A Blast to the Past

by SassyAngel

Summary

It’s impressive how all it takes for everything to change is one event, one second, one snap. One snap and Tony Stark’s entire world collapses in on itself. Everything and everyone he knew was just gone. His darkest fears became reality. His nightmares came true. And in just one snap and its fixed. Its almost hard to believe that everything returned to the way it was, almost as if nothing had ever happened. No, it is because nothing had ever happened. All it took was one snap.

“This universe will remain the same up until Thanos reaches the first infinity stone, at that point he ceases to exist, and life goes on.”

or

In which Tony Stark redoes the timeline, and has help from a certain wizard to try and fit back in.
It’s impressive how all it takes for everything to change is one event, one second, one snap. One snap and Tony Stark’s entire world collapses in on itself. Everything and everyone he knew was just gone. His darkest fears became reality. His nightmares came true. And in just one snap and its fixed. Its almost hard to believe that everything returned to the way it was, almost as if nothing had ever happened. No, it is because nothing had ever happened. All it took was one snap.

Tony easily recognized the room he was in, it was his room in the compound… his compound. His home. He felt sharp tears threaten to fall, so he closed his eyes painfully. He took a moment before opening his eyes again. He looked down at himself, he was wearing a suit. He was probably getting ready to go to some formal event. He then noticed he still had the infinity Gauntlet on his arm, with all six Infinity Stones still attached.

He grimaced, uncertain as to what to do. He definitely couldn’t leave it around someplace, even if it was the safest place on Earth. What if there was some alien threat that managed to take it? He at least knew where he could store the time stone and the mind stone. He’s sure the sour faced magician he met would be more than willing to take the time stone off his hand, and Vision would probably want the mind stone back. Now that he thought about it, he wasn’t quite sure Vision even existed right now. He didn’t really know when in time he was, it could honestly be anywhere from before even Iron Man to maybe right after the events in Siberia.

“This universe will remain the same up until Thanos reaches the first infinity stone, at that point he ceases to exist, and life goes on.” That was his wish, it was what he thought would be his dying wish considering the hole he had in his stomach. Now it was like that was nothing more than a bad dream, but he knew better than that. It was a really simple wish, but still effective. It was a comfort to see that it worked. Tony took in a deep breath.

“JARVIS?” He asked, tentatively. If he was still in the JARVIS timeline, then it meant ULTRON never happened. It meant the Avengers might have never happened either. Tony felt perfectly content with that. They were doomed to fail anyways. It also meant Tony had his dear friend back, he loved FRIDAY with all of his heart, but no one could replace JARVIS. Well, no one could replace FRIDAY either.


“Yes, it’s all fine and dandy.” Tony sighed. FRIDAY meant ULTRON did happen, which means the Accords might have happened or, maybe worse, might happen in the future. A groan escaped his lips, he really didn’t want to relive those events. “Tell me what day it is?”

“February 23rd, 2016.” FRIDAY supplied. Tony nodded, making calculations in his head. That means that the accords have yet to happen, which means Germany has yet to happen. Siberia has yet to happen. Tony felt a rise of panic fill his veins. “Is everything alright?” FRIDAY asked again, concerned. Tony took a deep, shaky breath.

“Everything is fine FRI. It just means I can avoid a shit show.” He started thinking. Was there anything he could do to avoid another Germany? It was a bit sad how the answer came almost immediately. “James Barnes.” He sighed.

“The Winter Soldier?” FRIDAY asked, curiously. “He is a HYDRA agent that has been
responsible for many assassinations and has been missing since SHIELD’s downfall. Do you require further information on him?”

“No, that’s all I’ll need FRI. Thank you.” He shook his head. “I want you to monitor as many cameras as you can get access to, especially in Germany. If any individual has an 85% or higher facial match to that of James Barnes I want you to let me know about it immediately.”

“Sure thing, boss.” Tony smiled gratefully.

“What was I doing before this FRI?” He asked.

“You were thinking of ways to ‘woo Pepper into dating you again’.” Tony couldn’t help but laugh. This felt like it had happened ages ago, mostly because for him it did. He remembered wanting to dedicate his entire life to Pepper, to being with Pepper. This time, however, Tony knew better. It was a stupid dream that wasn’t meant to be. To be with Pepper meant to abandon Iron Man, and he couldn’t do that no matter how hard he tried. “Boss?”

“Do I have any meetings today? Or anything notable?” He asked, already trying to figure out how the hell he could get rid of the stones in a way that no one would be able to use them ever again.

“You are scheduled to attend a charity gala in an hour. I suggest you leave in five minutes if you wish to make it in time.” FRIDAY supplied.

“Cancel that, and also any meetings I have for tomorrow.” He told her, already undoing the tie around his neck. “I’ve got some things I need to resolve first. Oh, and make sure I donate at least a couple of thousands.”

“Will do.”

He gingerly took off the gauntlet, almost afraid that if he was no longer wearing it then things would go back to how they were before. Nothing happened. He took another shaky breath. “What am I going to do with this?”

“I could have someone throw it away for you.” Tony immediately shook his head and negated the idea. Just the thought of tossing away all the stones willy nilly sent a wave of panic through Tony’s body.

“FRIDAY, darling, I love you. But that is a terrible call and you will absolutely not do that.”

“Sorry.” FRIDAY was silent for a moment before speaking again. “I’ve been meaning to ask. Where did that come from? One minute you’re fine and getting dressed, the next you’re wearing that and display symptoms of amnesia as well as PTSD. Your heart rate also elevated at an unnaturally fast pace.” FRIDAY seemed worried, Tony couldn’t help but feel grateful towards his AI. She wasn’t JARVIS, certainly, but she was FRIDAY and he loved her just the same.

“Will you believe it if I told you I just came back from the future, FRI?” He asked, bemused. He carefully placed the oversized gauntlet on his desk and started changing clothes to something exponentially more comfortable.

“That’s highly improbable. Time travel doesn’t exist.” FRIDAY was quick to answer, but she seemed slightly hesitant.

“It does the future, and also in the present. You remember those things called infinity stones? Like the one that is… was in Vision’s head? Well, one of them is all about time fuckery.” Tony groaned. “Magic is stupid FRI, let it be known that I resent it on all occasions.” Once he was
comfortably dressed, he quickly picked up the gauntlet, justifiably afraid to leave it alone for more than a second. “And now I have to deal with it,” he groaned again. “And I also have to act like I don’t know what’s going to happen in the future don’t I? That’s going to be so annoying.”

“What happens in the future?” FRIDAY asked not just for genuine curiosity, but also because she wanted proof that time travel was real and that her creator wasn’t going insane.

“For starters, the Accords happen. This causes the Avengers to break up, and that leads to me being beaten to near death by Rogers. Some stuff with Peter and some idiot super villain called the Vulture happens too. And finally, Thanos comes to Earth in search of the two remaining stones he needed to kill off half of the universe. Also, some boring SI meetings and stuff, but who cares about those right?” He offered a smile. “I stopped Thanos, so that part won’t come true anymore, but the same can’t be said about the Avengers and the Accords. There’s also Peter Piper, I’ll have to be more careful with him this time around.” He already started thinking about what he could do about that as he made his way to sit down on the couch he had insisted on putting in his room despite Pepper’s protests.

“Who is Peter Piper?” FRIDAY asked.

“Oh, I guess I haven’t yet looked him up by this point, huh?” He sighs. “Well, his real name is Peter Benjamin Parker, and he’s Spider-man.”

“Spider-man? As in the new vigilante hero-wannabe that dresses up like in kiddy pajamas?”

“Those were my words, weren’t they?” Tony cringed. He could probably afford to be less judgmental towards the kid.

“Yes boss.”

“Alright, well he is a hero. More of one than Rogers could ever hope to be.” Tony explained. “Do your research on Peter Parker, and then figure out a time in his schedule for when he’d be home. I want to talk to him earlier, this time around.”

“Will do.” FRIDAY said, finally beginning to believe that Tony might have come from the future. “Boss, could you tell me in detail the events of what happens in the future? I want to know what happened so that I may better assist you.” FRIDAY insisted. Tony thought for a moment, and he realized she had a point. No one would believe that he came from the future, and he really didn’t want to have to deal with this alone. Having FRIDAY would definitely make his life a bit easier. He knew she’d help him regardless of what she knows, but it would be a hell of a lot easier if she knew everything that had happened to him. He knew FRIDAY was one of the few reasons he managed to stay sane after Siberia. He needed her then, and he sure as hell needs her now.

“Okay FRI. I can do that.” He started inspecting the gauntlet. He knew better than to try and remove the stones by hand. They could easily burn his entire being with probably just one touch. The only reason he could even use them was because of the gauntlet.
“Thank you.” FRIDAY seemed happy, Tony couldn’t help but smile at that. He had really missed her. He looked back at the gauntlet. He really needed to think of something he could do with those stones. He figured he’d spend tomorrow trying to find that one grumpy wizard and make him take the time stone back. Tonight, he could focus on giving the mind stone back to Vision. The other stones, he didn’t really trust anyone to keep. He also didn’t want them to be on Earth, two was more than enough. He could, begrudgingly, call the Guardians of the Galaxy to take at least one stone from him. He could also try and get Thor to take another. That leaves two more. Where could they go?

“FRIDAY, could you find Vision for me? I think he’s missing a part of himself that he kind of really needs in order to stay functional, at least for the moment.” Tony decided to take this one step at a time, before he started overthinking the problem.

“He’s in his room. I believe he was watching culinary videos on YouTube before he lost function.”

“Thanks FRI.” Tony smiled softly. He remembers how much Vision started to like cooking after a while and decided to try and pay more attention to that. Vision was someone who deserved a lot, and Tony decided that he was more than willing to give. He stood up and made his way to his workshop with the gauntlet still in his possession. He quickly skimmed over the mess in his workshop, trying to find the tools he needed.

He realized he was working on an old version of his suit, it was before the nanotech, before the surgery. He felt a ping of irritation flood through him. “FRIDAY, when you can, schedule a removal surgery for me. It’s time I get rid of this bad boy.” He tapped his arc reactor. “Give me at least a week first though, I need to make a replacement before that.”

“Yes boss.” FRIDAY started looking through his schedule, trying to think of when a surgery could fit in seamlessly. “Did you do this in the future too?” She asked after a while.

“Yeah, right after Rogers bashed my chest in. I had to get it removed, and I ended up just putting a housing unit in to replace it. It didn’t take nearly as much space as this current arc reactor, and I didn’t really need it to survive anymore. It was meant to be more of an emergency only kind of thing, little did I know an emergency would happen right after.” Tony sighed. “I thought I was going to be done being Iron Man, but boy was I wrong.”

“What happened with Steve Rogers?” Tony stilled at the question. He knew FRIDAY would ask him at some point, but he didn’t think it would be so soon.

“Vision first, then I’ll tell you.” He started grabbing the tools he needed. “It’s a bit of a long story.” He explained while grabbing a couple of different sized pincers, he wasn’t sure which one would best fit Vision.

“Boss, there is an unknown energetic force forming itself in this room. Threat level unknown. Dispatching the Iron Man suit, they should be there in two minutes.” Tony frowned, mildly confused. Nothing like this every happened in the previous timeline, was this the Butterfly Effect in action? He heard a sizzling noise behind him, and he quickly turned around, clutching the gauntlet close to him. Upon seeing the orange-red circle forming, he let out a sigh.

“That will be unnecessary FRI. It seems we’re dealing with the wizard first, and then Vision.” He looked at the portal with mild disinterest. He was used to seeing Strange’s portals now, but it didn’t mean he liked or trusted them. He had spent some amount of time with Strange, so he knew the guy wasn’t bad news. After Siberia, though, he was careful with whom he gave his trust. Strange, didn’t really make that cut.
“Tony Stark, I demand that you return the time stone this instance!” Doctor Strange said the moment he stepped out of the portal. Tony gave him a bored expression. Did he really need to be so dramatic?

“Alright.” He said simply. “Give me the Eye.” Tony could easily admit he felt smug satisfaction when the wizard gave him a confused stare.

“What?” Was all Strange could respond with, still dazed with confusion. “The Eye?”

“Yes, the Eye of Egg Motto or whatever his name was. I don’t intend on handing you the stone without making sure it’s well protected first. So, Strange, give me the Eye and please take this stupid stone away from me before it gives me a heart attack.” He explained, still reveling in Doctor Strange’s confusion.

“Agamotto,” the other man corrected, finding his composure. “And how is it that you know my name?” Strange asked, no longer standing in the defensive. He reached for the ancient necklace he kept around his neck, opening it so that the stone could be placed inside.

“How do you know mine?” Tony retorted. “You have your secrets Doc, I have mine.” He carefully picked up one of his pincers and made to grab the time stone with it.

“That will not be necessary.” The stone easily lifted itself from the gauntlet and made its way towards the Eye where it belonged. Strange expected Tony to react surprised but was thoroughly disappointed when instead he just got another bored stare.

“Right, I forgot you could do that.” He sighed. “Anyways, do you need anything else?” Tony was already making his way out, deciding not to waste another second when he could be fixing Vision.

“How is it that you managed to get the time stone from right under my nose? And why do you have all of the infinity stones Stark? What are your intentions?” Strange glared at him now, ready to make his life hell if his answer wasn’t satisfactory. He was honestly tempted to just take the gauntlet before Stark had the chance to use it, but begrudgingly decided to give the man the benefit of the doubt.

“It’s a long story that you won’t believe anyways. As for what I intend to do with the stones, it’s pretty simple actually: I want to get rid of them. Hopefully in a way that makes sure no one ever has access to them again.” Strange almost didn’t notice how dark Tony’s face grew for a second. Something must have happened, and he intended on finding out. “Now, if you’ll excuse me I have an appointment.”

“You have no scheduled appointments boss.” FRIDAY mentioned. Tony groaned, and Stephen jumped in alarm. Where had that voice come from? Looking around, there was no one else in the room.

“Vision, FRI. I’m talking about Vision.” Tony was at the door now, already forgetting about the annoying magician he was dealing with a moment before. “Make sure no one has access to his room until the stone is back on his head. I don’t want Wanda freaking out on me.” He felt his heart drop at the memory of her. “Never again.” He muttered softly, still feeling bitterness towards her for what happened with Rhodey.

“Which stone?” Strange asked, deciding to follow Stark around. He wanted answers, and he was going to get them.

“You’re still here?” Tony raised a brow. “I thought you’d leave the instant you got your stone
Strange opened his mouth to answer but Tony cut him off quickly. “Which reminds me.” He turned on his heel to face the other with an intense stare. “You are to protect this stone with your life. Do not even think about giving it away to spare someone else’s life. I will literally murder you if you do that again, Doc.” He huffed. “Seriously, what were you thinking.” He stood challengingly for a second before remembering the good doctor literally had no idea what he was talking about. “Never mind. Just don’t give it away.” He turned back around and continued making his way towards Vision’s room.

“I would never, protecting the stone is my main responsibility. It would be rather uncouth of me to simply give it away.” Tony scoffed, forcing his mouth shut before he says something he really shouldn’t. “You said again.” Strange noted suddenly.

“I don’t remember that.” Tony said easily, finally reaching Vision’s room. He felt his heart drop when he saw Vision simply slumped over in front of a computer screen. If Tony didn’t know better, he would have thought someone had killed Vision. He silently made his way towards Vision’s body, gripping the gauntlet tightly.

Strange wanted to argue with Tony, to understand what exactly had happened. The way Tony talked and acted with him made it seem like they’ve had previous interactions, and yet Strange had no recollection of any. It was starting to bother him. He really hoped this was some sort of tasteless prank coming from the billionaire, but, knowing his luck, something ridiculous must have happened and the world almost ceased existing or something equally as dire. He opened his mouth to make his retort and try to drag the truth out from Stark, but quickly shut it when he saw the look on the man’s face. He looked very worn out. Strange decided it might be best to put this discussion on hold for the moment.

“Hang in there, buddy.” Tony gently lifted Vision’s head, looking at the hole left behind from the Stone’s absence. “Looks like everything’s still in order. FRIDAY, can you scan him for any damages he might’ve sustained?”

“No damage has been detected.” FRIDAY responded dutifully. Tony nodded softly. “Lucky us.” He hummed softly, feeling relief wash over him. “I thought I would never hear your stupid voice again.” He whispered so quietly, Strange almost didn’t hear him. The sorcerer wasn’t really quite sure what to make of the situation he currently found himself in. He had absolutely no idea what was happening. He assumed one of the stones was placed on this robot’s head, and Stark was clearly troubled by its removal. Why did Stark remove it then? Did Stark even remove it? He also couldn’t really believe this was the same Tony Stark he’s always seen on the television. He was supposed to be more of an asshole. Why wasn’t he being an asshole? “Okay Doctor Wizard, if you’re really going to stay then you’re going to do work.” Tony finally looked up at the sorcerer again. Strange opened his mouth to correct him, but Tony beat him to it again. “Yes, I know you’re a sorcerer and all that mumbo jumbo, but I’m going to keep calling you a wizard nonetheless, so save your breath and put the mind stone in Vision’s head. Gently.”

Okay, Strange mentally sighed, he was being an asshole. At least some level of normalcy was obtained. Strange complied to the man’s request, deciding it might serve him well to be on Tony’s good side. Maybe he’d be more inclined to finally tell the sorcerer what he needed to know.

The mind stone fit perfectly within Vision’s forehead, though nothing seemed to happen for a moment. Strange was about to ask if he needed to do something else, but when he looked at Tony, his train of thought was immediately forgotten.

The other man looked absolutely devastated. “FRIDAY? Tell me what’s happening. Why isn’t Vision responding?” He forced himself to concentrate. He could still save Vision, he knew he
could. He just didn’t know how, not yet.

“I’m not sure, but it might be lack of power.” Tony closed his eyes harshly, ignoring the spots that
flocked his vision. He felt himself wobble slightly. “Boss, I recommend you go sleep soon.
Currently, you’ve been awake for about thirty hours now.”

Tony easily ignored FRIDAY’s suggestion, he’s used to staying awake for days at a time anyways.
He wondered if he could use the stones to repower Vision, but that train of thought was quickly
dispelled. He told himself that after the whole Thanos fiasco, he refused to let anyone else use this
stupid gauntlet ever again and that included himself. He groaned, trying to remember everything he
knew about the stones. Suddenly, a light flickered on his mind. A dark, irritating shade of red light
that gave him headaches just by thinking about it, but a light nonetheless.

“Ask Wanda to come over, please.” He snapped his eyes open, ignoring the dizzy spell he felt.
“Stephen, move him to the bed. I think Wanda would actually kill me if she saw Vis like this.” He
sighed, tapping his fingers on the gauntlet nervously.

“She’s on her way.” Tony nodded, mentally preparing himself to face the witch.

“Stark are you okay?” Strange asked as he carefully, and magically, put Vision’s body on the bed.

