seams revealed the slight curve of her belly. She looked as lovely as always, but now, she also looked unmistakably pregnant.

Stephen looked toward Tony and saw the slight flicker of regret he'd expected. It wasn't much, and it faded quickly, but it'd been there. Tony had done great politely chatting with Clint about his kids, and he'd helped strategize with Pepper over swapping leadership before she dealt with maternity leave. Neither of those, though, had involved standing a few short feet away from her as this development became unmistakably present.

"Thanks so much for coming," Pepper said. They'd stepped through the portal and into her small, tidy back yard. It wasn't much of a play space, barely a strip of green, but their brownstone was close to the spacious Prospect Park. Should Phil and Pepper stay in this house, the child would have acres of convenient parkland. It was a charming setting, really.

And it was certainly more lush than the compact blocks of Greenwich Village, with constant streams of Avengers fans on the sidewalks and, a little further afield, the distinctly non-child-centered area around NYU. Tony knew all of that. He knew that he'd made life choices in a totally different direction.

Still, that was an exceptionally well-tailored dress, and Pepper's pregnancy belly really was obvious, and Tony was probably going to need another long hug later.

"Thanks for having us," Stephen said when Tony didn't, after what felt like a much longer pause than it actually was.

Twenty minutes later, Phil proudly plated his homemade gnocchi. "I'm learning to cook," he explained as he set their meals in front of them. Out of a sense of fairness to Pepper, they all had sparkling water, rather than wine. "I like knowing exactly what we're eating."

"He gets concerned," Pepper explained in conspiratorial tones. "Very, very concerned. I told him that he didn't need to do this, but then it was either 'Phil cooking' or 'Pepper, have you thought about going vegan?' And I've been craving wings like you would not believe."

"I found a great wings recipe," Phil added. "And our grocery store sells organically-raised chickens. I didn't know that until I asked."

Stephen obligingly chuckled—slightly—but under the table, he brushed his hand lightly against Tony's leg. A slightly hollow sadness had edged around his eyes. No matter how Tony tried to hide it, Stephen saw that, even if it'd fool Pepper and Phil.

"So, what cued this invitation?" Tony prompted in the slightly awkward silence that followed. "It felt
like it had a point of some kind." And please don't do it again, he didn't say, but Stephen felt. Tony was happy with his life, he was, but he didn't want to see the slow-motion arrival of the kid he wasn't having.

"It did," Phil confirmed, and turned to smile at Pepper. "I feel like you should ask."

"I should probably ask," she agreed, and flashed the broad, nervous smile that Stephen had come to associate with her. "So, well. Tony. Stephen."

Tony lifted his glass of sparkling water, and looked at her curiously over its rim.

"Phil and I were talking about this. We both trust you, and of course we all get along. And you're both so smart, and good at what you do..."

Stephen speared another gnocchi and nibbled it off the fork. He wasn't sure why Pepper was buttering them up more than Phil's rich sauce, but it was a very pleasant discussion to hold over dinner. He and Tony both positively thrived under praise.

"Well. Now that I'm past the first trimester, it seemed like the right time to maybe consider bringing up..." Phil cleared his throat, looking halfway ready to laugh, and Pepper's spiraling question circled to a stop. "Tony, Stephen, would you consider being the godparents?"

Stephen blinked. The godparents? He had to imagine she meant that in a secular sense. Even so, that was both an enormous expression of trust and an enormous responsibility. They'd be permanently in this child's life, expected to offer guidance and protection from all the ills the world could bring. They'd be like relatives of choice, rather than DNA, and almost like back-up parents. He'd never expected this, and so had no clue how to respond.

But of course, Tony did. "Of course!" Tony said, so quickly that he nearly tripped over his own tongue.

"It's a huge honor," Stephen said impulsively, for he just couldn't ruin that brilliant smile on Tony's face. "Of course we will." Okay. Well. They'd just been handed part of a kid's life, like suddenly opting into a timeshare. With their relationship's composition, he really hadn't considered this sort of surprise as ever being on the table.

"I'll put together a kid lab in the flex space warehouse," Tony announced. "Full design capabilities, but actual manufacturing won't happen for anything dangerous."

"In, like... ten years?" Pepper asked, bemused and a bit wary.

Tony hesitated, then replied like it was a negotiation, "I was picturing slightly earlier?"

"I'll talk with him," Stephen promised, earning a laugh from Phil in return. Considering it had been Stephen who broke open the universe, it was probably a bad sign that he often felt like the responsible one.

"Well, great!" Phil replied, and lifted his glass of sparkling water for a toast. "To the first Avenger
"Third," Pepper corrected, ever the perfectionist. "Agent Barton has two."

"To the third Avenger baby!" Phil cheerfully corrected. "And the first Avenger godparents!"

Pepper just couldn't help herself. She just loved accuracy too much. "Actually, years ago, Agent Barton asked—"

"It's just a big loving Avenger family, all around," Tony said, too chipper to care about the particulars. "God bless us, every one." And then he shoveled in a mouthful of gnocchi, and chewed like it was the best thing he'd ever tasted.

Well, Stephen thought, and returned to his own meal.

He'd better get used to training novices, again.

Chapter End Notes

1) I had to add some comfortable warm fuzziness before all the action in 2012. (Arriving very soon.)

2) I was listening to some older music playlists on Spotify. I nearly started laughing when this song came up and the first two verses basically described the story's first 15 or so chapters. Then it got to that song title in the chorus, and I went, "...Okay. Gotta share this."
Tony could barely wait to get back into his own house. His hands itched to invent.

"Astronomy," he announced, unprompted, as Stephen let them walk back into Wooster. When Tony's excitement surged and chattered over dinner, Stephen had obligingly let him guide the discussion. Now that they were home, that conversational balance would apparently continue. "I can do something with astronomy. Hey, do you mind if I just...?" Gesturing, he indicated his workshop, where he would happily spend the rest of the evening.

Stephen nodded and smiled, with that same level mood he'd set all evening. "Of course."

Grinning, Tony squeezed Stephen's arm, then darted for the stairs.

It wasn't that he had to have his own kid. The crushing loss was not being able to be part of any young life, not sharing knowledge and love... and not being able to come to some sort of resolution with the complicated memories of his own father. But a godfather could do all of that. All of it! So, the kid would look like Pepper and Phil? Fine. Uncle Tony would still be the one sparking new interests, offering counsel, and serving as an impossibly cool north star.

Without changing a single diaper.

Really, this was its own kind of perfect.

The offer they'd made them was an absolute godsend. Otherwise, Tony's only chance to serve as a permanent mentor would be with Peter, and that wasn't going to happen for years. Very deliberately, Tony had avoided thinking about Peter Parker ever since reality slam-dunked him back into 2007 and ordered him to stay there. If he'd put the kid in danger before as a high schooler, it'd be infinitely worse for Tony to even vaguely intersect his struggles with someone attending elementary school. The world knew Tony Stark's name and they knew his street address, and if he was a halfway decent human being, he wouldn't give anyone reason to also look up May and Peter Parker.

But Pepper Potts was also known around the world, and she'd just taken her own first photo for a magazine cover. Phil Coulson soon would be on covers of his own. Unlike Peter, this baby would be born into danger as a potential ransom target or hostage, and so it made complete sense to add another two heroes to the protective circle around it. Tony could be excited about this kid with absolutely zero sense of guilt or regret, and oh, he was.

As the spring sky darkened through his windows, Tony sat back, filled with satisfaction, and held up his creation for inspection. A series of suspended rings looked like a traditional baby mobile that might dangle colorful plush shapes over an infant's curious eyes, but of course, Tony wasn't going to give them something traditional. "Activate," he ordered.

In the center of the mobile, a hologram of suspended golden light appeared. It served as a miniature sun, though it could go as dim as a nightlight, and he'd added an occasional, subtle effect of sparks coming off the edges of Stephen's portals. It'd be good for the kid to get used to them. Holographic versions of the planets appeared after that, disproportionately large. Then they began to circle the sun at mostly-accurate relative speeds and angles, and over the surfaces of Venus, Earth, and Jupiter, clouds swirled.

Tony studied his design, pursed his lips in thought, and then headed for the elevator. "I need a second opinion," he announced after exiting onto the seventh floor, where Stephen was reading
something in his favorite armchair. "Do I add moons, or is that just going to be too much for a kid to focus on?"

Stephen looked at the complicated, swirling cluster of astronomical holograms, and blinked.

"Moons?" Tony repeated, and cued all of the planetary satellites into existence. As clouds swirled over Jupiter while it circled the sun, seventy-nine tiny specks swirled around the planet itself. He studied that complex dance for a full rotation around the solar system, then looked back up. "It feels like too much."

After a significant pause, Stephen asked, "You made that in an hour?"

Tony lifted the mobile for closer study. "I cheated and yanked some NASA imagery." The moons flicked off, and he again considered the appearance without them. "I'm leaning toward 'no' on satellites. I'm sure this kid will be smart, but..." Trailing off, he belatedly, finally recognized the overwhelmed edge to Stephen's expression. He looked like he hadn't since they got roped into founding the Avengers. Against his will.

The happiness filling every inch of Tony began to deflate. "You're excited about this, right?" The question wasn't a clarification; it only wanted a confirmation. It needed a confirmation.

Stephen hesitated, and then deliberately moved his bookmark into place. "I'm excited that you're excited."

That wasn't the confirmation that Tony wanted, and so with a deepening frown, he set aside the baby mobile, walked to Stephen's chair, and perched on one of its armrests. Looking down on him, he retrieved the book Stephen was holding and laid it purposefully on his lap. "You're okay with this, right?"

"Seeing you so happy has me thrilled. Really." Off Tony's increasingly hangdog expression, for he wasn't giving the easy answer that Tony wanted, Stephen took one of Tony's hands in his own. "I could never ruin this for you. I'm just..."

"Yeah?" Tony prompted, still feeling ill over the possibility of this somehow not happening. This was something amazing, a way to fill that very last gap in Tony's redone life. It wasn't supposed to be something Stephen barely tolerated, and only for Tony's sake.

Stephen opened his mouth again, sighed, and rolled his gaze to one side as he admitted, "I'm just really bad with kids."

Tony paused, then couldn't help but laugh. "Babe, you're really bad with people. Pepper and Phil know that. They still asked you." Stephen looked flatly back at him, and Tony sobered. "Seriously. Are you okay with this?"

Each word came out emphatically. "One hundred percent truth. I want to hear it. Whatever it is."

Without making an attempt to free himself of Tony's hold, Stephen reluctantly replied, "The one hundred percent truth is that I'm not one hundred percent okay."

That was still a queasy answer to get, but it was a conversation they should have had before Tony shouted Yes! to the heavens. And this wasn't a no. It wasn't the worst-case. Nodding slowly, Tony dropped his hands from Stephen's face, but retained his seat on the armrest. "Okay. Tell me."
"I already get impatient with novices and residents, and they're all intelligent adults."

Tony smirked faintly, despite himself. "Yeah, you're a little uptight." That earned another flat look, and Tony laughed and kissed Stephen's forehead. "I've seen you in surgery with your residents, and I saw you training that girl from Santa Monica. You got impatient with them, but they still learned from you. You're... not easy-going, whatever, but that's not bad. Just be a McGonagall instead of a Snape."

Confusion and surprise mingled in Stephen's expression.

"I got invited to a lot of movie premieres, and you don't turn down Dame Maggie." Sitting back, Tony continued, "Look. I've got boundary issues. Because I'm the fun guy, and following rules isn't fun. But suddenly, things spiral because I crossed a boundary that I shouldn't have, and it's hard to pin down just which step took me over. Well. Maybe putting the two of us together would actually be a really awesome combination for the kid."

Stephen looked to consider that, thankfully, but his list of concerns had apparently only begun. "I'm just not good with family things. Remember how Christine was the only person who gave a damn about me after the accident? Yeah. There was a reason for that. Every single time I could either build up connections to people who cared about me, or focus on myself, I focused on myself. After a couple of decades, that's where it got me."

It was unsurprising that the original draft of Stephen Strange had been that thoroughly and utterly self-absorbed. But that wasn't who was sitting in this room, next to a similarly redone Tony Stark. "So, why'd you say yes to Pepper and Phil, then?" Tony wondered.

It took a few seconds to get an answer. Seeing where Tony was going with the comparison to the past and present, Stephen drawled, "Because you care so much about this. And I care about you." His level gaze acknowledged that yes, they were both a lot better than they'd been. He still didn't look convinced, but his reluctance had eased. A bit.

The men they'd been in 2011 version 1.0 couldn't possibly have taken responsibility for a child, but version 2.0? Maybe that was different. Maybe. Maybe. "Anything else?" Tony asked. "Get it all out."

"I'm already known by some very powerful enemies. When I..." Gentle sadness entered Stephen's voice, and he continued, "When I become Sorcerer Supreme after the Ancient One, I'm going to be known by even more of the worst beings in creation. This could be painting a target on the kid for them."

"I actually worried about the same thing. It's why I never even looked up where Pete's in school, right now." After giving Stephen a moment to process the reference to Parker, Tony continued, "But this kid is going to be born to a Fortune 500 CEO and an Avenger. The target's already there, from actual supervillains to guys just wanting to ransom a quick million. We'd be more bodies between the baby and those bad guys."

"Tony, you're not listening. I'd be bringing in a whole new collection of 'bad guys.'"

"Why? It's not your kid. No shared blood, no shared name. Isn't that the sort of stuff that magic cares about?"

Stephen said nothing, and his gaze turned more considering.

"Yeah. Exactly. But you would be there to do shields that I can't do. Just like I did this one—" Tony
lifted Stephen's book and tossed it idly against the window, which glimmered with energy at the impact. "—But you did the energy wards that fried Fury's spy gear."

Stephen again said nothing, and looked down at where the book had landed. Then he looked back up to Tony with a sharp air of annoyance. "You threw my book."

"I... okay, it wasn't one of your old, fancy books." He still got that level stare, and so Tony laughed and added, "It's a cheap paperback from a newsstand! And you had a bookmark in it!" That still wasn't good enough, and Stephen's continued annoyance only amused Tony more.

God, he really did love this rock-stubborn emotional lockbox of a human being, and he knew Stephen loved his emergency mode-button self in return. At first, those contrasts aggravated them. Now, they just shored up each other's weaknesses. They really would make a spectacular pair to help chart a child's life, and he hoped Stephen could see that, by now.

Stephen's irritation eventually faded, but as it did, he raised one last concern. "I don't know if this is an official part of the agreement, or if it's just assumed, but if something happens to Pepper and Phil..."

Tony sobered instantly. "It won't."

"I'm just saying. You can say we're only shields, and not painting any targets, but if that kid actually lives in this house?"

"Nothing is going to happen to him," Tony snapped. He heard his own answer, and awkwardly corrected, "To them." The last bit had been necessary to add for Stephen's hypothetical of a child without parents, but they both knew exactly who would be on Tony's mind as the next year rolled on. It was April, 2011, and the baby's birthday would probably be some time in September. If 2012's timing was like before, that baby wouldn't even be able to sit up before... Phil...

"Nothing's going to happen to him," Tony insisted, more to himself than Stephen.

Stephen studied Tony, uncertain how to respond to the intensity of that promise, then nodded slowly. "Right. We'd be pretty terrible godfathers if we let the father die on our watch."

Tony's breath caught. "So, is that a yes?"

Stephen didn't answer, but did look to one side and smile.

"Is that a one hundred percent yes?"

"It's a..." Stephen took a deep breath. "Let me sleep on it, just to be sure. To be completely sure. Because we can't renege on this."

Tony caught Stephen's face in his hands again, and grinned. "We did already tell them yes, you know." And of course Stephen would phrase it like 'reneging.'

The look he got in return said that Stephen knew that perfectly well, and he'd accepted that this would happen, but he still needed a night to accept that acceptance. In the exhausted, excited, loving silence, Tony laughed delightedly and pulled him into a kiss. "Thank you. Thank you."

"Now, may I please have my book back?" Stephen asked, trying to again seem emotionally composed.

"No," Tony said, and kissed him anew, then dropped another kiss along Stephen's jaw, just under his
ear. The next one was halfway down Stephen's throat, and then along his collarbone, and soon Tony descended from the chair's armrest to kneel on the floor. This deserved another thank you. An enthusiastic thank you.

_We're gonna be dads_, Tony thought hours later in the quiet darkness of their bedroom. Excitement kept bubbling up and waking him with its intensity. Yes, fine, being a godparent wasn't quite the same thing, but it was close enough that he felt like he could get away with saying 'dad.' At least to himself.

"Imagine hearing all of this right after we landed here," Tony whispered to Stephen, too quietly to wake him. The steady rhythm of his breathing didn't falter, and the moonlit edges of his face and shoulder didn't move. "Right after that hangover, we hear: you and me. Together for real. Happy. Dads."

Stephen didn't stir. 'Dad' remained safe to say.

"It's gonna be hard," Tony admitted, still in a whisper. "God, I just... my dad had these impossible standards. I don't want to be like that, but what if I am?" His head shook slightly against his pillow. "We'll check each other, okay? Call each other out. But back each other up."

Hesitantly, Tony reached out a few fingers and barely brushed them against Stephen's shoulder. A faint smile bloomed at the unexpected memory of touching him there after the night with the black blood, when the sudden realization of love left Tony completely overwhelmed and giddy. Love surged again, but in a deeper and far more consuming way. Feeling newly content, Tony scooted closer under the sheets and melded his body against Stephen's back. His arm snaked around Stephen's chest, over the scar that had brought them together.

That contact finally earned a soft, sleepy _hrmm_?

Tony kissed Stephen's neck again, then closed his eyes and made a soft, pleased noise in reply. He felt Stephen drift back under a few seconds later, and Tony followed him.

The next day was an completely-sure yes, Stephen promised, though Tony could still see an edge of hesitation over breakfast. It wasn't enough to ruin their plans, and Stephen probably thought he'd covered it. Hell, Stephen might not even know that he was showing unease. He prided himself on his steely nerves.

Later that night, Tony walked up from his workshop, only to stop dead at the stairwell exit. At the last second, his hand reached out before the door could click closed.

All day, Stephen had been back at Kamar-Taj. He'd made plans with Karl for moving to New York, he'd worked with Wong about which relics to transfer to the city, and he'd approached Melinda about also coming to Bleecker Street. And apparently, he'd visited the library for a volume that Tony very much doubted he'd already borrowed before today.

In Stephen's hand was a small object: a handle sized for a baby's fingers, with a bulge at one end. It looked like an unremarkable baby's rattle, right up until Stephen glanced back at the opened book and his other hand gestured. The rattle's round end rippled, then shifted from a monochrome plastic lump into a gently-spinning miniature galaxy. Oversized colorful nebulae rounded out the empty spaces in the sphere, and when he tried waving it, a faint trail of purple, turquoise, and gold followed.

It matched the astronomy baby mobile, Tony realized. His vision blurred until he blinked hard, and his heart swelled with the uncomplicated joy he'd felt while designing that miniature solar system.
Then Tony took some quiet steps backward, so his voice would echo in the stairwell, and called, "Hey, you ready for dinner, yet?"

As he'd expected, Stephen didn't want to show off his idea until it was finalized. When Tony emerged back into the living room, the rattle was tucked away and the book was closed.

'Dinner sounds great," Stephen said, and reached for that book like he was opening it for the first time. The cover appeared to be in Sanskrit, so there was really no need to put on this whole charade, but Tony kept pretending that he hadn't noticed Stephen making that toy.

"I'll order," Tony promised, and headed for the kitchen. "So, if the kid'll be born sometime in September, I'm hoping it won't be on the 15th. Let 'em start off with a day that's a little less... complicated."

Stephen chuckled. "Yeah, probably best not to start life on the day the universe broke."

Tony's feet drew to a halt, for he'd been struck again with all the love that had overwhelmed him in bed the night before. He turned, and smiled. "Although... it was actually a pretty good day."

After a few seconds, Stephen smiled back. His fingers trailed over the cover of the book he'd grabbed for the sake of that unborn child, to make a toy he wouldn't yet admit to crafting. "It was."
Chapter 44

Chapter Notes

Buckle up. The next four chapters are basically one Avengers movie that'll take them through Loki's arrival, and things are going down.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"It's a boy," Pepper announced. Bright, cheerful May sun lent a perfect setting to this happy news, as did gentle scatterings of flowers across the park's landscape. She was visibly heavier by now, and had decided to walk as much as she could manage as the final trimester approached. Normally Phil came with her on her morning strolls, but today she'd asked the two of them to join.

Stephen knew that Tony had been roughly 60/40 on preferring a girl, but he looked thrilled, regardless. And Stephen held no preference at all, so he simply smiled and wondered, "Have you considered names, yet?"

"Well," Pepper began significantly, and Tony and Stephen looked at each other with amusement. They knew that voice.

The two of them had a huge shared tendency, and that was to assume they were the only person capable of solving some particular problem. After some (serious) initial aggravation, being faced with that from each other was actually a positive. Both of them simply couldn't be the lone hero who didn't need anyone else, not if they faced the same challenge. It still led to arguments, sure, but it had also slowly taught both of them to check some of their worst impulses, and play better with others.

But Pepper and Phil had a very different shared tendency, and it was one that each other hadn't challenged. Instead, their precise natures had reinforced, and they'd happily turned their household into a well-ordered machine. They had their 'checklists,' Tony often chuckled, and Stephen had begun using the the same language in his own thoughts.

As Pepper continued, they got a glimpse into the sort of complex analysis that had been used to settle on a name for their son. "First off, we agreed that we wanted to hyphenate our names. But then the issue became which order to put them in."

"Coulson-Potts," Tony said, rolling it around his mouth like a wine tasting. "Potts-Coulson. Coulson-Potts, Potts-Coulson." He passed under an overhanging tree in considering silence. "Gotta say, I like the second option."

Pepper held up a finger. "We were satisfied with how both names sounded, so alphabetical order in the classroom was the deciding factor. I always hated seeing so many people ahead of me, while..." Trailing off, she studied Tony and Stephen. "Actually, I'm surprised you two didn't think of that."

They exchanged a glance. "I'd be first," Tony grinned at Stephen.

Yes, Stark came (barely) before Strange alphabetically, but. "Only for last names," Stephen countered.

Tony grin slid into smugness. "Anthony."
"Oh, come on, you never go by Anthony."

Laughing, Pepper chose a path at the next fork. They obligingly followed the steady pace she set. "Then it came time to pick a first name, and Phil. He. Well." Sighing, she drawled, "I think this is your fault, Tony. You invited him to the Avengers, and he's been so excited about training, and the suit, and..."

"Don't tell me he wants to name the kid 'Sentinel.'"

Pepper snorted. "No. But he's all fired up about the idea of a team, and so he wanted to pick a P name. Like the two of us."

After a few confused steps, Tony said, "But your real name isn't Pepper."

Startled, Stephen looked at Tony, then Pepper, and promptly tried to cover his surprise. (How hadn't he known that?)

With a short nod of agreement, Pepper answered Tony. "Of course it's not. But he figures that the whole world knows me as Pepper, and he's Phil, and so we need a 'P' baby. Honestly, I think it's silly, but he's just so excited about the idea of us as a team." And she smiled and shrugged, carrying the amused resignation of however many discussions they'd held.

Hopefully, they hadn't settled on 'Peter,' Stephen thought. That could get weird. "So, Phil Junior?" he prompted.

"It was on the table, but we started talking about school, and college, and careers, and..." Seeing their mounting impatience, Pepper stopped and turned to them. "Pierce."

Stephen and Tony blinked back at her, and then Tony said with deliberate emphasis, "Pierce Coulson-Potts?"

"I think it sounds very capable and confident," Pepper replied cheerfully.

"It sounds like he's the douchey frat bro villain in an eighties movie."

Pepper's gaze sharpened at the criticism of her first child's carefully selected name. "Tony, this was actually not a discussion item on the agenda. It was just an informational item."

Tony blinked back at her a few more times, then smiled. "Pierce. Great name. Strong. Like Brosnan. Hey, Phil wants to be James Bond, so that works." He nodded. "I love it."

With a tolerant eyeroll, Pepper set back into motion.

"Pierce?" Tony hissed as soon as she was out of audible distance. "Seriously, that name belongs to a rich fraternity jerk wearing a pastel sweater tied over his shoulders." After a few steps, he added, "And the kid's just going to be rich."

Stephen's reply was also too quiet for her to hear. "Actually, when you said the full name, I realized they were planning to give their child the initials of phencyclidine. PCP. Angel dust."

Fresh horror dawned. "God, I didn't even realize. They're totally giving him a drug name."

But when Tony moved to speed his pace, to close the gap between them and Pepper, Stephen caught his shirt. "No."