“Just fine… Super dandy.” He forced himself to take deep breaths. “Okay, we got this.” He
muttered mostly to himself. He didn’t have many good feelings towards the witch, and the little
hope for salvation their relationship had was crushed when Rhodey lost his legs. He really hated
the fact that Wanda could easily just go through his mind like it was some funky but brilliant
carnival ride at her disposal. He especially hoped she wouldn’t try to do that now.

It would be nice to know someone who knew what he knew. It was incredibly fucking lonely
being the sole survivor of a universal catastrophe that hasn’t happened. Once he lets FRIDAY in
the know, it’ll be less lonely, but still pretty shitty. Wanda could simply go in his head and see
everything that happened, but he rather she didn’t. To put it plainly, he doesn’t trust her. He doesn’t
trust what she could do with this information, and he doesn’t trust the way she could easily fuck
him over with it. His mind was a nightmare fuel at this point. He thought his PTSD was bad
before, but now it’s basically an entity of its own made simply to make sure Tony never has
another decent night of sleep in his life. Wanda could take it to an even worse level.

“Stark?” Stephen asked again, observing the incredibly tense looking engineer. Tony snapped his
attention towards the sorcerer. He was someone who could use magic, maybe he could solve this
problem. He’d probably want something in recompense, but it’s probably better than the alternative
at this point. With a groan, he gave the sorcerer his full attention.

“So, quick question, do you think you could make sure our good neighbor, the Scarlet Witch,
doesn’t try to go through my mind?” Strange’s eyes widened, he was starting to get annoyed by
how utterly confused he was. Since when was there another sorcerer capable of doing that? He
briefly wondered where she studied magic. “…and can your magic cloak take this gauntlet away
from here? I don’t really want anyone else to see it. FRIDAY will direct it to my workshop and
make sure it avoids anyone.”

“Okay. But you owe me an explanation after all of this is over.” Strange decided to try making a
deal, hopefully he’d get something out of this. His cloak already made its way towards the
gauntlet, trying to take it from Tony.

“Please be careful with this and make sure no one but me gets it, please.” Tony told the cloak,
nervously handing him the gauntlet. “Thank you.” And with that both the cloak and the gauntlet
were out. Tony took a couple of deep breaths, trying and failing to ease his nerves. “You’re welcome for some tea after all of this is over.” He finally looked over at Strange, his face neutral from any emotion, but his hands shaking mildly. He was clearly nervous. Stephen wondered if it was because he no longer had the stones with him. That’s quite the separation anxiety he was having. “I’ll be happy to give you a short explanation, if you want it. Then, you’ll have to leave me and the stones alone unless some other world catastrophe happens.” Strange nodded calmly, not really planning on following through with that if Tony gave him any inclination that his intentions weren’t good.

Then there was silence, no one said anything. Tony was too busy thinking of a couple of solutions to fix Vision, if Wanda couldn’t help. Strange was too busy trying to analyze Tony, hoping to gain some form of understanding. This was probably one of the more bizarre interaction he’s had, and this is said considering the fact that he’s the current Sorcerer Supreme. Tony was nothing at all like he had expected him to be.

Suddenly, they hear footsteps coming closer, and then a door open. It was Wanda.

“Vis, you called?” Tony stilled, hearing the familiar voice of the witch. Stephen almost didn’t notice. He wondered what happened between them to warrant that reaction. He then wondered why they worked in the same team if there wasn’t a base level of trust between them. “Tony, what are you doing here? And who is this?” She said confused, before her eyes landed on Vision. “What. Did. You. Do??” Tony tried not to pay too much attention to the red magic forming on her fingertips. Stephen was already preparing to make counter spells should she try to attack.

“The stone did something.” Tony sighed, trying not to aggravate Wanda. He looked her in the eye, trying to show sincerity. “There, thankfully, wasn’t any damage taken due to its absence. I tried putting the stone back into its place, but it didn’t quite work. I’m thinking we have to give Vis a jumpstart. Your magic is the one more closely related to the stone, so I figured you’d be able to give him a pretty decent jumpstart. Think you can do that?” He asked softly, knowing how she and Vision were developing some sort of relationship.

Wanda glared at him for a moment, before letting her eyes settle on Vision. She quietly made her way towards him, not caring that she basically pushed Tony out of the way to do so. Tony was still stiff, but he didn’t seem to mind too much. “I think I can.” Wanda released a shaky breath. “If I can’t, it’s your head I’ll be after Stark.” She gave him another glare, before going to work.

Strange looked between the two of them, trying to understand their dynamic. As far as he was concerned, the Scarlet Witch was a member of the Avengers. She had done some questionable activities in her past but ended up saving the world alongside the rest of the team from some threat. He didn’t understand the animosity between the two of them. Shouldn’t they be friendlier towards each other? It was clear that Wanda resented Stark for some reason. Looking at Stark, it looked like he had many emotions towards her, none of them good. He wondered if he should ask about this at some later date, though he supposed he didn’t really care past the initial curiosity.

In a moment, Vision stirred awake. He sat up immediately, looking directly at Tony. He didn’t even notice Wanda wrapping her arms around him in a hug. He didn’t notice Stephen staring at him curiously. He could only look at Tony with wide, concerned eyes. The billionaire shifted his weight between his feet, uncomfortable.

“Well, looks like you did it.” Tony clasped his hands together with a loud clap, getting everyone else’s attention too. “Good job kid. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’ve an annoyed wizard to deal with.” He made his way towards the door, ignoring Wanda’s angry glare and Vision’s concerned stare. “Gandalf, that means you. Chop, chop. I don’t have all day.” With that he left.
Stephen looked at Wanda and Vision one last time, before nodding at them and making his way to join Tony out in the hallway.

The two of them walked in mild silence, Tony already thinking of the many, many things he needed to get done between now and the accords, meanwhile Stephen still wondering what the hell was going on. Eventually, they reached the door leading back to Tony’s workshop. He was rather thankful he had a kitchenette installed, even if he mostly just used it for coffee and the occasional smoothies.

“Take a seat.” He gestured to one of the desk chairs he had and started getting a kettle ready. “I don’t have a monopoly of tea options, just whatever Banner liked. Feel free to grab whichever though.” He also started getting his coffee machine ready. Stephen nodded, sitting down comfortably after selecting a packet of green tea. They were enveloped in silence again.

“So, where do we want to start this conversation?” Tony finally asked, hoping to get this conversation over with as quickly as humanly possible.

“First, I want to know where you acquired that.” He pointed towards the cloak, levitating silently in the corner of the room still holding on to the gauntlet. Tony looked to where he was pointing, and visibly sighed in relief. Stephen raised a curious brow but decided not to mention anything. Ultimately, he didn’t really care about what Tony felt, he only cared about why Tony had possession of literally all of the stones and an abnormally large gauntlet.

“Thanos.” He answered simply, as if that answered all of Stephen’s questions. He smiled softly once he saw the kettle was ready, and his coffee was done. He poured the hot water onto a mug. “You take any sugar or honey?” He asked.

“Sugar. Two spoons, please.” Stephen answered. “Who is Thanos.” He tried not to notice how Tony stiffened at the question.

“Right, I suppose you don’t know,” he smiled darkly to himself, “won’t know.” He gave Stephen the mug of hot water and sugar, and then drank from his own mug of coffee. “He’s some grape colored asshole who basically fucked over the entire universe.” Tony shrugged. “Next question.” He grabbed a Stark tablet, writing down some notes on nanotech suits. Stephen had to admit he wasn’t too fond of how nonchalant Tony was being about this entire thing.

“Why did Thanos give you that gauntlet?”

“He didn’t. I took it.” Stephen noticed Stark’s hand move towards his stomach, almost as if remembering something. He quickly dropped that hand, though. “Next question.” Stephen took a deep breath, wondering why Stark was wasting his time.

“How did he get all of the stones?” Tony was silent for a while, Stephen was almost tempted to repeat his question and rush the other. Then, Tony sighed, looking more tired than he has this entire day.

“He took them by force.” Tony answered. “Killed a lot of good people to get to them, only to kill more.” The billionaire finally looked at the doctor’s eyes after a moment. “You’re not going to let me leave it at that, will you?” For that moment, Tony looked so much older than he was. He looked so tired and hopeless, almost lifeless. Underneath that was a layer of panic, like one wrong move and his world would come crumbling down. If Stephen didn’t know better, he’d say Tony Stark had just come back from war.

“I’m afraid not.” Stephen easily responded, once more electing to ignore whatever emotional
distress Tony felt. It was really none of his business.

“What are your thoughts on time travel?” Tony suddenly ask, giving Stephen his full attention.

“It’s something not to be trifled with.” The sorcerer took a more threatening tone. He of all people knew how irresponsible it was to mess with time.

Tony took another moment of silence, contemplating what he should do next. He was starting to doubt the wizard would leave him alone if he continued to give half-assed answers. He thought back to the few hours they spent together confined in that oversized alien donut. He remembered Strange being very dedicated to his job, but really nothing else. He was insufferable and annoying, but he didn’t seem the type to screw people over. Then again, Tony’s been wrong before, or, in the future. This is getting mildly confusing.

Well, the chances of Strange actually believing him is low anyways so whatever. And if Strange believes him, then he doubts anyone will believe Strange. He takes a deep breath and hopes that he isn’t making a colossal mistake with trusting Strange.

“Well, a year or so in the future of a different timeline, some assholes decided to come to our backyard and have a party. After making a huge mess of the place, they took you and me,” and Peter, “out to space on a giant donut to come join them in their own space party hosted by Thanos. We went, got our asses kicked. You lost the time stone. Thanos won. The people who survived the Snappening banded together to try to go for round two. We won that time, sort of.” He could still remember all of the bodies of the people he knew surrounding him. He could still remember almost dying before he could undo everything. He forced his mind to stay on track, refusing to have a panic attack now. “I basically made it so Thanos never happened. Everyone no longer died or ceased to exist, and half of the universe wasn’t gone,” he took a sip of his coffee, “you’re welcome.” His focus was now back towards his tablet. He needed to distract himself.

Stephen took a minute to try and let this information sink in. A couple of things didn’t really make much sense. What did a giant donut have to do with anything? What exactly was the ‘Snappening’? What happened? Despite all of this, one thing was certainly clear. “You’re from the future.”

“Supposing this is all true, you do realize you could’ve sent the universe in an endless time loop? The stones aren’t something you can simply mess with, Stark.” Stephen warned.
“You know, I almost forgot how insufferable you can be.” Tony huffed. “Yes, Strange. I’m well aware. Which is why I intend on getting them as far away from me and each other as I can. You weren’t there, and I don’t mean current you. You were one of the people who stopped existing after Thanos snapped his fingers and erased half of the universe. You didn’t see how horrible it was.” Tony’s shoulders slumped slightly, the memory was still fresh. The misery was still there. He needed to take a deep breath and push that train of thought away. “Now, if we’re done talking, I will happily direct you to the door, or you can use one of your fancy portals. I don’t really care either way.”

“I still have more questions.” Stephen sighed, taking a final sip from his tea. “Like how do you intend on getting rid of the stones? Or what are you going to do now? Where’s Thanos? How do we know he won’t come back? What happened exactly? Et cetera.”

“Thanos isn’t going to come back because he no longer exists. A lot of shit happened, and I’m still trying to solve it… so I’ll get back to you on that. I’ll get back to you on the stones too. Now pretty please take your pretty red cape and skedaddle, I have too much to do and too little time to do it. And before you get your panties in a twist, I have no interest in using any of the stones.” Tony could feel the impending headache forming.

“Are you okay?” Stephen asked, putting his cup down.

“Fine.” Tony answered easily. He wasn’t really fine, and it didn’t take a medical degree to realize that. Looking at the man in front of him, Stephen could easily conclude he was suffering through some sort of trauma. If what Stark has been telling him is truth, then it’s easy to imagine where the trauma came from. Stephen didn’t really necessarily care about that, however, he only cared about what had happened so that he can prevent it from happening again. But he had to admit that it was starting to get harder to simply ignore all the signs of stress and anxiety Tony was practically radiating. It didn’t sit well in his conscious to pretend everything was fine, especially after taking the Hippocratic Oath and promising to help those who need it.

He doubted Tony would ever let him help though.

Tony, meanwhile, had no intention of sharing too much information with Stephen. He didn’t want to have to deal with the next couple of incoming events, and he especially didn’t want to do it on his own, but he definitely didn’t trust Strange to help him out. He could tell Stephen wasn’t really interested in anything other than the stones, and that’s dangerous regardless of the reason. Sure, the good doctor probably meant no harm, but the stones aren’t something to take lightly.

“I want to know what happened in your timeline, but I can wait until another day.” He took out a small piece of paper and put it by the now empty cup. “Give me a call when you’re next available to talk.”

“Sure thing, wizard man.” Tony picked up a different type of metal and started examining that too. Stephen sighed and began creating a portal back to the Sanctum. He started to step through before stopping himself.

“Thank you, Stark.” He finished walking through the portal and closed it, leaving a surprised Tony Stark at standing alone in his workshop.

“Well, can’t say I actually expected him to thank me.” Tony said finally. “I suppose I should probably answer your questions now, right FRI?” He turned his attention back towards the metal around him. He needed to start working on the housing unit and the nanobots soon.

“Oh if you want.” FRIDAY answered almost eagerly. “There are many things you did not
mention to Doctor Stephen Strange, including the Accords and whatever follows after.”

“How long has this body been awake FRI?” Tony put a hand to his chin, thinking.

“Thirty-one hours and twenty-two minutes.”

“How about I use BARF to compile all of the more important memories of the next few months until the moment I rewrote history?” Tony picked up the gauntlet and made his way towards a different work bench, the one where he was working on an improving BARF. “That way, you get to see everything first hand, as though you were there.”

“I think that’s a wonderful idea.”

“Flattery will get you everywhere FRIDAY.” He grinned. “Alright, bring in a suit to guard this gauntlet. Do not let anyone in this room under any conditions, and immediately notify me if someone tries to break in. If anyone calls for me, tell them I’m sleeping.” He picked up the BARF headgear and started hooking it up to one of his computers. FRIDAY would have basically immediate access to whatever memory he gave her.

“Mark 51 is here.” FRIDAY announced as one of Tony’s suits walked in the room.

“Good.” Tony carefully placed the gauntlet on the suit’s outstretched hand, and immediately went back to pick up the BARF headset. He cleared a desk and, with an exasperated sigh, laid down on it. “Remind me to put a bed in here FRI.” He mumbled, putting on the BARF headset.

“Will do boss.”

“Okay, now what do you want to go over first?”

The rest of the night was spent with Tony and FRIDAY going over different events occurring in the timeline. It started out with something simple: The Accords. It then moved on to the fight in Germany, then Peter Parker. Eventually they went over what happened in Siberia. Tony had to stop there, he needed to take a break. He was already a pile of nerves from having just faced Thanos, and, loathe he is to admit it, but he never quite got over what had happened in Siberia. Even when he was fighting alongside Rogers again, he was still harboring an enormous amount of distain for the man. It shouldn’t matter now, especially since it never happened, but Tony can’t really help it. It could still happen. It will still happen unless Tony does something about it.

And boy does Tony intend on doing something about it.
Hey guys! Just wanted to say thanks for giving this story a chance, and I hope you enjoy it!
Hope you're having a great day (or night, if you're a night owl like me)!

Peter Parker was having a pretty alright day. Nothing really exciting happened in school, and nothing exciting really happened on his way home from school. That is, of course, until a really fancy-looking black car stopped right in front of him. He had just finished saying goodbye to Ned after their paths diverged and was about to continue on down the street to his own house when the car appeared, rolling down a window.

“Hey kid, you’re Peter Parker right?” Peter blinked at the strangely familiar voice, though he couldn’t remember where he had heard it before. He slowly nodded, beginning to wonder what the heck was going on and how did the person with the familiar voice sitting inside a fancy car know his name. “How about I give you a ride home?”

“Sorry mister, but I’m afraid I don’t take candy from strangers who are trying to lure me into their van. Stranger danger, you know how it is.” He responded easily, already starting to back away. He stopped dead on his tracks when the window rolled down even further and the face belonging to the voice could be seen. It was Tony Stark himself! He took off his sunglasses and gave Peter a bored stare. Peter responded by gaping like a starstruck kid, which, to be fair, he kind of was.

“You’re Tony Stark!” The teenager squealed in delight. “What is the Tony Stark doing offering a random student like me a ride?” Tony couldn’t help but smile, he really missed the kid.

“How about you take the offer and find out?” Tony opened the door for Peter, scooting further in the car. Peter hesitated for a moment, wondering if maybe this was a bad idea, before throwing caution to the wind and stepping inside and closing the door behind him.

“You’re Tony Stark!” The teenager squealed in delight. “What is the Tony Stark doing offering a random student like me a ride?” Tony couldn’t help but smile, he really missed the kid.

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“Can I just say it’s, like, such a huge honor to meet you Mr. Stark!” He closed the door behind him. “You’re really super cool! Oh man, I can’t wait to tell Ned about this! Why are you here anyways? Aren’t you supposed to be super busy all the time? I mean, not that you can’t not be busy… I just don’t think you’d be the sort to offer random kids rides! Or maybe you are? I don’t really know, but it’s still pretty cool that I get to meet you!” Tony bit back a smile, refusing to admit that he missed how the kid sometimes went on and on before getting to the point. Before he might’ve called it annoying, but now he calls it endearing.

“How about you take the offer and find out?” Tony opened the door for Peter, scooting further in the car. Peter hesitated for a moment, wondering if maybe this was a bad idea, before throwing caution to the wind and stepping inside and closing the door behind him.

“Kid calm down.” He took a bottle of coke from a minifridge he apparently had in his incredibly spacious car and offered it to the teen, who took it eagerly. “To answer your question, I don’t usually pick up random kids on my way home.” He then took a bottle of water from the fridge and opened it for himself. Peter didn’t even stop to think how the Tony Stark knew he’d prefer the
coke over water, but then again, he was still getting over the fact that he was sitting right next to his idol.

“Okay, so then… why am I here?” Peter suddenly started feeling concerned again. He really wasn’t sure what this was about, but he really hoped he wasn’t busted. It would really suck if he was busted. He literally just started being Spider-man, he didn’t want to stop anytime soon.

“I have an offer for you to accept.” Tony said simply, giving the teen a moment to breathe before continuing. “Don’t freak out, but I know you’re Spider-man.”

Peter freaked out.

“Uh! No?? He’s like, some really cool hero… or whatever! That’s not me! I’m just an average boy living an average life in an average world that apparently has super heroes and stuff! That’s all! Who even is Spider-man? Not me, that’s for sure.” Peter continued his nervous rant for some time before Tony decided enough was enough.

“Oh, you’re not Spider-man then? Well that’s a shame.” Tony faked a sigh. “Because if you were Spider-man, I would offer to make you a suit that wasn’t made out of… pajamas and some foggy goggles. Then, I’d offer to help train you to become a better hero. I’d even let you come hang out in some of my labs to do homework or experiment or whatever it is kids like you like doing with their free time. I’d even offer to give you a Stark internship to use as an excuse for whenever you’re out there doing Spider-man things.” Tony enjoyed watching the teen go from extremely worried to extremely excited. He almost felt bad for teasing him like this, but he really couldn’t help it. He missed the kid’s genuine reaction to everything, and he was so easy to tease. “But, I guess since you’re not Spider-man, this offer is pretty meaningless, huh?” He suddenly turned his attention from Peter to Happy. “Happy, will you please take this boy to his house, so he can continue not being Spider-man?”

“Sure thing, boss.” Happy replied rolling his eyes.

“Thank you.” Tony smiled mischievously, and then looked back at Peter. “You simply have to excuse my confusion, Mr. Parker.” He saw the boy’s smile drop, he saw the boy bite his lip, thinking of his next move, and finally, he saw the boy’s eyes harden with determination.

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“Okay, you got me. I’m Spider-man.” He said confidently. “Just please don’t tell Aunt May! She’d kill me!” He added quickly. Tony offered another smile.

“Deal.” He knew Peter would eventually let his secret slip anyways, so it really didn’t matter either way if he told May or not. “Here, catch.” He tossed Peter a version of the Stark phone he’ve been working for made specifically for the kid. He wasn’t surprised with how easily the kid managed to catch it. Show off. “That, right there, has my number in it. Do not call me for anything that isn’t an emergency… or do. I really can’t stop you.” He shrugged. “Drop by the Tower sometime, and I’ll have you tested for a new suit.”

“The Tower?” Peter blinked.

“You know, the one that used to have my name written down on it with a large neon sign?” He held back an eye roll, watching Peter’s face reden slightly.

“Right, that Tower.” He gave a wobbly smile.

“That Tower.” Tony repeated with a nod. “Well, Underoos, here’s your home.” He said the moment the car stopped and reached over to open the door for the kid. He was expecting the hug
this time around, and despite desperately wanting to return it, he chose not to. It would be incredibly weird for him to just hug the kid, at least for now. “We aren’t on hugging level yet, kid. I’m just opening the door for you.”

“Oh!” Peter smiled sheepishly, quickly letting go of Tony. “Sorry, Mr. Stark.” He hastily made his way out of the car, and out of the awkward situation.

“Call me Tony, Mr. Stark is my dad.” Tony responded, already knowing it won’t stick. “Have a good day kid, and don’t forget to stop by the Tower sometime. Just give me a heads up.”

“Will do Mr. Stark! I mean… uh… Tony! Thank you!” Peter gave him an excited smile.

“Sure thing, kid. I’ll see you around.” He waited until Peter was no longer in his line of sight before asking Happy to take them home. Not for the first time, he was incredibly thankful he had returned to a simpler time. Hopefully everything that had happened in the previous timeline, wouldn’t happen now.

“You seem to be in a good mood today, boss.” FRIDAY commented while Tony tinkered with his housing unit. In a span of three days, he had already managed to redevelop the nanobots. Now he just needed to finish the housing unit, program the suit, and make a new arc reactor. He was close to finishing it, so he was admittedly excited about it.

He had remembered that when he had to undergo the last-minute surgery to save his life. Thinking about it, he had no idea how he lived through that, but he knew he’d probably have to undergo something similar -minus the whole being beaten to near death part. He couldn’t help but wonder if he could do something to make himself stronger. He knew he heavily relied on his technology like a crutch, without the Iron Man suit he could hardly fight. In Siberia, it had already failed him. In Titan, it had failed him again. He was starting to see a pattern.

“I am.” He hummed. “I saw the kid today,” he explained. “He was just as energetic as he was the first time around.”

“That’s good.”

“Yeah.” He agreed easily, feeling a smile form on his lips. “I’m just glad I got to see him like this again. The future was really shitty, you know? He was one of the ones that got affected by Thanos’ snap. I’m not sure if that would make him lucky or not, to be honest.” He said softly, the smile dropped as the memories resurfaced. A part of Tony died when he had seen the kid turn to dust.

Peter was like a ray of hope, inspiring those around him that there is still good in the world. Despite Peter’s insistence of wanting to be just like him, Tony would rather be like him. He was a kind soul, always looking out for those around him. Tony didn’t mean to get attached, but, looking back, there was absolutely no way in hell he wouldn’t be. The kid made him want to become someone better, to become someone worth looking up to. Slowly, Peter had become something akin to family, someone who Tony would take a bullet for. Someone who he’d do his damn best to protect.

Then he died in Tony’s arms.

“How come?” FRIDAY’s voice brought him back to the present… the past? Time travel is weird.

“Well, after the snap, everything really just went to shit. Half of the universe was just gone, FRIDAY, it was horrible.” Tony took a deep, calming breath. “Do you want me to talk about it, or do you want to see it?”
“I would like for both, boss.” FRIDAY responded. “I would like to see it for better understanding of the event, but I want you to talk about so for better understanding of how it affected you.” Tony nodded.

“Yeah, okay. That makes sense. I’m not sure I can get to both on one day FRI, it’s the stuff of nightmares honestly.” He glanced at the safe on his desk that currently housed the infinity gauntlet. He knew he wouldn’t be able to carry the cursed item with him at all times, but he sure as hell knew he could do the next best thing. He made a ridiculously complicated to open safe, with at least twenty different types of locks and several layers of different types of hard to break through metals and other materials. He made sure that two automated suits were to guard it at all times, and that it was stuck hard on the reinforced table so that nothing could move it without his permission. Maybe he was being paranoid, but in his line of work it’s usually better safe than sorry. “I’ll talk about it for now, though.” He trailed his eyes back onto his in-progress housing unit.

“Look up survivor’s guilt.” He said calmly. “That’s how the majority of us felt. Half of entire communities were just gone, with one snap. Can you imagine? Half of an entire universe. How many lives were lost that day, I wonder. It was really hard to come back from that, at least here on Earth. Though I wouldn’t be surprised if other planets had similar problems. People blamed each other, they blamed the governments, and they blamed the Avengers. There was a lot of civil unrest, and when there wasn’t, everyone just looked like zombies. They were only half alive, not caring about what happens next. A few actually tried to live on, but it wasn’t enough. Maybe in a couple of more months, we’d be able to move on, but it was too hard. So many people had given up.”

“That sounds terrible.” FRIDAY commented, a note of sympathy resonated in her voice.

“That’s because it was.” Tony continued working on the housing unit. His mind was repeating the events of the other timeline. He was reliving it, over and over. Punishing himself for letting it happen, while simultaneously reminding himself not to let it happen again. Thanos may be gone, but he would be a fool to rest at that. There was always a looming threat of someone bigger than the worst enemy. Just because there is no more Thanos, doesn’t mean someone wouldn’t do something equally as bad if not worst. This is why Tony was scared of the stones. Someone might want to pick up where the purple grape left off. Tony was no fool.

After a couple of silent minutes, he spoke up again. “It’s okay though,” he started, “because I won’t let it happen again.”

With that, Tony continued to work. He rather enjoyed slaving away in a lab, creating whatever he wants. It was liberating. It was easy to lose himself in whatever he was working on, and it was definitely a good break from the nightmares that plagued both his dreams and memories. Not to mention that machinery was something Tony understood easily. It was pretty straight forward and familiar. He didn’t need to deal with people while he worked. He didn’t need to deal with emotions either. He didn’t need to think.

If he could, Tony would probably spend the rest of his life stuck in his workstation.

“I suggest you take a break.” FRIDAY suddenly spoke, interrupting the hard rock playlist he had on. Black in Black, though still playing, quieted down to a mere whisper. He missed working on his suits and whatever other project he had while blasting music loud enough to deafen an elephant three rooms over.

“You’ve been awake for 40 hours, and you have been working almost just as long.” Tony sighed. He had just finished coming up with a couple of designs for the Spider-man suit. If he was to take
a break, he had to admit now was as good a time as any.

“Ten more minutes?” He asked petulantly.

“You said that ten minutes ago.” FRIDAY almost sounded amused. Tony couldn’t help but chuckle.

“Alright, I’ll go make some coffee.”

“You need to leave the room, maybe go out for a walk around the compound.” FRIDAY suggested. Tony thought about it, and decided he agreed. His legs were starting to get stiff from sitting for so long.

“You win this round FRI.” Tony smiled softly, forcing himself to get up and leave his workshop. He’ll be the first to admit that it was quite the struggle.

Tony decided that he’d walk over to the community kitchen. That way, he’d get his coffee and he’d be walking around for however long it took him to get there. Everyone’s happy.

“Boss, I don’t think you should go into the next room.” FRIDAY warned, using Tony’s phone to project herself rather than the speakers built into the compound. Odd.

“Are you unable to reach the compound FRIDAY?” Tony asked, stopping dead in his tracks and paying full attention to his AI. “Is something wrong?” His mind quickly thought back to JARVIS, how he was there one moment and then gone the next. He had lost a dear friend when JARVIS died, and now he might be losing another.

“I am fine, but I really think-” FRIDAY suddenly stopped herself midsentence. Tony became increasingly worried, looking over his phone. He was wondering, hoping really, if maybe he was having a malware error, though he never thought that would ever be a problem considering he designed and produced the phone himself. It was actually scheduled to be released to the public in a year or two, he wasn’t really sure.

Suddenly, he heard a very familiar voice, and everything became clear. FRIDAY was trying to warn him.

“Hey Tony!” Rogers called out chipperly. Tony stiffened, and his heart sank with dread. He felt his body freeze in fear -something he would refuse to admit. Stark men are made of iron. His father’s voice rang in his mind. Right now, Tony felt like glass. He gritted his teeth, trying to calm himself. He refused to cower in front of Steve Rogers. He refused to show weakness.

Tony hadn’t expected the Rogue to show up out of the blue. No, wait, that’s not quite right… He hadn’t expected the Avenger with absolutely no criminal records to show up out of the blue, Tony corrected himself. In all out honesty, Tony had forgotten that Rogers still technically lived in the compound, even if he spend a lot of time and money going from place to place to look for Barnes. The man was manic. Though, at least in that sense, Tony could sympathize. Had it been Rhodes, Tony would probably be looking all over the globe and beyond for a simple trace of the man. His sympathy ended there, however.

“Hheeeey… Steve.” Tony tried not to sound as awkward and nervous as he felt, forcing his nerves to calm down. He knew he was dangerously close to fight or flight territory, he could almost feel the adrenalin being pumped into his veins. “What brings you to this exact room of the compound at… FRIDAY, dear, what time is it?” He waited anxiously for a reply.

“Two in the morning.” Tony was relieved when he heard her voice surround him. So, FRIDAY
really was just trying to be stealthy, what a smart girl. His fears of losing another prized AI, another precious friend, finally calming itself. Her voice also proved to be a bit of a grounding factor. Unlike Siberia, she could call for help should he need it. He noticed that she sounded a bit anxious, he wondered why.

“…at two in the morning?” Tony finished his question, forcing a press worthy smile on his face.

“Jet lag.” Rogers shrugged. “Are you alright?” He asked, looking at Tony with caring eyes. The same caring eyes that had been lying to him for months. The same caring eyes that stared at him disapprovingly while he bashed Tony’s chest in with his shield. The same caring eyes that betrayed him. Tony shook his head lightly, trying to wrap his head around the present.

“Peachy, just tired. I haven’t slept in… uh… FRIDAY?” Tony couldn’t think straight. His mind kept taking him back to Siberia, much against his better judgement.

“40 hours.”

“That.” He rubbed his eyes for effect and forced a yawn. It took a moment before he realized the yawn became genuine. Maybe he felt tired after all. Steve looked at him, he looked concerned. If Tony didn’t know better, he’d think Steve actually cared about his wellbeing.

He knew better.

“Maybe you should try and sleep then.” Steve made his way closer to Tony, putting a hand on his shoulder. It took a lot of willpower for Tony not to flinch away. He felt his panic rise exponentially. He needed to leave. “I know you’ve been working yourself to the bone. Maybe you should take a break?” Tony almost scoffed. Rogers had some nerve using that sweet, gentle voice. The worst part about this whole interaction is that, in all out honesty, Rogers hadn’t done anything wrong. He didn’t actually refuse to sign the accords, ignoring the will of 117 countries. He hadn’t sacrificed everything to save Barnes. He hadn’t ignored Tony’s suggestions on how to fix everything. He hadn’t nearly killed Tony. This Rogers was innocent. In some time, he wouldn’t be. He’d be the monster Tony sees him as, but right now he isn’t. It was infuriating to feel this spiteful towards someone who, by all means, is innocent. The only exception to this that Tony can think about, is that Rogers knew about Barnes killing his parents. That only made him a liar, but still no criminal.

He wanted to scream in frustration. He took another deep breath instead.

“Nah, I just need to inject some coffee in my veins and I’ll be as good as new.” He shrugged, looking at the door behind Rogers. He could make some excuse to get him out of there, but he wasn’t quite sure he could do that without looking suspicious.

“That doesn’t sound too healthy.” Rogers laughed that booming laugh he has. Once upon a time, Tony used to admire that laugh, to want to be the one who caused it. That laugh meant they were friends. It meant Tony was accepted. Now he feared it. He hates himself for fearing it.

“Oops?” He plastered another smile on his face with. He was incredibly thankful for having to grow up famous, if only for the ability to look perfectly fine no matter what he felt.

“Hello there Mr. Rogers, Mr. Stark.” Another voice joined the room, a voice belonging to Vision. Tony couldn’t help the relief that flooded through his system. He trusted Vision. If Vision was here, Rogers wouldn’t hurt him. He hated how dependent he felt, but right now he couldn’t help it.

Since Siberia, Tony hadn’t had any contact with Rogers. Even after their fight with Thanos. Even
after the snap. Roger’s team was always on another side of the battlefield, Tony made sure of that. When he and Nebula managed to find a way back to Earth, the first thing Tony did was call Rhodey. Not Rogers. Never Rogers. He gathered a group of people - Bruce, Nebula, Shuri, anyone with a sharp mind really- and made a think tank. Together they came up with an idea on how to beat Thanos. Rogers was never invited. He fought Thanos alongside everyone else, but Tony never saw him on the battlefield. He was, thankfully, always somewhere else.

And now, he was here. All of the effort spent in avoiding this one man was suddenly pointless. The emotions Tony so carefully pretended never existed were now flooding through. Tony hated feeling so powerless over something so stupid. He beat Thanos, saved the world numerous times, had several versions of the Iron Man suit, had allies, and yet he still feared one human being that was, what, a bit stronger? Sturdier? Healed faster? That was basically nothing compared to fighting a literal god, a titan, or even a machine that could nuke the entire world if it wanted to.

“Hey Vis.” Rogers said with a smile, finally releasing Tony’s shoulder. Tony let out a breath he didn’t know he was holding, once more forcing his mind to stop wondering. He needed to focus on the now. He then turned to face Vision, only to realize that the other was staring at him intently.

Normally, Vision wasn’t too good at showing emotions. He was still learning what exactly it meant to be sentient, to be alive. You could usually only tell if he was happy or sad if he told you. He had yet to learn how to properly express himself. And yet, here he is, giving Tony a steady and reassuring look. A determined gaze that Tony had never seen on the android’s face. It was astonishingly beautiful, mesmerizing, but most importantly, it was comforting.

“Mr. Rogers, I was hoping I could ask you some personal questions regarding your transition into the current century.” Vision said, his eyes never leaving Tony. “Privately, if possible.” He finally looked at Rogers. It almost seemed like Vision had no interest in actually talking to Rogers, but why else would he say that?

Tony couldn’t really wrap his mind around it, but he knew an out when he saw one. “I’ll take that as my cue to leave.” He said with a wonky smile. “Catch you guys later.” He was surprised he didn’t outright run from the room.

He quickly locked himself back into his workshop, taking deep breaths and sinking slowly onto the floor.

“Are you alright?” FRIDAY asked after a couple of minutes. Tony still felt shaky, but better.

“Fine.” His voice was barely a whisper. He hated how easily Rogers affected him, and he hated himself for letting Rogers affect him like that. Though, he had to admit it was a bit of a shock for Rogers to treat him like they were good friends again. He supposed that to Rogers, they were still good friends. “FRIDAY?” He asked after a few more seconds.

“Yes boss?”

“Cancel Tower Move. Make arrangements to move everything of mine from the compound back into the Tower. Remove the Tower from Craig’s List, we aren’t selling it anymore.”

“Will do.”

Tony forced himself to stand back up and walk towards his work station. He needed to focus on something else, anything else.
“Tony, what exactly do you think you’re doing?” Rhodey asked furiously. His eyes were on the road, trying to get to Tony’s tower as quickly as he could. “You can’t possibly be thinking hijacking a government owned suit is going to bode well.” He took this moment to glare at the camera on his phone, hoping it showcased how irritated he was right now with Tony.

The mechanic only smiled while he continued his work. “Actually, the suit belongs to me. You stole it from me, remember?” By this point, everyone knows Tony meant for Rhodey to take it. No one could even think of trying to take Iron Man suits, and it’s not because of lack of trying. So it came to no surprise that Tony had managed to hack into the War Machine suit and make it fly all the way towards him in a matter of minutes.

“You were being irresponsible.” The ‘you were dying like an idiot and didn’t tell me’ was left out. Now that Tony thinks about it, the two of them don’t talk about that time. Tony doesn’t really care much about it, but he’d be stupid not to notice how Pepper would stiffen and Rhodey would frown whenever someone mentions the countless times Tony has almost died. He’d also be stupid not to notice how the majority of his team doesn’t really bat an eye.

“It’s in the past.” Tony grinned. “Anyways, how else was I going to get your attention? Stealing the War Machine armor seemed like the perfect idea.” Tony finally looked up from the suit he was working on. “And from the looks of things, it worked.” He offered Rhodey a mischievous smile.

“Oh, I’m giving you my attention alright. Prepare to get your ass kicked when I get there.” Rhodey grumbled, but there was no heat behind his threat. The most Rhodey would do is nag at Tony and give him a well-deserved slap on the wrist.

“Aw, come on Honey Bear. Don’t be like that.” Tony whined, offering a fake sob. Rhodey could only roll his eyes at Tony’s antics, having gotten used to them over the years. After a couple of moments, Rhodey could be seen parking his car in Tony’s personal garage and making his way up the elevator towards Tony’s personal lab.

“You better not lock me out of the lab Tones, or I swear…” Rhodey muttered, waiting patiently behind the elevator doors.

“I would never!” Tony gasped, theatrically putting a hand over his heart as a gesture of shock. “I love you too much for that my dear Platypus.” He responded solemnly before dropping the act and getting back to work. “Besides, I need my precious guinea pig to see if my new toys work.”

“What?” Rhodey frowned, glaring at the doors in front of him.

“I didn’t say anything.” Tony grinned. The elevator doors finally opened, and Rhodey quickly made his way towards the lab.