"I don't want my godson to be a frat douche on PCP."
"As a student, I was required to complete rotations in different fields of medicine. Including obstetrics. And you know one of the first things I learned there?" Stephen waited a significant moment, then finished, "Don't criticize the name."

Tony grumbled. "Whatever." A few steps later, he added, "It is funny to picture you stuck delivering babies."

"There's a reason I went into a field where all my patients are anesthetized."

"I can hear you talking about me!" Pepper called without turning back. "And about Pierce!"

This time, Tony did hurry to join her, and explained, "Actually, I was making fun of learning that Stephen had to spend time in a delivery ward on his way to becoming a brain doctor."

Pepper turned to Stephen when he joined them, with a real look of amusement. "You did OB-GYN?"

"Rotations are standard student procedure," Stephen grumbled. He hated being anyone's punchline. "Along with internal, radiology, emergency, pediatrics—" The last made both Tony and Pepper burst into laughter, and Stephen stopped to spread his hands with outrage and wait for an explanation for what was so hilarious, or an apology, or at least an excuse.

"Sorry," Pepper giggled, and struggled visibly to bring herself back under control. "The image of..." Her lips thinned as she slammed her mouth shut, and held like that for a few seconds. Then, she finished, "You are a perfect neurosurgeon, Stephen." Tony snickered at her response. "It's an incredibly challenging field and the world is so lucky you pursued it," she added diplomatically.

"I saved those twin infant boys," Stephen said, now incredibly grumpy. "With the shared ependymoma." Yes, fine, he was still concerned about how he would do as a godfather, but that didn't mean they were allowed to mock his abilities around children. Even if he had told Tony he was terrible with them. And... even if he was terrible.

Of course, that did nothing to challenge Pepper's observation that he seemed better with kid brains than with actual, entire children. "I should really get to work," Pepper said, still diplomatic. "We're close to a park exit where I can have Happy meet me. Thank you for coming out here, and I'm so glad that you love the name Pierce." Her smile dared Tony to say otherwise. He was smart enough not to take that bait.

As soon as Pepper left them, Tony turned to Stephen, let a full-body groan contort all of his limbs, and then demanded, "Pierce? Why not just name him Preston, and give him a polo pony for his first birthday? Oh God, he's going to major in finance. I'm going to have to spend so much time showing that kid some tech."

Stephen folded his arms. "I actually got very high marks on my pediatrics rotation."

Tony's complaints fell away into amusement. "You've gotta let it go."

Stephen shrugged.

"You've got to let it go," Tony repeated, and laughed as he squeezed one of Stephen's folded arms. "Because this is what it's going to be like." A quick, impish grin flickered. He gestured toward the path Pepper had taken, and then back toward Manhattan, where their building sat as both a home and the interim headquarters of the Avengers. "Welcome to the family."

The phrase interrupted Stephen's grousing. As his rigidly folded arms lowered, he felt a small smile
starting to build. He'd never want to be a punchline, but as for this other 'family' bit, well... he rather liked the sound of that. Much to his surprise.

And, much to his surprise, he even enjoyed being on a team.

"Double or nothing," announced Clint Barton a week later, and retrieved a variety of custom arrows from his quiver. Once he'd been convinced that Tony and Stephen's combined shields were truly up to the task, he'd let loose inside Wooster's training area with all sorts of fascinating weaponry.

"You said that before the last round," said Melinda May with a smirk, and flourished her gun of choice. Its enhanced abilities had captured more targets than even Clint's sharp aim could manage.

"Yeah, well, that's before I knew all of the weirdass stuff you can do."

"I'm in," announced Sam Wilson, who also drew a gun, and Natasha Romanoff, who drew two. Off to the side, Karl Mordo mildly asked, "Are we allowed to participate if we're not using any sort of ranged physical weapon?"

"No," Natasha announced, and studied the empty expanse of the training area. "Wait your turn."

Rhody didn't want to add his suit to the mix; its machine guns and missiles were overpowered for this marksmanship competition. Steve and Phil were focused on defense, Tony and Stephen were busy running the exercise, and so the finalized lineup took their positions and waited for the team-sized assault to begin.

As Tony reinforced his shields and holographic emitters, Stephen flipped through the books that Karl had brought to New York for this purpose. "Give me a minute," he said, loudly enough to carry across the crowd. "I want to make sure this is convincing."

"He actually has to check his notes, first," Sam said, and raised one eyebrow. "That never happens. I think we should be worried."

"Needing to take on the equivalent of inter-dimensional gods does mean I've prioritized spells besides mass glamours, yes," Stephen dryly replied. Karl chuckled, and Melinda smirked. The rest of the room shared a collective sidelong look at the mention of 'gods.' "All right, Tony, add the emitter resistance to the enemies... now." As Stephen's spell cast, those of them outside of its field of influence saw a new pocket reality almost as if a movie was playing out in front of them, on a two-dimensional screen and with obvious special effects.

But inside the field, the quartet saw the Wooster room dissolve into a broad avenue in midtown Manhattan. Stephen's spell brought sensory intensity that holograms never could, and the fighters now heard screams, smelled car exhaust, felt humidity cling to their skin. After a few seconds to set the scene, aliens began to pour from the illusory sky. With each weapon blast they sent, Tony's holographic emitters sent a shockwave of pressure that made the danger feel all too real.

"It's an impressive spell," Steve said after a considering minute of watching the fighters dive out of (supposed) harm's way.

By now Tony had taken over controlling the physical interface for the impacts, while the illusion continued to play on its own, and so Stephen turned to answer Steve. "If this proves useful, I could try to learn more of these. Illusions are their own category of magic. It's not one I've put much effort toward, yet." Karl and Melinda were better with melee-range spells and weapon enhancements, Stephen was better with long-range attacks and dimensional manipulation, and none of them were particular masters of illusions. Hopefully, what he could do now would be sufficient, as he didn't
want to wander too far afield.

"This one looks pretty good already," Steve said approvingly, and returned his focus to the competition.

Inside the illusion, aliens continued to attack. Clint's specialized tech-disrupting arrowheads took out their transportation and Melinda's magical bullets did the same. Soon, Natasha and Sam fell behind on the scoreboard. (Tony had added one as a gigantic hologram in the illusory sky.)

"Can we do a defensive exercise next?" Phil wondered, coming up beside them.

"Good idea," Rhodey agreed. "You'd lose points for each person who dies, instead of racking up points for taking down aliens."

"I'm in," Steve immediately said.

"Intriguing," Karl said, clearly wanting to join.

"Tony, it'll be the four of us next," Stephen decided. He wanted to play a little, too, and he preferred saving even illusory lives to taking them.

Ten minutes later, the exercise ended with Clint (finally) victorious. His crow of triumph was ruined somewhat by Melinda reminding him that yes, he'd won that double or nothing, but they hadn't bet anything. Still, the joy of his arrows triumphing over guns and literal magic appeared to be satisfaction enough, and the first group stepped out of the combat area as the illusion vanished.

Three seconds later, Tony's ceiling shields shimmered, and all of the arrows and bullets lodged there fell to clatter against the floor. The room let out a collective chuckle as an army of cleaning drones scurried out to collect them. "I'll be glad when team exercises happen in that new facility upstate," Stephen said dryly, and looked at the unmarked ceiling. On the floor above them sat his library and archive, and although he did trust Tony's shields, he'd prefer not to push their luck by continually firing in the direction of his very valuable stuff. "All right, Phil. Suit up."

With a proud smile, Phil reached for the watch Tony had made for him. Turned one way, the interface could extend energy shields that would keep him safe in the field; turned the other, it summoned his suit from storage. Several floors down, Sentinel came to life. When it reached the fourth floor via a rooftop launch chute, its pieces clicked around Phil's legs, then arms, then torso with mechanical efficiency.

Unlike the Iron Man or War Machine suits, Sentinel was designed to stay in the back lines and protect, rather than attack. Accordingly, Tony hadn't given it their aggressive visual stylings. Sentinel wasn't in gunmetal grey, nor fiery crimson, but in glossy, unblemished white. Gold trimmed its joints, but the suit's only other markings were two chevrons on the chest in rich scarlet and blue.

"Show-off," Clint drawled as the dramatic suit-up sequence concluded. Phil grinned at him, and then let his helmet snap into place. Its eyes glowed azure.

Melinda looked over her best friend, then snorted. "You look like an iPhone, Phil."

Phil turned to her. Though his suit looked different than Tony's or Rhodey's, its voice was still harshly mechanical. "Don't be jealous just because my outfit doesn't look like a spa robe."

"A spa robe?" Karl repeated with slight offense, and looked down at his own mystic ensemble. Stephen refused to give him the satisfaction of a reaction.
Before Stephen walked forward into the training area, he glanced surreptitiously toward Tony. This wasn’t the first time the Sentinel suit had been put to use, but as next year’s attack approached, Tony craved more data on its effectiveness. He’d be watching this exercise closely, eying anything else he’d need to do to save Phil’s life if Loki’s arrival went wrong.

"All right, let’s do this," Stephen announced, and held up his hand. The other three defending fighters joined him, and after a nod from Tony, Stephen cast his spell. The blank expanse of their training area again fell away into an illusion of midtown Manhattan, and from inside of the spell it actually felt, smelled, and sounded real. But Tony’s hologram hanging in the sky had a different label than before: REMAINING LIVES: 1000.

"Okay," crackled Tony’s voice from seemingly nowhere. "Keep that number as high as possible. Stephen, cue the aliens."

Immediately after the sky opened for another alien attack, the number in the sky dropped to 999. Everyone looked down at the elderly man who’d tripped over a curb and gotten hit by a fleeing car.

"Well," Steve sighed, "let’s try to not let the number fall any more."

Phil and Stephen had the advantage for this exercise, as their shields could grow large enough to indicate relatively safe escape paths. Steve had his own methods for keeping people alive, and that was to direct the crowd that could otherwise turn into a deadly stampede. He leapt in and out of danger, raising his own shield to protect himself as needed, but always stayed visible to the crowd as a guide to follow. And Karl...

Stephen nodded in approval as he saw Karl’s boot relics kick into effect, and he leapt impossibly high to land on one of the protective barriers over the crowd. Karl would let them shield the civilian lives, then, and he’d whittle down the threats that made those shields necessary. When he bounded upward again, the Staff of the Living Tribunal extended like a whip and arced over his head, aimed at the underside of another alien vessel, and—

The hologram in the sky abruptly changed to read SIMULATION PAUSE. A second later, it added, STEPHEN END THE SPELL.

Startled, Stephen did. While his illusion fell away, as did his and Phil’s barriers, Karl returned to the ground. With the magical facade gone, everyone blinked up at the gash that Karl had carved into the ceiling, even through Stephen and Tony’s layered shields. The latter crackled as its energy field attempted to re-form.

"Well. That is one very angry stick," Clint said as he took a step back from the Staff.

Karl smiled proudly, and twirled it once before it retracted into its compressed, non-glowing form. Sam and Natasha stepped back, as well.

"I’m just... going to go check on the fifth floor," Stephen said as Tony stared at his failed shields with dismay, and hurried for the stairs. Thankfully, only one artifact had toppled in its case after the impact from below, and no books had slid off their shelves. "I understand if Tony wants to take his time making the perfect upstate campus," Stephen grumbled to the Cloak as he looked at the warped spot in the floor. "But maybe these team exercises could relocate to that flex space warehouse?"


"Give me a minute."

"No. Seriously." The volume dropped on Tony’s end, like he was trying not to be overheard. "I
"kinda forgot about someone."

"Someone?" Stephen echoed, and did turn for the stairwell.

Two minutes later, the entire team emerged onto the streets of Queens, with all three power suits in play and everyone wielding their weapon or shield of choice. "So, this asshole stole one of my municipal arc reactors," Tony sighed, and watched an energy beam lift a car into the sky, then slam it back down onto the pavement. Screams echoed at the impact, and again at the energized whip that tore those pieces into smaller projectiles.

"What are we dealing with, Tony?" Steve demanded.

"A guy who had a serious beef with my dad." Tony grumbled, scanned something, and added, "Okay, wait. Wait. There's more than just Vanko. Hammer was supposed to be out of the equation after Fury did his clean-up! My sensors say that it's Hammertech swinging those cars around, and Vanko apparently stole one of my new oversized reactors to fuel it."

"That sounds... incredibly overpowered and dangerous," Rhodey said.

"Not arguing. And—"

Phil jerked his arm up. Just in time, a shield extended to cover the team after a distant rumble turned abruptly into an explosion. "I hope you don't have any more arc reactors stored in this warehouse behind us, Tony," he said. Even in his suit, he sounded nervous.

"No. This is the flex space, and we're between projects. Energy research is a mile away." Tony stepped forward, scanning the area around them, and then groaned anew. "Seriously?"

"That's not a word I love," Sam drawled. Nor did Stephen, though he stayed silent. From the strength of Tony's reaction, he suspected that things had gone very wrong. Somehow.

Tony gestured toward the fight, which hadn't yet turned its attention toward their arrival. "Okay. Summary. Extremely angry accent man with the energy whip hates my dad. He stole one of my extra-strength reactors to fuel tech designed by extremely douchey man who hates me. And that explosion came from another extremely douchey man who designed this chemical called Extremis, which tends to make things and/or people go boom." Tony groaned again. "This is a whole lot to be happening all at once."

After a moment of consideration, Clint turned to him. "There are a lot of people who don't like you."

"Not really relevant at the moment."

"Actually, it does seem pretty relevant," Natasha said. "Because if—"

Abruptly, the reason for the lack of attention paid to the Avengers' arrival became apparent. A roar ripped through the air, as loud as a jet taking off. Then, leaping high enough to be seen over the rooftops, Emil Blonsky roared again before falling back to Earth.

Steve blinked a few times before asking, "Wait. Is the Abomination fighting the guys who hate Tony?"

"How did he even get out?" Rhodey wondered. "The military locked him up after Harlem."

"Okay." Tony's head tilted. "So this is... really, really weird."
Yeah, this definitely didn't match up with anything that Tony had described from Round One. Stephen allowed himself a few seconds of continued confusion before stepping forward to get the group's attention. "Whatever the reason for this fight, it's putting the entire neighborhood at risk. We should shut it down. Now."

"Right," Steve agreed. "We do the sim teams from earlier. Defense team, we circle around northeast and push them toward the water. If another explosion happens, we don't want it in the middle of buildings. Offense team, head southwest. Let them know we're also here for a fight and draw them in the direction we want. Stark, Rhodes, take to the air. Look for anyone heading in a direction we don't want and encourage them otherwise."

"Instead of the water, should we be relocating this fight to somewhere even less crowded?" Melinda wondered, and fingered her sling ring.

"We'll portal them if we need to, but we don't know that we've ID'd all the targets, yet. I'd hate to leave a hostile here without a good babysitter."

"It's Vanko with Hammertech, Killian and some lackeys with Extremis, and Blonsky," Tony promised, with one hand near his helmet's scanners. "That's the whole show."

"Just in case there's someone else," Steve said emphatically, despite earning an offended stance from Tony at the suggestion that his suit's scanners had missed a potential threat. Then, he insisted again, "You and Rhody take to the air and keep an eye on things. Blast anyone who isn't following the other teams' suggestions until they decide to comply."

"Fine. Let's go," Tony said, and shot into the air, followed shortly by Rhody.

"Stay safe," Steve told the other group. "Don't take unnecessary risks. We outnumber them, and I want to keep it that way."

"Stay safe," Natasha echoed warmly, and took Steve's hand in hers to squeeze it. The release was slow and lingering, and their fingers trailed against each other before separating.

Were the two of them seriously not just fucking with Tony's head? Stephen blinked once, hard, and then set off with Steve, Phil, and Karl to drive the attackers toward an inlet of water that cut its way deep into Queens. The Cloak kept him low, to avoid attention, and Phil jogged rather than using his suit's noisy engines.

As they approached, Steve asked, "Phil, can your scanners identify any more of those explosions before they happen? If we know it's coming, you three could contain it."

"I'm seeing a few people with notably elevated body temperatures," Phil confirmed, as he tried to sneak another subtle admiring glance toward Captain America on an actual battlefield, right next to him. "But for now, they're holding steady. I'll let you know if things change, Cap."

Even when they got within a block of the fight, then peered around a corner to put their heads in view, none of the fighters noticed them. Despite the Avengers being the biggest (and only) superhero names around, they were ignored. The conflict in front of them remained remarkably self-contained, and inexplicable.

Sam's first strafing run from above finally got their attention. Vanko's energy whip arced instinctively toward Sam's wings, who easily sailed over its reach, but Killian tried to dodge back to find better position in territory that had abruptly become even more hostile. He rebounded off Phil's shield, instead, and the push to steer their foes toward the water had been officially engaged.
Apparently, Extremis made people very strong, very fast, and exceptionally fiery. The team's shields were well-suited to deal with all of that. Gouts of fire splashed uselessly against walls of magic and energy, as did super-powered punches, and Killian's attempts to get through to them soon shifted back toward the rampaging Abomination. Allowing himself to be pushed into a reluctant retreat was preferable to ignoring that monster at his back.

"Can we shoot these guys?" Phil wondered during a temporary lull. Clint's electronics-disrupting arrows had caused a hiccup to Vanko's system, too, and so they'd been given a real chance to gain an advantage as they pushed everyone inexorably toward the water.

Stephen grimaced at the casual suggestion of fatalities, but didn't argue. He knew no one would listen.

"Try to avoid shooting the Extremis types," came Tony's broadcasted response through Phil's helmet. "It might work, or it might make them go boom. But for anyone else... knock yourself out."

Abruptly, they realized that the question had become irrelevant. The Tony-Hater squad had cleared the street, drawn further southwest after a sudden, showy surge by the offense team. But a mere block away, in the midst of dust from settling rubble and framed by the backdrop of a spurting broken hydrant, was the Abomination. And he was looking at them.

"I think he remembers us," Stephen said dryly, and readied a shield.

"Remembers you," Steve corrected, and raised his own shield. "I was off steering civilians."

"I've got this," Phil said cockily as that ugly, hulking grey figure snarled. Sentinel's energy shields spread into a broad, flat rectangle, as big as a van. Overhead, Tony drew to a halt in the air and looked down at the sight with clear concern: Phil Coulson, staring down the Abomination, with only Tony's tech between him and certain death.

Stephen didn't need Tony's prompting to help, and his own shields layered instantly with Phil's.

"Rogers, we've got the defense handled. Call in some firepower."

"We're fine," Karl said as the Abomination rebounded off their shields, roaring.

"No, he's right," Steve said, and reached for his earpiece. "We need more offense with Stephen busy shielding us. Rhodey, Tony, we could use your help with—"

"We're fine," Karl calmly repeated, and gripped both ends of the Staff of the Living Tribunal. It glowed in his hands as he lifted it, level with his eyes and parallel to the ground. He studied the Abomination over its edge. Its light grew brighter with each breath.

The next time the Abomination threw himself at Phil's and Stephen's layered shields, striking them hard enough to send both men stumbling back a few steps, Karl leapt impossibly high, like he'd done in the simulation. This time, he flipped over shields instead of landing on them. To Stephen's sudden horror, Karl's arc put him not only on the other side of their shields, but also just a few vulnerable feet away from a monstrous foe who'd needed Tony, Rhodey, and the Hulk to put him down.

But then, at the base of that arc, the Staff impacted the back of the Abomination's head. A distinct cracking sound followed.

As Karl landed lightly on the ground, the Abomination landed hard, and didn't move.

Stephen gawked at Karl and let his shield vanish. Steve stood up straighter. Phil lowered his hands.
"The physically stronger the foe," Karl said, and smirked as he rested one end of the Staff against the street, "the stronger its blows become." Clearly, he enjoyed the open disbelief he'd earned from the men around him. "We've got this handled," he then promised Rhodey and Tony, who'd flown in to also stare at his one-hit victory.


Tony's head tilted. "I have got to get that stick into the lab."

Karl's flat look in reply said that he would be doing no such thing.

"Should we be expecting our oversized friend to rejoin us any time soon?" Steve wondered, and nudged the Abomination with one foot. Now, Stephen could see that the missing hand and foot on the beast had been replaced by grey metal prosthetics.

"He's out," Rhodey said after a quick scan. "I'm assuming he'll wake up eventually, because this dude's hard to kill. But it's not going to be quick."

"Then it sounds like this clusterfuck just got a little less clustered," Tony said cheerfully. "Rhodey, let's go help out near the water. And you guys... try to catch up."

After that dismissive good-bye, and Tony and Rhodey's subsequent departure, Phil said dryly toward the sky, "I have foot jets too, you know." He gestured toward Stephen. "And he has a flying cape."

"Cloak."

"Aren't they pretty synonymous?"

"Not if you're being precise," Stephen said, and turned to follow Tony's path. "And I know you like to be—"

Mid-sentence, something struck him in the chest, hard. The Cloak's instincts kept that blow from crashing Stephen into a nearby brick wall, but it couldn't shield him from the invisible, unexpected strike. A rib's cracked, he instantly knew, and grimaced at his next painful intake of air.

Wide-eyed, Karl spun to face their unseen attacker with the Staff in hand, only to cry out and drop to one knee. His weapon went skittering away after a sharp strike to that arm, and a third blow in rapid succession knocked him dizzy.

Whatever had attacked them, it moved so quickly that Phil and Steve needed that long to react with anything but instinctive self-defense. "Shields up," Phil announced, and formed his energy wall into a cylindrical perimeter around the group. Steve darted through its closing gap to retrieve Karl, managed to return without being targeted, and held him steady as the shield's edges met.

"Can you see what's happening?" Stephen wondered, clutching his ribs. He wasn't sure that he hadn't also somehow taken a blow to the head like Karl, because his vision kept twisting. Phil's shields were the same steady, translucent blue he knew from Tony's suit, but through them, the sight of a Queens warehouse district kept warping and shifting like an error code in reality. It was a small spot, though; only the size of...


"Do you know who this is?" Steve asked quietly. He'd seen the ghostly figure, too.

"Not a clue." But that didn't mean Stephen was out of ideas. "Phil, we need to relocate the shield
area toward the Staff," he announced, though talking this loudly lanced fire through his injured ribcage.

One short shake of the head. "I'd prefer not to risk shifting the field until we know what we're up against."

Stephen's volume dropped to more comfortably quiet levels, that made him sound like he was sharing a deadly secret. "Remember, Karl's Staff can break through energy shields. With it out there, we're sitting ducks in here." And then, Stephen waited.

As expected, that error code in reality had listened in when he murmured his warning. A few seconds later, Karl's weapon lifted off the ground. Although Steve and Phil tensed for the approaching impact, and Karl was still too dizzy to notice, Stephen simply fought back a smug smile.

When the Staff swung, Stephen knew they'd won. A relic chose its owner, and the strongest ones could be quite emphatic about that decision. Whoever this was, it wasn't who the Staff wanted to wield it.

The plan worked. Phil's shields barely rippled when the Staff impacted it, but their assailant let out a distinctly feminine scream as the Staff's power backfired. "I don't think so," Stephen said when she tried to dizzily scramble away, now visible, and caught her wrists with the same energy bonds that he'd used to trap Obadiah years earlier. They attached to the asphalt as securely as they had to a condominium carpet, even as she fitzed and glitched inside them.

(Oh God, that movement hurt his ribs.)

"Additional hostile secured," Steve said over the team comms, once he'd turned over Karl to Stephen's careful medical inspection. "She's locked down."

"She?" Tony asked after a significant pause. "Wait, wait, additional hostile? Is everyone okay?"

"We're verifying," Phil said, and knelt next to Stephen.

"I'm fine," Karl murmured, though his gaze was still unfocused from the blow he'd taken to his head.

"I'll be the judge of that," Stephen said in a voice soft enough not to demand any deep breaths. The inspection was quick, for Karl's condition was unfortunately obvious. "Yeah, you need a full hospital work-up."

"I am attuned to my body," Karl protested, "and... I am not..." Trailing off, his expression warped with nausea.

"You really do need medical," Stephen insisted. Vomiting after a head injury was never a good sign, and that was going to happen real soon, now. He instinctively moved to help Karl stand, so they could walk through a portal toward the help he needed, only to gasp when agony screamed anew. Okay. It was probably more than one cracked rib.

"I've got him," Steve promised. He gently helped Karl rise, then paused with professional courtesy to allow him to cough up and spit out a large mouthful of bile.

With the three of them focused on recovery, Phil turned his attention to their captive. Now, they could see that their assailant was slight and slender. Even if she'd struck Stephen's ribs with a full roundhouse kick, she probably had some physical enhancements to make the blow land quite as hard as it had. A pale grey catsuit covered her completely, topped by a hooded helmet with an unsettling faceplate that looked like a cyborg crossed with a spider.
If the woman's occasional, continued glitching still surprised them, though, it was nothing compared to how Phil jerked back when he figured out how to get the helmet off. "Ava?!" he demanded.