“Well, my dear sour patch, I’m working on a suit.” Tony smiled, finishing up the last detail. “To be more specific, I’m working on your suit.” He gave it a light tap. “And this baby is done now.” He turned around to finally look at his old friend. Rhodey wasn’t surprised to see that he looked absolutely exhausted. He noticed that he looked even more exhausted than what he usually had. A glance around the lab would show the several cups of coffee the man had, probably in the past hour alone. Rhodey made a mental note to talk to Pepper about this, it was time they made a little intervention. “Want to give it a whirl?”
Rhodey raised both of his brows in surprise. He didn’t really expect an upgrade to his gear so soon, especially considering Tony had made one a couple of weeks ago, maybe a month. Rhodey knows that Tony is always working on something different, so he only occasionally does something to Rhodey’s suit… and even then, it’s usually just maintenance and making sure everything works.

“What exactly did you do?” Rhodey asked, eyeing the now open suit questionably. He wasn’t necessarily afraid of what Tony had done, he was more worried it was something stupid that he’d have to talk to his superiors about. Disco balls, for example. They didn’t really like that addition.

“First and foremost, I added a parachute. I added a backup parachute to boot.” Tony sounded serious all of a sudden, gaining Rhodey’s undivided attention. Tony rarely used his serious tone of voice, even when he had something serious to say. There must’ve been something really bothering Tony. “I also upgraded some of the weaponry, don’t tell people about that though.” He was looking at the suit, as if he was giving it a critical inspection. “It’s a bit heavy duty, and I’d rather you only use it for emergencies only.” His eyes scanned around the metal plating.

“Heavy duty how?” Rhodey found himself asking.

“Basically, bigger lasers that could probably melt metal in the moment of impact.” Tony shrugged. “I also added an emergency program.” He mentioned, finally nodding in approval of his work.

“What exactly does the emergency program do? And what’s with the multiple parachutes?” Tony was acting a bit weird… Or at least weirder than usual. Rhodey couldn’t help but feel a sudden nervousness.

“The emergency program just makes sure someone can find you if you go missing.” It also made sure Rhodey would be evacuated from a battle if it got too dangerous, but Tony wasn’t going to tell him that. “And the parachutes are in case of a fall, regardless of whether it’s due to mechanical or pilot error.”

“Tony what’s going on?” That was definitely not the reaction Tony had expected. Rhodey looked genuinely concerned.

“Can’t I make sure my best buddie is safe and accounted for?” Tony countered. “I just want to get some bases covered, just in case.”

“And I appreciate that, but you’re making it seem like something big is going to happen. Are you making the same upgrades to your suit?”

“Nothing bad is coming Rhodey, not if I can help it.” Tony offered a grin. Rhodey still didn’t look convinced, but Tony could work with that. “But yes, I did.” That was an authentic lie, but Tony wasn’t about to admit to that. “Now, are you going to test it out or should I just send it back?” He raised a brow, silently demanding that Rhodey put the suit on. With a sigh, Rhodey obliged.

“Fine.” He grumbled, stepping into the suit. “This conversation isn’t over though.” He promised, turning on the suit and immediately being greeted by the HUD.

“I’m pretty sure it is.” Tony smiled, already planning on distracting Rhodey with several different conversations and also maybe beer. “So, how does it feel so far?”

Rhodey sighed, accepting momentary defeat while promising himself to revisit this conversation sometime. He moved around, suddenly noticing how much more fluid the armor moved. It was always pretty easy to move around considering it was a full body metal armored suit with guns attached, but now it moved like it was almost a part of him. “Woah,”
“Oh yeah, I also made it run smoother.” Tony felt himself grin with pride. “You like it?” He asked cheekily.

“Very much. How did you do this so quickly?” The suit had been stolen for about two hours, three, tops. Tony shouldn’t have been able to do any of that in such a limited timeframe.

“What can I say, I’m a genius.” Tony walked over to a different workbench in his lab, already thinking of his next project and also the one after that. He sat down comfortably on one of his stools, eyeing the container with the stones still in it. He should get started on a solution for that.

“Right, how could I forget.” Rhodey rolled his eyes. He walked over towards Tony, still impressed with how the suit moved. He was tempted to walk over towards the landing pad and testing out how it flew. It was like being handed a new toy, and he was more than eager to test it out. He decided he’d definitely do that at some point, but first he wanted to catch up with Tony. There had to be something he was missing; otherwise, why would Tony be so concerned with something going wrong with his suit? If there was something Tony was absolutely confident in, it was the performance of his many different suits. He trusts his tech more than he trusts those around him, though it’s to be expected considering his company. Speaking of which, “how are things with the Avengers?” Rhodey almost didn’t see Tony flinch at the question. Bingo.

“Fine.” Tony effortlessly pretended there was nothing wrong, but Rhodey knew his tricks. “They’re fine. They like the Compound. So that’s nice. Vision and Wanda are the only ones that are always there, though Rogers is there at the moment. I’m not sure for how long though. Natasha is probably there too, since he’s there.” At this point he was basically just giving a status update.

“Rogers? Since when do you call him by his last name?” Rhodey almost didn’t pick up on that, but he’s observant when he needs to be and to be friends with Tony being observant is a definite must.

Tony, meanwhile, realized his slip up a bit too late. He was far too comfortable with Rhodey, having spent a lot of years alongside the other. He cursed himself. “I’m not the biggest Steve Rogers fan right now.” He admitted. “I don’t really trust him.”

“What did he do?” Rhodey couldn’t help but ask. “Aside from his usually B.S.” Tony was someone who overlooked a lot of people’s shit, who was willing to go above and beyond for someone even if they don’t deserve it. He was someone had been through so much, yet still cared so much for others. For him to turn his back on someone he considers a friend or even just a team member or subordinate, something drastic must have happened.

“He didn’t do anything, I just realized how much of an ass he is.” Tony offered a shrug. Rogers hadn’t really done anything, not yet. Maybe never if Tony managed to change things.

“Finally.” Rhodey muttered. “It took you long enough Tones. The guy is a complete idiot.” Tony frowned and looked over at Rhodey, setting the metal piece he had been tinkering with down.

“What? I thought you liked Rogers?”

“Tony, he literally treated you badly since day one. I mean, I get that you can sometimes be insufferable to work with, but he doesn’t have to treat you like a child that he has to deal with. Not to mention he and the other Avengers have never thanked you for how much you’ve contributed to the team. And I’m not even talking about how you pay for literally everything of theirs, including their weapons and the damages they do.” Rhodey huffed, finally glad he could tell Tony how he felt about the others. Rhodey has a lot of respect for Tony. At first, he hadn’t really liked the genius mechanic too much,
but he grows on you with time. Once you get past the front he puts up, he’s a pretty stand up guy. They’ve had their fair share of fights, but who hasn’t? Rhodey would happily take a bullet for Tony, and he’s positive the other would do it for him too. He knows Tony is the type to give, even if he pretends he isn’t. Unfortunately, he knows Tony ends up giving more than he should, just because he can. Because of his respect for Tony, he won’t say anything. He’ll let the other do what he wants, until it gets to the point where it just gets ridiculous. Rhodey was glad it didn’t get to that point just yet, but he knew it was close. The Avengers were starting to become harsher and harsher towards Tony, and frankly that wasn’t going to fly.

“Insufferable? Me?” Tony gasped in mock hurt. Of course, that’s what he took from Rhodey’s words. “Oh, how you wound me Honey Bear.” The engineer wiped a nonexistent tear.

“You just proved my point.” Rhodey said flatly with a straight face. It only took a couple of seconds before he was smiling, though.

“I live to please.” Tony smiled back. “Anyways, Rhodey, I hate to kick you out but…”

“Yeah, yeah. I get it, I’ll get out of your graying hair.” Rhodey grinned widely, already making his way out as Tony made a face of indignation.

“GRAYING HAIR!??” He stood up quickly and started stomping his way towards Rhodey. “I’ll have you know I’m still a young spring flower with many years yet!” He yelled once he realized Rhodey had already left his lab. “Graying hair? The nerve of some people.” He huffed, crossing his arms. And if he was smiling at his friend’s antics? Well, no one had to know.

After a minute of looking back to where his friend had just left with his upgraded suit, Tony turned back around. “FRIDAY, let’s go back to lockdown, shall we?” He sighed tiredly.

“Engaging protocol: Lockdown. Any and all calls will be neglected, and lab entry will be denied to all.” FRIDAY obliged, though it almost sounded like she was disapproving of this action. “Boss, maybe you should get some sleep. You have been awake for nearly three days now, not counting the moments you’ve lost consciousness. The human body isn’t meant to be awake for such extended periods of time.” Tony sighed again. He knew he was pushing it. He’d been pushing it more than he should, and he knew it. Every time he even thinks about sleeping, nightmares creep up on him. What if’s circle his mind. Fears of failure keep him awake. Every time he manages to fall asleep, it isn’t long before a memory wakes him up.

He had a long way to go before he could sleep well again.

“Eventually FRI. For now, we need to figure out how to hide the stones.”
Hey everyone! I just wanted to say a big thank you for all of your lovely comments! And another thank you for some of the notes you've given me! This work isn't really proof read from anyone else, so I sometimes miss a couple of things. Thank you for putting up with it though and enjoy the chapter!

(Also, chances are I won't be uploading next week! Only time will tell.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It took about four more days to finish the entirety of his new suit and, of course, add upgrades. All Tony needed to do now was undergo the surgery, and that was scheduled to happen in about two days. He easily admitted to being nervous about it, but also eager. Having this suit in Germany would’ve made a pretty sizeable difference. Having this suit in Siberia would’ve made his life a hell of a lot less painful.

Whenever Tony needed a reprieve from his work, he would start making plans and goals. Thinking back to everything that had happened in the previous timeline and considering any actions he could take in this one. It was confusing, to say the least. Time was something no one really understood, it was something no one had the chance to mess with and test out. It was one of those things people could only hypothesize. Some people believed that everything that happens is fated to happen, that no matter what, every choice one makes they would have made regardless. Other people believe that new, entirely different timelines are created with each choice given, one for each possible option. Some believed time to be one singular, linear set of events that are formed by choice.

Despite having been able to travel back in time and prevent a major universe-wide catastrophe from happening, Tony still didn’t have a strong enough grasp on what time was exactly. None of Tony’s interactions were the same as they were in the previous timeline, but, with the exception of a certain homicidal Titan’s existence, nothing really notable changed either. He still made the same deals with the same companies, he still had to produce the same products for the same markets, and he still had to go to the same events for the same reasons.

He had made a couple of changes in this timeline, like deciding to remove the ARC and introduce himself to Peter earlier. Some other big changes that came as a consequence of time traveling were his newfound ownership of all of the stones, now with the exclusion of the Mind and Time stones, and also being placed in Doctor Strange’s radar. He knew that wasn’t the last of it, and he knew that the longer he held on to the stones, the longer Earth housed all six of them, the more likely something horrible was bound to happen. It wouldn’t be Thanos, which that was a relief all on its own, but it could be something just as bad, if not worse. The thought alone made Tony sick to his stomach with dread.

Tony had started to wonder about what other changes he could make. He would recall different moments in the previous timeline, and what he could use from it. He remembered returning home to Earth with Nebula after the snap and hearing about random vigilante heroes that had made themselves notable, such as Daredevil. He also heard of the great loss of similar vigilantes, like
Jessica Jones. Like Spider-man.

Tony grimaced at the thought. It never happened, he made sure of that.

Thinking back to the problem in hand, Tony wondered if it would be wise to reach out to those individuals. If Tony learned anything from the previous timeline, it’s that Earth needs people, heroes, to defend her. The Avengers, regardless of the ideals of peace, protection and justice that Fury claimed they stood for, weren’t enough. Tony no longer cares for them, he doesn’t even feel the crushing regret he used to feel whenever he thought about it.

Rhodey was right, they never treated him right. He was only ever meant to be a tool at their disposal. He was their checkbook, their punching bag, their scapegoat, and their caretaker. He was never right, and always at fault. If he was a victim, they would downplay his emotions to mere moments of pure dramatics or simply ignored. They didn’t care… or maybe they did. Maybe the manipulations, the lies, were how they showed their love. The thought terrified Tony.

The point was that, ultimately, Tony didn’t want to be there for them anymore. He didn’t want to be an Avenger. He wanted to help the world and make it a better place and he didn’t need to be an Avenger for that. Although he no longer wanted to be a member of that team, he would also rather not go solo again. The only other option he had was to form another team, preferably with people he could actually trust not to stab his back. He’d take what he could get, though.

He also decided he wanted to get a leg up on the Accords. He’ll admit that in the previous timeline, the original draft of the Accords was pretty lackluster. It was far more restrictive than he would have liked, but he could make amendments, something the Rogues failed to realize. He wondered if maybe presenting his own version to the Avengers as well as to the UN would somehow manage to help prevent the team’s hostile fallout. That, alongside a happy, well fed and trigger-free Barnes, would probably be enough. Probably.

Unfortunately, FRIDAY has yet to find someone who has a similar facial match to Barnes. Occasionally they found one or two look-alikes, but so far none of them were actually Barnes. Tony figures he could always check the apartment that Rogers had found Barnes in, but he doesn’t want to chance a meeting without his nanotech suit. He doesn’t really think he’s going to let the situation escalate that much; he’s sure the super soldier had already obtained some level of self-awareness by now, and he’s already forgiven Barnes for the whole debacle anyways. It wasn’t really even his fault, that was all HYDRA.

The same can’t be said for Rogers.

It was the intent of forming a second team or, perhaps, several smaller teams and create his own version of the Accords that lead him to knock on Nelson and Murdock’s door at incredibly early o’clock with a sharp smile and a crisp suit.

“Mr. Stark!” A beautiful lady with pretty blond hair and glistening red lips opened the door to their firm, surprise apparent in her wide eyes. Karen Page, Tony’s mind supplied him. “Come in!” She finally said as she opened the door for him after a couple of silent, awkward seconds. “Please.” She offered a smile which Tony happily returned.

“Thank you, Ms. Page.” He nodded, making his way inside. “I’m sorry for the unannounced visit, but it’s been a hectic couple of days.” Days passed working endlessly trying to solve multiple problems at the same time while fighting off sleep and occasionally blacking out only to wake up with a horrid memory of what had happened or a nightmare of what could happen. “I hope I haven’t caught you at a bad time?”
“Not at all!” Karen shook her head, still smiling. “If you’ll give me a second, I’ll call in the boys.”

“Sure thing.” He said casually, trying his best to sound as tired as he felt. He watched Karen maneuver through the room towards a class door, she gently knocked on it.

“Matt, Foggy, we have a client here that you’d really like to meet.” If Tony’s hunches were right, then Murdock would have already known that Tony Stark was here to pay him a visit. He wondered what kind of person Matt was. Heroic, righteous and just, if his horned persona was anything to go by. The same as Rogers, he thought bitterly. Then again, perhaps not. Who was he to judge? Just because one righteous hero was also an asshole would-be almost murderer, doesn’t mean all of them are.

“Woah is that…” Foggy started to say as he stepped out of their private office. Matt was behind him, scowling and tense.

“Tony Stark, in the flesh.” Tony flashed a smile, finishing his sentence for him. “It’s a pleasure to meet with you Mr. Nelson.” He extended a hand towards Foggy’s direction. Foggy eagerly shook it.

“The pleasure is all mine!” He smiled wildly, probably excited to meet someone famous. “This is my associate, Matthew Murdock.” He stepped do the side once they dropped their hands.

“It’s nice to meet you, Mr. Murdock.” Tony raised a hand for him as well, but the other didn’t shake it. Tony shrugged and dropped his hand, not completely surprised by the reaction. If he had to guess, Murdock knew perfectly well that Tony had offered to shake hands but preferred to use his status as a blind man to avoid formalities. Tony would have probably done the same.

“Likewise, Mr. Stark.” There was a pointed smile on Matt’s lips, it looked almost dangerous. Another person might’ve backed down and walked away, but Tony was never one to turn around on the first sign of danger. If the Devil wanted to fight, then Tony would happily oblige. “What can we do for you?” Tony knew that Matt wasn’t asking that, not really. The real question he was asking was what do you want?

“Straight to business, I like that.” Tony gave a press-worthy grin and started explaining. “So, I’m pretty sure we all know about my on-the-side activities as Iron Man.” Foggy’s smile widened, he was here on hero business. Foggy always wanted to be a hero’s lawyer. “And we all know what went down recently, with SHIELD, with Sokovia and Ultron.” His smile immediately fell. “We know about how many people suffered and how many died.” Tony paused for a moment, as if to think of his next words carefully. “I want to prevent that from ever happening again.”

“It was a tragic event, and I’m sure you, as well as the Avengers, did your best.” Matt said cautiously, “but I’m still not understanding your reason for being here.”

“Well, to put it simply: I want accountability. I want the Avengers, and any future hero team, to be held responsible for their actions. I want the world to feel safe with us, and not fear us. We have been running wild for a while now and, though it worked before while with SHIELD, I think it’s time we change that.” Tony paused, this time for the dramatics. “I want to make a legal document that will require us, all of us, to be responsible for our actions. One that would still make us independent for the most part, but also still operating under what the world wants.”

“Future hero team? Are you saying there is going to be a second Avengers group?” Matt tensed slightly, probably worried about his secret identity.

“Yes, as it stands I’m not very confident in the Avenger’s performance. I’m also aware of the
existence of others who are willing to fight for the good of others. Eventually, I want to make other
hero groups that can operate independently from the Avengers while maintaining the same
responsibilities.” Tony bit his lip, debating whether or not he should say the next bit. “After the
Chitauri we were given hard evidence of life outside our planet, and also that they are willing to
attack us. I’ve done what I can to prevent another alien invasion,” to prevent Thanos, “but it’s only
a matter of time. Especially now with all of the stones still on Earth.” Tony sighed, his mind once
more thinking back to the problem of the stones. How was he going to get rid of them? “The
Avengers are not enough, and frankly, I don’t think we ever were. Even having multiple teams
might not be enough, but it’s better.”

“What do you mean ‘all of the stones?’ What stones?” Foggy was the one who asked this time,
alerting Tony of his slip-up. He took a deep breath and tried not to panic. The less people knew
about the stones, the better. He was so engrossed in explaining himself, he had forgotten to censor
it.

“That,” he started slowly, trying to buy himself more time, “is an excellent question… and it has an
excellent answer,” he gave a sheepish smile, “that I don’t think I can give you.” He had debated
just flat out lying, making up some story about how the stones are in mode in some other part of
the galaxy, but he knew better. If he wanted Murdock to be his lawyer, and hopefully future
teammate, then he needed to show that he could be trusted, that he wouldn’t lie. “I’m sorry, it’s
really better that you don’t know.” He sighed tiredly.

“Is it dangerous?” Karen spoke up this time, looking a bit fearful. Tony looked at her for a
moment, wanting to comfort her and say there’s nothing to worry about but even he didn’t know.
Thanos was gone, but Tony wasn’t a fool to believe there wasn’t some other threat out there. There
will always be another threat, another fight. He knew that he would never be able to rest until he
died, and he’s come close to that more times than he’s comfortable with.

“Yes,” he said gravely, “but I’m working on it.”

“Why us?” Matt asked, his posture tenser by the second. Tony did a great job at making him more
worried, especially since he intended on doing the opposite. “You have your own private firm, do
you not?”

“Yep.” Tony popped the ‘p’ lazily. “My firm is great and has saved me from so many scandals that
I practically owe them my life.” That earned him a chuckle from both Foggy and Karen, but not
from Matt. “They could, no doubt, figure out how to write this document and make it look like a
gift from heaven. The thing is though, I don’t really trust them. Not with something this important.”
He was serious now, looking between the three of them. “SHIELD might no longer be a thing, but
that doesn’t mean there aren’t other spy networks out there with sleeper agents lurking about every
corner, including HYDRA. I haven’t even told the team about this. I want the document to be
drafted first, so that I can try and convince them that we can’t go wild around the world and expect
everything to be perfect. Having a smaller, lesser known firm has the great advantage of stealth. No
one, aside from the four of us, would know about this side project of mine until it was time, and
none of you strike me as someone who’d yell ‘Hail HYDRA’ at the top of their lungs at the first
given opportunity.” Tony smiled, earning yet another round of chuckles from the two civilians.
“Besides, after what you’ve done with the Fisk case, you’ve proven that you are rather skillful with
the law.”

Matt nodded, seeming accepting of this response. “That makes sense.”

“I know I’m asking a lot of you, and I will respectfully understand if you choose to decline my
proposal. This is a rather serious and lengthy matter that will take up an annoyingly large amount
of time, and I’m basically dumping all of it onto the three of you.” He sighed, rubbing his eyes tiredly. “Should you be interested, though, you would be paid handsomely for your efforts.” He looked up at them. “You’d also end up being my advisors on this matter and how to approach it, as well as the whole ‘other teams’ sitch.” He offered a smile, knowing his charm alone might not be enough to convince them.

The three looked between themselves, silently debating their answer. They knew the money and eventual reputation from this deal would be phenomenal, but it also put them in an awkward situation. The whole reason Tony is asking for them is because he’s afraid of something happening if this deal was made publicly. Working with someone famous and accomplished would give them amazing bragging rights, but it also made them a target. Tony suddenly pulled out a tablet and offered it to them.

“You don’t have to answer me now. Take as much time as you need to go over the offer and get back to me when you can. This tablet has a compilation of the main points I want to include as well as minor ideas I think would make decent additions. It also contains base information for arguments that can be made, both for and against this document.” He then pulled out a card from his breast pocket, it was metallic with a number etched on it both numerically as well as in braille. “Here’s my number. Feel free to give me a call any time of the day.”

“Thank you.” Karen said as she took both the card and the Stark Tablet.

“You’re welcome.” He nodded and gave her a warm smile. “It has been a pleasure meeting with all of you, and I look forward to your answer.” After exchanging pleasantries, Tony walked out feeling slightly confident that they would agree to this. The tabled he had handed them contained many clauses of the original Sokovia Accords but tailored to be more beneficial. It also included so many ideas FRIDAY and he had thought of to protect the enhanced who did not wish to fight or were too young for the program. He figured Matt would be interested in working with it knowing it would protect many innocent people, both enhanced and not.

The UN would probably prefer their own Accords, since it gives them more power, but they wouldn’t be opposed to it. Tony could probably make great arguments for it to sway their opinions. The only problem was getting the Avengers to like it. He groaned at the thought of even mentioning it.

“Boss,” a voice was heard in Tony’s headset, “a camera in a small-town North of Switzerland has captured footage of a man with similar facial and body structure to that of Sergeant James Barnes. Further investigation has shown that he is occupying an abandoned building for some time and shows no signs of leaving soon.” This made Tony stop dead in his tracks. He had decided to walk his way back to the Tower, giving himself some time to think before he dives back to work. He now began to regret his decision, wanting to leave for Switzerland as quickly as possible.

“Ok, that’s great.” He took a deep breath. “How quickly can you get me there, FRI?”

“If you take a suit to the compound and use the Quinjet, you will arrive in your destination in roughly 7 hours.” Tony nodded. “Would you like me file a flight plan and notify Switzerland of your arrival?” FRIDAY asked, already writing an email to the security team of the airport closest to Barnes’ location.

“I would appreciate that.” Tony smiled once he saw a glimmer of red in the distance, heading his way. “Also, please have the stones ready for transport. I don’t want to leave them unattended.”

“Very well, dispatching Iron Sentries with the stones. They will be onboard and ready when you arrive.” Friday took a moment before speaking again. “Boss, I’ve been meaning to ask… what will
your intentions be with Sergeant Barnes?” Tony smiled softly, rubbing his eyes once more. He knew she was inquiring whether he would kill him or not.

“BARF.” He almost chuckled. “I need a better name for that.” He muttered under his breath. “I intend on using BARF to eliminate the triggers HYDRA planted in him. He’ll no longer be subjugated into living as a mindless weapon. I also plan on offering therapy for him, once the triggers are gone.”

“Boss, you’re not that kind of doctor.” Tony paused for an instant before erupting into a burst of laughter. It had been the first time he had laughed in a long, long time.

“No baby girl, I’m not. I was thinking of finding someone trustworthy to help him. Maybe I could make an AI that would do the trick if he doesn’t think he can trust anyone. After that, I don’t know. Maybe I’ll let him go, he’d be free to do whatever he wants. Maybe I’ll turn him in to the police to answer for his crimes. Maybe I’ll get him the best damn lawyers in the world to make sure he’s seen as innocent.” Tony shrugged. “It depends on what he wants, really. I don’t care as long as he stops being the weapon that killed my parents.” He was thankful there weren’t that many people out in the streets at this time of day, otherwise he’d be flocked by curious bystanders.

“I don’t understand. Why would you help someone who has done nothing for you? And worse yet, has caused and will cause you harm? From your recounting, eventually he and Steve Rogers will—” Tony interrupted her, not wanting to talk about that incident right now.

“I know what he did.” He said grimly. “But it wasn’t really him, and I wasn’t thinking straight. I shouldn’t have attacked him after seeing the video, it was wrong of me. Barnes is just another victim, and one who needs help. I’m probably the only one who would be able to give him help, and currently the only one willing. He means a lot to Rogers, so having him on the team would help keep Spangled Banners happy and willing to stay in the Avengers. If someone like Thanos were ever to come to Earth, I’d rather they face a unified team.”

“It would be deteriorating for your health to have both super soldiers in your team. Whenever the subject is brought up, you experience a spike in your heart rate. Logic shows that it would only worsen with their presence.”

“Doesn’t matter.” Tony shrugged. “As long as I can protect the Earth, I don’t care.” FRIDAY was silent at that. Eventually, the suit reached Tony and he entered it easily. “Let’s get this shitshow on the road FRI.” He grinned as he made his way towards the compound.

In the shadows of an alleyway, a masked individual sat in silence. He had hoped to figure out Stark’s intentions and was thankful that the other had decided to walk. Carefully, he stood up from the railing and started to make his way back home, more than satisfied with what he heard.

James ‘Bucky’ Barnes was an unknown fugitive, or rather, mostly unknown. The world’s governments roughly knew about the Winter Soldier and of his many, many deeds. A blurred amalgamation of his face had been recorded while he fought with Captain America in the fall of SHIELD, but it was nothing incriminating. No one knew where to look for him; he never stayed in one place for too long, and often avoided civilization if he could. His current residency has been about three weeks long and he was already planning on moving elsewhere. He debated on whether he should go to Germany or France, both seemed like decent enough hiding spots.

Right now, he was coming back from a small market that didn’t have many costumers. He was trying to stock up on supplies before he leaves. He was about to open the door to his makeshift
home before he realized something was wrong—he heard the faint whirl of a machine inside. He stood in front of his door now, debating whether or not he should enter. On one end it could be an ambush, on the other he might’ve left the coffee machine on. With a grunt, he decided to chance it and open the door.

The coffee machine was on.

There was also a man sitting with his feet propped up on the table and a mug in his hand.

The man, who James swore looked familiar, smiled once he saw him enter. He smiled wildly and took a sip of the coffee before putting his feet down and sitting up straight. “Honey, you’re home!” His voice was sickly sweet, but not threatening. Barnes closed the door behind him, eyeing the man in front of him. Sizing him up.

He almost didn’t notice the metal suit in the corner with a suitcase behind him. He immediately stiffened, ready to attack if needed.

“Oh him?” The man asked, noticing Barnes’ hesitation. “He’s just my mode of transportation, my luggage carrier, and also my backup if you try to kill me.” He sounded chipper, but Barnes knew it was forced. “Forget about him, I’m here to talk… if you’ll have me?” Barnes frowned, unsure of whether or not he should entertain the man in front of him, try to extract information from him, or run away before he can cause any harm.

“I hope you don’t mind that I took some liberties with your coffee machine,” he said casually as he took another sip from the cup, “I’m a bit of an addict.” Another grin, but this one was more genuine. “And Swiss coffee is majestic. Seriously, good stuff.” He hummed.

Barnes sighed, and made his way to take a seat in front of the man. He looked carefully around the room, trying to find any signs of danger or foul play. There were none, but he wasn’t going to let his guard down just yet.

“Alrighty, so… I don’t know how much you know about me, but I know a lot about you.” Barnes glared. “Oh, don’t give me that!” The man sounded like Barnes was throwing a temper tantrum. “You’re pretty infamous for your… work… with HYDRA.” Barnes noted the tone of disgust in his voice. “Though, I know that wasn’t really up to you.” Resignation. “Which is why I’m here, actually!” Back to false cheer. “See, I want to help you out. Like I said before, I know a lot about you. I know who you were, Sergeant James Buchanan "Bucky" Barnes. I know who you were forced to become, the Winter Soldier. I know the people you were forced to kill…” Sadness. “And I know about your triggers.” Sympathy.

So far, this man had yet to sound off any alarms Barnes had. He seemed to be genuine in his request to talk, and, from what Barnes could tell, there were no ulterior motives. So far no reason for distrust was given, but they had only just began talking. Barnes nodded for the man to continue, interested in where this sales pitch of a conversation was leading them.

“My name is Anthony Edward Stark, I am the owner of Stark Industries. I am also a member of the superhero group known as the Avengers. I am Iron Man.” He was introducing himself, sounding proud for the most part. “I’m Howard and Maria Stark’s son and heir.” Barnes flinched, now knowing why the man looked familiar. He had some resemblances to the man and woman he had killed for HYDRA. The man… Stark looked satisfied with Barnes’ reaction, though for what reason, he wasn’t sure. Did he assume Barnes flinched because of who he was, because of what he’s accomplished, or because of who his parents were?

“I’m currently developing a device with the intent of therapeutic use. At this time, it’s known as
Binarily Augmented Retro-Framing, or B.A.R.F. for short.” Stark winced, clearly bothered by something. “I know, the name sucks.” He sounded apologetic. “I really need to work on it.” He sighed before speaking again. “Anyways,” his false cheer was back, “it’s a device that alters memories. It’s supposed to make them more bearable and give you a feeling of control. I was thinking we could use it on you and hopefully get rid of the triggers, get rid of what could force you to become the Winter Soldier again.” Bold. No, not quite. Confident? No. Determined.

Stark was determined to use the device on him, but what were his motives?

“Why?” Barnes asked, speaking for the first time. Stark grinned wildly, almost as though he had already gotten what he wanted.

“He speaks! As much as I love the sound of my own voice, Mr. Barnes, I don’t quite think I could listen to it for much longer.” He laughed, unbothered by Barnes’ stoic face. “Well, as shocking as this may seem, I just don’t want to chance you relapsing into being a mindless weapon. I’m pretty sure it could come back and bite me in the ass.” Barnes wasn’t quite sure what emotion he saw in Stark’s face. It was like he remembered something, but, prior to this moment, the two had never interacted. “HYDRA still exists, and as long as they know you’re alive they won’t stop coming for you.”

“And if I refuse?” Stark shrugged, leaning back into the chair and sipping more coffee.

“Then you refuse. I can’t force you into this Mr. Barnes, I can only try and convince you. You may have a criminal status right now, but I won’t try and bring you in. Frankly, I’m tired. I don’t want to fight. I also don’t trust anyone with you. Anyone can be HYDRA, even your friendly neighbor next door that has a cute dog and always bakes you pie.” Barnes made a face in confusion. “You don’t have a friendly neighbor with a dog and baked pie, do you?”

“No.”

“Darn. I’m in the mood for pie now. Apple or cherry?” Stark tapped his chin in concentration. It almost seemed like it was a life or death matter. This man was truly strange. “What do you think?”

“I… prefer Blackberry.” No one had asked for Barnes’ opinion in a long time. No one has treated him like a human. This felt odd but satisfying. Barnes wondered if working with Stark would always be like this; talking like friends and having random conversations. It was a nice idea, but Barnes wasn’t one to be hopeful.

“A good choice.” Stark hummed, he then smiled. “We’re getting a bit off track, aren’t we?” He took another sip. Barnes didn’t say anything. “Where were we? Oh! Right. The part where I try to convince you I’m not some asshole trying to take advantage of you and genuinely just want to help.” He nodded to himself, satisfied with his summary. “How’s that working, by the way? Are you convinced yet or should I bring out my hidden weapon: the puppy dog eyes?”

“That won’t work.” Barnes almost didn’t feel the lopsided smile that somehow formed with his lips. When was the last time he smiled?

“Darn.” Stark shook his head. “Well, worth a shot.” He smiled easily, looking at Barnes as though he were just another business partner. His smile then dropped, so did the lighthearted atmosphere he had created. He was serious now. “I don’t intend on doing anything to you without your consent, Mr. Barnes. I know it might be hard to ask you to trust me, especially considering your history, but I truly do just want to help.” He sighed, lacing his fingers together on the table and leaning forward. “If it makes you feel better, I’m not really doing this for you.”
Barnes raised a brow and tilted his head, waiting for the man to elaborate.

“I kind of want to test B.A.R.F. and see if it works, who better to test it on than someone who was basically mind raped for the better part of a century?” Stark gave a shark-like grin. “If it works, then not only are you free from HYDRA, but I also have a highly functional device that will sell for millions.” Barnes frowned, somehow everything Stark had just said felt like a lie. His voice hadn’t wavered, and he didn’t hesitate when he said it, but it wasn’t genuine.

“That’s a lie.” Stark’s eyes widened, he wasn’t expected to be called out on his bluff. Barnes grinned victoriously.

“Perceptive.” He mused. “Well, I guess that means any half-assed excuse I give you won’t quite work. So, the truth then.” He took a deep breath, calming his nerves. “A lot of shit is going to go down and I’m trying really hard to stop it.” This time, it was Barnes’ eyes that widened. He hadn’t expected Stark to be honest with him. “I don’t know if you remember Steve Rogers or not, but he used to be your best friend.” Barnes remembers Steve alright. He started remembering bits and pieces of his past before the Winter Soldier, and Steve was pretty prominent. He also couldn’t help but appreciate the fact that Stark had used past tense, admitting that who he was talking to wasn’t the same person who Steve had known. He felt relieved, knowing that there was no expectation for him to be who he used to be, to be who he isn’t.

“Rogers has proven that he’ll go a long way to get to you. He’ll break any law, any obstacle, any person to get to you.” Despite how neutral Stark sounded, there was a hint of anger lingering in the corners. Something happened, though Barnes wasn’t sure what. “He won’t rest until he finds you. He wants to protect you, to help you.” The anger became resignation, and his voice softened. “He cares a lot about you.” It wasn’t meant to sound comforting, and it didn’t. It sounded like fact. “At some point in time, he’ll find you. He’ll be forced to bring you in for trial, and he’ll be waiting impatiently for the first opportunity to break you out. The thing is, that’s all the time an undercover agent needs to get to you, whisper the sweet, sweet words of murder and restrictions, and trigger you back into being a weapon.” Stark spoke coldly now, giving him the harsh facts.

“So, either you let me help you and all of this can be avoided, or you don’t and at some point in time it’ll be a pain in the ass to deal with.” Stark sighed again, once more leaning back into the chair. He took another sip of the coffee and looked out to the side towards a window. “So really, it’s up to you. Maybe none of this will happen and I’m just being paranoid. Maybe no one will ever approach you in your life time.” Somehow, Stark didn’t seem convinced about that. “Either way it’ll be nice for you not to have to deal with triggers.”

“And Steve Rogers?” Barnes found himself asking.

“What about Rogers?” He noted how detached Stark sounded from the name, almost like it was a bad memory. Stark turned his head to once more look at Barnes.

“Will he be involved?”

“Fucking hell no.” Stark didn’t even bother masking his rage this time. “I don’t trust that man as far as I can throw him. He is a liability.” He explained, trying to keep the edge off his voice. “After we get those triggers out of your head, you can do whatever you want. If you want to go find Rogers and sing kumbaya then be my guest.” He snorted, sounding almost annoyed. “All I care about is repairing your mind. After that…” He shrugged.

The two now sat in silence. It was clear that Stark had said everything he wanted to, he was just waiting for an answer. Meanwhile, Barnes was thinking of what his answer would be. He didn’t know if he could trust Stark, but he also had to admit that this was a golden opportunity he would
be an idiot to decline. So far, Stark hadn’t given him any reason to doubt him, but this was their first interaction. His super soldier instincts were something he could rely on, and they seemed to be fine with Stark. If the man was being honest, then Barnes might have the chance of becoming human again. He’d be free to be himself, whoever that was. He wouldn’t have to worry about the constant threat of HYDRA finding him again. If he was lying, then Barnes might be walking into a trap. He might lose himself again and become a weapon, a monster.

He looked at Stark, the man was now lazily working on his phone. A closer inspection and it showed that he was checking his emails. From first glance, he looks like a powerful person. Someone not to be trifled with. He looks strong and dependable. Then you notice the makeup covering the bruises under his eyes from the lack of sleep. You notice how his body sometimes shakes and sags from lack of energy. You notice how he’s barely holding up. He looked like a busy man, and it made sense. He was the owner of a successful company and a member of a team of heroes, it would be surprising if he wasn’t always busy. He could easily be doing anything else, but instead he was here, sitting with a known fugitive and patiently waiting for an answer.

“Okay.” Barnes finally said, breaking the hour-long silence.

“Okay?” Stark echoed, looking up at him with a neutral expression. He was trying to avoid guilting Barnes into a decision, even though it wouldn’t have mattered either way since he wasn’t one to be easily guilting into things.

“I’m in.” It was only after these words that Stark smiled.