"You know her?" Steve demanded as he steadied Karl.

"Ava Starr," Phil explained, and retracted his own helmet. From the ground, Ava stared hollowly up at him. "She's a S.H.I.E.L.D. agent. One of our best."

(Fury, Romanoff, Barton, Coulson, May, Hill, Starr. By now, had Stephen not encountered all of S.H.I.E.L.D.'s best?)

Behind them, more foot jets roared, then cut abruptly off. "Is everyone okay?" Tony demanded again, and ran forward as his helmet retracted. Relief painted him at the first sight he saw: the hostile captured, with Phil whole and healthy over her. But that shifted to regret when he took in Karl's injuries, and he turned to Stephen to say, "I swear, whoever that is, she didn't come up on my scanners. Totally invisible. I'm—"

As Tony drew him into a tight embrace, pulling broken bones against a metal exoskeleton, Stephen couldn't hold back a sharp cry.

"—Sorry," Tony finished, and released him. Regret changed to horror.

"It's okay," Stephen promised, though his voice was more strained than he'd like. His hand pressed against the curve of his ribcage, and that did help with the pain. Slightly. "Just cracked ribs, nothing serious. But Karl needs help."

By now, Karl didn't protest the suggestion. Yeah, they needed a hospital.

"Tony, how's the fight wrapping up over there?" Steve wondered.

"They've." Tony swallowed. As his gaze darted back and forth between Karl, Stephen, and Ava, even more regret filled him. "They've got it handled."

"Stephen, if you two need to head to a hospital, I can find out what's up with this rogue agent," Phil said, and frowned down at whoever Ava Starr was. "But I'd appreciate back-up, just in case the Abomination comes to a little earlier than we expect."

Steve began, "Tony's suit could scan Blonsky—"

"I am going with them to the hospital," Tony cut in, with a tone that brooked no argument. "Steve, watch Phil's back." He was concerned about Phil Coulson's fate, yes, but there was someone who'd always rank higher on Tony's scale.

Steve obligingly let Tony take over supporting Karl while Stephen opened a portal, and the three men stepped from Queens to Manhattan. "Sorry about that," Stephen then said to the nurse he'd startled. The nurse blinked at him, at the tray of surgical instruments she'd dropped after his sudden portal, and again at him. "Could you please go find Dr. Palmer?"

"My scanners didn't show anything," Tony said in the silence that followed. A crowd gathered to stare at the trio of heroes from a far end of the hallway, but he didn't acknowledge them. They might as well not exist. "Another threat was right next to you, and I didn't even notice. I just... left."

"We're okay," Stephen promised.

Tony turned to look at him, and then dragged his gaze deliberately downward, to where Stephen
Only cracked ribs," Stephen reminded him. "You've had far worse. Repeatedly. We just need to get Karl a MRI, and all the fallout will be handled."

Sighing, Tony looked away to nod in greeting toward Christine as she approached. Soon, Tony walked behind Karl's gurney on its path to the MRI room, while the Cloak had Stephen smoothly glide a few inches above the floor, so quick steps wouldn't jostle him. That trip ate up time, as did Stephen ducking off for an X-ray. By the time they waited for his Karl's final results, the worst of Tony's fear had faded. "Sorry," he then said, less strained with fear but still full of regret. "I just keep kicking myself for flying off."

"Only cracked ribs," Stephen repeated with a faint smile. The X-ray had confirmed that. This was unpleasant, but hardly life-threatening, and now that he knew that no worse injury lurked, he allowed the majority of his pain to slip away from acknowledged awareness. "You suffered the exact same... what, four months back?"

"Yeah," Tony reluctantly admitted. His gaze focused back on the room through the windows, where Karl's scans were concluding. If those suit gloves weren't in the way, Stephen would have clasped their hands together to reassure Tony. It'd have to wait.

Tony had grown up assuming that he would take over a weapons manufacturing company that killed distant enemies at the push of a button. It was little wonder that he now thought that lives should be able to be saved with the same clean margins of error, supported by cutting-edge technology and with guaranteed efficiency. Stephen's work, though, had always been up close, and it messily bloodied his hands on a daily basis. He knew that biology was seldom clean or easy. Living bodies loved complications.

A screen flickered with an announcement of incoming scans. Stephen went to look at them without waiting for Christine. "There's damage, but it's not too bad," he murmured as he looked over Karl's results. "Standard concussion recovery protocols should do the job," he added to Christine as she joined them.

"Good." She pored over the results, too, and soon nodded. "I noticed developing bruising on his arm and leg, so I'm also going to take X-rays there. Whatever hit you guys, hit you pretty hard."

Stephen held back a sigh at her inadvertent re-cueing of Tony's concern. "Thank you, Christine. There are also probably going to be some injured civilians from that fight. Should they be directed to the local hospital, or could we—"

"Sure, send 'em in." Christine smiled lopsidedly. "Findlay kind of likes that Metro's turning into the 'superhero ER.' He even keeps trying to get me to bring James in before a date. I think he wants a picture."

Unlike Phil and Pepper hitting it instantly off, Christine and Rhodey's workloads had been too irregular for a smooth romantic launch. Prying into the situation to measure its status felt intrusive, and a little weird, and so Stephen had ignored them. But now that he knew that, yes, they were apparently still together, he found himself happy to hear it. Neither Christine Palmer nor James Rhodes could find a more reasonable, considerate partner.

Stephen nodded. "I'll pass that along to—" Oh, he shouldn't have turned like that to leave. Even with pain sensations muted, that movement stung.

Christine opened her mouth.
"Anti-inflammatories, reduced activity, ice the area as needed, and breathe deeply now and then to avoid pneumonia," Stephen recited.

"Glad I could help," Christine replied with a smirk, then glanced down at her pager. "Looks like your teammates are on their way, and yes, they'll bring along all the civilians we can manage." Melinda must be making those portals. "I'll reply to this request myself. If you want to head home and get comfortable, Stephen, I can handle this. You should be resting those ribs."

Normally, he'd push through to see Karl's recovery all the way into a patient room. For Tony's sake, though, Stephen nodded his thanks and left things at that. Once they were home, Tony finally processed that he was still inside his suit, and stepped out of it to hug Stephen around his shoulders, very gently. "I'm sorry I left," he said, yet again.

"Tony," Stephen laughed. Ow. No laughing right now. Laughing was bad. "I have no idea what that invisible woman was doing, but it was no wonder your scanners overlooked her. And it was one enemy, instead of that whole fight near the water. You were right to leave."

"Yeah, well, we can't afford for my scanners to overlook things," Tony sighed. This would probably prompt at least a week of obsessive upgrading, during which Tony barely left his workshop and ate only when he remembered to. It could be worse, Stephen supposed. God forbid he'd been the one with the concussion, instead of Karl. Then, Tony probably wouldn't eat at all. "Go lie down on the couch. I'll grab you something."

By the time Tony returned with a glass of lemonade and two ibuprofen tablets, an explanation for just who they'd been facing was incoming. "Hey, Phil," Stephen said as the man's holographic head and shoulders appeared, then swallowed down his painkillers. "How'd things end up?" Tony moved to sit near his feet, then seemed to think better of it and instead took a spot in a chair, where he wouldn't jostle Stephen.

"Fury collected the Abomination this time, instead of Ross. Which is probably for the best," Phil added dryly, "because Ross arranged the whole thing."

"What?" Stephen demanded, and began sitting up before he remembered that was a bad idea. Wincing at Stephen's visible pain, Tony gently pushed him back to a flat position. As he did, he prompted Phil to continue.

"Ross and some of his buddies on the Council apparently aren't fans of our team getting so big, so fast. They wanted to keep Fury under tighter control, with less sway over the public, and so Ross suggested not letting Fury be the only one with this particular card in his hand. He did always want to have Blonsky on a team, after all. He arranged for some killer prosthetics for the limbs you cut off, Tony, and set him loose."

"Against a bunch of guys who happen to hate me?" Tony asked dubiously. "That's unbelievably convenient. Emphasis on unbelievable."

"Actually, Ross put out feelers for anyone who hated you, Rhodey, Captain Rogers, or I." Phil hesitated. "I'm not trying to be impolite, but it was apparently way easier to find supervillain types who hate Tony."

Stephen smirked, despite Tony's grumbling.

"After stealing an arc reactor for setup, the flex space warehouse was the actual bait. He promised those men a different situation than they actually walked into, because they'd been set up for the
Abomination's heroic debut." Phil hesitated, sighed, and added, "And Ava's."

"Yeah, who is she?" Stephen wondered.

"A S.H.I.E.L.D. agent with... unique abilities. She can phase through matter, turn herself invulnerable when she does, and pack a mean punch when she phases back." Phil's expression sobered with each word. "And apparently, all of that hurts like hell, and it's been starting to hurt even more in recent years. Director Fury, he hasn't..." After a pause, Phil finished, "General Ross gave Ava reason to believe that he would pursue a cure for her condition with more enthusiasm than Director Fury has, if she also joined his new team."

Tony snorted, and shook his head. "She's an idiot if she believes that."

"She doesn't sound like an idiot," Stephen said, and put a hand back against his broken ribs. "She sounds desperate."

"I'd like to believe that," Phil admitted. "I've done a mission with her, and she didn't seem like a turncoat. Desperation isn't... well, it's not admirable, but it's understandable."

"Where's everyone now?" Tony wondered.

"Abomination's in Fury's lock-up, like I mentioned. So's Ava, and Fury's about as happy with her as you'd imagine. Melinda had to do a portable version of your magical handcuffs, Stephen, to keep her from walking through another wall." Phil exhaled. "And as for the other side... a bunch of people on Extremis blew up, thankfully right along the shoreline, and we brought in Vanko. Justin Hammer now has a warrant for supplying armaments to a 'terrorist.' Everything's wrapped up."

"Good." Tony raked a hand through his hair. "Good. I don't want any loose ends." That sounded different to Stephen than it did to the still-ignorant Phil, but they both nodded. "Phil, upload me all your data from today. I want to assess everything. Everything." That last word came out too emphatically, too emotionally, and he seemed to realize that a second later.

Tony felt like he'd failed on multiple fronts today, from scanners to strategy. He needed any and all data to direct him during the obsessive week ahead, when he'd be renovating his tech with the fate of the entire universe in mind. It was quite a heavy tone to have in his voice, even as he sat next to Stephen and his broken ribs. "After all, gotta make sure you're there for Pierce," Tony added, like all he cared about was the shields.

Phil brightened at the mention of his unborn son's name. "Isn't 'Pierce' great? We worked really hard to pick it out."

"Great," Tony echoed, and nodded.

Stephen nodded, too, and took another sip of lemonade.

Still clearly pleased, Phil continued, "Captain Rogers is handling the situation at the hospital, Melinda is with Karl, and Rhodes is talking to the press. If you'd like, I can handle communications with Fury." They were more than happy to hand off that responsibility. "Great. Rest up, Stephen. A couple people got singed during the Extremis fights, but all in all, we came out of this one pretty well. Let's keep it that way."

A moment later, his hologram vanished. As soon as it did, Stephen rolled his gaze toward Tony. "I suppose it's futile to ask you to not spend the next seventy-two consecutive hours in your workshop."

Tony didn't appear to find the suggestion very plausible or humorous, no. "I left you there. She was
right there on the street. Right there under me. And I just left you with her, without any clue that there was anything to worry about. I just..." His head slowly shook, and the very real emotions he'd fought back on the street began to bubble back up. "When I heard that there was another hostile..."

"It's only broken ribs," Stephen said, like this time Tony might actually listen. "I've had much worse."

"The last time I faced down Killian, Pepper was this close to dying," Tony admitted, and held up his fingers so close they nearly touched. "She was never, ever in more danger than when he showed up."

Oh. "I'm not her," Stephen pointed out, though it was understandable to panic momentarily over that echo of history. "In... many ways." Then he laughed once, and regretted it.

That pained reaction earned fresh dismay from Tony. "I know that. Obviously. I just... he was around today, and I left you there. And I left Phil there. That's a pattern I can't set. I can't. We've got less than a year, Stephen. The kid's due date is on September tenth, and Loki shows up in less than a year, and from this point out I cannot make mistakes."

By now, Stephen knew Tony very well. He couldn't meditate this stress away, pound it into a punching bag, or even fuck it out of his system. He needed to invent, because Tony needed to fix things.

Tony's heart would rest so much easier once they'd pried Mind and Space away from Loki. But until then... he needed to invent.

"I'm just going to stay up here and rest," Stephen relented. "Remember to eat something."

Tony smiled lopsidedly. By now, he knew that this wasn't the best coping mechanism, but he also knew that he had no hope of doing anything else. "I'll set a timer for three hours. I'll check on you then, and I will eat something."

"A fair compromise." Stephen watched Tony walk to the elevator, his gaze already distant as he began running blueprints and numbers through his head. When the door dinged, then closed again with Tony behind it, Stephen looked at the ceiling and sighed.

He hadn't brought this up to Tony, for Tony was already spiraling, but today worried him. It involved players that people knew, and yet they'd done an entirely different dance than in the initial timeline. In this world where Pepper Potts would soon give birth to (sigh) Pierce Coulson-Potts, they apparently faced unexpected villainous team-ups and sudden loyalty shifts from S.H.I.E.L.D. operatives. Hopefully, things would stay predictable enough to manage through next May. Because if they didn't...

"Now I'm spiraling," Stephen murmured, and tried to release his stress in a clumsy form of meditation.

Over the next few hours, concerned messages dinged on his phone. The whole team had heard about his injuries, and wanted to check in. It wasn't a sensation he was used to. Whether as a doctor or a mystic, barely anyone had cared about him, before. But here... welcome to the family, indeed. It wasn't an unpleasant change, but it was a change.

Changes. They'd better still be able to get the drop on Loki, and stop him with one hit as surely as Karl had taken out the Abomination. Because otherwise, he was slippery. And, spiraling or not, Tony was right: they couldn't afford to make mistakes.
A few things: Pepper's having a boy (with a name Tony would never pick) to emphasize that this is really a different place. (But the kid's going to be adorable, anyway.) Ross making that move will have consequences for him, that he'll hate but Tony will very much enjoy. Everyone you'd expect to see by the end of the first Avengers movie will be here.

And I added a character death tag a while back for a reason.
Chapter 45

"Adjust the readouts to display wavelengths as short as three hundred nanometers. Do a tint compression toward red as needed. Color accuracy doesn't matter; I just want to see figure movement." Again, Tony watched the footage he'd taken while hovering in the sky over that Queens street, with Stephen, Phil, Steve, and Karl clustered below him as the Abomination went down hard.

But, even when he reviewed the close-up shots from when he'd landed to stare at Karl's one-hit win, there was nothing. Even when he reviewed light that had crept into ultraviolet, nothing. Even when he looked down the spectrum toward infrared, nothing. Nothing, nothing, nothing.

Groaning, Tony turned toward the framed Pink Floyd album cover hanging on his workshop wall. He'd hoped the prism on it would have been the inspiration he needed, but peeking into the edges just past the visible light spectrum was clearly too easy a solution. "Okay," Tony said, ran a hand through his hair, and tried again. "Let's pull sound recordings from this period. Start isolating any footsteps that don't belong to any of the men visible onscreen."

An alarm startled him during that work, and Tony stood up fast enough to knock over the stool on which he'd been sitting. A second later, he realized that it wasn't alerting him to any danger. As he'd promised Stephen, he needed to go back upstairs. Already, it'd been three hours, yet he'd accomplished nothing.

As he walked out of the elevator, Tony called out, "How are you feel—" but cut off inside the living room. Good. He hadn't been too loud, for Stephen was still asleep.

His position was awkward, though; he'd slipped down a bit from where he'd earlier propped his head on one of the armrests. After a detour to a hallway closet, Tony laid a light blanket over Stephen, and then very gently slid his hand under the back of Stephen's neck, and adjusted him just far enough to place a small throw pillow.

Well, Tony thought with a lopsided smile, and sat quietly down in an armchair. At least I managed to fix one problem.

With a few hours behind him, Tony could admit that cracked ribs weren't that bad. Truly. Hell, someone could get them from coughing too hard. And, with some time to decompress, Tony could even acknowledge that an unexpected attack against Stephen couldn't possibly be fatal, thanks to that oath to the Horkos Staff. Just as Tony's body had moved out of his control while he was proving a point to Rhodey and Steve, Stephen's oath to stay alive would have certainly have steered him out of mortal harm's way.

It'd just been really, really hard to hear that there was a threat that Tony hadn't controlled for, right as he was staring Aldrich Killian in his smug face again.

This almost felt like a betrayal to admit, but what he had now was better than what he'd had before. It had nothing to do with his partner; he did (had) love (loved) them both, but they were so different that he couldn't possibly make a comparison. Nor did he want to. But as great as Pepper had been—as great as she was—she had been dating a Tony Stark who needed years to reliably extract his head from his ass. (He had grown and matured, and so Tony could now admit that.) And over there, the Avengers had come together only when the world most needed them. They hadn't stayed as a team, right from day one. Here, new friendships grew, old wounds mended, and some wounds were avoided entirely.
Hopefully.

God, he hoped.

This new equilibrium was wonderful, and Tony found himself wanting to do absolutely anything necessary to protect it. Even so, his absolute top-of-the-line tech, years ahead of what anyone else in the world could design, had completely overlooked one measly S.H.I.E.L.D. agent. And that one agent could have killed people.

He might not be frantic any more, but Tony still knew he wouldn't be able to sleep soundly until he found an answer to this challenge. With a sigh, Tony stood, placed a kiss on Stephen's forehead that was too gentle to wake him, and headed for the kitchen. One quick smear of peanut butter on bread later, he returned to his workshop.

Technically, that counted as eating something.

During Tony's absence upstairs, his system had thoroughly analyzed every last flicker of sound that his speakers had recorded. The results were disheartening. Yes, Stephen could have been alerted to approaching footsteps a second before the strike, but no earlier than that. Either Tony's jets had drowned out more subtle noise, or it had appeared out of literal nowhere. The idea of someone being able to simply appear was terrifying, because there could not be any more of a wild card to lay down during Loki's arrival. Accordingly, Tony began proving the first possibility.

In the middle of that work, a touch on his shoulder made him jump. Blinking, Tony turned to see Stephen with a dark workshop behind him. After a moment, Tony removed the noise-canceling headphones he'd put on while trying to isolate any signal inside the auditory data. "Yeah?"

"Are you ever going to sleep?"

Blinking again, Tony looked Stephen over. Not only had he woken up from his rest on the couch, but he'd changed out of his mystic's garb. What time was it? Tony had been so focused on this corner of the room that he hadn't even noticed the rest of it darkening around him. "Twelve thirty-two," he said after checking a clock. "Shouldn't you be in bed?"

"I've still got some brick dust on me. I could use a shower, first."

"Good idea," Tony agreed, and turned to put his headphones back on. There was a secret buried inside this data, he knew it.

The set was plucked from his hands, and as Tony turned with annoyance to grab it back, Stephen added, "And I could use some help."

Tony rolled his eyes. "That's blatant."

"I'm serious." Stephen reached to the zipper near his throat, pulled it down a few inches, and tugged it back up. "I'm lucky that the shirt I had on overlapped like it does, because it was easy to take off. But when I tried to put on something else, I couldn't move right. I had to borrow something that closes in the front."

Yes, that was one of Tony's hoodies, and he supposed knowing that Stephen was wearing it for a comfortable recovery was a nice feeling. But still. "It's blatant," he repeated.

"Well," Stephen said dryly. "I didn't think simply ordering you to go upstairs would go over great."

After a significant pause, Tony relented. He sagged where he sat, nodded once, and blinked hard a
few times to clear away the gathering fog of a long, stressful day. Give him a fight, whether physical or technical, and he'd throw as many punches as he needed to. But give him failures? Dead ends, spotty data? Now that was exhausting. "Yeah, okay," he said as he let himself be steered toward the elevator and their private eighth floor.

A shared shower would be a lot more fun if not for that dark, angry bruise on Stephen's chest. Tony tried to ignore it, but he couldn't ignore Stephen's overly careful movements. This request had lured him out of his workshop, at least, but it certainly didn't solve anything else.

Normally, after a rough day, Tony curled up tightly against the person he cared about. It let him feel like he was doing something even in sleep, and their steady breathing reassured him they were alive. When Pepper had been saved from the Killian nightmare, he'd used his own body as a shield against an imagined someone else as they drifted off. But he couldn't curl up against broken ribs. In unhappy solitude, Tony slept.

"See you later," Tony said at the end of the next morning's breakfast, and rose to walk downstairs to his workshop.

Stephen peered at him over the rim of his coffee mug. "And what's today's plan?"

Tony shrugged. "Same thing as yesterday: figure out how to see what I missed."

He did not.

So far as Tony could tell, by the end of what felt like an agonizingly endless day of failure, that woman had not existed prior to cracking Stephen's ribs. His scanners clearly hadn't been up to the task of collecting all relevant inputs, and so there were frustrating gaps in his data. Which meant that he instead needed to figure out how to tell when non-existence was about to resolve abruptly into existence, and to do that... he had no idea.

At the end of the day, there was a soft clatter of a plate being gently laid on a glass-covered counter. "What?" Tony snapped.

No answer came, and Tony turned toward Stephen, his eyes flashing with impatience. If he kept being interrupted, there was no way he was going to finish. Stephen should know better.

Stephen's expression was flat and deliberately impassive. Again, he'd borrowed one of Tony's zip-up hoodies, presumably because putting one on was easy to manage without twisting his ribs toward a painful angle. On the plate was what looked like Tony's favorite seafood ravioli, which he'd chosen for delivery four times in one month before Stephen put his foot down about too much Italian.

"Sorry," Tony said after a significant pause, and sighed. "Sorry. How are you feeling?" Anger was bad toward someone looking out for him, it was bad toward someone injured, it was bad toward someone he cared about, and it was really bad toward all three of those combined.

"The bruise settled in, like I'd expect the day after an injury. But nothing unexpected, and I'm only letting myself feel enough pain to know it's not getting worse. You should eat that before it gets cold." It was less a suggestion than an order.

After one silent nod, Tony did so.

"I researched the visual disturbance I saw—"

"You saw?" Tony repeated, thankfully between bites. "Seriously? I wasn't able to get anything to show up on my scanners. And you just saw her with your own eyes?" For God's sake, had he really
failed *this* hard?

"That actually makes sense. You've had trouble establishing connections between different dimensions, and I'm almost positive that's what's going on." Stephen nodded once. "But yes, I occasionally saw flickers of her. Little blurs in reality. I suspected what that might mean, and started looking through my books."

Old, dusty books had beaten Stark tech to the punch. Fine. Whatever.

"Phil's going to go meet with Fury, tomorrow," Stephen continued in Tony's silence. "And probably Starr. It's fine for you to go, too, if you want to scan her up close and start getting that data."

"Fury's fine with that?" Tony asked disbelievingly, and speared a ravioli.

"I played up some anger about getting slowed down for a few weeks because Fury couldn't keep his agents in line." Stephen barely shrugged. "It halfway worked. I was shooting for two invitations."

He might as well go look at the woman, Tony supposed. He'd certainly get more data when Starr was the center of his efforts, rather than being ignored as background noise (radiation? movement?) on a street. Swallowing his ravioli, he nodded and said, "Good idea. Thanks."

Stephen nodded once. Tony had the distinct impression that Stephen sympathized with Tony's need to fix whatever problem had landed in his sights. He knew all of this behavior stemmed from a place of caring, deep concern, and love. But at the same time, Stephen Strange was not a patient man. This spiraling couldn't go on long, not like the habits Tony had let develop over a decade, and Stephen especially didn't appreciate being forced into a caretaker role when he was the one who couldn't pull on any shirt that didn't close in the front.

It was good to get resistance to their well-worn instincts. On occasion, it could be good for both of them.

"And," Tony said after that pause, "once I've got data, I can analyze it from the perspective of whatever your books say. If they know dimensional theories, and I can build scanners for that..." He shrugged, and let more tension fall away.

Acknowledging that Stephen's magical perspective could be just as valuable as Tony's technology earned a real smile, finally. Tony returned it.

The next morning, his improved mood held. His feedback loop had been successfully interrupted. Stephen was good at doing that for Tony, just as Tony was good at keeping Stephen from closing himself off. (There was 'being an introvert' and there was 'I refuse to deal with people, at all'.)

He didn't want to compare his two loves themselves, but their relationship dynamics were a different story. For all that Tony had loved Pepper with his whole heart in Round One, their dynamic had been simultaneously easier and harder. She was so much easier to get to know, so much easier to be friends with, so much easier to fall for. When things worked with them, it was like a fairy tale. But he could be a runaway freight train, and sometimes he'd bowled her over. And while Tony thought it was normal for things to be that fast and loud, sometimes she'd thought it was too much to deal with, and she walked away while he was left feeling abandoned.

Now, Stephen? Stephen had been an absolute goddamn pain in Tony's ass. But once they figured it out, he didn't pull back if Tony started poking and prodding and pushing at boundaries. He stood right where he was, the immovable object to an unstoppable force, and then they argued and got over themselves.
Ava Starr was not a problem, Tony now saw. She was not a crisis. She was just a symptom of something else that Tony could improve on, and he always appreciated the chance to improve his technology. She was unique and fascinating, and he was going to collect her data, and then maybe he could *finally* solve that dimensional communication problem that had been bugging him for years.

"I'll yell at Fury for you a little," Tony promised, and earned another real smile from Stephen.

And that truly was Tony's plan, but he didn't get the chance. Because it wasn't just Tony at that meeting.

"What the hell, Nick?" demanded Melinda, and threw down a file folder onto Fury's desk. A few papers spilled, and one nearly slid off the edge. "This condition keeps deteriorating, and she's just going to... *dissolve!!*

"S.H.I.E.L.D. scientists are working on the problem," Fury said blandly, "and they estimate half a decade or more before her situation becomes unsustainable. In the meantime, while they go over their data, she can still do her job."

"How long has this been hurting her?" Phil wondered. He didn't throw down his file folder, but his knuckles did tighten around it.

"Agent Starr is in control of her condition."

"She's literally not," said Clint. "That's obviously the problem."

Wow. Look at all of these agents actually standing up to Fury. Pleased, Tony settled down into his chair and let the yelling continue.

Of course, someone had to interrupt the string of home runs. "Director Fury is right," Natasha insisted, earning an annoyed eyeroll from Melinda. "Ava got the chance to do good in the meantime and have S.H.I.E.L.D. scientists save her, but it doesn't sound like an easy fix. There's no use in having her just wait around while there are missions to run."

"Thank you, Agent Romanoff," Fury said, and smiled.

Clint shot a disbelieving look at Natasha, who returned an almost apologetic shrug. Right, Tony realized: Natasha owed Fury deeply for giving her a second chance and a new home, and so she would never yell at him for doing the same for another agent. Tony still didn't know all of Natasha's history, and probably never would, but he knew Russia had brought her into the fold well before adulthood. The others in the room might have flinched at the records of how young Ava Starr had been when she started working for S.H.I.E.L.D., but Natasha wouldn't.

Yeah. When Tony wasn't caught in a feedback loop, he really did understand people better, now.

"Nat, don't let him off the hook for this," Melinda said. "He's—"

"The man who runs the organization that you left years ago, *Ms. May,*" Fury interrupted, making sure to emphasize her lack of an agent title. "Meaning that I'm not sure why you feel it appropriate to interject yourself into this discussion. And, speaking of." His dark glare turned toward Tony.

Tony smiled thinly back. "Stephen gave me his invitation. Since he's at home. Sore. Resting. From a broken ribcage that your agent gave him."

Never did Tony like to think that he was a runner-up at anything, but Nick Fury might actually be more annoyed at losing control of a situation than Tony had been. He hadn't anticipated this move
from Ross and the Council, he hadn't anticipated one of his own agents picking a rival team, and he definitely hadn't anticipated fully half of his Avengers showing up in his office to yell at him. (Well. Except for Nat, but she liked sticking to the shadows.) After a long, grumpy stretch, Fury muttered to himself and then asked, "What exactly is the intended outcome of this meeting?"

"You cut the bullshit with Ava," Clint said.

"Get her some real help," Phil added.

"She's a good agent," Melinda said. "She wouldn't have walked away from S.H.I.E.L.D. unless she felt like there wasn't any hope inside its walls." Her gaze toward Fury sharpened. "I know how that goes."

Nodding slowly and pursing his lips, Fury replied, "And if I have previously arranged for top-of-the-line S.H.I.E.L.D. labs to look into her condition, and they've as of yet found nothing... where exactly would I find this 'real help'?" There was no immediate answer from anyone who'd made demands, and so he added, "I did ask for your intended outcome, people. I know you wouldn't engage a target without knowing the anticipated outcome of a mission."

Natasha sat back in that contemplative, quiet way she had, then turned toward Tony. Thankfully, he was able to recognize what she intended to say, and she allowed him one short opportunity to shake his head, which he didn't take. Perhaps he should have, before she said, "Give her to Tony and Stephen."

Fury frowned at her. "I beg your pardon?"

"There's something weird happening to her body," Natasha shrugged. "And we've got the best tech guy and the best doctor."

Instinctively, Tony opened his mouth to argue. Now that she'd actually said it out loud, the idea seemed preposterous. This woman had attacked Stephen. Hell, she'd totally downed Karl, the man who'd just downed the goddamn Abomination, and they were supposed to bring her into their own house? When Stephen had only been able to trick her into a loss before, and so they had no surefire path through a rematch where she'd know to avoid such traps?

But instead of a denial, Tony found himself saying, "Let me ask him." They were stronger when they planned together.

Five minutes later, with S.H.I.E.L.D.'s express permission, Stephen opened a portal into one very specific part of their prison ward.

"He's got a glamour spell on, Tony realized as Stephen walked in with a strong, confident stride that his injury wouldn't allow, wearing a shirt that he couldn't currently pull over his head. Yes, Stephen was all right with doing this, but only if he didn't look vulnerable.

"The S.H.I.E.L.D. crowd argued Fury into allowing this," Tony explained in a low, tight tone. "But we don't have to actually go through with it."

"No," Stephen said after a moment of consideration. "I want to. I'm actually curious as to what's going on with her."

Nodding, Tony let himself be directed further into the prison wing. As they walked behind a guard, he shot Stephen a sidelong smile, grateful for them to be walking shoulder-to-shoulder instead of staring at each other across his workshop.

Ava Starr was held in a cell more intimidating than her size should warrant. A six foot-long magical bond attached her to one wall; long enough to reach a bed and toilet, not long enough to reach the
door. Though it was no thicker than a few threads wound together, that magical rope held steady even when Ava flickered like a blurred video.

Tony watched that happen a few times, and frowned before turning to Stephen in question. Yes, Stephen's silent nod said. That was what had happened before, on the street. Human eyes could apparently process it, even though Tony's equipment had overlooked it.

Now it made sense. Whatever she was doing, it didn't seem to follow the rules of this dimension's physics. And while humans had a hugely flexible capacity for new experiences, Tony's suit only did what he'd programmed it to do, and he'd programmed it to follow the laws of physics (as he understood them).

_Huh,_ he thought, and studied her again through the transparent panel in the door.

"You can come in," said a smooth, accented voice from inside the cell. "I see people looking."

After another glance toward Stephen, and another nod in return, Tony gestured toward the cell's guard. Shortly, they stepped inside. A lock thunked heavily back into place, and then a faint hum restarted. S.H.I.E.L.D. was trying to layer the walls with what sounded like their best energy shielding, for all the good it would likely do them. The magical bond that Melinda had wrapped Ava's wrist with was probably the only true containment this cell offered.

Ava Starr didn't look like someone who could take down two powerful mystics in seconds. As little as Tony liked to consciously admit this, Stephen could do things beyond the limits of what even Tony's best tech could accomplish. Yet, she'd been able to down him effortlessly. There was something very odd going on with this woman, who sat on her bed and looked at them levelly, without a flicker of fear.

There was another young woman who was able to disable powerful Avengers effortlessly, Tony added to himself after a considering moment, during which he'd tried to place Ava's sharp gaze from behind a wavy, messy head of dark hair. Wanda had joined up with the wrong crowd, too. With Obadiah's very early arrest, it appeared that Stark weapons had been kept away from Sokovia, so perhaps Ava was that echo of an event that would now (apparently, hopefully, fingers crossed) never happen.

"You're doing an illusion spell, aren't you?" Ava wondered, looking Stephen over.

Stephen raised his eyebrows slightly, and said nothing.

"I don't think you would be able to move this easily after I broke your ribs." Ava did have the good grace to look ashamed over that attack. "I'm sorry. When your team showed up, Ross ordered me to treat everyone as a threat. Especially since I was left on my own after Emil was disabled."

If she was going to be talkative, perhaps they would just let her keep sharing, Tony decided. She could reveal whatever she'd reveal, and they'd work from there.

"Vanko made quite a mess out of stealing that arc reactor, apparently. He wasn't as sneaky as he should have been. But you never responded, and so Ross thought it was a good time for us to make our debut." Ava shrugged slightly. "Since the Avengers must be distracted."

"We were training," Tony said after a short pause.

"Distracted," Ava repeated. "Well, then. What's to be done with me? I betrayed Nick Fury, after all. That doesn't tend to end well."
Stephen studied her, then mused, "You're very chatty, for a spy."

Ava shrugged again, and Tony realized that the faint smile on her face was nothing more than resignation. From the sound of it, S.H.I.E.L.D.'s research had long been her one chance of recovery, but she'd grabbed desperately onto another rope when this one didn't look quite long enough to swing her across the chasm. But that one hadn't held, and now she must have lost her first chance, and so there was nothing left. By now, she'd had nearly two days to accept and grieve over this seemingly inescapable error.

"The reason that we're here," Tony said after waiting for an actual response, which didn't come, "is because Fury wants us to research you."

Ava blinked, and frowned in sight confusion before her smoothly dismissive tones returned. "I've been researched."

"Not by us," Stephen countered. "Give me your hand."

After hesitating, and inspecting both men anew, Ava did extend the hand not bound by Melinda's cuff. Though it was a strong, assured movement, there were odd shifts that made her hand look like it was slip-siding out of position. It looked like her hand was *shaking*, Tony realized, and looked up to measure Stephen's expression.

The sympathy he'd expected was there. Despite this woman giving him broken ribs that would linger for weeks, still, Stephen couldn't help but feel for someone who'd lost control of their body. "It's like you're going through a portal," Stephen murmured after holding her hand for nearly half a minute. During that silence, Tony had recorded the proceedings as best he could, with as much data as the devices locked inside his watch, sunglasses, and belt buckle could measure.

"It's nothing like your portals," Ava countered. "I feel each molecule of my body being ripped apart, every second of every day."

"What exactly do you think happens with portals?" Stephen dryly asked, let her hand go, and stepped back. "They rip open our dimension's walls. Do one wrong, and you're asking to be dissolved into nothingness as you step into an alternate dimension and become affected by its rules."

That was the first he'd heard of that unfortunate possibility, but Tony kept quiet and said nothing. Something very interesting had happened just now, but he wasn't sure if either of them had noticed it. He'd measure more data before he pointed it out.

"I've studied all of you," Ava said. "I've watched your footage, for Fury's sake and for Ross. Your portals open where and when you want them, and they take you where you want to go. I'm not so fortunate."

"If my dimensional manipulations have nothing to do with what's happening to you," Stephen said, and took her hand again, "then why doesn't your hand blur for as long as I'm holding it?"

Startled, Ava looked down. Tony smiled, and nodded to himself. Of course Stephen had noticed.

"That's..." Blinking hard in surprise, and probably wonder, Ava shook her head. "The rest of my body still hurts, so I didn't..." But then Stephen pulled his hand away again, and her fingers blurred a moment later. Disappointment filled her, for just as Tony's readings had indicated, only an active application of a magical field could correct whatever was happening to Ava's body. Apparently, Stephen couldn't tie that field off; when he stopped touching her, her issues resumed.

"Could the Ancient One stabilize her?" Tony wondered after studying his results. This was
fascinating stuff, but he doubted that either of them were capable of reaching a full solution any time soon. If the Ancient One could tie off the dimensional field effect that Stephen couldn’t, Ava could feel better while Stephen and Tony dove back in to study whatever was happening.

Stephen nodded. "It's worth a try. She knows dimensional travel better than I do. I can take Starr there if you get my med lab ready for study afterward, Tony."

Despite Ava being officially handed over to them, it took another ten minutes before they received authorization to leave. "I assume you're not planning to run off?" Tony asked Ava when they were left alone. Stephen had been the one to explain to the guards that he'd be transporting the captive to Nepal. (By now, everyone inside S.H.I.E.L.D. knew where Kamar-Taj was.)

No, Ava did not look ready to run off. "Doing that would make me an awful lot of enemies that I don't want. And I..." Trailing off, she eventually continued, "I've worked with people who have tried to help me. S.H.I.E.L.D. gave me control over my abilities, but none of them actually took away the pain. Just now, though, my hand stopped hurting. I won't run."

Tony nodded slowly. Hearing returning footsteps, he turned to add, "You hurt him again and I'll leave you to dissolve. Hell, I'll help it along. Got it?"

Ava studied Tony, then nodded back. She wasn't threatened by him, he saw in her eyes. If it came to a fight, she could go intangible and simply let his blasts pass through her, while his armor would mean nothing if she could simply reach through it in return. But she didn't want to fight. Fury had dangled the promise of a cure over her head to get her to target his enemies, and then Ross had done the same. Attacking the Avengers had been nothing more than a condition of that second agreement.

And Ava certainly wasn't going to ruin this next chance she'd been given. Not when, for the first time in years, her hand had completely stopped moving.

"We're ready to go," Stephen announced as he returned, oblivious to the threat Tony had leveled for his sake. He actually looked excited at the possibility of figuring out this challenge. "I'm not sure how long the Ancient One will need, Tony, but I'll keep you updated."

"Hey," Tony murmured after Stephen opened his portal, and caught the cuff of Stephen's shirt (Tony's hoodie) before he could walk through that portal into a dim temple interior. "Be careful."

"I really don't think she's a threat, any more," Stephen murmured back. But he smiled. "I will, though."

Ten seconds later, Tony blinked in a suddenly dark room as the last sparks faded. Oh. Damn. He should have asked for a portal back home, first.

At least this drive gave him a chance to catch up with Happy, who had relocated to a new apartment in Brooklyn, the better to let his life focus mostly on Pepper. "I've already tested this car with a car seat," Happy said cheerfully as he drove them toward Greenwich Village. "And I tested Pepper's."

She still drove the R8 that Tony had given her on impulse, years ago. "I think Phil is getting used to the idea of giving up Lola for any family drives. He really loves that thing."

"How are they doing? In general?" Tony wondered. Happy saw Pepper a lot more than Tony did, now. During her daily commutes, she surely talked about minutia of everyday life that wouldn't come up in their own conversations.

"Excited, obviously." Happy glanced over his shoulder, then merged them into another lane. "Pepper's worried about what it says that she took over the CEO spot and then needs some maternity
Tony snorted. "It means that she can literally do it all. If anyone calls to get a quote about that, forward 'em to me. I'll yell about... what should I yell about?"

"Sexism, glass ceiling, maybe?"

"Yeah, exactly. I'll yell about that."

At a red light, Happy turned fully around. "Don't tell them I told you this," he continued in a conspiratorial whisper, "but when things calm down after the baby, I think Phil's gonna propose."

For years, the wound in Tony's heart had been healing. Upon arrival, he had to let it roughly scab over so that every platonic look from a professionally disinterested assistant wouldn't hurt him anew. Phil showing up had ripped off that scab, and he'd bled again for months afterward. Even after finding his own new love, the spot still had bruising underneath the surface. A painfully awkward double date had confirmed that, and even years later, hearing about a baby that wasn't his earned a sudden fog of undirected sadness.

Being any sort of a father—even a godfather—had apparently made the final difference. When Tony heard about an incoming proposal, joy wasn't a follow-up emotion. It was his very first instinct. "Yeah?"

"I'm pretty sure," Happy said, and let his grin spread. "And I—" A honk jolted him, and he turned to set the car back into motion through the now-green light.

Things were good, Tony reminded himself as he got home, and headed up to Stephen's sixth floor full of medical labs. The Avengers had a powerfully huge roster and they worked well together. The injuries taken in the Queens fight weren't serious, the doctors had all confirmed. Now they were fixing problems that he hadn't even known existed in Round One, and nothing had been knocked off-course before Loki's arrival. Everyone was in place to face him and collect the two Stones he brought. This'd work.

Once Stephen's favorite lab had been readied, Tony brought up the data he'd measured in Ava's cell and began to study its ebbs and flows. Everyone's in place to face Loki, Tony repeated to himself with great consideration, and watched the peculiar flow of the energy running through Ava Starr. Everyone. Everyone.

All right. Slight change in plans. With any luck, the Ancient One wouldn't actually fix everything, because Tony had a brilliant new idea.

Needing to call on Happy for a ride had worked out, for Tony only needed to wait impatiently on Stephen and Ava's return for twenty-seven minutes after he got home. "It's not a perfect solution," Stephen said as they walked in from Nepal, "or a permanent one. But yes, the Ancient One was able to stabilize Ava."

The young woman's expression was level, but she was clearly making a visible effort to maintain that control. Only very occasionally did her body jolt or blur out of position, even though no one was touching her to apply a magical field. "It barely hurts," Ava confirmed. The thick tone to her voice confirmed Tony's suspicions about the emotions hiding behind her spy's facade.

"Well, then," Tony said, and gestured to a medical bed. His scanners hung above it, and he'd spent this waiting time adjusting them to reflect the readings he'd taken earlier. "Let's get to work."

Five minutes later, once they'd settled into their studies, Stephen spoke up. "The Ancient One knew
the feeling of the energy running through Ava. It comes from a place called the Quantum Realm."

"Yes," Ava said, and blinked rapidly as a roaming scanner's spotlight rotated across her eyes. "My father was doing research into quantum energy."

"You know anything else about what he was looking into?" Tony wondered as he tried adjusting a few settings, then shook his head. 'Quantum' did seem like an appropriate label, for this energy was as confusing as quantum mechanics would be to someone who'd only ever studied classical physics.

"I was young. Just a child." Ava's voice chilled, and her expression flattened back toward the assassin Fury had trained. Though that made Tony instinctively tense, her surging anger wasn't directed toward either of them. "My father was working on his own, thanks to Hank Pym, and he... there were complications."

"Hank Pym?" Tony repeated disdainfully.

Stephen looked up from Ava, curious. At his tone, Ava's expression shifted toward curiosity, as well. "You know Pym?"

"Well enough to know that he's a douchebag," Tony snorted. That earned a genuine, barking laugh from Ava, and he couldn't help but flash a quick grin down at her in return.

"You're definitely doing better, Ava," Stephen mused after another few minutes of analysis. "But it's not going to hold. I can already see the Ancient One's patch job unraveling, bit by tiny bit." Seeing the deep disappointment that earned, Stephen added, "I saw exactly what she did, so I should be able to repeat the process. But we're going to need to find you a solution that doesn't need my re-application every few days. Tony, any ideas?"

Tony nodded shortly. This was everything he'd hoped to hear upon Ava Starr's return: they'd found an interim solution, but not a permanent one. To achieve that permanent fix, they would require one more particular skillset. "Yep. We need a freelancer."

"A freelancer?" Stephen repeated with confusion.

"I refuse to work with Pym," Ava instantly said. "Just send me back to that cell."

"Ew," Tony said, and grimaced. "Gross. I don't want to work with Hank, either." Every brief interaction they'd had over the years had shown him a man with his father's inflexibility, Tony's own touchy temper, and a core of frustrated resentment toward both Starks. It was an unpleasant combination to be around, but especially for someone with his last name.

Stephen pushed a scanner out of his way, the better to study Tony. "Clearly, you have an idea. A very specific idea. Mind sharing it with the rest of us?"

After gesturing a holographic display into existence, Tony began that explanation. With each word, the hologram zoomed in further to showcase an oversized row of cells, or waves of rippling energy that bucked and warped bizarrely as they flowed. "I've figured out how to collect more data on what's affecting her body, but this energy behavior is like nothing I've ever seen. If I could get the energy behavior pinned down, I know you could figure out an improved treatment plan, but... well, see the previous problem."

Tony's admission made Ava sigh audibly. At least they were on the road to any answer, but she had the renewed resignation of someone who'd already spent far too much of her life inside a medical lab. If nothing else, Stephen's magical band-aid could remove her chronic pain, but it needing to be reapplied every few days wasn't any sort of true fix.
Stephen's response was different, though: confusion. Normally, if Tony had discovered one step toward a solution, it would only encourage him to run faster in that direction. He’d snapped at Stephen yesterday because he couldn't figure out any way to go, which was always Tony's worst-case scenario. But, now that they'd managed to clearly describe the challenge they faced, he was stopping? Tony never saw a clear challenge in front of him, shrugged, and said that he couldn't handle it. Ever. Stephen's hesitation came from Tony seemingly doing exactly that.

But that was only because Stephen didn't yet know that Tony was actually solving two problems at once. One unspoken, lingering challenge they faced was figuring out how to bring someone into the Avengers fold, if Loki was still on track to be an easy, quick resolution. They now had an answer for that.

"So we need a freelancer," Tony continued with an easy smile, "who is very good at working with weird-ass radiation."

Understanding filled Stephen's eyes. "Ah."

On the table, Ava frowned up at both of them. "Who are you talking about, then? If it's not Pym?"

It was no surprise that S.H.I.E.L.D. had kept extremely precise tabs on Bruce Banner, even long after the Hulk had scampered off into the Canadian wilderness. In Round One, his journey toward a seemingly hopeless cure for his rage issues had led Bruce to India by the time the Avengers needed him. Perhaps he'd been here at this date in mid-2011, or perhaps this different world had led him down a different path, but this Bruce was living in a small, ramshackle house outside the borders of Port Elizabeth, South Africa.

"Bruce!" Tony called cheerfully as they approached the house. It was late into a temperate winter afternoon in the Southern Hemisphere, and this spot on a hill saw spectacular landscapes of golden, dying grass, light-edged clouds, and a glittering ocean. They'd all agreed that it would be best not to surprise Bruce with a portal, and so Stephen had deposited them a good half-mile away from Bruce's hideout. From Tony's perspective, it had been a very pretty walk.

"I really wish that I weren't facing the Hulk with broken ribs," Stephen grumbled. For him, it'd been a long walk, across uneven ground. Muting his pain sensations only did so much.

"I am sorry," Ava murmured. "Really."

"We're not gonna face the Hulk," Tony assured them. "It's just gonna be Bruce. Bruce!" he said more loudly when he saw the man emerge from his small, patchwork abode. "Hey! Remember me?"

"You're Tony Stark," Bruce said after a moment of study. He was in a typically wrinkled shirt and pair of trousers, with mussed, floppy hair that was longer and darker than what Tony had seen during their last face-to-face. It was great to see the guy, but even more than most people they'd met during the redo, Bruce was a real change from what Tony remembered. "Stephen Strange. And..."

"Ava Starr," she supplied.

Bruce slowly nodded, having decided that he wasn't expected to know who she was. "Right. Well. Can I help you?"

"You really don't remember me," Tony sighed. He hadn't missed his lab buddy too badly; they'd spent years apart after Sokovia, which he'd grown unfortunately used to, and in this world he'd been able to engage in different kinds of lab talk with Stephen. But now that he finally saw Bruce again, he did want as much of that old dynamic back as they could manage. "I guess I should have
expected that. The big guy's not exactly a Jeopardy champ in the making."

At the mention of 'the big guy,' Bruce's demeanor shifted. His wary smile warped into something sharper. "Right. Yeah. The news story about what happened in Harlem. You helped him." Nodding, his arms folded awkwardly across his chest. "It took you a while to track me down."


A few seconds passed before any reply. Bruce looked over the expansive, sprawling landscape, where he'd found himself a home safely away from any vulnerable neighbors, and laughed faintly as he shook his head. "I'd ask why you're here, but it's pretty obvious."

"We don't need the Hulk," Stephen cut in.

That earned a snort. Yes, Stephen had assumed Bruce's mindset correctly, but in no way did Bruce believe him. "You two are superheroes," Bruce retorted. "You fight. All the time, you fight. And I'm pretty sure why S.H.I.E.L.D. would keep its eyes on me, and it's for the same thing as you two."

"It is for the same thing as us, yep," Tony said. "And they love us most of all for our brains."

"Your brains," Bruce snorted. "They care about my brain? Yeah. Sure. S.H.I.E.L.D. knows I've got this unstoppable monster inside me, waiting for one moment of weakness, and they care about my brain. That's all he needs, you know. One single second when I lose control, and everyone around me is at risk. Everyone," he spat emphatically, and gestured at the open hillside on which he was living.

"It'd probably be a good idea if you stopped yelling at us, then," Tony said dryly. God, he'd forgotten how emo Bruce used to be.

"We are actually here to consult with you about something, Dr. Banner," Stephen said with a detached, professional tone, like Bruce hadn't been implicitly threatening them with the Hulk's unstoppable emergence. "This young woman is being torn apart by quantum radiation. Neither of us has any way to resolve it, only to delay it."