“Wonderful.” He sat up straighter, putting his phone away. “I was hoping you would say that.” Stark stood up and made his way towards the Iron Man suit. Barnes then stiffened, ready to run if he had to, but Stark didn’t even look at the suit, instead he picked up his suitcase and walked back over towards the table. “Okay,” he placed the suitcase on the table and opened it, “you can hitch a ride with me back good ol’ U of A, but then we’ll have to part ways for a bit.” He explained as he shuffled through his luggage.

Barnes looked into it, wondering if he had a concealed weapon or something of the sort. He was surprised to see there was just a large metal box with an intricate lock, some technological devices, clothes, a bag, and some papers.

“You might have to sneak into my jet, deal with me for another 7 or so hours, and then sneak out, or you can figure out your own way to the US. Whatever you want, but keep in mind that the less people see you, the better. We don’t want the government to come after you before the triggers are gone.” He took out the tech first. “This is a phone.” He stated the obvious, handing Barnes a phone identical to the one he had before. “It’s not on the market and, frankly, won’t ever be. It’s Stark Employees only. It’s near impossible to hack and has a program that counters any attempts, causing the offender’s tech to malfunction. It has my number in it, and coordinates to a safehouse I own. Once you leave the jet, that’s where we’ll meet up. Call me when you get there, and I’ll get ready to start.” He paused, looking at Barnes carefully. “Making sense so far?”

Barnes nodded, looking over the phone. It was light and very thin. It was easy to carry, and easy to break if needed. Barnes would probably trust a relic, burner phone more than this, but he took what he got.

“Good. So, this,” Stark handed him a tablet, “has everything on B.A.R.F. and how it works as well as general info on the safehouse including what it has and what you can do there. It has a newly paved track, if you like to jog, along with other amenities for you to look over. The tablet with only work if it’s in proximity with the phone, and the phone is the only way to unlock it. Bottom line is, don’t lose the phone.” Barnes nodded again. “Next order of business is your identity.” The man
handed Barnes some documents, they had his picture on them. It was a colorized picture of the one he took for the military, but somehow altered to make it look more modern. Somehow, it also showed his longer hair.

“Isn’t Photoshop great?” Stark commented with a cheeky grin. “You are, temporarily, Anderson “Anger” Logan, my makeshift bodyguard for when Happy is otherwise occupied.” Stark chuckled, obviously amused with his own antics. “This is in case someone tries to stop you and asks for your identification. It’ll also be a makeshift alias while you make your way to the safehouse. The bodyguard part is only if we are caught together.” He then handed Barnes an envelope. Checking inside, Barnes saw a decent amount of money. “For whatever you need.”

“Here is a fresh set of clothes, and finally a bag you can store everything in.” With that, Stark was finished. He closed the suitcase, but not before wearily eyeing the metal box. “Any questions, comments, concerns?” He lifted the luggage midair and waited. The metal suit then whirled to live, walking towards them. Barnes stiffened again, apprehensive towards it. It collected the luggage and powered down again.

“None.” He answered finally, still glaring at the suit.

“Great! Then with that, I’m off.” Stark clapped his hands together, smiling wildly. “Are you going to tag along?”

“No.” Barnes might be seeking help from the guy, but that didn’t mean he trusted him enough to spend hours in a confined space with him. The man didn’t seem to care too much about it either way.

“Okay, in that case I’ll see you when I see you.” He shrugged and extended his hand. “It’ll be a pleasure to work with you, Mr. Barnes.” He smiled genuinely, with no sense of hostility. Wearily, Barnes shook his hand.

“Likewise.” Satisfied, the man made his way towards the door, his metal suit reviving and following him at a casual pace. Barnes looked at him, watched him open the door, and sighed. Guilt would not let him take advantage of this man, not when he had committed crimes against him, and not when he didn’t even know about it. “Wait.” Stark turned around, looking carefully at Barnes. He seemed worried, wondering if he had done something wrong. “Before you go, there’s something you should know.” Barnes eyed the suit again, it looked like it was guarding the luggage with all it had.

“What is it?” Stark asked carefully.

“Your parents, I was their killer.” Barnes went straight to the point, like ripping a band-aid. He refused to sugar coat it or try to make excuses. Stark was silent, looking at Barnes with a calculating expression. He was staring at the sergeant’s eyes, looking for something. Barnes had no idea what he was thinking, nor why he was just silently watching him. After a long, silent moment, Stark finally sighed. He looked sad, compliant and even more exhausted.

“I know.” He whispered softly, a specific type of pain seeping through his voice… it sounded like betrayal. “I appreciate you telling me this upfront, and it changes nothing of our agreement.” The sad man then bit his lip, thinking for a moment. “Do you regret it?” Barnes shook his head.

“It’s hard. Being the Winter Soldier is like being in a dream; everything is hazy, it’s unreal. I remember it, every second of it, but I can’t feel anything. I hate that it happened, and that I was forced to do it. But it’s hard to say I regret it, because it felt like I didn’t do it. For what it’s worth, I’m sorry for your loss.”
The two basked in silence for a moment. It wasn’t an awkward or tense silence, but it wasn’t comforting either. It was just that. Silence.

“Okay.” Stark finally said, nodding once before turning back to the door. “I’ll see you soon Elsa.”

And with that, Stark was gone.

Chapter End Notes

More *Strange* things to come next chapter!
See you then!
Tony has been in the process of moving back into the Tower, though considering he hadn’t really even started moving in to the Compound yet, it wasn’t too much of a hassle. After his encounter with Rogers, he realized he couldn’t afford to live there anymore. He doesn’t exactly trust the star-spangled man, and he certainly doesn’t trust sleeping under the same roof as him. Even though he doesn’t really spend much time in the compound, just one meeting was more than enough to drive Tony insane. He feels moderately guilty for leaving Vision there alone, but he already has some ideas on how to make it up to him. One of them being inviting him over to cook dinner together. He was looking forward to that, actually.

For now, however, he was focusing on recreating Peter’s suit. He was debating giving the kid a basic suit with nothing more than the essentials, considering how Peter had his friend hack it the last time he gave him an incredibly over-powered suit. He decided against it. If Peter didn’t have all of those cool little knick-knacks Tony had given him, then he might not have been able to save his friends in Washington. He refused to chance that.

While he worked, he was thinking about the many, many other things he had going on in his life. For one, he was waiting on a phone call from Barnes, which could come at any time. Then there was the surgery that was set to happen in one day - he was still extraordinarily tired from the one-day roundtrip to Switzerland… at least he managed to sleep for a couple of hours. There was also the Accords and his own version that he had to deal with, thankfully Nelson and Murdock agreed to work with him. He’d have to meet them sometime this week to work through some more details. Then there were the stones, once more sitting on his workbench and guarded by two suits. He needed to find a way to contact the Guardians, but he didn’t have much to go on. He did tinker quite a bit with Nebula’s ship, and he had to mess with its frequency a lot in order to try and contact Earth. He could work with that. Maybe if-

“Boss,” FRIDAY’s voice suddenly interrupted his train of thought, “I’m detecting an unknown energetic force in the center of the room. I believe it is Doctor Stephen Strange attempting to create another portal.” Tony audibly groaned, wondering what had prompted the good doctor’s visit this time. He already had his precious green rock back, didn’t he?

“What the hell are you doing here Strange?” Tony took a deep, calming breath. He didn’t even bother looking at Strange when he entered the room. “Last I checked you already got your stone back, plus a couple of questions answered for the road.”
“You never called me.” Strange noted with a bored tone, taking no offense that Tony had barely even acknowledged him. “I figured I’d come and pay you a visit instead.” He walked over to one of Tony’s chairs, taking the liberty to sit down comfortably while Tony worked.

“Don’t you know the three-day rule?” Tony asked, keeping his focus towards the suit on his desk.

“The three-day rule?” Stephen repeated, raising a questioning brow.

“Yup. After successfully getting the person of interest’s number, you have to wait for three days before texting them so that you don’t seem too desperate for a date.” Tony explained, still focused on redesigning the suit’s operating system and AI. Her name was Karen, if he remembered the name right.

“It’s been a week, Stark.” The man sighed feeling utterly exasperated. Tony straightened his back and looked back at Strange with an incredibly fake sympathetic expression plastered on his face.

“Ouch, I guess I must’ve not been interested… well this is awkward.” He then smiled smugly before shrugging. Strange couldn’t say he was amused with his display of dramatics. “Well, better luck next time Gandalf.” With that, Tony was once more immerged in his work.

“Right, well it’s a good thing I’m not quite interested in that prospect either.” Strange rolled his eyes.

“Hey! I’ll have you know I’m quite the catch.” The mechanic gloated with a smirk, still focused on whatever tech he was working on.

“I’m sure.” Strange made sure his words dripped with sarcasm. He watched Tony work for a while, before he decided to speak again. He had to admit, watching the man work was actually rather interesting, not to mention relieving. For the first time since he’s seen him, Tony actually looked relatively calm and focused, granted he’s only seen him once before. Regardless, it was interesting to see the mechanic in his element, surrounded by what he enjoys and no longer looking like he’s seconds from suffering from a panic attack. Though he could do with a bit more sleep, but Stephen wasn’t his doctor, nor did he care to be. “Look, Stark, I don’t really know what exactly happened in your timeline, but I can’t say I’m not intrigued… and a bit concerned.” He sighed when he didn’t get an answer. So, they were playing that game, were they? “Did I wrong you somehow? Do I owe you an apology?”

Tony abruptly stopped working. His focus was now on Strange’s words. “Not really.” He answered with a shrug after a couple of confused seconds. He honestly hadn’t expected Strange to go that route in his interrogation. He was ready for Strange to keep badgering him with questions, or maybe attempt threatening him. He was ready to remain silent and ignore the other until he gave up. He was really good at being a stubborn pain in the ass like that. He definitely wasn’t expecting the sorcerer to give a shit about their association.

Tony thought for a moment before turning to face Strange with a mischievous smile tugging at his lips. “Actually, I take that back. You were obnoxiously annoying with your wizardry and fake science.”

Stephen deadpanned. “I’m not apologizing for that.” Tony let out a laugh. Stephen marveled, with slight confusion, at how the other man chose to interact with him. One second it was silence, and then the next it was good humor and teasing. If anything, that proved that there were no ill feelings directed at Stephen, but it still didn’t answer the question behind Tony’s silence.

“Fair enough. I figured it was worth a shot.” With that, Tony’s attention was back to the suit. He
needed to make sure it was perfect for the kid.

“So, if I’ve done nothing wrong, why are you refusing to talk to me?” Stephen asked casually, once more admiring the man in front of him work. He wondered if that’s what he looked like whenever he was performing surgeries, calm and absorbed but with purpose and focus. Stark was quiet again, and Strange was starting to lose his patience. Regardless, he had already decided he’d wait however long it took to get his answers from Stark. He too could also be incredibly stubborn if he wanted to be. He was about to repeat his question when Tony finally answered.

“It’s not that I’m entirely against talking to you, Strange.” Tony put down his tools, choosing to walk over to his kitchenette. He put on a kettle for tea and turned on his coffee machine. “It’s more that I’m against talking about it in general.” He started preparing a mug for Strange, remembering to add in the two cups of sugar. “Same tea as before?” He asked.

“Yes, please.”

“It was a really, exponentially shitty experience. The future in that timeline sucks. It was basically one shitshow after the next, at least that’s how it felt.” Tony heard himself chuckle. “And I’m the only one who remembers it. My only reason for being here now is to make sure none of it happens.”

“I still don’t see how this keeps you from telling me what I wish to know.” Strange said coldly.

“Okay, let me put it in simple terms for you then: I don’t trust you with this information.” Tony retorted back. “I’m almost confident that talking to you, or anyone really, about it will only increase the odds of making the future stay at least a couple of levels of fucked up.” He took the heated kettle and poured the boiling water on Strange’s mug. He then put the tea in it, handing it to Strange.

Stephen frowned, taking the mug with a quick thanks. “I suppose that makes sense.” He sighed. “But that’s quite the burden you’ve given yourself Stark. What happens if you fail?”

Tony shrugged. “Then I fail.” He took a sip from his coffee.

“You fail, and then what? Everyone else suffers for it?” Stephen challenges. It almost seemed as though Tony didn’t actually care about saving the future. How a man could be so selfish was beyond Stephen, and that was saying something considering his own egocentric mannerisms.

“No, everyone else won’t suffer. Just me.” Tony’s voice was hushed and pained, dispelling any negative judgement Strange had made towards him. It was like he was opening a fresh wound.

“How can you promise that? You may know what’s going to happen, but that doesn’t mean you’ll be able to stop it. You have only your own perspective to go off on. You might have experienced what could happen, but that doesn’t guarantee that you know what would set off the chain of events that caused it. And if you do, if you change that event, then you won’t know what happens next. There are far too many uncertainties for you to play God. Time isn’t something you can just toy with, Stark, it changes constantly. Each decision made has it’s repercussions.” Stephen would have continued his rant if not for the calculating look he saw on Tony’s face.

“The Butterfly Effect. I’m aware of it.” Tony rolled his eyes. “Though, I suppose you’re right. I only have my own perspective of what happens.” Tony muttered under his breath. He started tapping his finger against the arch reactor in his chest, a nervous gesture he wasn’t even aware he was making. “Damn.” He suddenly stood up, no longer paying Stephen any attention as he paced around the room. His mug of coffee was suddenly left forgotten. “FRIDAY, I want you to go
through the BARF files we’ve been recording. Look for anything moments that could be considered key triggers for the events of the previous timeline and compare them to what is happening currently.”

“BARF files?” Stephen frowned. He really hoped that there wasn’t actual bile included in this.

“Make an estimate on how the removal of The Winter Soldier as a factor will affect the timeline.” Tony continued before finally looking at Stephen. “I don’t intend on playing God, Strange. I intend on fixing my mistakes and preventing others from making theirs.” He said, looking absolutely exhausted.

“I’m not convinced.” Stephen responded casually. “Look, Stark, I understand where you’re coming from. You want to fix things, to make sure the bad never happens, but sometimes you can’t do that. You’ve been given a second chance to do things differently, but should you? Before I became a sorcerer, I was a successful neurosurgeon. The only reason I stand where I do today is because I was an idiot and drove my car off a cliff, crushing the bones in my hands and preventing me from ever performing a surgery again. If that hadn’t happened, if I hadn’t lost myself in depression and desperation, searching for any possibility of getting my hands back, I wouldn’t be here. I wouldn’t have saved the world as many times as I had. I wouldn’t be able to annoy you with my fake science.” Tony gave Stephen a small chuckle at that, choosing to pretend the other hadn’t just told him something personal. Stephen was grateful for that.

“I’ll keep that in mind Doc.” Tony sat again, once more paying attention to his forgotten cup of coffee. Stephen sighed, temporarily giving up on trying to convince Stark to tell him the events of the future. Stark made the future seem like it was a living hell. Stephen wasn’t sure how much of that was true, and how much of it was exaggerated drama. Regardless, he wanted to know what went down. He wanted to be prepared for any incoming threats, both to protect the stones, plural, and to defend the Earth if needed. He supposed that he’ll just have to be more aware of any outside turmoil, any potential threats… at least until Stark finally spills the beans.

“Just be careful with what you change, Stark. Sometimes, the mistakes you made give a better outcome than you think.” He paused when the other nodded, taking a moment to drink his tea. “Will you at least tell me what you plan to do with the stones? Surely you’re aware that keeping them all in one place is an incredibly stupid idea.” Tony rolled his eyes at that.

“No shit Sherlock. I’m trying to figure out a way to hide them and get them the fuck away from Earth.”

“Care to elaborate?” Tony gave him a glare. “You don’t trust me.” He stated lamely. “Okay, that’s fair, but why? Did I do something to betray your trust in your timeline? Something that would give you reason to doubt me?”

“No.” Tony answered slowly, almost as if he knew exactly where Stephen was going with this. “I suppose not.”

“Did I ever try to use any of the stones for any reason?”

“No.”

“Did I try and thwart your plans to stop Thanos?” There was a small silence after this question. Stephen tried not to be too concerned about that.

“You gave him the stone, trading it for my life.” Tony reminded him. “But, I suppose it was to get us here. So, no.” He sighed. “Okay, I think you’ve made your point. Where are you trying to go
“Let me help you.” Stephen was determined to stop a threat like Thanos, and he was determined to do it any way he could.

“I find it hard to trust other people, Doc. If you read my SHEILD assessment, you’ll find that I’m not much of a team player. I’m far too selfish for that.” Tony gave Stephen a sharp, predatory smile, teeth glistening like a shark. “I don’t think you’d want to work with that.”

“You’ll find I can be quite selfish myself, Stark, and that I don’t particularly care for whatever nonsense SHIELD spouted. Let me help.” He looked at Tony, hoping to convey as much sincerity as he could muster. Tony fell silent for a moment, hopefully to rethink his decision on the matter.

“Okay.” He said finally. Stephen let out a small breath of relief. “But we’re doing things my way, capiche?” Tony stared straight at him, promising hell if his terms weren’t met.

“Very well. I can live with that.” The sorcerer could only roll his eyes. “Have you already started thinking about how you intend to rid yourself of the stones?”

“Yes, actually.” Tony grinned and clasped his hands together while he stood up. “Hold on to your seat Doctor Wizard, I’ve got a show for you.” Stephen had to admit he was slightly impressed with this man’s newfound energy. He wondered if Stark had some sort of special coffee that had revitalizing properties.

Tony walked over to a different workbench than the one he was using before and brought Strange a metallic sphere, tossing it to him carelessly. Strange managed to catch it, though barely. “The first problem I want to solve is how to hide their energy.” Tony explained. “Thanos had to have found the stones somehow, and I doubt he happened to have an Infinity Stone compass. After a while, I came to the hypothesis that the stones were attracted to each other. If you keep them separated and distant, then the attraction is almost nulled. Think of it like gravity, each stone has an equal amount of power, or in this analogy, mass. The closer they are towards each other, the stronger their attraction, and the farther they are, the weaker. If I can somehow encase the power and make it unreadable, I could make it seem like they are lightyears apart even if in reality they are mere inches! So, I’m building a case of sorts that will do the trick.” Stark’s burst of sporadic energy suddenly deflated with a sigh. “That’s the goal, anyways. Unfortunately, I have yet to find any known material that will do the trick. I’m thinking that maybe vibranium would do it, but I don’t have any. Not to mention, it might only partially work. I’ll take what I can get, though.”

Stephen thought for a moment, contemplating if there was anything he could do. “I could look for a spell that hides traces of power. Perhaps that alongside the metal would be enough?” Tony looked at him for a moment.

“It’s worth a shot.” He murmured, not entirely enthusiastic about working with magic. “I’ll try and hack into Wakanda, see if good ‘ol king T’Challa… wait no, T’Chaka should still be alive…” Tony frowned for a moment, trying to place himself in the present again. “See if King who-ever would be willing to sell me some vibranium.”