Tony waited for Bruce to blink in surprised confusion, followed by his anger deflating, and added, "Yeah. Neat stuff. You interested?"

"That's..." Bruce frowned, and blinked. "What was your name, again?"

"Ava."

"You don't want my help, Ava."

Tony's brow furrowed at Bruce's weighty, world-weary tone. Yeah, this guy was so emo. My existence is torture, I must exist in isolation, yadda yadda boo hoo life sucks. It really was a good thing that Ava was an excuse to get Bruce involved, because this was a man who should not be left alone to spiral inside his own mind. He needed a project. Everything was better with a project. "She does need your help, Dr. Banner."

"So, uh, how did this go in your heads?" Bruce wondered. "The two superheroes drop off a woman who looks like she weighs a hundred and ten, soaking wet? And you just... abandon her in an isolated shack, where the Hulk comes out if I lose control? This is your plan?"

"Actually," Tony mused, while Ava studied Bruce with a trained agent's eye, "you're right. I should probably stick you in a place that has a better research setup. This place is a total pile. I've got a
"A vacation place in Morocco," Bruce repeated. "I'm supposed to go to Tony Stark's vacation place in Morocco."

"Yeah, all my vacation homes have full labs. Obviously."

"That's not the..." Bruce raised his hands, inhaled, and lowered them. "Ava, I'm sure you're very nice, but I'm not the person to help you. Sorry."

"Why?" Stephen asked dryly. His glamour was still up, but when he shifted his weight, Tony imagined it was to relieve pain from his sore ribs. "If you're worried that you might hurt her, I'd suggest that your concern is misplaced. Even the Hulk couldn't hurt this woman, if she didn't want to be injured."

Bruce raised one eyebrow in amused disbelief.

"Here, Mr. Stark," Ava said, and bent down to retrieve a fist-sized rock off the ground. With a wry smile, she extended it to him. "To demonstrate, you may wish to throw this directly at my head." She hit you may wish with meaningful weight; she remembered the threat Tony had leveled against her.

Well, it wasn't like he wanted to smack her, now that everything was on the mend, no. But, a harmless throw like this... "Alley-oop," Tony agreed, grabbed the rock, and pitched it through Ava's skull as soon as he saw her begin to blur. Apparently, the Ancient One's band-aid didn't remove Ava's powers; it just brought them under comfortable control, and so Ava was able to calmly let the rock pass through her body to land with a faint whuff of rising dust.

Startled, Bruce took a step back.

"Even the Hulk couldn't hurt this woman," Stephen replied. "Because if she wants to, she can be completely—"

"Immune to physical attacks," Bruce slowly finished, with a dawning look of wonder. "No matter how strong someone is, if you can phase yourself out of fourth-dimensional space-time to ignore matter displacement, then..." He trailed off, studied the ground for a few silent seconds, and then looked abruptly back up. "Could you reach through something solid, and then fully re-enter our four-dimensional space-time continuum? Become solid again inside another object?"

Ava blinked at him, then seemed to realize what he was asking. "Yes. I could."

Tony swallowed, for he too had realized Bruce's true question. Bruce, without any friends to depend on to maintain his mood, or trusted Avengers associates that could hold back a rampaging Hulk, had deliberately found himself a home in isolation. Here, he was unlikely to kill many people if things went wrong. And then he'd met them, and he'd met Ava. Ava wasn't just the first person he'd met who the Hulk was totally incapable of hurting; she was someone who could phase her arm through the Hulk's brain if he did begin hurting innocents.

The emo jokes were less funny, now.

"So, can we count on you?" Tony asked in the silence.

"I might just take you up on that Morocco offer, Mr. Stark," Bruce slowly said, without looking away from Ava. "Yeah. I'll get to work."

"I'll need to re-apply a magical field that gives her some pain relief," Stephen cut in. "Every few
days, I'll be stopping by."

"Sure." After looking back down toward the rock that had passed through Ava's head, Bruce nodded, his gaze growing distant and contemplative. "Sure."

"A Dr. Bill Foster has been trying to help me for years," Ava added. "I can put you in touch, if you'd like. Perhaps the two of you can discuss the data he's collected. And I do very much appreciate this, Dr. Banner."


It sounded like Bruce would be talking with all sorts of people. He had purpose, he had connections, and he had the relief of finally finding a last-resort way to keep the Hulk from hurting others. Tony fought back his growing smile, for it would be impossible to explain why seeing a happy Bruce Banner should matter this much to him.

Tony's villa in Morocco was nothing special: four bedrooms, four bathrooms, really only notable for its lush gardens and a beautiful location on a cliff overlooking the Atlantic. Tony mentally resigned himself to losing the building itself to some inevitable Hulk tantrum, but did hope that he'd leave the gardens untouched. Rebuilding was one thing, but trees needed a while to grow. "Labs," Tony said, and gestured down a hallway. "Bedrooms." Another hallway. "Kitchen. Hey, Vincent, add Bruce Banner and Ava Starr as authorized users for the house."

For a few seconds, nothing happened. Just as Tony began to frown in confusion, the familiar J.A.R.V.I.S. voice spoke up. "Sir, was that addressed to me?"

"Wow. I have apparently not been to this place in a while," Tony said with surprise. The current J.A.R.V.I.S. software had been tailored for professional purposes—meaning, for his research warehouses and the three power suits—while Vincent was the thoroughly customized home model. By now, he'd replaced all of the personal J.A.R.V.I.S. installations, or so he'd thought. "Hey J.A.R.V.I.S., replace yourself here—"

"That's really not necessary," Stephen sighed.

"—With Vincent. And like I said, add Bruce Banner and Ava Starr as authorized houseguests, with lab access." With that request made, Tony looked back to Stephen. "I just want standardization."

"Software update concluded," the system announced soon after, not in J.A.R.V.I.S.'s voice. "Please tailor your food preferences using the screens in the kitchen, and I'll order grocery delivery along with dinner."

Bruce, who'd spent years hiding away in homes that didn't come equipped with artificial intelligence units, squinted at a speaker. Then, he squinted at the two of them. Pointing toward the request he'd heard, he took a step toward Stephen and asked, "Wait, was that...?"

"Yes," Stephen groaned.

"You put your voice on the robot?" Bruce asked with a hint of genuine amusement. "Seriously?"

"He put my voice on it," Stephen immediately corrected, and pointed toward Tony, who shamelessly shrugged. Yes, Tony had whined his way into that voiceover, but it was totally worth it. He was sure that Stephen's famous superhero voice had contributed to Vincent's absolutely phenomenal sales figures. And besides, Tony liked being able to hear him whenever he wanted. (Also, very, very secretly, he did like being able to give orders and hear an easy 'yes' back. That never happened with
"Well, whoever picked it, it's a little weird to have a home A.I. with the voice of a superhero," Bruce chuckled.

"...Not quite as weird as you might think," Tony said after a considering pause. If Ava was a potential stand-in for the general Wanda dynamic, then Tony had gone an awfully long time without putting two and two together about this amusing little nod in Vision's direction. Maybe they truly had side-stepped the whole Ultron debacle. If so, that did seem to indicate that they would successfully capture both the Mind and Space Stones in less than a year, and keep control of them both.

"Anyway. Do you guys need anything else, or can I leave you two to figure out..." Trailing off, he gestured in Ava's direction.

"We can get provide you all the data from New York," Stephen added. "But we do want to be kept in the loop."

"Sure, sure," Bruce nodded, then turned to slowly study the luxurious house in which he'd suddenly found himself. "So. Ah. Ava, you like... doing... anything?" he awkwardly finished, after realizing he'd just been dumped in a house to live with this young woman, mostly alone, until they found her cure. "If you're going to go out for walks or whatever, that's fine, but just let me know. Some of my experiments might be time-sensitive."

"That won't be a problem," Ava promised. "Part of the agreement to be released from S.H.I.E.L.D. custody was for me not to leave the building I was currently in, unless I was under Mr. Stark or Dr. Strange's control." She shared that condition with the same smooth, smiling ease as always.

Bruce blinked. "S.H.I.E.L.D. custody?"

Stephen nodded. "She attacked me. Broke my ribs."

"I really am sorry," Ava said again.

"That's. Uh." Bruce frowned, clearly left off-balance by the casual addition. "You... you won't want to do that here. It'd really piss him off."

"I don't want to fight anyone," Ava assured him. "And I certainly don't want to be a fugitive."

"Well. Good," Bruce said, still uncertain. "Then... I guess we get to work."

Things were better, after that. Stephen healed, with just a bit of magic to speed things along, and the three men began a fascinating trans-Atlantic research project that moved in fits and starts, but did move. "You know," Stephen said, well into that project and without looking up from his current hologram model, "I occasionally realize all over again how well we work together."

"I told you that you'd love Bruce," Tony agreed.

"No. I mean." Stephen laughed, and turned to face Tony. He moved easily, again, for by now he'd long since healed. "You and me."

Tony smiled lopsidedly, unsure of just what had prompted this. It didn't seem to be tied to anything with Ava. They'd made progress, but no breakthroughs, and although her energy was intriguing, he hadn't yet found anything new and fun to do with it. Over the summer there had been Avengers fights (nothing special), individual scuffles (easily handled), and more inventions and surgeries (flawlessly done, of course). This was just another day, and Stephen wasn't one to be randomly demonstrative with his affection.
Seeing Tony's contented confusion, Stephen added, "I've thought before how good it is for the both of us to be forced to play well with others. To not assume that we have all the answers."

Chuckling, Tony gave Stephen an affectionate, lopsided smile as he remembered his own unfortunate behavior at the start of this research project. "Yeah. On occasion."

"On occasion," Stephen agreed with good humor.

"And then," Tony grinned, and gestured emphatically with the stylus he was using for precise hologram manipulation, "the great thing is that, after we work through everything? We do find all the answers."

"All of them," Stephen echoed, and smirked. Yes, it was good to have their self-assured confidence checked on occasion, but they only wanted an interruption, and nothing more. Once they'd had that chance to blink away any fog, they could return to their normal roles of being the most accomplished, capable men in the world. Able to handle anything. Unstoppable.

Their phones buzzed in unison, and both men looked down. A second later, they paled. Every last bit of mutual ego drained away into nothing.

Oh God.

The baby was coming.
They were ready for this, Stephen told himself as he and Tony hurried upstairs to grab the small bag they’d prepared. Due dates were an imprecise thing, but as September 10th approached, they’d slowly amped themselves up. It was now the afternoon of September 8th, well within shooting distance of that anticipated date, and so they were ready. They were ready.

"They're at the wrong hospital," Tony abruptly said, dismayed.

Worry stabbed at Stephen. But when he checked his phone again, he blinked and said, "No, they're at Presbyterian."

"They're supposed to be at Methodist."

"They are not supposed to be at Methodist. Her obstetrician works at Presbyterian."

Tony gestured impatiently in the direction of Brooklyn. "She's also got privileges at Methodist. I checked. Methodist has a newer facility, and so that doctor should have hauled her ass over to Methodist when she got the call that Pepper Potts had gone into labor."

Oh, this was falling apart already.

"They're checked in. It's not changing. We need to get to Presbyterian," Stephen said after a calming pause, and raised his hand. As soon as they stepped through the portal, though, regret did fill him that they hadn't convinced Pepper to ignore the nearby hospitals, for he could have portaled her to Metro as soon as her water broke. But instead, they were here. In Brooklyn. Where he didn't know where anything was.

It took them nearly twenty minutes of misdirected pointing and surprised Avenger fans until they found the maternity ward. This hospital was very large, and laid out very poorly, and every employee inside it appeared to be a complete idiot. It had to be those employees’ fault that Stephen and Tony found themselves practically running into the waiting area, feeling like they’d already missed something critical. Which was foolish, of course. As Tony went to speak with the receptionist, Stephen reminded himself of the factual realities of the labor process. Pepper might not even be in the active stage, yet, and when that did arrive, it'd probably last at least eight hours for a first birth.

But when Tony came back into view, all of those facts fell away. From high inside his neurology castle, Stephen had always been dismissive of obstetrics work, but all of this felt very different on the patient and family side of things. "And?"

"She's just getting started," Tony said. "They're going to call..." Trailing off, he gestured toward Phil emerging from a hallway.

The dad-to-be looked ready to either vibrate from excitement, or pass out. Or both. "So, it's happening," Phil said with a breathy laugh. Most of his skin had paled from stress, but his cheeks were warm and flushed.

Stephen began to ask, "And it's going—"

"Well," Phil finished. "They say it's going well. I don't know what it means to 'go well' at this stage, but apparently, however it's going... is... well."

If someone looked in on the three of them right now, it would be very difficult to believe that they
were men who saved the world on the regular.

"What should we be doing?" Tony wondered in the awkward pause that followed.

That, at least, Phil was prepared to answer. "Could you let people know? It doesn't have to be right away, I'm sure it's going to be a while. But I want to get back—" He pointed toward the hallway. "To." His finger wiggled in the direction of Pepper's room.

"We will let people know," Tony promised. With an agreed-upon plan of action, all three men exhaled, and a very slight amount of their stress eased.

After settling down into the waiting area, Stephen rested their small travel bag on a chair, retrieved his tablet from it, and checked the half-dozen portable battery units to see if they needed to have their power levels topped off. Protein bars and water were in place, as were various pills for various ailments. A wave of his hand cast a general glamour spell over the area, making them unnoticeable to strangers and muting any conversations to eavesdroppers. With all of that handled, he returned his attention to Tony, ready to ask when they should alert the others.

Just then, his phone buzzed. "Okay, I told the team," Tony cheerfully announced.

"You... already sent it to the group chat," Stephen said with rueful resignation as he watched messages begin to pour in. "They do know it's going to be hours and hours, still. Right?"

Tony hesitated, and then reached for his phone again.

Fortunately, the rest of the team kneejerked less than the two of them, and didn't immediately rush over. Many sent congratulations, promises to visit as soon as Pepper was open to guests, and nothing more. Only a group who'd already been leaving the S.H.I.E.L.D. offices decided to carpool over, to offer support to their fellow operative and father-to-be, and that rush hour journey took Natasha, Steve, and Clint more than an hour.

"It's been a little while since I've seen one of these places," Clint chuckled as the S.H.I.E.L.D. group arrived, and handed over a Starbucks cup apiece to Stephen and Tony. "But I'm already getting flashbacks."

Stephen accepted his coffee with thanks, and said, "It's still going to be a long time until anything really starts happening. We can keep you all updated."

"We're here for moral support," Steve said, and picked a chair. "And so we're not leaving." Since he was already at the hospital, that wasn't a bad idea. If any one teammate's presence could assure Phil that everything would be all right, it was Steve Rogers. For Phil, he was a patriotic good luck charm.

"Besides," Natasha added as she settled in next to him, "we were planning to go see a Contagion preview tonight. Which was not my movie pick. I'm totally okay with not watching the world die to some megavirus."

"It got good reviews," Steve said unapologetically, and shrugged as he rested his hand near Natasha's knee. By now, neither Stephen nor Tony reacted to such demonstrations from the pair. They were still weird, though.

Rhodey and Sam were assisting a military-centric mission somewhere in Asia, and Karl and Melinda were resolving a Sanctum threat. This appeared to be the official waiting room line-up, then, and twenty minutes passed with the expanded group sitting there in anxious unison.

"Phil's calling me," Tony abruptly said, and fumbled for his phone. "No. He's videocalling me."
"I sure hope he has Pepper's permission to do that," Clint dryly said, with the experience of someone who'd been in a delivery room more than once.

Phil did have Pepper's permission, for this appeared to be Pepper's idea. "Hi," Pepper said on the phone screen, and lifted a weak hand off her blanket to wave at them. Her hair and makeup still mostly looked like she'd come straight from the work she'd refused to ignore, right up until her due date, but even on a video call's small screen she was becoming rumpled. She was ever the consummate professional, though, and so had to acknowledge their show of support. "Thank you, everyone. I appreciate it."

Guessing what she'd intended, Tony slowly rotated the screen across the group, to allow everyone to wave in return and offer their well-wishes.

At that sight, Pepper smiled again as she fell totally slack against her pillows. Her bit of courteous energy had apparently been expended. "Phil said that he saw in the team chat that people were coming over. You really didn't need to come to the hospital. You'll just be sitting out there for..." Dismay began to fill her expression. "A while. Still." A sigh trickled out.

"Except for Tony and Stephen," Phil cut in, poking his head in from one side of the video's frame. "They can't leave."

"Well, obviously, they can't leave," Pepper added, looking disbelieving that Phil had even felt the need to specify it. "But the rest of you—"

"We're sticking around," Steve promised.

"All of us," added Clint, echoed by Natasha a moment later.

The concern visibly touched both parents-to-be, and after another wavering smile from Pepper, Phil stepped back from where he'd been holding that phone near her. In greater privacy, he continued, "It really is going to be a while. But thanks, guys. We appreciate it, and I'll keep you in the loop."

"Do you want us coming in there?" Tony wondered.

Phil blinked a few times. "I. Ah. Probably not?"

Stephen rested his hands on one of Tony's and smiled lopsidedly. Tony wasn't in any sort of active love with the woman anymore, but he'd spent years comfortably assuming he'd someday have a kid with Pepper. From his perspective, offering to be in the labor room with Pepper still felt reassuring. From Pepper's, though, having her pelvis exposed to her entirely platonic former boss would instead feel... slightly awkward. "I'm sure the room is crowded," Stephen suggested.

"It's going to get really crowded, yeah," Phil said, glad for the smooth escape. "We went for the premium package, so to speak, and I'm realizing it's a lot of people coming in and out of here."

By now, Tony had seemed to clue in on the boundaries he'd inadvertently crossed in his excitement. His voice became more crisp and precise; the equivalent of taking a verbal step back. "Right. So, just text us every now and then?"

"Will do. I—" Phil glanced over his shoulder. "More contractions. Phone call is done." His face disappeared a second later, replaced by a black screen.

"And now, we wait," Stephen announced and settled back into his chair. His hand squeezed Tony's again, and received a squeeze in return. Good. Tony wasn't actually upset. Like usual, he'd just wanted to take any possible step to help.
"Now, we seriously wait," Clint chuckled with the voice of long experience, and took a sip of his coffee.

Eventually, after his second such cup, Clint got up to track down a restroom. Soon after he was out of view, Natasha turned to Stephen and wondered, "You put up another mass glamour, right? No one's paid any attention to us. Clint walked past a kid with an Avengers shirt just now, and nothing."

Stephen nodded. "Getting up here was a nightmare already. I didn't want people asking us for autographs while we're waiting. To any strangers passing by, we look and sound just like normal visitors."

"Handy," Steve said, and raised his eyebrows with approval. After a moment, the corner of his mouth twitched. "Between Stephen's spells and Tony's holograms, you two are pretty good at fooling people."

"Thanks?" Tony replied after a short pause, and frowned. Stephen frowned, too. There had been something peculiar in Steve's voice.

For some unknown reason, a real smile was trying to edge onto Steve's face. And when she saw that Steve was about to lose control, even Natasha Romanoff, the world-class spy, couldn't help but smirk. "Sorry," Natasha eventually laughed. "Steve honestly thought you were gonna call us on this by now, but I guess I won our bet."

"Bet?" Stephen echoed.

Tony's frown deepened. "Call you on... what, exactly?"

"Fake dating," Natasha said. "I told Steve that you wouldn't actually ask us if this was real or not."

Sighing, Steve shrugged at Natasha, and accepted his loss.

"You..." Stephen exhaled, and saw Tony's jaw tighten as he worked it back and forth. All these months, both he and Tony had been pinballing back and forth between assuming that Natasha Romanoff and Steve Rogers couldn't truly be dating, versus deciding that they'd acted too affectionately, for too long, for it to be fake. But in the end, yes, they really had been engaged in some absolutely pointless, utterly ridiculous practical joke. While Tony squinted at them in annoyance, Stephen demanded, "What exactly was the point of this sophomoric charade? And are you both twelve years old?"

Natasha slung her arm over the back of a row of chairs. "Well, I mean, you two fake dated." Ignoring their mutual jolt of shock, she continued, "We wanted to see if you'd call someone else on doing the exact same thing. Like a... hypocrisy test. But then you didn't. Ever. So, it turned into a running joke to see how far we could push it."

"That's..." Annoyed, Tony rounded on Steve and demanded, "You told her? You weren't supposed to tell anyone!" And hadn't the reality of their relationship's origins been part of the Horkos oath conversation? If so, Steve shouldn't have even been able to tell anyone the truth.

"No, Steve just looked totally panicked when I asked him," Natasha laughed, while Steve held up his hands in a defensive posture. Seeing that they wanted more of an explanation, immediately, she continued, "Before Stephen got attacked at the hospital, you two were pretty obviously faking something. You were so over the top. But then he got attacked, and how you acted afterward was completely different. That Rolling Stone interview even talked about how you were in blushing honeymoon mode, months and months after you'd 'started dating.'" The fingerquotes were
Stephen sighed, and rolled his eyes toward Tony, who sighed back at him. It wasn't like they could argue their way out of Natasha's observations, for she'd pinned down their behavioral mistakes as surely as Fury once had. They shouldn't have told Steve about how they hadn't really been dating at first, for Rogers was anything but a master of deception. His reaction to Natasha's suspicions wouldn't just be an open book; it'd be a billboard.

"Well," Tony then said in dust-dry tones. "I'm glad you two had fun spending all this time together. That's really super."

Between letting Steve and Natasha's multi-month 'joke' play out without any pushback, and not noticing Ava on the street before she cracked Stephen's ribs, Stephen and Tony had not done a stellar job this year of seeing beyond the obvious. "Yeah," Stephen drawled. "This was all. Just. Hilarious."

"Hey, Clint," Natasha said when she saw her friend return, and twisted in her seat to face him. "What happened with those two after Stephen got stabbed coming out of baby surgery?"

Clint blinked at the context-free question, but after a moment he said easily, "Oh, they finally hooked up."

Tony threw up his hands.

"We're secret agents," Clint laughed, and did not apologize for seeing through their apparently sloppy ruse.

"The whole world bought it, you know," Tony said, and folded his arms rigidly across his chest. "We poll as the second-favorite celebrity couple. Consistently. Right after Barack and Michelle."

That was true, and normally Stephen resented such invasive personal attention, but right now he appreciated the fact being wielded in their romantic defense.

"Well, the whole world didn't buy it," Natasha countered, and smirked again at Clint.

"I mean, full points for enthusiasm," Clint added when he saw Tony and Stephen's continued grumpiness. "You two were not holding back. Remotely. But... you always stayed in sight of the cameras."

"Rookie mistake," Natasha agreed. "Like that gala at the museum? You made a show of trying to find privacy, but picked a big room with perfect places for photographers to hide. It was pretty deliberate."

When Tony and Stephen's glares rounded on him, Steve held his hands up again like he was showing that he had nothing to hide. Don't blame me! I'm just a poor, innocent super soldier! This isn't my fault! And that was mostly true, but he could have tried to hide his knowledge a little better. Or at least, he could have decided not to participate in that ridiculous dating prank after accidentally confirming Natasha's suspicions.

Seeing their mounting annoyance, Natasha's expression smoothed. Her smile appeared more sincere, as did her voice when she reassured them, "But we know that it is real with you, now. And it has been for a long time."

As Tony's sidelong gaze softened toward him, Stephen found himself returning it. But then Tony turned his attention back to the group, sighed again, and asked, "So, who else figured that out? Fury?"
"Probably," Natasha guessed, "but his real focus was always on your team stuff."

"Phil?"

"I think his attention was more on the technical, Stark Industries side of things. You should be safe."

"What was the deal with that, anyway?" Clint wondered, and ripped open a vending machine bag of Chex Mix that he'd obtained during his bathroom hunt. "Your weird fake dating that turned into heart-eyed real dating?"

They might have needed to come unfortunately clean to Nick Fury without the safety net of the oath relic staff, but that wasn't a habit they intended to let develop. "It's an extremely long story," Stephen began, with a tone that made it clear he wouldn't be telling the story that evening.


"And we can tell you more about it later, on a day when we are not waiting for a baby to arrive," Stephen finished in an even more authoritative tone.

Clint and Natasha studied them both for a few weighty seconds, and then turned to Steve and his give-away-the-game expressions. But Steve only blinked innocently back at the agents. Stephen and Tony's true story was indeed long; it did involve Obadiah; they did have a reason for delaying the full revelation. There was nothing else for Steve to accidentally confirm today, and so he was safely locked back inside the explicit oath he'd taken.

"Later," Natasha agreed after that examination, and settled back against her seat. After a moment, she turned to Clint and opened her mouth.