“Surprise, it’s real.” He raised his hands and shook them, giving Strange his best showman smile accompanied by jazz hands. “And their tech is relatively interesting, I must admit… Though, not nearly as advanced as they seem to think it.”
“Right…” Stephen wasn’t entirely convinced, but he decided it best not to question Stark right now. “Moving on then. Let’s assume we’ve managed to find a suitable encasing for the Stones, what then?”

“Then it’s sayonara to the Stones and hello melting pot for the gauntlet.” Stark explained with a smile. “There’s this group of… well intentioned idiots floating around the galaxy. I figured I could try and hit them up with a stone to either guard or find a safe place for. Maybe two, if we don’t have that many options. I was considering sending a stone to Asgard, but it’s probably going to be destroyed soon, and Thor had intended on making a new Asgard but on Earth… so that’s a no-no for the stones. I was-” Tony was rudely interrupted by Stephen’s demanding question.

“Asgard is going to be destroyed? And worse yet, the Asgardians intend to make a home of Earth?” Stephen made sure to keep his tone flat, but he couldn’t help the worry that fell on him at the mention of Asgardians living on Earth. “That is likely to end horribly.” He paused for a second. “Did it?”

“No… yes? From what Bruce and Thor told me, Thanos killed all of the Asgardians before they could make it to Earth.” Tony was silent for a moment, remembering the pain in Thor’s eyes—eye? Tony wasn’t sure if a fake eye counted—when he retold what had happened on his end. “I don’t think it would be a bad idea, though. The Asgardians are a powerful, strong, worrier race of ‘gods’ that live for a ridiculously long amount of time. If anything, they might be able to help fight any alien threat.”

“You said they died to Thanos, what makes you believe them capable to stop him on Earth?”

“Separated we’re nothing but united we can be a force to be reckoned with… or some other team work spiel Fury might’ve used at some point in time to manipulate the Avengers into doing his bidding.” Tony shrugged. “It’s true though, we would be a fuck ton stronger if it was all of us together. Back on Titan, Deep Purple’s destroyed home planet, we managed to hold him back. We almost even took his golden glove from him, and it was just you, me and the Guardians of the Galaxy, and they were comprised of a total of three idiots and a cyborg… That sounds like a band name.” Tony smirked, refusing to include Spider-Man in any of this. He refused to give others any opportunities to start making expectations from the teen. Tony Stark would do right by Peter this time, he would stop endangering the poor boy and actually be there for him. “Anyways,” he continued, “imagine what we could do with all of them plus the heroes on Earth plus Asgardians. Thanos wouldn’t stand a chance. Besides, there is no Thanos. Not anymore.”

“Was that your wish? To go back in time and kill Thanos?”

“No… well… I guess that’s one interpretation of my wish. The actual wish was basically Thanos going ‘poof’ when he touches a stone and for life to go on as it would normally. The time travel back was just an unwanted bonus.” Tony explained, picking up a different metal he had already scrapped.

“Unwanted?” Stephen questioned. “I would have imagined the time travel to be a boon. Foresight is a gift many have asked for.”

“Foresight is great and all, but you forget that my future was depressing as all shit.” Tony shrugged, trying not to show how much it affected him. Whenever he thought about the future he couldn’t help but think of all of the death and depression that ensued. He couldn’t help but think of Peter crying in his arms as he was dying. He couldn’t help but see Rocket getting mauled to death by some grotesque Chitauri-like monster. To see Nebula take a hit meant for him. To see Thor lamenting his home, his friends, and his family, all while blaming himself for being unable to kill Thanos. He also thought about how he was the only one who remembered any of it. He was the
only one still mourning and suffering the loss. He was the only one who was unceremoniously
fucked up from the whole ordeal. He was alone. “I could do without the nightmares.” He joked,
forcing himself to move on from that train of thought. He had better things to do.

“I see.” Stephen didn’t laugh like Tony had expected -and hoped- he would, instead he returned to
examining the sphere Tony had given him. “I understand that feeling well.” Tony raised a brow,
motioning for him to elaborate. Stephen only offered a smirk. “Trust flows both ways, Stark. You
show me yours and I’ll show you mine.” He chuckled, wildly amused, when Tony huffed in
annoyance. “I will say this however: you’re not the only one who has meddled with the Time
stone.”

“We should make a club.” The mechanic mused. “I call being president.”

“I’d imagine that role being mind, considering I am the stone’s keeper.” Stephen shot back,
standing up and placing the sphere on one Tony’s work benches.

“I’m afraid that would make you the club’s treasurer.” Tony gave the other a shit eating grin. “A
job I truly don’t envy.” He adds snootily.

“I can’t imagine why.” Stephen rolled his eyes, smiling smugly when Tony laughed. “Admit it,
you simply want to be president so that you may boss me around.”

“I would never!” Tony gasped dramatically at the accusation. “Oh, how it wounds me that you
think so little of me!” He faked a weep.

“I’m truly sorry.” The way that he had said that made it clear Stephen wasn’t sorry at all. “Will
you find it in your shining, metal heart to forgive me?”

“Maybe if you admit it that your magic is nothing more than fake science. Only then will I
consider forgiveness.” Stephen rolled his eyes again, honestly not surprised that this was what the
other man would bargain for.

“I’m afraid that’s just not possible.” He shook his head. “I was raised not to be a liar.” Tony
chuckled at that, grinning wildly at the other.

“And yet here you are.” Tony quipped, leaning back on his workbench.

“Here I am.” The two were smiling at each other now, pleasantly surprised and heavily amused
with how the conversation ended. Tony hadn’t thought Strange would be the sort to joke back with
him.

During their brief time together in that bland donut ship, they were preparing for war. They weren’t
quite in the humorous mindset where they’d joke around and have silly banters. It was an
incredibly tense atmosphere. After their fight with Thanos, there was only dreadful silence. Tony
was focused on not bleeding to death and being mad at Strange for giving the homicidal alien what
he wanted, and Strange was also seemingly catching his breath and probably waiting for his
imminent death by disintegration.

“I suppose I should take my leave now.” Strange said suddenly, looking at the time piece wrapped
around his wrist. “I’ve been here far longer than expected.” He mutters the excuse softly, almost as
if he was talking to himself rather than Tony. “I look forward to working with you in the future,
Mr. Stark. I’ll be in-”

“Call me Tony.” The other interrupted. Strange shot him a confused stare before nodding.
“Then call me Stephen, please.” Stephen practically begged. “Doctor Wizard and Merlin are not names I wish to go by.” Tony could only laugh.

“No promises, Gandalf.” The sorcerer groaned in clear displeasure.

“Well, you have my number. Use it this time.” Stephen started making a portal back to the New York Sanctum where he was wholly expecting Wong to be waiting for him with an impatient glare and a speech on how he is a librarian and not Stephen’s stand in Sanctum guardian. “I’ll be around.”

“Don’t worry, after today I’ve decided to give you a chance.” Tony winked, fully antagonizing Stephen.

“Wonderful.” Stephen deadpanned. “Goodbye, Tony.” The man made his way back into the sanctum satisfied with how the night turned out and his inclusion in Tony’s plans for the stones. He hoped that maybe someday he’d be able to get more information on the future, and hopefully be able to make preventive measures that would guarantee nothing of the like happened. As he started closing the portal, he heard Tony shout after him.

“I’m looking forward to our next date Stephanie!” The engineer then proceeded to grin with satisfaction at Stephen’s exasperated face.

“Asshole.” Stephen muttered with a small smile a second before the portal closed.

Tony smirked at where the portal had been just a moment ago before looking back at Peter’s suit.

“Hey, Pep.” Tony said nervously on the phone. Against his better judgement, he decided to call Pepper before the procedure. He wasn’t sure whether or not she’d try to talk him out of it, considering his chances. He wasn’t heavily worried, since it worked out fine the first time. He knew that it wasn’t really a guarantee of whether or not it would work out fine this time either, but he honestly didn’t care either. He’s made several preparations for what would happen should he not make it out of the operation table.

Firstly, he managed to finish Peter’s suit and directed FRIDAY to make sure he gets it if Tony couldn’t give it to him directly. After their first and only meeting in the car, Peter had nervously texted Tony with an endearingly awkward message that had Tony smiling fondly at his phone. The two had been in contact since, texting almost constantly, and had made plans to test out Peter’s abilities sometime soon. Tony had mentioned the operation to Peter and explained that there was a chance he wouldn’t make it out, though he downplayed it enough to make it seem like it was highly unlikely. Peter was, unsurprisingly, still worried about Tony’s wellbeing and had even offered to be there during the operation for moral support. Tony almost didn’t have enough self-restraint to say no, especially since it was during the school day. Throughout their texts, Tony has to remind himself that this Peter isn’t the Peter that had died in his arms. The urge to apologize for his inability to protect him the first time is still incredibly strong, but he knew Peter wouldn’t really understand what he’s talking about anyways. He’ll just live with the guilt.

The second preparation was with Matt Murdock. Some hours ago, the two had a phone conversation where they talked a bit more about the document and Murdock’s thoughts on it. He had made some really good arguments both for and against some of the things that Tony had wanted to include in his version of the Accords, and they kept making newer, better suggestions to add or remove certain clauses. It was highly productive and, honestly, if they weren’t so determined to make this the best damn Superhero Bill of Rights possible, he’d be fine with how it
is now. Should he die on the operation table, he’s confident Murdock would see this through on his behalf and excel at it.

The third one was what would happen to Sergeant Barnes. He had instructed for FRIDAY to send a message to Barnes’ shiny new Stark phone relaying what had happened to him, and another to Doctor Cho, the only person he felt he could trust with Barnes, requesting for her to take care of Bucky and his BARF sessions when he asks for them. He felt bad that he couldn’t take care of Barnes before the surgery, but he wouldn’t get much rest until the death trap that was his ARC reactor was out of his chest alongside the shrapnel. He hates how he still has to have an ARC on his chest, but this one was shallower and wouldn’t fuck him up as badly if he was hit on the chest with something deadly, like Roger’s - no, like his father’s shield.

The last preparation was, quite possibly, the most important one: what happens with the stones. Originally, he had programmed his several Iron Man suits to self-destruct should his heart stop beating, but he decided to reprogram them into dividing into groups of armor and just blasting off into space, each group holding onto a stone locked in a nearly indestructible lock. It’s not much of a plan, but it’s better than nothing. He also requested that a message be sent to Stephen, notifying him of what was to happen to the stones should he die. That way, Stephen would have time to cast any protection spells before his suits, each with a base A.I. combined with a version of FRIDAY piloting them, took them out to space in different directions. If he tried to steal them, he was warned that he’d be shot at.

Tony was more than satisfied with his preparations, though for some reason he got the feeling that FRIDAY was not. He had started to notice how she was displaying certain levels of emotions, but he wasn’t too worried about it. In the previous timeline he didn’t allow for her to develop nearly as much as JARVIS had, he was overly terrified of another ULTRON fiasco happening and denied her the autonomy she deserved. When he was stranded out on Titan with Nebula, he had a lot of time to think while fixing the Guardian’s ship. One of the things he thought about was FRIDAY and how much he missed both her and JARVIS. He was so used to having an AI to talk to, and he couldn’t help but feel the loss deeply. When he returned to Earth, despite everything, he was at least happy with the prospect of being reunited with his AI. Without him to stop her, she had developed into such an intelligent being. He had been so proud. He had decided that either Vision or Rhodey would inherit her, maybe Harley. He thought about Peter too, but he figured the young hero already had Karen. It depended on who FRIDAY preferred, really. He had made the list of who he’d trust enough to take care of her, but he left the choice to her. It was only fair.

Now, minutes before the operation, he couldn’t stop himself of thinking about Pepper. He hadn’t really come in contact with her after his time travel shenanigans -aside from any business that he had to do for the company, of course. He was still a ‘responsible’ adult after all. In the last timeline, he was still trying to court Pep, trying to be with her and give her his all. Eventually the two started dating again, only for Tony to break both their hearts again and leave for Titan. She had greeted him with open arms when he came back, but also with a broken, closed-off heart. The moment he went inside that damned space ship he knew any romance between them was an impossible dream. He hated himself for it so long, but eventually he just accepted it with resignation. He learned to accept many things with resignation. He had to.

This didn’t mean that he didn’t want to be close to Pepper though. Not counting Rhodey, Pep was his oldest friend and one of the only people he could trust with almost anything. He had trusted her with his company, after all. After Stane, it was something he never thought he’d be capable of doing, but he did with Pepper. He knew she wouldn’t forgive him if he hadn’t at least talked to her before the operation, especially if he didn’t make it. That’s one regret he couldn’t live with, and he already had too many of those.
“Tony? Is everything okay?” Pepper sounded worried, though Tony didn’t really know why. “Rhodey called,” oh, “he said you haven’t been taking care of yourself. I’d been meaning to call, but I wasn’t... sure if I should.” She wasn’t sure if they were over their failed relationship, she meant. Tony offered a smile he knew she couldn’t see.

“I’m fine Pep. You know you can call me whenever you want. Sorry I haven’t called you sooner, I just... thought maybe you didn’t want to talk to me for a bit. The whole ‘give the other some space’ thing after a breakup. Pep, who ever made that rule is dumb. Can we just skip to the we’re friends again part?” This earned a short laugh from the Stark Industries CEO.

“We can do that.” She said, relief evident in her voice. It was something that was bothering her too. “I’ve missed you Tony.” The honesty in her voice surprised Tony, but he didn’t let it show.

“I missed you too Pep.” He hesitated for a minute. “So, hey,” he started slowly, “if you look at my itinerary, you’ll find I’m scheduled for an operation.”

“What?” Pepper shouted. He heard a fast string of click clacks as Pepper furiously typed on her keyboard. “Tony Edwin Stark, what the hell are you thinking?!” She asked exasperated. “Why on Earth are you telling me this now?”

“Better late then never?” He offered, trying not to think of the impending lecture he’s going to receive if he makes it out. “I want to get rid of the shrapnel, Pep. I can’t live with it anymore. I want it gone. And I want a shallower ARC reactor in my chest. One that isn’t an impending death trap.” Pepper was silent for a moment after this.

“Why not just take it out completely?” She finally asked. Tony knew where she was going with this, he knew what she wanted. Why don’t you just stop being Iron Man? They could be together, finally. They could be happy. If there’s something Tony has learned, though, is that he doesn’t get to be happy for long. There’s always something that he has to do, something that always ruins his chances of being happy and with someone he loved. He remembers Peter explaining to him why he couldn’t not be Spider-Man, and, even though Tony still didn’t like the idea of a teenager playing hero, he agreed with him. Tony had the ability to save the world, and, after he’s failed it so many times, he vowed that he would.

“Well, I have a hole in my chest Pep. Having the reactor imbedded in me and rearranging my sternum kind of fucked up my anatomy. If I take it out completely, I won’t have a very supportive sternum. One strong tap and I’m pretty much fucked.” He could also try and make a metal sternum or something else to support him, but Pepper didn’t need to know that. Besides, it wasn’t guaranteed that it would work in the first place.

“I see.” She sighed, hope fully and freshly squandered. Tony tried not to feel too guilty about that. “Still, I wish you would have told me about this sooner. I would’ve gone with you if I had known.”

“I was a bit of a spur of the moment decision.” That wasn’t exactly a lie. Though he did have a week to tell Pepper about it, he just didn’t. It was like the palladium poisoning all over again. No wonder he wasn’t good at relationships.

“Oh Tony, what am I going to do with you?” She sighed, once more sounding exasperated. “I’ll be there after you’re done with your surgery.”

“Pep, you don’t have to! This isn’t a big deal or anything. It’s just me getting rid of some shrapnel. No sweat.” Tony grinned, almost forgetting that Pepper couldn’t see him.

“I’m going to be there. Does Rhodey know?” Tony was silent for a moment, debating on what
excuse would be less likely to earn him death by Pepper. He apparently took too long to think, because Pepper already started yelling at him. “Tony!” He winced. “I can understand why you waited until last minute to tell me, but I’d have expected you to at least talk to Rhodey about this!”

“Pep, you two are busy. You have your own lives to live. You’re running my company and Rhodey has a government to appease.” He argued.

“Tony, you’re about to go into an open-heart operation to remove not only the shrapnel that’s threatening to kill you, but also the device that’s keeping you alive. Not to mention you’re, once again, reshaping your rib cage to fit yet another, albeit smaller, ARC reactor. The least you could do is tell us about it a bit earlier than thirty minutes before it could happen. What if you don’t make it?” Pepper was nearly yelling at him now, just barely keeping her voice at a normal volume. “What if the last time I saw you was in that board meeting where you were being insufferable, and I ended up glaring at you the entire time?” Her voice was quieter now, scared. “We are your friends Tony. We care about you. I understand that you want to be free from the shrapnel, but you have to understand that we need to know about any life-threatening life choices you make or any situations you’re in. We want to be there for you.” She was talking about the time he nearly died. Tony felt his guilt renew tenfold.

“I’m sorry.” He says with a smaller voice. He always hated fighting with Pepper, especially if she had such a good point. Back in the previous timeline, he didn’t have the luxury of talking to people about what he was up to. He didn’t have the luxury of having friends worry about him. Pepper still did, despite everything, but she was far too busy dealing with damage control and grief to really pay attention to him. Rhodey was fighting beside him, so there was no point in telling him about the stupid suicide mission he was going on this time. And, honestly, he didn’t have anyone else. Happy was gone, Peter was gone, May was incredibly mad at him. The Rogues didn’t care much about him either.

“Good. You better be.” She sighed, seemingly accepting his apology for now. Tony was eternally thankful for it. “Will you promise me that you’ll at least tell Rhodey next time?” She demanded more than asked.

“Yes, I will.” Tony found himself smiling softly. He missed Pepper, so much. “When this is over, do you want to go grab lunch?”

“When this is over I expect you to stay in the hospital bed for however long Dr. Cho tells you to,” Pepper barked back. “After that though, I do.” Tony couldn’t help but smile. The two kept talking for a little bit, Pepper telling him about what she’s been up to along with some business things they’ll need to go over, and Tony just listening to her and occasionally answering her questions or encouraging her to keep talking. He missed her voice, he missed her friendship.

Soon a nurse tapped on his shoulder, signaling him that he needed to end his call and that the operation would begin shortly. Surprisingly, for the first time, he actually felt a bit nervous for it. Too late now, though. This was something he needed to do for his own sanity. He didn’t think he’d be able to stand himself if he let Siberia happen again. He felt safer with the idea of a better, stronger suit and a more durable, less damaging arc reactor housing unit on his chest. It probably wouldn’t fair much better than the reactor he has now, but at least he won’t be in danger of the shrapnel killing him if it fails.

“Will that be all, Mr. Stark?” Pepper asks, sensing the end of their conversation.