He handed over another bag of Chex Mix before she could get the question out.

Two hours after that, Stephen and Tony replied to Bruce's 'morning' emails. It wasn't yet dawn in Morocco, but he'd gotten up to use the bathroom only to sidetrack himself into examining the initial results of a lab culture. They weren't yet close to a true Ava solution, but they were closer than they'd been. Stephen only needed to re-apply her magical shields once per week, now.

Three hours after that, Tony had to be reassured that everything was still normal. Yes, even after all this time. Yes, even after Phil's texts became less frequent. The flip side of being someone who could get so joyfully excited about opportunities was that Tony could spiral toward stress just as readily. "It just seems like we should have heard more, by now," Tony insisted.

"Hearing nothing is a good sign. This is all very normal," Stephen promised, and checked the time again. This hospital truly was laid out terribly; Steve and Natasha still hadn't returned with hot food, even after twenty minutes of searching. Everyone was already sick of the protein bars that Tony and Stephen had packed for the wait, and it'd become too much for those two to bear.

"It'd feel more normal if Phil kept texting us," Tony insisted, and flung a stress squeeze ball toward Clint. With it, they'd begun an impromptu game of catch.

Clint caught it easily, of course. "It's normal."

Tony lifted his hand without bothering to position it particularly well. As he'd assumed, Clint was able to chuck the ball perfectly back into his palm, regardless, and the cycle of catch began anew. "Yeah, well. We've got a dad. The ball sailed toward Clint, while Tony's gaze rotated toward Stephen. "And a doctor."
Seeing Clint eye him and begin to lift the ball, wondering if he also wanted in on their game of catch, Stephen held his tablet up like a shield. No. He did not want to play.

As Tony caught the ball again on its return, he continued, "I'm just saying: both of you are a lot more used to this than I am. I just... I hate waiting." He sighed, and flung the ball with a bit too much spin. Clint had to reach to one side to snag it. "Hey. Clint. Nat's your kids' godmother, right?"

"Yep," Clint confirmed, and tossed the ball up in a loose, easy arc that brushed the ceiling before landing in the dead center of Tony's palm.

"Why'd you pick her?" After returning the ball, Tony added, "And why'd you want a godparent? What do you hope they'll do?" His concern was clearly rising about the imminent status of being an official godfather, instead of their pre-Pierce theoretical label. Stephen was concerned, too, but he tried to hide that sort of thing.

"Well... kids are complicated," Clint laughed, and rebounded the ball off a wall, off Stephen's tablet, and into Tony's hand. Stephen looked up from his work, frowning. This was probably a good conversation to pay attention to, though, and so he set his tablet aside to listen to Clint's ongoing answer. "At first, you think they'll be the pictures you had in your head. And those pictures are cute, and simple, and easy. But as soon as they grow up, even a little bit? Kids ain't easy."

"Reassuring," Tony dryly said. "Thanks."

Laughing, Clint continued, "Kids are people, and people are complicated. For complicated situations, you do better with a team." He caught the ball again and studied it. "Sometimes, a bad guy needs Rhodey's bigass rockets. But sometimes, a bad guy needs—"

Instinctively, Stephen brought his hand up when he saw the ball coming at him. Lowering his tablet had apparently signified that he was fair game, after all.

"—More of a scalpel," Clint finished, and smirked.

"Or a new invention," Stephen suggested, and placed the ball in Tony's outstretched hand, rather than actually tossing it over.

"Or a whatever," Clint agreed. "But anyway: with Nat, it felt like Laura and I had another person on our team. Aunt Nat could—"

"Could what?" Natasha cut in. Behind her, Steve carried several bags printed with Wendy's logos. Stephen hoped that the hospital didn't sell something so unhealthy inside its actual walls, as that seemed wildly counterproductive for patients on the mend. He did accept a hamburger from the options they'd brought, though.

After allowing time for the food allocation, and for Steve and Natasha to settle back into their seats, Clint explained, "They wanted to know what you do as the kids' godmother."

Natasha laughed, and stabbed a chicken tender into a sauce tray. "Serve as a cautionary tale."

"Aw, come on," Clint protested. "Give yourself more credit."

"That can be a very valuable role," Natasha insisted, and bit off half of the chicken tender in one bite.

As they bantered, Stephen couldn't help but smile in-between bites of dinner. From Tony's perspective, Stephen knew that the Avengers felt like closer friends than they'd managed in the first round. That was especially true for the ones who'd split from the team over the Accords, and for
Steve most of all. Tony did still spiral occasionally here, yes, but that spiraling was because he had so many people he cared about in his life. It was an embarrassment of riches to defend, rather than a closing of the ranks as fears or betrayals piled up.

And from Stephen's perspective? By September, 2011, version 1.0, his reputation had surged, meaning that he could increasingly keep the world at arm's length while adulation took the place of real human connection. He'd spent years building up his walls to keep the riff-raff out, only to discover too late that he'd really bricked himself up into isolation. But he wasn't isolated, here. Even when he tried very hard to be.

"You know what else Nat does?" Clint added after swallowing a mouthful of cheeseburger. "She does voices. When she reads books, she does different character voices for everyone."

"I. That's." Natasha sighed, and stabbed another chicken tender into sauce. "That was supposed to be confidential intel, Barton."

"You 'do voices?'" Steve repeated with open amusement, and leaned in closer to Natasha where she sat. One arm slung across the backrest of her chair as he delightedly asked, "Like what?"

"Those voices are only for my godchildren to hear," Natasha said, and spent too long swirling sauce around her current chicken tender of choice.

"Come on."

"Taking them to my grave."

"Come on," Steve wheedled.

"Hey, Tony," Natasha said too loudly, and turned to him. "It's Christmas, and Pierce wants you to be the conductor on the Polar Express. Do a voice."

For once, Tony Stark wilted under sudden attention. He was very many things, but a voice actor he was not. Before tonight, the thought of being expected to act out the characters in a children's book had clearly never crossed his mind. Under pressure, he was probably rapidly debating the merits of Natasha's personal, old-fashioned touch, versus some sort of over-engineered storytelling hologram that could act out the story over Pierce's bed while Tony recited it.

Since Tony did not need one single ounce of additional stress that night, Stephen swept in to say, "Any sort of reading to an infant is beneficial. You don't need to worry about the format. Countless studies show increases in neural pathway development from exposure to human speech. You could read a... read a mission debriefing to Pierce, early on, and it'd be good for him."

"Until he learns what the words 'slime carbuncles' mean," Natasha added with shivering disgust.

Fair point. That had been a really gross fight. "Most debriefings," Stephen amended. "But so long as you keep talking to him, you'll be helping with all of those important developmental steps." At that, he couldn't help but smirk and add, "Trust me. I'm a doctor."

"Stephen!"

That sudden yelp had hadn't come from any of them. It took the group a mutual moment to realize that, and another moment to face Phil as he ran out of the hallway. With concern, Stephen wondered, "Is everything all right?"

"Wait, wait, why is he asking you if everything is all right?" asked another unexpected voice. Now,
the group spun to face Happy Hogan. He was red-faced and faintly sweaty, having apparently also run through the hospital to find the maternity ward, and he looked beyond dismayed to hear even a suggestion that something might be going wrong. "Pepper asked me to go handle something in L.A. for her earlier, and I flew back as soon as I could, and why aren't things all right?"

Stephen frowned. Happy didn't like Stephen, even after so long. He probably resented the way the entertaining spillover from Tony's outrageous lifestyle had stopped abruptly in 2007, followed by Tony nearly cutting Happy out of his life as the 2018 duo tried to control the flow of information. Still, even if he mostly tried to ignore Stephen's existence, Happy should have thought of this. "Why didn't you just ask me for a portal back from California?"

Happy opened his mouth, flummoxed at what he'd overlooked, and then closed it.

"Can we focus, please?" Phil insisted, and the group's attention rotated back toward him.

"Seriously, is everything all right?" Tony asked at that reminder of Phil's tense arrival.

After a tight, focused exhalation, Phil explained, "Nothing's wrong. But remember how I said we have a whole bunch of doctors? By now, it's too many. Way too many. They're talking to each other over Pepper's head, and she's feeling out of control. And she never feels out of control. Everything's kinda spiraling."

It was important to keep the mother in good spirits, yes, and it was beyond unfair to make Pepper feel helpless during one of the most important moments of her life. Still, though, Stephen had to ask, "So, what did you want us—"

Phil grabbed for his hand. "Come in."

Startled, Stephen didn't pull that hand away in time. "I... what?" Tony's expression was just as surprised, for he clearly remembered the very logical explanation for why his own delivery room offer had been rejected earlier. "But. You said there were too many people, already."

"Too many doctors having doctor conversations over Pepper's head," Phil insisted urgently, and tugged him to a standing position. "We need someone to explain them. Someone who'll actually acknowledge us." When Stephen still hesitated, Phil sputtered, "Come on! You're a doctor! So you can translate the other doctors! She said you've done this before!"

"Go. I'll see you afterward," Tony said once he'd caught up. To Stephen's immense irritation, Tony now actually looked amused. To his even greater irritation, so did everyone else.

Well, then. These were probably Stephen's first officially official godfather duties. As he allowed Phil to steer him through the halls, Stephen at least comforted himself with the knowledge that he could use this night to force Tony into doing all of the voices. Ever.

Pepper was no longer a picture of slightly frazzled control, like they'd seen on the video call earlier. Sweat beaded on her forehead as she panted in tight, frantic bursts between clenched teeth. Pain hummed at the back of her throat with each sharp exhalation, and her knuckles were knobby and white as she clutched the bed's railings.

"Thank God," she said as soon as the contraction eased, and turned her reddened gaze on Phil and Stephen. Water rimmed her bottom lashes, pushed from tear ducts by the sheer strain of what her body was suffering.

Okay. Okay. It'd been more than a decade since doing general student rounds in medical school, and Stephen had spent only three weeks working an obstetrics cycle, but he knew the basics. Any good
doctor knew the basics. "She asked me in," he immediately said when the hospital team began to protest his arrival.

"We're not dealing with brain surgery, Doctor Strange," snapped the obstetrician from her position between Pepper's knees.

From how she'd spat 'Doctor,' instead of referencing his medical degree hanging on an office wall, he could somehow hear the CNN supervillain crisis headlines. Emergency technicians and doctors loved working with him for clean-up, and so did other neurosurgeons who wanted to see magic in action, but apparently he wasn't viewed in quite the same way outside of those fields.

His ego instinctively bristled, more like a tiger than a housecat, and Stephen opened his mouth to defend his medical honor. But then, with great effort, he stopped. After a calming breath, he instead said, "Pepper asked in her child's godfather, and so I'm going to be in here." Tony wasn't the only person for whom he could squelch his self-interest.

The obstetrics team glanced at each other after that explanation. Although no one actually nodded, a collective ripple of acceptance seemed to flow through the room. They didn't welcome in Doctor Strange, but no longer did they challenge a godfather, and so Stephen reviewed the numbers on various monitors while Phil returned to Pepper's shoulder.

"Don't push quite yet," the obstetrician insisted. "I know it doesn't feel good—"

"This is way past 'doesn't feel good,'" Pepper spat, with more anger than Stephen had ever heard from her.

The speed of Stephen's review increased.

After a few minutes, Stephen thought he had figured out where things had gone wrong. Pepper and Phil had spent enormous money for what most people would consider top-level care: a full team there to measure every possible number and worry about them appropriately, and experts to tell Pepper what she specifically needed to do at each step. For many people, that would be very comforting. But Pepper and Phil wanted to know the details. They wanted information overload. They wanted the rationale for why actions were being taken.

And so, knowing that about them, Stephen returned to the happy couple's side and proceeded to give them details. He talked about dilation circumference, and the malleability of infant skulls compared to the stubborn rigidity of their shoulders, especially if this delivery phase lingered. He talked about the potential for the surrounding tissue to tear, which was sometimes unavoidable but could be hugely, painfully worsened by frantic pushing. The baby could even go into distress as his blood-oxygen levels plummeted. They would be forced into an emergency c-section to save his life.

At first, the obstetrics team looked horrified at the absolute worst-case scenarios that Stephen was freely sharing with Pepper. But then, like he'd expected (like he'd hoped), Pepper's tension eased. Hearing how things could go terribly wrong didn't scare this Fortune 500 CEO: it let her knowledgeably assess current indicators. Now, she knew that her doctors really weren't bullshitting her with their soothing urges to wait. She could trust the process.

The obstetrician didn't actually compliment Stephen as Pepper relaxed, just a bit, but she did raise one eyebrow and allow, "Saying all of that to someone would usually go a lot worse, you know."

With a faint, lopsided grin, Stephen nodded once in return and then stepped back. That was probably the best bedside manner he'd ever managed, in either version of his life. He'd always been professionally encouraging toward his patients, but had only wanted to get to really 'know them'
through scans and lab work. After they’d been a compliant slab of meat in his operating room, he would announce his success to the patient, and then promptly turn them over to the residents and move on to his next victory.

Yeah. Okay. This was good. This was all good. Remembering Tony, Stephen pulled out his phone and texted: We're good. Never had a smiling emoji in response carried so much weight with it.

Now that the obstetrician knew that the world-famous superhero neurosurgeon would still allow her to captain this ship, more tension eased. And since Pepper and Phil wanted Stephen to remain, to explain any other emergencies that arose, he found himself standing dutifully behind Phil and texting appropriate updates to Tony.

Delivery was so visceral compared to the sterility of surgery. The human body was not meant to be cut apart, and so when something dangerous enough to demand the use of a scalpel arose, it was done in tiny, precise steps to minimize the effects. Giving birth was natural, though. And frantic, and joyous. In Stephen's surgeries, he'd felt like a conductor steering an orchestra through sheet music, but this team was a jazz ensemble reacting to natural ebbs and flows.

Of course, the joy of birth still clearly hurt like absolute hell. When another contraction hit, and Pepper squeezed Phil's hand hard enough to turn it purple and red, Stephen was quietly, selfishly glad that he was out of harm's way. He could imagine this timeline breaking a few bones in his hand that way, instead.

"Get him in," Pepper gasped when the team announced that she was fully dilated, and could finally begin pushing.

The doctor chuckled. "We're trying to get him out, now."

"Tony!" Pepper snapped. "I mean Tony! If it's happening, and Stephen's here, then he's gotta be!"

"I'll get him," Stephen promised, and raised his phone again. After typing a quick text, he gestured toward the door. A slender scrawl of fiery energy pierced the wood to wind through the hallway beyond.

Following that magical guideline, Tony was able to soon arrive at a run. Breathless and smiling, he took in the sight with a quick survey: the obstetrician leaning down between Pepper's sheet-covered knees, Phil holding her hand, Stephen constantly checking the numbers on the monitors. After a comforting brush of Pepper's shoulder that earned a strained smile in reply, he stepped back and laced his fingers through Stephen's.

Yes, delivery was visceral: strained cries, the scent of blood. But eventually, that pain earned tears of relief. Rising from her bent-over position with a smile, the obstetrician announced, "Here he is."

There were still things that needed to happen, Stephen remembered: succioning the mouth and nose, clipping the umbilical cord, and cleaning the newborn's delicate skin. Pierce seemed to vanish behind an absolute wall of people as that checklist happened, and the four of them were left trying to peer back and forth between shoulders to see the new arrival. During that wait, Phil stroked Pepper's hair and murmured quiet, teary congratulations, and Tony leaned contentedly against Stephen while the readouts were reviewed one last time.

And then Pierce was there, cleaned and swaddled. Someone laid him gently on Pepper's chest, a tiny bundle of soft blankets. Blinking in amazed exhaustion, she stared down at her first child. "Wow," she whispered, and more tears sprang. "Hey."
"Hey," Phil echoed, laughed once, and wiped at his eyes with the back of one hand. "Hey, little guy."

That really was a new, tiny person, absolutely incapable of defending himself in any way, who would grow up in a world that seemed more dangerous by the minute. Stephen might have gotten dragged into this role, but now that he'd seen this child's first breaths, absolute determination suddenly filled him. They had to win this. All of it. The intensity of this sensation was overwhelming, and terrifying, and amazing.

Tony seemed to feel the same way, when Stephen finally remembered to look away from Pierce. His eyes were warm and glossy with unshed tears, and his mouth quivered like he wasn't sure whether he was about to cry or shout with joy.

Abruptly, they realized Pepper was talking about them. She'd introduced Pierce to his mother and father, and now it was time for the two of them to step closer. Pierce's skin had leveled out from the red, mottled tone common after delivery. He was now a delicate, rosy shade, with a dusting of pale hair that would probably darken as he aged, and blue eyes that probably wouldn't. Despite everything, he'd stopped crying, and was now taking in the new world around him. "He's perfect," Stephen said after watching that unfocused inspection.

A moment later, Tony repeated the words. With faint amusement, Stephen realized that he'd needed a doctor's reassurance, for Pierce still had the odd, squashed facial features that were common just after delivery. But he was. He was perfect.

When the rest of the group came in for an abbreviated round of congratulations before Pepper drifted off into well-earned sleep, that was perfect, too. Absolutely everything was perfect, right up until Tony and Stephen returned for another visit the next day, with a first round of gifts.

Tony's holographic crib mobile absolutely awed Pepper and Phil, as did the nebula rattle that Stephen had created. But when they opened the next gift, which was far more normal and should have required far less thought, Phil and Pepper simply stared and said nothing.

With unease, Tony and Stephen craned their necks around to verify that yes, that was just a simple, comfortable red fleece blanket. They'd had it custom-made, as a 'best baby gifts' site had recommended it for households that loved some particular sports team. But instead of Pepper and Phil's favorite team (the Mets), Tony had ordered one with a Stark Industries logo in one corner and Pierce's initials in another.

"I really cannot believe we didn't notice that," Phil said after a long pause.

"P...C...P?" Pepper said weakly. "Seriously, how did we not notice?"

"I told him we should tell you it was a drug name," Tony instantly said, and pointed an accusing finger at Stephen, who jolted in surprise and stared back at him. "He said I couldn't."

"But. You. You said you'd thought about the name!" Stephen sputtered, wanting to wilt under their mutual stares. He wasn't someone who felt bad about things like this. He was a Sorcerer Supreme in waiting, for God's sake. As someone who protected humanity's collective mental capacity from being scoured bare by unspeakable demons, he should not feel this targeted by Pepper's look of betrayal.

But he did. Damn it all.

"Why'd we make you a godfather," Phil demanded, "if you're weren't gonna warn us about naming our kid after a street drug?"
"I. That's." Stephen closed his eyes, and sighed. He wasn't used to being bad at things. "Pepper. Phil. Phencyclidine, PCP, Pierce's initials, consider swapping the order."

"We'll do that," Pepper said dryly, after sharing an equally dry look with Phil.

"And I'll order a new blanket," Tony said with a delighted grin, that was directed squarely at Stephen and his temporary inability to be the most self-assured person in any given room. "With new initials."

So, not quite everything about Pierce's arrival was perfect. But it was close enough.

Even enthusiastic godfather Tony had to admit that newborns were not especially interesting in the first weeks. Everyone already loved Pierce, from the fierce intensity of his official family to the automatic affection that others felt for him, but the plans Stephen and Tony had made were fairly grand. Early milestones like 'eyes come into focus' or 'the head can lift, a tiny bit,' were great signs... for the future. But Tony already itched to teach him how to use computers while Stephen kept debating between science and magic, and 'Pierce reacts to sounds, now' was pretty far removed from those goals.

His brain was developing, though, and that was key. And when they eventually offered to take Pierce for a night, so that Phil and Pepper could again leave their house as independent adults, Tony clearly remembered what Stephen had said about helping with that brain development. For when Stephen walked in to the living room, ready to ask Tony what he wanted with dinner, he saw Tony sprawled on the couch with Pierce bundled on his chest.

To that tiny form, Tony was reading from his tablet. "Like the rules for atomic lattices developed by Pauling," Tony explained in a softly cheerful tone, "these are guidelines for determining relative nanoparticle superlattice stability, rather than rigorous mathematical descriptions."

Stephen couldn't help but chuckle and wonder, "What are you doing?"

"You said I could read anything to him, early on," Tony said, and looked up at Stephen as he approached. To Stephen's quiet delight, Pierce now clearly had the capacity to recognize him. Stephen walking close enough for his still-fuzzy eyes to focus upon earned a tiny, rosebud smile.

"And so you picked?"

"Nanoparticle Superlattice Engineering with DNA. 'October 2011 issue of Science.'"

Genuine laughter escaped Stephen at that. While he was sure that Tony would dive into children's books soon enough, that sounded about right for now. He loved this man and his absolute laser-focused personality. He already loved that baby, too, even if the responsibility still felt odd and unpracticed, and God, he loved seeing both of their perfect faces look up at him. How had this new life launched like some sort of disaster comedy, but turned into something so ideal? "Actually, that does sound interesting," he then replied, still smiling. "Send it to me."

"Done."

"Thanks." One quick, bent-over kiss to Tony's forehead later, Stephen straightened and wondered, "Chicken or shrimp alfredo?"

"Both."

"Cheater."

Watching a baby who slept sixteen hours per day shouldn't be so exhausting. No wonder Phil and
Pepper had happily accepted Tony and Stephen's offer of overnight babysitting. Even though they'd added a nursery in their home's copious square footage, with duplicates of all the gifts that hung in Pierce's own bedroom, they were soon tired.

"You wished to be alerted," said Vincent some time later, repeating it with increasing volume until the alarm worked. Blinking, Stephen sat up. He'd never get used to his own voice waking him.

"What?" Tony blearily asked as Pierce also stirred against his chest. The baby's pink mouth opened and yawned wetly, and his tiny fists moved. From a corner of the room, the Cloak swept in to temporarily collect Pierce as Tony adjusted his position on the couch. The relic, they'd discovered, had a real soft spot for babies.

"The TV," Stephen realized. Now that he'd acknowledged it, Vincent unmuted the sound, and they heard the crowd rumbling as the Times Square ball descended steadily toward its New Year goal. Only just in time did he remember what that meant. Stephen pushed himself out of his chair to kneel near Tony's head, a few short seconds before a soft, midnight kiss.

Even after their (apparently over-the-top) fake dating, they'd publicly celebrated New Year's Eve each December. Big parties were the norm, not homemade late dinners and nearly sleeping through midnight, but neither complained about the change. Not when Pierce smiled at the sight of them both when the Cloak handed him gently back. Not when they'd take him home tomorrow to people who felt increasingly like real members of an expansive family.

In Times Square, the crowd still roared. An inset video showed the New Year's fireworks that had begun over Manhattan, and in another corner of the screen, a popular singer resumed her concert. "Happy New Year," Stephen said, looking back to Tony.

Tony didn't look back at him. His gaze locked on the scrolling headlines, and his arms tightened slightly around the tiny, blanket-wrapped form on his chest. After a few aching seconds, he nodded. With a shadowed gaze, he added, "Happy 2012."
After a long pause, Pepper wondered, "Tony, what is that thing above my baby?"

"You want one?" Tony asked cheerfully as the robot's arm rotated, and its 'fingers' secured the last tape tab for Pierce's fresh diaper.

"Did you seriously make a robot just so you wouldn't need to change diapers?"

"I have changed plenty of diapers," Tony insisted, reviewed the readouts, and nodded to himself. By now, the robot was running exactly as intended.

From his spot on the counter, Pierce giggled up at his robot helper. He was approaching eight months old, which seemed to be an even more ideal age than seven months. Nine months would probably be even better, and then ten would beat that, and over and over again in ever-improving familial bliss. (Tony refused to consider that whispered horror of the 'terrible twos'.)

"You seriously made a robot just so you wouldn't need to change diapers," Pepper repeated. This time, it wasn't a question.

"Look." Tony gestured broadly with a screwdriver. "Like I said, I have changed plenty of diapers. But you know who really is a big whiny wuss about them? Mr. 'I think the inside of brains are cool but can't stand wiping baby butts.'"

"That's—" Pepper paused, then rolled her eyes. "Okay, I can see that."

"Mmmhmm. But seriously, do you want me to make you another diaper robot?"

Pepper returned her attention to the robot, and studied it for a long, considering pause. "Test it a little more. Then yes."

Yeah. He'd thought so.

By now, Pierce could reliably sit up on his own, and did so after Tony fastened him back into his onesie. His small, chubby hands lifted toward Pepper in anticipation as she approached. Being scooped up by his mother earned a coo of delight. "I know," she cooed back, and placed a kiss on his tiny nose. When Pepper's attention returned to Tony, her voice dropped out of that sing-song tone and into the confidence of a CEO. "Thanks again for watching him. All of a sudden, we could make the meeting happen."

"And?"

Pepper grinned, and so Tony preened with satisfaction. That reaction meant that they'd secured their biggest energy contract in company history, by far. His municipal arc reactors were well-tested by now, and countless foreign governments had reached out about installations in their own countries. There'd been pushback by officials who saw it as a national security risk to allow the technology
beyond U.S. borders, and they'd been arguing with others who saw it as a global defense against climate change. Apparently, Group B had won.

"So, how much money did I just make?" Tony then asked.

"Here is the contract," Pepper said, and gestured the full details onto a hologram that Tony provided. The hand that wasn't occupied with Pierce trailed down its numbers, seeking the line in question. "And here is..."

"Nice," Tony happily said as he took in all of the zeroes attached to his cut of the spectacular profits. "I've had my eye on a place in Monaco. I might need a fun little 'me' present after this."

"You had a place in Monaco. You sold it."

"I hated that kitchen, you know that."

"Well, then, have fun with Monaco. Again," Pepper said. "Anyway, Pierce tried to pull himself across the floor this morning. You'd better pick one room where he'll be when he comes over, and babyproof the whole thing."

"Already?" Wow. That seemed early. Look at their little genius go.

"Already." Pepper glanced at her phone. "Oh, Happy's downstairs. I'd better run. Thanks again!" Her gaze rotated down to her son. "Say goodbye to Uncle Tony."

As Pepper turned to leave, Pierce obediently smiled over her shoulder. A shouted 'ba!' was probably intended as the goodbye in question, and after Tony gave him a grin and wave in response, Pierce kept repeating it. Those increasingly loud babbles only ceased when they stepped into the elevator and its door slid shut.

Tony's smile lingered a few seconds longer, then slid from his face. "Babyproofing, huh." Turning, he looked at some screens that Pepper thankfully hadn't asked about, and walked toward one to study its details.

Ava Starr was not yet officially, totally fixed. Stephen only had to redo her shields once per month, now, but without that effort she'd still start to lose control of her body. That meant that Tony and Bruce had to keep pursuing their research, with additional quantum field input from Bill Foster over in California. (Good guy, actually.) It had been a great way to form fresh bonds with Bruce, who had perked up once he could make safe social connections. Between their two genius intellects, along with Bill and Stephen's own irreplaceable contributions, they were getting a real understanding of this energy that was ripping Ava apart.

And to do that, they'd needed to gain a firm understanding of how to manipulate dimensions.

Years ago, Tony had been left helplessly wondering if Obadiah had somehow overcome Stephen while they were locked into a Mirror Dimension dome in Afghanistan. Then, he'd struggled to understand the aliens crawling out of a dimensional fold and onto the campus of the University of British Columbia. He'd been unable to access his satellites through the spells wrapping Kamar-Taj, and even after having this challenge in the back of his mind for years, he hadn't been able to send messages to Stephen when his work took him to other realms.

Stephen's comments about the dangers of his portals ripping open dimensional walls had further heightened Tony's concern, and curiosity. Even if every single other dimension was its own unique mess of physical contradictions, there had to be a way to understand how energy potentially flowed between them. Thanks to this extended study of Ava Starr, paired with the curious readings he'd
taken in the relic lockbox room at Kamar-Taj, he'd finally figured it out. This was the trickiest problem he'd ever tackled. Ever.

But he'd figured it out. He always figured it out.

Understanding inter-dimensional energy flows meant that he was now able to remotely monitor the Space Stone and see any warning signs of it soon causing trouble, even before when S.H.I.E.L.D.'s own lab tech could. If everything duplicated Round One, then Loki would arrive in exactly ten days, but Tony's spine itched with the concern that it might instead happen sooner, or later. Either way, they couldn't afford to let their guard down, for Stephen did need to catch him by surprise.

That uncertainty about the date was exactly why Tony had worked so hard to perfect the tracking of dimensional energy flows. Everyone he cared about needed to be protected. The whole world needed to be babyproofed.

When he brought up that remote tracking, he saw that—for now—the Space Stone was still stable. Nodding to himself, Tony directed the system to alert him to any variation, then checked whether Stephen was done with his surgery. He'd apparently saved the leader of some country or company today, or something. It was an important surgery, but not an especially neat one, and so he hadn't bothered to fill Tony in on the details.

Good. He was done. They could grab Cantonese, like they'd both been craving.

Nine days. Sicilian.

Eight days. Thai.

Seven days. Bolivian.

With six days to go until the 'right' arrival date, Tony's stomach decided to tie itself in absolute knots. The distraction of traveling for dinner had worked on previous nights, but by now he couldn't handle anything heavier than a bit of roast chicken. He'd used to love a restaurant in Malibu that was famous for its light, healthy food. (Well, to be truthful, he'd loved its bar.) Thinking of it did feel like a return to simpler days, and so maybe a visit would help. Maybe.

After barely nibbling at that California meal, Tony concluded that the visit had not actually done that much.

Stephen sat across the small table from Tony, glancing too frequently off toward the Pacific. He clearly felt some nerves, too, and Tony's tension surely wasn't helping. On Tony's recommendation he'd ordered the salmon, but had only picked away at half of the not-especially-generous portion.

Just as a waiter handed them the check, Tony's watch beeped.

It was happening. The Space Stone was beginning to flicker. Loki would arrive tonight.

Impatiently, Tony shoved far too much cash at the waiter, and told him to keep it all. He and Stephen ran for the door, drawing gasps of surprise and concern as they pushed between tables. Diners lifted their phones to photograph their hurried exit. "I'll get them," Stephen promised when they reached the parking lot, and opened a portal. Beyond it sat Kamar-Taj.


"You're sure this will work?" Tony asked, catching Stephen's hand before he could step forward to
Stephen nodded. "Based on what you've told me, we're about to collect two Infinity Stones."

"Then. Okay." God, Tony wished that he had a perfect memory, too. He hadn't paid too much attention to this particular part of the S.H.I.E.L.D. files he'd stolen off Fury's helicarrier, and after so many years he thought he was right, but... "See you soon."

Four minutes later, Tony got through to Nick Fury's personal line. It hadn't been easy; he was in a secret base in New Mexico, and officially, he was not taking calls. "It's all happening tonight," Tony said urgently. "You need to be ready."

"Stark, you'd better not be distracting me from something important. Other people are trying to call me at the moment."

"Yeah, I know, but Stephen's got this handled. Like we've talked about." The last sentence hit emphatically.

As the timeline wound its way toward late spring, they'd shared many specific details with Nick Fury. Unfortunately, as Tony only now realized, there was one related detail that extended well beyond tonight. It was understandable that their attention had centered upon Space and Mind, but there was more to consider. Tony finished, "But there's something else to keep in mind. Once these two Stones are under control, you also need to control Loki himself."

"I am assuming these 'gods' share our vulnerability to a M4 carbine," Fury easily replied, "even if a few more shots are required."

"No!" Tony inhaled. "No." He held no love for Loki, a man who'd tried to hand the world over to Thanos, pointed Tony toward a one-way nuke trip, and had personally killed Phil Coulson. (Pierce's dad.) Despite all that, Tony knew he had to keep the big picture in mind. Maintaining a broad perspective could be unfortunately tricky when the number of people who fully knew that big picture fit on one hand.

Stephen, Tony, the Ancient One, and Wong were completely in the loop. No one else knew it all: not Steve, not Rhodey, and not even Nick Fury. The latter clearly recognized that he was missing some vital information, and so demanded, "Tell me."

"An evil elf is going to try to turn the lights out in the universe. Or something. I don't know, it was weird. I didn't pay that much attention." Sensing Fury's impatience, Tony added, "Loki helps with fighting them. I'm guessing that help is mandatory. You can't kill him. You've just got to trap him."

After a lengthy pause, Fury snapped, "Fine. I'll scramble my helicarrier. I hope you're right about this, or you're going to waste about ten million dollars for nothing. And that amount of money does actually matter to some people."

"Send me a bill, I just made five hundred and forty."

"Show-off," Fury snorted, and hung up.

Twenty minutes later, Tony paced impatiently in the fourth-floor conference room at Wooster. Karl and Melinda had collected most of the Avengers, except for Stephen and Clint. Those seven others in the room were staring curiously at Tony as he pinballed around the space, barely resisting the urge to gnaw his fingernails bloody.

Passing a feed from the street security cameras interrupted Tony's pacing. A group of smiling pre-
teens had gathered in front of the Avengers lineup in the plate glass windows, and played with the various holograms that Tony had added over the years. All of the team was represented down there. Everyone. The thought of telling the robots to remove someone's gear from the lineup...

Tony exhaled as the security camera panned across a set of Sentinel armor. That old Mark One armor was hugely outdated. By now, Phil wore Mark Six. The revisions had addressed numerous vulnerabilities, and so even if something unexpected did happen, Phil Coulson was going home at the end of all this. He was, Tony wouldn't have to explain to Pepper why he'd personally shoved her husband into this suit, against her wishes, and then let Loki kill him. Again.

"Tony," Rhodey eventually said when Tony's nervous gait picked up again, yet he still refused to give them any explanation for the emergency meeting he'd called. "Seriously, man, what's up?"

Okay. Okay. Showtime. Tony walked to the head of the table, rested his hands on it, and squared his shoulders. "Nick Fury has an unbelievably powerful object in one of his labs. My scanners show that someone is about to make a move on it."

"How powerful is 'unbelievably powerful?" wondered Natasha. "Fury does have a lot of neat stuff, but..."

"It's something called an Infinity Stone."

Karl and Melinda both stepped forward, their eyes wide. "What?" Karl demanded. His voice shook. "How has one fallen into their hands? Who's moving to take it?"

"And which one is it?" Melinda added.

Tony answered Melinda first. "Space." That seemed to steady out their mounting fear, at least; he supposed that Reality or Power would be even more of an immediate worst-case scenario. But seeing the mystics so terrified had put the rest of the team even more on edge, and so Tony directed his response for Karl toward the entire room. "I saw its energy going weird and figured out what was happening. Stephen took that info to the Ancient One. She's handling it."

Relieved, Karl nodded.

"And she'll be good enough?" Phil wondered, studying Karl's change in mood with a curious frown. "For what has you so upset?"

"The Ancient One can..." Grimacing, Tony trailed off. God, he hated to admit this. "She could probably." He really hated to admit this. "Probably take this whole room at once."

"He's right," Karl instantly confirmed, to Tony's consternation. Mordo could have pulled back from being a Kamar-Taj cheerleader just a tiny bit. He was supposed to be loyal to this team, too.

"How much else do we know about the situation?" Steve wondered, and tilted his head as he walked over to study the monitors. "I see Fury's scrambling his helicarrier. Is there a reason for that?"

Shadows in his expression indicated that he recognized Tony's greater knowledge of this threat, as did Rhodey's.

And maybe Tony should have told them. Maybe he should have brought everyone in with the Staff by now, instead of constantly finding excuse after excuse to delay things, even after Natasha and Clint had also poked holes in their story. Maybe he should have. Maybe. But Loki was more slippery than those two oiled-up bikini models he'd once wrestled. (Twenty-second birthday party.) And for as long as this assault lasted, Loki was directly working as Thanos' hand on Earth. Between their sharp cunning and raw power, getting more people to openly, actively, visibly stand against the two
men seemed wildly counterproductive for that goal of getting everyone home alive. The more predictions people were making, the more moving parts there'd be. Every moving part was a chance to break.

They needed to get through tonight. Then, he could start to tell everyone everything.

"I don't think Fury trusts the magic lady as much as I do," Tony lied after studying the readouts from his sensors. "If he's worried that a threat'll come pouring out of those portals, only to get loose from New Mexico—"

"New Mexico," Natasha said with abrupt concern, and stood. Fear filled her eyes and she barely kept it out of her voice. "Wait. This is at the facility where Clint's stationed?"

That. Was. Shit. Yeah. Shit. Everything had worked out in the end, there, and so Tony had overlooked that obvious risk factor with the timing they'd worked out. "He's really there, tonight?" Tony then asked Natasha in a hesitant voice, and pointed at the map with a shaky finger.

"His current mission is classified, but I think so," she said with enough worry to keep her distracted from Tony's conflicted expression, especially when the facility's monitored readouts began to blare with a fresh alarm. Walking closer to that screen, she wondered, "Is there any way to see inside?"

Nodding, Tony got to work. His fingers flew frantically across holographic keyboards, trying to overpower top-level S.H.I.E.L.D. security even as it slammed its highest safety protocols into place. Normally, he tried to work with a light touch, to give him at least some level of plausible deniability. Not tonight, though. Tonight, he just wanted in.

A few agonizing minutes later, he succeeded. Tony didn't remember everything from those files, no, but he did remember stories about Loki slipping out through the bottom-level tunnels. With that focus, he scanned their security feeds and was soon able to find the one tunnel where a commotion was brewing.

"Oh God, Clint," Natasha whispered a moment later, and lifted a shaky hand to her mouth.

There was Nat's oldest friend, yes, speeding through a secret tunnel with Loki in the back of a truck and Erik Selvig at his side in the passenger cab. Between them was a silver briefcase, and in Loki's arms was an elegant scepter. The sight had Tony nearly ready to scream. There they were. There they fucking were, and Loki was getting away, and it was all happening again. They'd fucked up. He was getting away. It was all happening again and he'd told Stephen where to look but it didn't matter because they hadn't fixed anything and—

A three-foot high beam of energy materialized in front of the speeding Jeep, too close to avoid at high speed. The car's front end crumpled like it had hit an unyielding concrete pillar. Windshield glass vanished just before the men in the cab would have crashed bloodily through it. From the open truck bed where he crouched, Loki was sent freely flying. A mystic portal flashed open to catch each man, and they vanished through sparks instead of slamming into stone walls.

Inside the Wooster conference room, another portal soon opened. "Got 'em," Stephen cheerfully said, and lifted the briefcase and scepter.

Tony stared wordlessly back at him. His gaze rotated to the Space Stone's briefcase. Despite the amazing news that this sight was, his expression couldn't help but momentarily crumple. Do you have any idea how hard that was, before?

"Where's Clint?" Natasha demanded. To her, the two Stones might as well not exist.
"The Ancient One and Wong worked with me on that attack," Stephen said. "They caught everyone in a secure pocket dimension. They're not injured at all."

"They just crashed," Phil protested.

"...Mostly not injured," Stephen allowed with a faint grimace. "Sorry. That truck was really moving. But he's fine," he reassured Natasha, who nodded shakily. "Karl, Melinda, could you go help with collecting people from those dimensions? Right now, my priority has to be..." He lifted both hands, indicating the impossibly valuable artifact he carried in each one.

Right. Stephen was right. Nothing mattered right now but those two Infinity Stones, and so Tony nodded. "Yeah. Get them safe, and we can talk later. You two, go help the Ancient One and Wong. Make sure Clint's okay, and get Loki locked up. Portal everyone to the helicarrier so it can take off ASAP."

A few minutes later, Tony finally allowed himself the luxury of sitting. Steve and Rhodey looked at him curiously, for only they had an inkling of how momentous tonight could have been. The rest of the room just wanted to hear that Clint was all right, and that the man who'd caused all this commotion had been adequately dealt with.

They'd... they'd done it. Nearly five years of planning, and they'd done it. With the additional research Tony had conducted, he'd been able to give a warning signal with enough lead time for Team Kamar-Taj to make their preparations. With Stephen's additional practice and planning, he'd launched exactly the surprise attack he said was needed for Loki. And they'd done it. They now had Time, Space, and Mind rounded up. Six years to go until the buzzer, and they already had half of the Stones.

They'd done it.

A disbelieving laugh escaped Tony. Delighted shock prickled at his face like electricity.

Sparks drew everyone back to their feet. To their mutual surprise, neither Stephen, Karl, nor Melinda was the first to walk through the emerging portal. Instead, that trio followed the Ancient One into the conference room, who smiled faintly at the surprise her unmistakable appearance earned. "I don't believe I've had the pleasure of meeting all of you, just yet."

After a significant pause, Rhodey replied, "I'm pretty sure I would remember you, yeah."

Phil's eyebrows raised. "This is who Tony says could take us all in a fight, right?"

Delighted, the Ancient One turned to Tony. He rolled his eyes.


"I'm going to want to follow up on that," Tony said, remembering what Clint had gone through the first time. It was good to have a mystic remove Loki's effect from him, but Tony still wanted to cover his bases.

"All right," Melinda replied, confused.

Next, Tony returned his attention to the Ancient One and asked, "So, where are the Stones?" When she began to give another inscrutable, damnable smile, he rolled his eyes and snapped, "Give me a real answer, not a fortune cookie."
"They're... in a lockbox," Stephen replied, with an inscrutable smile of his own.

Oh. That made sense. Wong wasn't there, and so he must be locking them away in Kamar-Taj. Remembering that secure lockbox room with all of the world's most valuable relics, Tony nodded uncertainly. He supposed that was one of the best places on Earth to keep them, but still, it left him uneasy to think of three Infinity Stones all stored next to each other. No matter how good Kamar-Taj's security systems were, putting half of the Stones in one place might just be setting up one-stop shopping for Thanos. An apocalypse Walmart.

After a few seconds of the increasingly odd smiles from Stephen and the Ancient One, everyone in the room began to clue in that something significant had happened. "What exactly did you do?" Karl wondered, his curious gaze moving between them both. Apparently, they hadn't even shared their actions with the other mystics.

A quick glance between Stephen and the Ancient One had her nodding once, and him nodding in return and stepping forward. His hand gestured a blue stone into place, which made Tony jerk with surprise until he realized it was only an illusion. That illusion hung steady for a few seconds, then flickered into invisibility.

Infinity Stones, Stephen explained to the ignorant people in the room, both produced and steered some fundamental aspect of universal existence. If the six were united, they could overwrite the universe; if removed from some dimension, that universe would eventually collapse or rot. They could exist as anything from full stones to individual atoms, but despite the danger they presented, they had to exist.

Somewhere in the universe.

At some time.

"At some time?" Tony echoed, frowning.

"At some time," Stephen confirmed, and gestured the illusory Space Stone back into place. "The Ancient One dealt with the Mind Stone, then asked me to handle the Space Stone. To do that, I used the Time Stone." A green illusion appeared next to it.

"Whole lotta Stones, apparently," Sam drawled. "Tony, you should have told us that you were so worried about these mystical Jolly Ranchers."

"I took the Time Stone and the Space Stone," Stephen continued patiently, "and with them, journeyed to some location in the universe. Then, I went to some point in the universe's lifespan. And then, I locked the accessible physical form of the Space Stone into a repeating five-second loop. Eternally."

Blinking, Tony looked back at the blue illusion and recalled how it had appeared, only to vanish from view. Comprehension filled him, followed shortly by wonder. "Wait. That means..." He took a step closer to the illusory Stones. "In the entire lifespan of the universe, the Space Stone is only accessible for five seconds?"

Stephen smiled.

"And you're never, ever going to say when or where that is, are you?" Steve guessed.

Stephen's smile grew.

With disbelief, Karl asked, "How can either of you possibly control an Infinity Stone like that? You
used the Time Stone, yes, I understand. But... that level of..." His disbelief faded into awe as he looked between Stephen and the Ancient One.

The Ancient One cut in. "I took the same precaution with the Mind Stone, of course. I hid that troublesome Stone before Stephen hid Space. Before I even told him what we were doing, actually, for that assured I couldn't get a glimpse inside Stephen's decision. I have no idea when or where he chose as his hiding place, and my choice is a secret, as well." One eyebrow raised defiantly, and her shoulders moved back. "I am the Sorcerer Supreme. As the Stones do still exist, my plan assures the continuation of reality. And reality is also protected in other ways, for—"

"It just became impossible to bring all six together," Tony cut in. "Literally. Impossible." Without exact knowledge, it really would be impossible to track down the five-second span, somewhere and somewhen in the universe, during which a Stone became accessible. And to actually grab the Stones during their flicker of availability in the ancient past or far future, one would have to steal the Time Stone, which all of Earth would now defend. Those defenders included a mystical order that grew by the day.

And then. And then, someone would have to become practiced enough with the Time Stone to overcome the effects that had been applied with it. That foe couldn't just become an expert at Time; they would have to actually overpower what Stephen had done. They would have to overpower the effect applied by a man who'd controlled the Time Stone through millions of futures and countless deaths, growing more skilled with each cycle.

And if they somehow—somehow!—managed that, they'd next have to overpower what had been done by a woman who had the energy of the Time Stone itself literally flowing through her veins. Though it was killing her, for her remaining years, the Ancient One basically existed as a second Time Stone.

Even if someone did gather the intel, overpower all of Earth, and use the Time Stone to surpass Stephen's expert effects... they could never, ever use one Time Stone to overpower what had been done with two.

That woman was a goddamn genius.

"It's impossible," Tony repeated as he sank into a nearby chair, and felt a hysterical giggle threaten to burst free. They'd just won. Not just for today: forever.

Oh, they would obviously collect the other Stones, just to make things even more secure and cut the collateral damage to its absolute minimum, but they'd won. It was 2012, and they'd just won. "We actually won," he said emphatically, and bit his fist when a high, delighted giggle did finally erupt. Because Tony brought vital knowledge of this crisis back with him, and because he'd figured out those frustrating dimensional scanners to get the early alert they needed, he'd been able to aim Stephen as precisely as a sniper rifle. Working together, they'd hit their target. And they'd won. They'd won.

"Tony is really excited about the Jolly Ranchers," Sam said in the blank silence that followed.

"We can explain later," Stephen said. He'd always been better at controlling his emotions than Tony was, but even he had an enormous grin. "Wong is looking up ways to erase even the vaguest energy trails of what we just did, without waiting for them to fade."

"Go, then," Tony insisted. Tidying up after themselves was vital. They needed to cross every T, dot every I, and not stumble even momentarily as they crossed the finish line. "I'll handle this clean-up, and you handle that. I will see you after this is completely finished. Don't come back until you're
Stephen nodded. His pale features were flushed with excitement, and his eyes sparkled with it. Before calling another portal, he stepped closer to Tony and drew him in to a tight embrace. "We did it," he murmured into Tony's ear. Close as they were, it was still barely audible. Faint breath tickled Tony's skin.

"We did it," Tony murmured back and tightened his hold. Relief might make him laugh again or sob with its intensity. This was what they'd been desperately planning for years, knowing that the entire universe would end if things didn't work. Despite little mistakes here and there—S.H.I.E.L.D. agents figuring out their hidden motives, changing the timeline of superhero debuts—they'd stuck their landing. They didn't need to wait until 2018 to know they'd won. Whatever issues popped up after this could be dealt with, but as for the big fight... they'd won.

Their mouths met. Heat flared across Tony's body as relief surged into the deepest, most encompassing joy he'd ever known. They'd carved out so much good for themselves in this new world, but it always had a ticking clock behind it. Not now, though. From here on out, they were in control. This was exactly how their lives should be.

By now their bodies were again well-trained and well-toned, and so their grips on each other were unwavering. Under the heavy fabric of the Cloak of Levitation, Tony's arms slid down Stephen's back, and as their mouths worked against each other, Tony's heart sped in his chest. His skin tingled with anticipation for when this was all over and they could celebrate without all of these clothes between them, or...

...Or those other people in the room.

Remembering the others, suddenly, Tony pulled back a few inches. His eyes rolled pointedly toward the blank stares they'd earned from every onlooker there. Stephen needed a few dazed seconds to catch up. When he did realize why they'd stopped kissing, his cheeks actually colored. His fists released their grip on the material of Tony's shirt.

"Does anyone else feel like they just got handed way too much information?" Sam drawled.

Rhodey snorted. "Did I ever tell you guys about the first time Stephen and I saw each other?"

"Right, well, I'll go handle those energy signatures," Stephen immediately said, and stepped back from Tony with a controlled expression.

As Stephen's portal faded, Tony turned to the rest of the team. "I hope you enjoyed the show."

Natasha did seem to have enjoyed it, yes, but she was not allowed to judge them. Neither she nor Steve could say one single thing about putting on a show for people, not with how they'd engaged in that months-long romantic practical joke. The joke had turned them into real friends again, Tony supposed, since this timeline did seem to be avoiding the Hydra crisis that had forged their friendship before, but it was still annoying.

Thanks to whatever expression he was making, Natasha thought better of openly commenting on the show that Tony and Stephen had given. But apparently, she wasn't going to let this totally go. Fury forbade a portal being opened on his in-flight helicarrier, and so to keep the big man happy, they had to summon a Quinjet to the Wooster roof. While Phil steered it toward their destination over the Atlantic, Natasha sprawled against her seat and said loudly, to carry over the jet engines, "So, speaking of inappropriate."
Tony rolled his eyes. It wasn't like he and Stephen had started stripping each other in front of everyone. Still, if Natasha didn't keep herself distracted, then she'd start to worry about Clint again. He let her talk.

"Apparently, people are actually up for the idea of me and Steve together." Laughing, Natasha tapped a few buttons on the wall, and brought up a file she'd saved. "Check this out."

Tony's watch beeped. Over his wrist, a small holographic projection emerged. It also appeared from similar watches he'd made for some of the other men, or from the small communication pads that others on the team carried. It only took him a few seconds to scan enough text in the hologram to realize what he was reading: more stories that Avengers fans had written about the team. This time, Steve and Natasha were the stars.

"Well," Steve said after a significant pause. His throat cleared as he scrolled down, and although he quickly tried to move past it, Tony was almost positive that he'd just seen a remarkably explicit description of a blowjob. "At least we're not werewolves, this time."

"Werewolves?" Natasha asked, bemused. Karl echoed it from the other side of the jet, and his question was far more concerned.

"Oh," Rhodey realized a second later, and laughed. "Oh! You don't know about the stories!"

"What 'stories?'" Karl asked. He did appear to be genuinely concerned about the potential for lycanthropy to strike the team. Oh, if only he knew that sex-crazed werewolves was not remotely the weirdest thing out there.

"There are 'stories?" Melinda repeated, but unlike Karl, she grinned. "People are writing stories about us? Hey Phil, did you know about the stories?"

From the cockpit, Phil glanced over his shoulder. "Stories?"

Shortly, they'd arranged a competition among themselves: after a ten minute hunt, each Avenger on the Quinjet would present the weirdest story they'd found. A vote would be taken, and the winner would get bragging rights for now, and the right to choose a dinner spot later. "This isn't fair," Phil protested as he adjusted the jet's vectors. "I'm busy piloting."

"So sad to hear you're not winning the contest, then," Melinda said without looking up from her search. She did not sound the slightest bit sympathetic to her best friend's plight.

"I'm sticking with the werewolves," Steve announced at the end of that hunt. "They've got this whole... mythos. It's kind of impressive. Weird. But impressive."

"And there are werewolves who can get pregnant," Natasha added as she studied his chosen story with a considering frown. "Gotta say, Steve: those vertical stripes on your costume are not very maternity-friendly. Gonna need a redesign."

When he'd first woken up from the ice, Steve Rogers would have been overwhelmed by the sheer, unrelenting oddity of everything currently happening in this jet. But after years of teamwork and friendship, he just laughed and leaned back against his seat, clearly confident in his chosen story as the eventual winner. Tony found himself smiling back, then turning to see who'd go next.

"Speaking of... that topic," Karl cut in, and loaded his chosen story. "I would just like to clarify that, er, reproduction spells are not catalogued in the Kamar-Taj library." Unlike Steve's amused confidence in choosing his werewolf story, Karl Mordo seemed to genuinely want to clarify that no magical path existed to impregnate him.
"Oh, you don't want to overstate things," Melinda smirked, and brought up her own pick. "A lot of our books actually have something very similar to this particular 'reproductive spell.'"

Curious, Tony skinned through the story Melinda had chosen. His cheeks soon burned, for she'd found a tale of a full-team orgy where the three mystics formed a sort of rudimentary mindlink that allowed for shared sensations. Maybe Stephen hadn't come up with that spell of his totally on his own. But as for what these fans had written... while admittedly hot, it wasn't half of what such shared bliss really felt like, and each attempt to describe it only reminded him of another actual night of passion.

"Hey. Check out Tony."

Startled by Rhodey's words, Tony looked up to see everyone in the back of the jet studying him with open amusement.

"I just got handed way too much information," Sam groaned again.

Tony cleared his throat, then slammed his ego back into place and asked pointedly, "Jealous?"

"I. Well." Sam frowned, and looked back down at his watch. "No." But after a moment, his gaze moved toward Melinda at his right shoulder, and turned very speculative.

"You couldn't handle me," she snorted.

There were also invading aliens who captured humans and put them in a zoo to breed. (Tony found that one, and was wildly entertained by some of the room assignments.) Wizards needed a 'battery' of a normal person to fuel their magic, and naturally, that connection was established through sex. (Rhodey's pick, and if that was at all accurate, he didn't want to know.) Eventually there was only Phil's story left, and he protested anew that this contest hadn't been fair at all, he was busy keeping the Quinjet from crashing.

"It's got autopilot," Steve said with a grin. "Share your story."

Shortly, everyone squinted at the text hovering near their wrists. "We're all... potted plants?" Karl asked, and turned to Phil for an explanation.

"We were finding weird stories!" Phil sputtered, and gestured at the steering column and windshield. "I was busy! And that is a really weird story!"

"Anyway," Natasha said after a heavy pause, "we should vote."

The werewolves won. Whatever.

In bright spirits, the team waited for the Quinjet's back door to open once Phil had expertly parked them on Fury's helicarrier. "You know," Nick Fury said dryly after they'd all emerged from their transport, "we do have a feed of everything said on S.H.I.E.L.D. aircraft."

At his side, Maria Hill deadpanned, "I would have picked the alien zoo."

"Thank you," Tony said, and gestured to her. At least there was some bit of sanity on the helicarrier tonight.

The last time Tony had been on this helicarrier, it was when Fury first rounded up the Avengers to deal with the impending threat that Loki and the Tesseract posed. They'd come together as a group of strangers, spent more time arguing than anything, and barely kept their heads above water as crisis
after crisis struck. This time, they shared collective laughter as they walked the helicarrier halls, with the long-established friendships of a functioning, collegial team.

Everything was so much better.

"And there is our troublemaker," Fury announced as he walked them into a conference room, and flicked on a large monitor. Ah, yes: Tony remembered that clear cage from when it had been originally designed for the Hulk, but had ended up holding Loki. In this go-round, it served that purpose again. There was that smarmy little sliver of a god, sprawling casually against one curved side of his cage like he was at a day spa.

Loki seemed to somehow notice their arrival, as he looked purposefully toward a camera. A second later, light rippled across his body. When it passed, he’d been replaced by the form of Nick Fury. "For the bigass check they had to write for this thing," drawled 'Fury,' "you'd think they could improve upon the accommodations."

"He’s been doing that for a while," the real Fury said, and rolled his eye. "C'mon. Romanoff, I assume you want to see Barton. Stark, I know you wanted to see him, too.

"That cage is the most secure location on this planet," Fury continued as he led Natasha and Tony into a hallway. "Outside of some very deep prison cells inside Kamar-Taj, that is."

Tony felt his eyebrows rise. "You actually trust the Ancient One, now? I mean, you did actually let the three of them set up shop in your escape tunnels. On purpose. Did your heart grow three sizes today?"

"She and I have come to an arrangement," Fury agreed with a lazy, pleased smile. "One that was amicable to all involved parties."

Oh. Gross. Something else might have grown a few sizes. "Please don't say that you and the Ancient One are another story for the contest," Tony said after a significant pause.

Natasha snorted.

Fury's good mood vanished, and his eye narrowed at Tony. "As you are aware, Stark, experiments with the Tesseract have caused me no shortage of trouble. I have needed to follow the orders of the World Security Council regarding that thing, and so even before Loki’s arrival, it grew a tumor in one of my agents. Apparently, that tumor could have ended all existence."

"Lucky you. It was nasty," Fury added, to which Tony nodded his agreement. "That cube has become an object of serious troublesome interest to the Council. Years ago, it was an object of serious interest to an alien race with a nasty mean streak. And after tonight? Apparently, it's again going to be an object of serious interest, to even more significant threats than we have already faced. Loki stealing it just now, and those Masters of the Mystic Arts lifting it off him, well... that was the perfect opportunity to break that particular cycle and take one threat entirely off the board. And I am a fan of keeping threats under control."

"You're seriously going to just let them keep it?" Natasha asked with amused surprise as they came to a stop outside the room in question. It wasn’t as if Fury could hope to ever get it back, not after Stephen had hidden the Space Stone at some mysterious time and place in the universe, but Tony certainly hadn't expected Fury not to put up a fight about that.

"We've come to an arrangement," Fury repeated, and smiled again before opening the door.
As they did, Clint Barton looked pitifully at them and announced, "I have a headache."

"Yeah, I bet," Tony said, remembering how Natasha had literally beaten sense back into his skull in Round One. As Melinda had verified that any lingering effects from Loki were gone, an equivalent must have happened inside that pocket dimension, but without it coming at the comparatively loving hand of his best friend. "Let me see how your head's doing."

"You're gonna see how my head's doing?" Clint repeated, and glanced at Natasha for clarification. She shrugged as she settled next to her friend, and so Clint turned back to Tony and pointed out, "I know you screw the guy on a daily basis, but being a big fancy brain doctor isn't, y'know. Contagious."

"You're probably fine," Tony said dryly, and grabbed a chair.

Questions came rapid-fire, and to Tony's relief, so did answers. Clint wanted to get home to the farm with Laura, his previous New Mexico assignment had involved a really big hammer, and that squirmy little prick in the cage had tapped him with a pointy stick before everything went very confusing. "Yeah, he's good," Tony said, and exhaled. Okay. Stephen and the Ancient One were tidying up the few last energy fingerprints, Fury had Loki in a cage, Clint was fine, and Phil was currently surrounded by five other Avengers. Bruce was in Morocco, meaning that the Hulk couldn't be triggered to rage through the helicarrier. Every last problem: addressed.

Natasha tilted her head at the mention of things going 'confusing,' and added, just to be safe, "Clint... if I mention a particular street intersection in Budapest—"

Clint frowned. "Galamb and that long name I can never remember?"

Laughing, Natasha pulled him into a hug.

"You see, people," Fury said with satisfaction, "this is why information is the most valuable currency in existence. If not for the Ancient One knowing exactly what was coming, tonight would have gone a whole lot bumpier, I'm guessing."

Instinctively, Tony opened his mouth to protest that he was the one who'd known what was coming. He closed it before words came. For everyone's sake—for the universe's sake—he'd let the two chessmasters continue their functional working relationship. "So. What 'arrangement' did you two reach, anyway?"

"In exchange for the Tesseract," Fury said, sounding almost cheerful, "she offered me something from her bag of toys. After looking into the future, she confirmed I wouldn't be needing this any more." One finger tapped his eyepatch.

"Looking into the future?" Clint repeated. His brow furrowed. "Sounds handy."

"It appears to be very handy," Fury confirmed. "But while I may not be able to look into the future, I can now look anywhere my heart desires. There's another one of these floating around my ship at this very moment, checking for any lingering threats." Lifting his eyepatch, he revealed that the eye underneath had been replaced by what looked like a marble sphere. Inset into it were glittering sapphires that mimicked an inhumanly bright iris. "We're going to get this mission wrapped up, gentlemen. And after that, I'm going to root out the very last of another problem I've been dealing with."

"She gave you a relic," Tony realized. That was how the Ancient One had convinced Fury to hand over the Space Stone for good. If that was some sort of spying relic that could feed information into
"You... replaced your eyeball with some magic seeing relic," Clint added after a significant pause, and shifted his weight.

"I'm seeing all sorts of things," Fury added cheerfully. "Best trade I ever made. The thing's easy to maneuver, too. Right now, the 'camera' side of this thing is about to say hello to our guest, to remind him what sort of magic Earth can bring to bear. Then I might say hello to Hill, again. She hates the thing, so I've flown it to her four times already. And—"

Cutting off abruptly, Fury turned to face them. All humor was gone from his expression, and his mouth had tightened into a thin line. Tension tightened every muscle. "Computer. Bring up the video feed from the containment room."

Tony and Natasha glanced warily at each other, and then at the monitor. Instead of Fury, Loki now appeared there as an even larger, equally intimidating old man with long white hair, wearing what looked like Asgardian armor. (He did still have an eyepatch, though.) Certainly, Fury couldn't be so tense about the sight of that figure pompously pontificating about the responsibilities of the throne of Asgard, so then why... would...

Oh. Oh.

Tony went very still. As bits of information snapped abruptly into place, he actually stopped breathing.

When the truck had crashed in the tunnels, all three men had been sent into a pocket dimension. Out of view.

Clint had just rattled off answers to every question they'd given him. But the Ancient One had made sure to hide the Mind Stone before Stephen hid the Space Stone. Otherwise, she might have read his thoughts.

Melinda had checked Clint over. And while she'd given him a clean bill of mind-control health, Stephen had often admitted that none of the three mystics on the team were particularly skilled with glamour spells.

However, there was someone who was infamously excellent with illusions.

And that someone had used the Mind Stone on Clint Barton.

Horror began to swell inside Tony as he again took in the sight of 'Loki' in that cage, and then as he slowly turned toward 'Clint.'

"I must admit," said Loki, still wearing Clint's face and voice, but speaking in smooth tones that fit oddly on their friend's appearance. "Though I applaud my own expert performance, I didn't anticipate encountering a relic that could see through my spells. More the fool, I." With the same abrupt speed with which Stephen had summoned his energy roadblock, Loki stabbed a suddenly visible knife toward Natasha.

"No!" Tony screamed and lunged for him, only to rebound off the medical bed. It had been nothing more than an illusion giving Loki a chance to escape, but when Loki bolted for the door, his hand snaked out again toward Fury. This time, a blow did actually land. Fury doubled over with sudden pain as Loki pushed past him.
Snarling, Fury straightened and yanked a scalpel out of his stomach. Its narrow wound bled. "Agent Hill, lock down this carrier. No one comes on, no one leaves, and people work in teams of three, minimum. Everyone keeps an eye out for changes in appearance. Barton's been the hostile all this time, and the hostile's now loose on the ship."

There was a pause. "Understood, sir." After another pause, Maria added with some reluctance, "You should probably keep patrolling with that eyeball of yours."

"Oh, I plan to," Fury snapped, and ripped his eyepatch off his head. The sapphire eye was slightly too big for the socket, and so that eye was now unblinking.

Barely fighting back panic, Tony slapped his wrist controls. In Manhattan, three suits came to life inside their storage facility: one red, one grey, and one white. One by one, they maneuvered into the launch chute and arced high into the sky, flying at top speed toward what he saw was the helicarrier's slow return journey toward land. By the time the suits arrived, they'd just be over the coastline of southern Maine.

"You'd better tell me what you just did, Stark," Fury demanded as Natasha rushed to the monitor to study who they now knew was Clint inside that clear cage. Over the loudspeakers, Maria's orders to the crew began.

"Summoned the three suits. We—" Tony hesitated, and barely kept from admitting that he'd wanted the suits to protect Phil from getting stabbed. Stephen thought he'd avoided such a fate for himself, after all, but then he walked outside on one May night... "We'll use their scanners," he finished awkwardly.

"You heard what I said: no one comes onto this carrier. And nothing. We've got an uncontrolled hostile on board and you want to bring in three superweapons?"

"Let me hook the scanners into your S.H.I.E.L.D. systems. You're not the only one who can see through magic, because I'm betting that guy isn't ninety-eight point six degrees." Tony nodded shortly, remembering how he'd successfully used his thermal scanners on that university campus, even when Stephen was left helpless to see their foes. "I know you've got all our biosignatures on file. You'll always know who's in the suits, even if you're not sure about anyone else. And you'll know who we're seeing in return."

After a significant pause, Fury nodded, and gestured them along.

On Fury's direction, the Avengers were moved as a group to a cargo bay, and it was there to where he led Tony and Natasha. "When those suits get here," Fury ordered, "they're equipped immediately onto Stark, Rhodes, and Coulson. Immediately. They don't come off until this is resolved. And you all don't move until the suits are on those three and their scanners are operational. I'm not about to lose my greatest weapons because you all didn't think to double-check around a corner."

"We need to get Clint out of that cage," Natasha said, and pointed back toward the hallway. "Right now, he's a sitting duck." Nodding, Steve and Sam moved to join her, but Fury held up his hand.

"The system's been locked down. That cage door isn't opening until it does." Seeing Melinda about to suggest something, Fury added, "And if you try to open one of your magic portals on my in-flight carrier, you will trigger an entire array of alarms. You would strongly dislike some of them. Be ready to fight Loki, people. The faster we get him under real control, the faster this crisis will end."

With a gesture, Fury summoned two of the working techs, and brought them along as he left. He was serious about working in teams of three, then. No one would ever be left alone and vulnerable with
their enemy, and Loki would find it difficult to freely change appearance. That caution would help. It had to help.

At least the portals embargo meant that Stephen couldn't come onboard. If he'd shown up again to put himself in harm's way, on a ship with a man who probably blamed him for ending his Thanos-assigned mission and putting him permanently on evil Barney's evil radar, Tony doubted that his heart could have taken the stress. Even so, the wait until the suits arrived was one of the longest sixteen minutes of Tony's life. Not since he'd been kneeling in a lake of black blood had he been so keenly aware of each passing second, and unlike that night, he wasn't even able to change bandages to help.

"I can't believe I missed this," Melinda eventually said, heartbroken. "I checked. Mind control. When I went to the tunnels, they mentioned mind control. So that's what I checked for."

And Loki-as-Clint had never been mind controlled. Perhaps she could have noticed his glamour, even if she couldn't actually overpower Loki's expertise to break the spell, but only if she'd thought to specifically hunt for it. Loki knew his niche, and his forgeries would fool anyone.

"The tunnels were collapsing," Karl assured her. "The facility was about to explode. If you'd taken any longer, Agent Hill would have died down there."

God. Right. The facility had detonated, thanks to side effects from researching the Tesseract. Tony hadn't even thought of that danger that Stephen had put himself into.

"I can't believe I didn't pick up on the fake as soon as I walked into that room," Natasha said morosely, and slumped against a metal I-beam. "I'm supposed to be a spy. I notice everything. I didn't notice this."

"I didn't bring the suits with us," Tony muttered. While Natasha slumped, he stalked. "Should have known something could still happen. Shouldn't have assumed it'd really all been fixed."

Fury had screwed up by sticking the wrong man in that cage. Even Stephen, Wong, and the Ancient One had screwed up by catching all of the men in a single pocket dimension, rather than immediately isolating them.

But, Tony told himself, Bruce wasn't there. The Hulk couldn't cause chaos again. Loki didn't have the Mind Stone, and so he couldn't turn any of these S.H.I.E.L.D. agents into his new lackeys. Loki was slippery, yes, but this time he was cornered on this ship. There was no way off, and Fury could see through his illusion, and in fifty-eight seconds, the suits would arrive and they'd have three more ways to break his glamours. Then they could get Clint out of that cage, actually smack Loki's control out of Clint's head, and Phil would go home to Pepper and Pierce and live a long, boring, and happy life.

With twenty-four seconds until the suits arrived, Tony was surprised to feel a thump under his feet. "What?" he mumbled, and looked toward the small cargo bay door that was sliding open to receive their priority delivery. No: according to radar, the suits were still a few thousand feet away. That sound hadn't been one of them missing their target. Then what... had...

Terror knifed Tony's guts, and he promptly ran for the cargo door and dove through it.

Shouts and screams behind him were ignored, and faded almost immediately into the biting wind. As he'd expected, the flying Iron Man suit saw his descent and adjusted its path, and caught him eight hundred feet above the ground. Tony had just enough time to fire his jets, arc back toward the helicarrier's underside, and fire off a trio of rapid attacks.
Those attacks struck Thor’s arm just as he’d been ready to loose Mjolnir. The Asgardian spun and glowered at his sudden assailant, whose appearance was still unknown to him.

"Back off, Fabio," Tony broadcast. As he hovered, his hands held steady aim toward Thor, who eyed their glowing palms with caution. "That’s not your brother in there."

They had Nat, Steve, and Clint on the helicarrier, along with Fury, Coulson, and Hill. Bruce was safely grounded in Africa. But there was one more person who Tony had overlooked, and of course it had to be the man who’d made his debut by attacking an aircraft in which Loki was being kept.

"I know not who you are,” Thor shouted over the roar of the engines, "nor why you wear that suit of armor, but I can assure you of this: no matter what arguments are made, the man I see is and shall always be my brother."

Tony stared at him for a moment, then demanded, "Why do you talk like that?"

"I mean you no harm, mortal. Allow me to collect my brother without incident and I shall return him for justice on Asgard."

"It’s not Loki in there!"

"He is on this vessel," Thor countered, "and I can see..." Trailing off, a flicker of consideration entered his gaze. Perhaps he’d finally remembered that, with Loki, looks could be highly deceiving.

Glancing over his shoulder, toward the visible bits of the containment cell at the top of its chute, Tony sighed in relief. Phew. Stopped him just in time. Jumping out of that cargo bay without his suit had definitely been the right call, especially since Stephen wasn’t there to yell at him for it. "Okay, then," Tony replied, and slowly lowered his hands out of attack position. For once, he wished that the suit’s broadcasted voice sounded less intimidating. "If you land down on that beach there, I can explain—"

Three explosions in immediate succession struck Thor square-on, and knocked him toward the ocean.

Stunned, Tony turned.

"You heard the big man," Rhodey laughed as his War Machine suit flew him out of the cargo door. "Always work in groups of three."

"Well, our visitor probably didn't like that very much," Phil said as his Sentinel armor flung up a shield in front of himself, Rhodey, and Tony. "Wait. Thor?!"

"Get back up there!" Tony shouted, pointing desperately at the cargo door. A fizzling noise turned him back around, and he instinctively threw up what shields he had. Energy crackled against it. Any more attacks at that level, and it’d fail.

There would be more attacks. From how brightly Thor’s eyes blazed as Mjolnir pulled him toward his foes, the dude was fucking pissed.

"Sir!" Phil shouted into his helmet. "Thor’s here and he's making a move for the cage! He thinks he's getting his brother!"

"Keep him away from that cage, Agent. Put those shields to use."

"Don't listen to Fury," Tony pleaded as he saw Phil fly closer to Thor, who knew nothing of them
beyond the fact that they were armored, dangerous, and in his way. "Phil, get back up there, please—No!" he now shouted as Thor sent energy arcing toward Rhodey, whose suit overloaded momentarily and dropped him a hundred feet before its engines kicked back on. "Rhodey! Go!"

They were fighting at Fury's helicarrier, and Loki was here, and Phil was supposed to die, and he wouldn't leave. They were thousands of feet in the air, and Rhodey was fighting someone while energy blasts seared his suit, and he wouldn't leave.

Out of everyone to be here, it was these two.

These two.

_Bloody cards sliding across a glass table._

_Grey metal landing hard in a grassy field._

"I can handle this!" Tony begged. Hot tears blurred his vision. "Both of you need to get out of here! Now!"

"You need our help!" Rhodey shouted back, and aimed more bullets uselessly at Mjolnir.

"You need to get out of here!" Tony repeated. Turning, a force percussion blast knocked Rhodey away from an electrical attack that could have sent his suit helplessly plummeting to the ground below. "This isn't gonna end well!" he screamed, and spun to also knock Phil out of the way of a hammer swing that could have caved in his skull.

As Phil was knocked aside, Rhodey halted momentarily, perhaps as Tony's true meaning sank in.

It was the break in their attack that Thor needed. In the heat of battle, Tony's earlier argument about Loki's illusions was forgotten. Loosing Mjolnir with full force, Thor began to fall, and shouted, "I am only here for my brother!"

Mjolnir sailed true, arcing up into the cage's chute. The dull, ringing _thud_ it earned drew a confused frown from Thor, who extended his hand to retrieve his weapon on its return. That hadn't been the shattering glass he'd expended.

But a shrieking of metal against metal was the sound of a released containment cage, and something that Tony had known would follow that strike.

"No!" he screamed, and dove to follow it. His guns tore toward its tumbling surface, but they'd never cut through it in time. "Mordo, May! Stephen! Someone! Open a portal inside that cage!" Beside him, Rhodey and Phil had also clued in, and they did what they could: weak bullet strikes from Phil, and great, booming explosions from Rhodey.

"What?" shouted Karl over the noise from Rhodey's rockets.

They hadn't been able to hear him.

"Portal!" Tony screamed. "Cage! Now! Clint's—"

Inside the cage, Clint was being tossed around like a ragdoll. By now, his illusion had fallen. Now, he was again the reliable, quiet family man of the team, with a wife and two kids waiting for him at home.

His head smacked against the cage, and Clint's sense returned. Through the glass, he stared at Tony's
helmet with recognition. The rest of Clint's expression filled with bewildered fear, for he'd been given exactly enough time with his own, functioning mind to understand what was happening to him.

And to realize that it was too late.

The containment cage struck the quiet Maine beach and kicked up great, choppy explosions of sand and sod. They erupted around it like a bomb going off. It half-buried itself from the force of its landing, and every exposed surface warped and broke.

Everything was very still, and achingly quiet. After a few seconds, the ocean rushed back in to what land the strike had temporarily claimed. Water lapped against pieces of broken glass. Seafoam lined their jagged edges.

Waves retreated again, taking dirt and sand with them. Now, Tony could see the inside of the glass cage.

It was red.

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