“That will be all, Ms. Potts.” Tony smiled, answering easily. “I’ll see you later Pep.” He hung up, and swiftly made his way towards the operating room. Before he entered though, he decided to send a quick text to Rhodey, mostly apologizing for not telling him about the operation.
With a deep, shaky breath, he entered the operation room and hoped for the best.
The surgery was an overall success, at least from the preliminary scans. Tony would have to do another set of scans in a month, to see if there were any problems they weren’t aware of. Dr. Cho casually informed Tony that he needed to give his body time to recuperate and heal before he could do anything taxing, like being an Avenger or working hours on end in his lab—he’ll admit he took it as a golden opportunity to avoid dealing with Rogers & Co. He needed to rest and sleep like a normal adult. Ever the perceptive doctor, Helen shoved a prescription of melatonin so that Tony would actually sleep despite his nightmares. That didn’t mean they stopped, though.

He lasted a week before he gave up on the notion of sleeping normally, even with the medication.

Just like she promised, Pepper was waiting outside the operation room by the time it was over. When she was allowed to enter, she all but ran to his side. An incredibly relieved and simultaneously angry Rhodey followed closely behind her.

“You don’t do this ever again, do you understand?” He growled pointing an accusatory finger at Tony. The engineer was tempted to make a joke and lighten up the atmosphere, but he thought better of it. Rhodey was serious, actually, genuinely serious.

“Yes.” He said earnestly, nodding his head in an attempt to prove his sincerity. Rhodey huffed, satisfied. Still angry, but satisfied nonetheless. Tony offered an apology, and his two friends readily accepted. It didn’t take long before the three of them were talking carefree, laughing and smiling with each other and cracking jokes. Tony didn’t realize how much he missed this. Eventually, though, they had to go. They were still busy people, after all.

Tony had always wanted to avoid bothering them, knowing that they had better things to do. Now, though, he wondered if it would be okay to be a bit more selfish and try to bother them more often. He was already starting to make plans before he heard a knock on the door.

“Come in.” He answered, wondering if Pepper forgot something.

“Excuse me, Mr. Stark,” a nurse hesitantly said as he nervously hid behind the doorway to Tony’s room, “there is a Peter Parker demanding to see you. We tried telling him that friends and family are the only ones allowed in here, but he’s rather adamant about seeing you. How should we proceed?” Tony blinked, actually surprised. The nurse also seemed scared out of his wits, probably worried that Tony would find some way to fire him for the disturbance.

“He’s basically family, honestly.” Tony said without thinking. The nurse blinked and nodded. He was about to turn around and leave before Tony quickly added. “Don’t tell him I said that.” It earned him a chuckle.

“Will do, Mr. Stark.” He responded with a smile, gently closing the door behind him.

It wasn’t long before that same door was slammed open with a nervous teen running through it. Peter all but ran into Tony’s bed in his haste. “Mr. Stark!” The kid nearly yelled, relief clear on his face. “I was so worried!” Tony raised his brows in surprise, blinking slowly. He noticed the kid was breathing heavily, sweat dripping down his forehead. He was also still wearing his school backpack.
“Don’t tell me you ran all the way here?” Tony asked incredulously. In the previous timeline, when Tony got near fatally injured from his fight with the super soldiers, Peter hadn’t come after him like this. Granted, Peter also didn’t know. Aside from the doctors who operated on him, nobody knew. He almost didn’t tell Peter about the operation this time either, but he had the same guilty feeling that he had with Pepper when he thought about Peter.

“Uh…” Peter backtracked, straightening up. “I didn’t?” It was an obvious lie. Tony blinked again, before smiling wildly, fondly at the boy in front of him.

“You totally did!” He accused. “Underoos, you’re now my favorite teen superhero.”

“I’m your only teen superhero.” Tony tries not to think too hard that Peter basically called himself one of Tony’s… something. Tony wasn’t quite sure what, but he knew it was his. He instead chose to wave off Peter’s deadpan observation.

“Still my favorite.” Tony announced, Peter smiled giddily. This is the first time the two had interacted face-to-face after their official ‘first’ meeting inside Tony’s car. Sure, they had texted each other constantly, but meeting physically was a whole other thing. Tony could tell Peter was a bit nervous once the adrenalin wore down. “Talk to me Pete, how’s your hot aunt.” This earned a shocked expression complete with gaping wide mouth from Peter, who’s face was growing redder by the second. Tony couldn’t help but smirk.

“What? No! You do NOT call her that!” Peter said immediately, flustered. “No, no- just no!” He shivered, probably thinking of May and Tony flirting with each other. It was so incredibly easy to tease the kid. “She’s fine though.” He finally answered the question. “She’s making pot-roast tonight. It’s one of those moments where I’m thankful I have a fast metabolism that comes with slightly faster healing. I don’t think I’d survive otherwise.” Peter murmured. Tony remembers his aunts cooking, having eaten there a couple of times. He’ll be the first to admit it’s nowhere near the five-star quality food he usually eats, but he’d readily admit it’s his favorite cooking, if only for the context behind the meal. It felt very similar to eating at Rhodey’s whenever he visited his family. Though, Momma Rhodes actually knew how to cook.

“Super healing, huh?” Tony smirked, already knowing about his powers but still excited about them. He loved seeing the kid beam with pride for what he could do. “That’s a nifty trick. What else do you have?”

“A lot!” Peter was jumping excitedly now. “I’m a lot stronger now! Like, a lot a lot! My senses are also really great now too, which kind of sucks sometimes but I can live with it.” Tony remembers the goggles the kid wore with his homemade outfit; how horribly fuzzy they were because the kid had to deal with sensory overload. He made a note to make some glasses that could help him out with that during day-time hours. “And I can shoot webs! Well, actually I made a web shooter that shoots webs.” He admits sheepishly, almost bashful. Too modest for Tony’s taste.

“Woah hold up kid. You’re telling me you made a web shooter?” Tony wasn’t really surprised by the revelation, having already known about it, but refusing to let the kid downplay something he made. He was completely satisfied with the proud expression Peter was wearing now. “You’re going to let me play with it, right?” Peter blinked.

“You mean, you want to see it!?” He nearly shouted in excitement.

“Yes, and you’re going to have to explain to me how you built it. Maybe we could build a second set together.” Tony already had all the materials to do this. In the previous timeline, he had taken the shooters and remade them to be smaller and lighter, but he left the webbing fluid to Peter’s capable hands. He decided that in this timeline, he’d let Peter have more of a say on how his suit is
built. Granted, his suit is already built and programmed with everything his previous suit had and more, but maybe the kid wanted something else that Tony hadn’t thought about. Maybe he could give the kid more control over his suit, unlike the last time.

He would be more responsible with Peter, and also more invested in him.

“Build a second set together.” Peter repeated in a whisper, star-struck. Tony wondered if maybe his offer was a bit much, he knew he had a tendency of going overboard and giving too much too quick. “Oh my God! YES! Yes please!! I promise I won’t disappoint you Mr. Stark!” He said eagerly. Tony nearly sighed in relief, but he didn’t want the kid to be worried.

“Great! Then it’s settled, you’re coming to the Tower, we’ll build web shooters, maybe mess around for a bit, and then have pizza.” Tony stopped, thinking for a moment. “You do like pizza, right?” He already knew the answer, but he figured he might as well ask if only for the dumbfounded expression on Peter’s face.

“Pizza is fantastic! I love pizza!” He said loudly, quickly. “Oh my God I’m going to eat pizza with Tony Stark.” This time it was a whisper that Tony barely heard.

“Yes, you’re going to eat pizza with little old me.” Peter then turned red after realizing he said that loud enough for Tony to hear. “How many boxes are we talking here, by the way?”

“At least four.” Peter answered truthfully. “Preferably six.” Tony blinked, actually surprised by this answer. He hadn’t actually invited Peter over to the Tower much, since he was planning on moving anyways. He figured that’s something he should change. The boy deserved more.


“Pineapple? Ew. Everyone knows that’s a crime.” Tony nodded in acceptance. “How about two cheese, two pepperoni and two ham?”

“Good choices.” He smirked, and Peter beamed.

The two continued talking for a while longer, mostly about Peter’s school life, his interests and his friends. Tony had always listened to whatever it was Peter had to tell him with an attentive ear, but aside from Peter’s phone calls, he didn’t always have the chance to listen to the teen talk about his life. There was so much more for Tony to learn about the boy, and he was thankful to get a second chance to do so. He really missed the kid.

Eventually, Peter had to go home to May, though he promised to bring Tony some of May’s pot-roast. He admitted he was afraid it would only prolong Tony’s time in the hospital and offered to bring him something else instead. The older simply laughed and thanked him.

Tony was told he had to spend at least a week resting in the hospital before Dr. Cho would even think about releasing him. He groaned at the prospect, already becoming bored with the stagnancy. He was thankful he was allowed a tablet to work on and his phone, where FRIDAY could communicate with him throughout the day. He was, however, visited by different people throughout that week.

Peter had taken to visiting him every day, Tony found himself looking forward to his visits. He usually stayed for at least two hours, sometimes more. It really depended on the day, what he had to do, and how bad crime was. He would constantly sneak in snacks for Tony to munch on, mostly nuts and dried fruit (Tony’s favorite). Sometimes Tony would help him out with his homework,
though Peter didn’t need too much help. If anything, Tony was teaching things Peter would only learn in college.

Pepper visited him twice more, both times short and friendly. She couldn’t stay long, nor did Tony want her to if he was honest. He loved Pepper, she was a dear friend to him, but her constant worried nagging wasn’t something he enjoyed. Rhodey came to visit him once too, but, just like Pepper, it was a short visit.

One visit that did surprise him was Murdock’s, a visit Tony really wasn’t expecting. The blind man had knocked on Tony’s open door with a smirk, standing straight and confident, but casual nonetheless. “I heard you’re shrapnel free these days.” He said casually.

“You heard right. Apparently it’s a healthier life-style.” Tony quipped back. “Decided to try it out. I hope it wasn’t just another fad.”

“Certainly not.” Murdock shook his head. “May I come in?” He asked politely, still smirking though. Tony smiled back, though he knew the other couldn’t see it.

“Sure, make yourself at home. Mi hospital room, su hospital room.” Tony nearly gestured to the chair beside him, but he caught himself. Even if Murdock was able to hear his movements and figure out where the chair was, he doubted the lawyer would appreciate him alluding to that. If he was being honest, he wasn’t really sure if Murdock knew Tony knew his secret or not. He wasn’t eager to find out though. “There’s a chair about five medium steps in front of you and two to your right. I’d offer to guide you, but I’m apparently bed-bound. Can you believe it? Dr. Cho threatened to tie me to the bed if I even so much as tried to leave it, and not in the fun way.” Tony huffed, earning a chuckle from Murdock.

“Truly unfortunate.” Murdock hummed, making his way to the seat Tony told him about. He was pleasantly surprised to find that Tony’s counted steps were right, though he didn’t really need them. “So, the surgery was a success I take it?”

“Well, I’m still breathing aren’t I?” Tony’s darker sense of humor was not lost on Murdock.

“That you are.” He laughed. There was a bit of silence, where Murdock was clearly thinking about something, slightly furrowing his brows with worry. “They say anything about your heart being weird?” Tony frowned at that, not quite certain what he meant. “Foggy told me about chest surgeries making hearts beat weird, or something.” He quickly added. Tony then remembered the rumor of Daredevil’s impeccable hearing. The man could hear his heart? That was impressive. He briefly wondered if Peter could do that too.

“I wouldn’t know, but to be fair my heart is pretty fucked by this point. I mean, it’s housed shrapnel and a reactor for literal years, I wouldn’t be surprised if there was something wrong with it. In fact, I kind of expect it.” Murdock hummed, accepting his answer.

“The damage isn’t too serious, I hope.”

“Nothing I can’t live with.” Tony was honestly astounded he had lived as long as he had in the previous timeline, considering he was constantly under stress and taxing his heart. Though, he hoped he wouldn’t have too much trouble in this timeline.

“That’s good to hear.” Murdock offered a smile. “Listen, if there’s anything that we, Foggy, Karen and I, can do for you, just let us know.” He said seriously. “And the next time you decide to undergo surgery, please tell me about it. It would be rather unpleasant if I found out my contractor randomly died on me.” Tony laughed at that.
“Don’t worry, I’ve already gotten that lecture. Apparently people like to know when I do dangerous things that aren’t superhero related. Sort of.” He remembered the phone call with Pepper, and the stern glare Rhodey had given him. A lesson taught well.

“Sort of?” Murdock raised a brow.

“Well, don’t tell anyone, but I kept the ARC on my chest for a reason and it wasn’t so that I could keep being Iron Man.” Tony smirked. Normally, he wouldn’t really even think about telling anyone of his new secret tech, but he figured he could trust Murdock with this. Firstly, Murdock had a secret of his own, meaning he knew how to appreciate secrecy. Secondly, he was a lawyer who thoroughly believed in doing what’s right, so Tony could count on him not snitching another person’s secret.

He also really wanted to show off a little.

“Go on.”

“Well, I’m not sure how much you know about nanotech, but this ARC plays as a housing unit for it. It both generates power for the tech and also keeps it hidden, for emergency cases. It deploys a pre-programmed suit that, is both resilient and flexible. I’ll probably stick with my pre-built suits, but this is a very good backup.” He was relatively proud of his work, even though he had done it in the previous timeline as well. He’s advanced it in this timeline, though; making it react quicker to his brainwaves. It’s not nearly as quick as he’d like, but it’s definitely better.

“So, you’re saying you get to wear two suits instead of one?” Murdock asked slowly.

“Basically. It never hurts to have a backup.” Tony thought back to Siberia. What he wouldn’t give to have that suit with him there. This backup suit was a lot better for close ranged combat, so he’d have more of a chance of not nearly dying to Rogers. Then again, it might’ve not made a difference at all, considering he was never really aiming to kill. He was just an emotional wreck after watching his parents die in front of him, lashing out in blind rage after realizing that his opinions of his father were wrong, that he wasn’t a drunk idiot who got his wife killed. After realizing he was lied to and used.

“Speaking from experience?” Murdock said with a gentle lull to his voice, bringing Tony back to the present. Tony mentally cursed himself, realizing his heart rate had elevated. He was thankful he convinced Dr. Cho that he didn’t need the cursed heart monitor, otherwise he wouldn’t be able to pretend he was fine.

“Something like that, yeah.” He forced a chuckle, though he knew he wasn’t really fooling either of them. To be fair though, he would’ve fooled anyone who didn’t have superb hearing. “In my line of side work, it never hurts to be cautious.”

“I think I can understand that.” Tony knew he could understand that. He also knew Murdock probably couldn’t monetarily afford to be his level of cautious. He figured that Murdock wasn’t the only one.

“Yeah. I’m lucky enough to have the funds to be this level of cautious, or paranoid. Call it what you will.” Ever one for dramatics, he sighed softly before continuing. “I’m thinking of extending that to others, what do you think? I already managed to get ahold of Spider-Man and am going to build him a suit that doesn’t look like he goes to bed with it. I’m adding some really cool gadgets to it too, and also an A.I. to help him out. I’m thinking I’ll try to approach Jessica Jones next, though, from what I’ve heard, I don’t think she’d like me very much.” He hummed. “She would make one hell of a drinking partner though.”
“That she would.” Murdock grinned, knowingly. “What about lesser liked vigilantes, like Daredevil?” What about people like me? Tony smiled, once more wondering if Murdock knows that he knows. He wonders if he knows that Tony knows that he knows he knows. English is a fun language.

“I don’t see why not. I’d probably offer both Jones and Devil some stronger armor, considering their fighting patterns. Maybe something lighter for the Devil, something easier to fight in. I might include a scotch holder for Jones’ armor, then again drinking while on duty isn’t something I should condone.” He joked. “Although, if any of them abuse their new toys, I’ll have to take them back.”

“That seems fair enough.” Murdock nodded in agreement. “This would be after they joined whatever secondary Avengers team you cook up, wouldn’t it?”

“Ideally, but if they really don’t want to join then I’d give it to them anyways.” Tony says honestly. “I mean, the way I see it they are fighting for the good of the people. I’ll have to be subtle about it, but the least I could do is make sure they have a higher chance of staying alive.”

“You’d risk jailtime to help out a lowly vigilante?”

“I’d risk being annoyed to help out a decent human being dangerously trying to do some good.” Tony fired back. “I’d have Pepper bail me out if it comes to that. Besides, I also have a damn good set of lawyers to stand up for me, right Mr. Murdock?” He beamed.

“Right, Mr. Stark.” Murdock smiled back, happily accepting the praise. “Though, I wouldn’t mind it if you called me Matt.” Tony blinked, surprised by that.

“Then you’re going to need to call me Tony, pal.” He felt himself grin. Honestly, he was expecting Matt to want to keep their relationship as professional as possible, but he wasn’t against first name basis.

“Deal.”

“Speaking of damn good sets of lawyers though, how are Mr. Nelson and Ms. Page doing?” Tony asks, mildly uncertain if he should refer to them by their last names or first names now too. He sometimes really hated social interactions, preferring to deal with machines instead.

“They’re fine. Foggy is looking over some of the clauses you had thought up, and Karen’s brainstorming some more. They are both eager to work on this, and I am too. It’s something much different than what we usually work with, but still important.” Tony wished he could take all the credit for that, but he did base the document off of the Accords. He didn’t really do anything groundbreakingly amazing. “Starting this blindly would have been tedious, to say the least.”

He was about to open his mouth to say something, probably sarcastic or maybe stupid, before he was interrupted with a knock on the door. “Tony?” The voice made Tony freeze.

Another visit that surprised Tony, to a less enjoyable degree than Matt’s, was that of Rogers. He was currently standing in the doorway, looking like a lost puppy. He seemed like he was worried for Tony, but there was no way to be certain. “Who’s your friend?” He asked warmly.
“Steve Rogers,” Tony was proud at how steady his voice was considering how sporadic his heart was beating, “this is Matt Murdock.” He risked a glance at Matt, grimacing at the deep frown the man wore. He was looking at Tony with concern on his face, clearly knowing something was wrong. “Matt, this is Steve.” He looked back at Rogers, planting a smile on his face.

“It’s nice to meet you.” Rogers held out a hand in front of Matt, a bit surprised, and completely offended, when the other didn’t take it.

“It’s nice to meet you too, Mr. Rogers.” Matt smiled politely, still refusing to shake Roger’s hand. Tony bit back a chuckle at Rogers’ wounded expression.

“Um, Matt is kind of blind.” If Tony was having trouble holding back a chuckle before, now he was performing a miracle by not laughing at Roger’s wide-eyed, in pure shock face.

“I am so sorry!” He quickly retracted his hand. “I didn’t realize that you were… I’m so sorry!” He apologized again.

“You do understand that I didn’t see anything that might’ve happened?” Matt kept his polite smile, but Tony knew he was antagonizing Rogers at this point. “I really don’t know what you’re apologizing for.” He had to admit, it did calm him down a bit to see Rogers act that uncomfortable towards a supposedly ‘weak’ blind man. It also made him feel bitter with himself for being afraid of Rogers. He really needed to get over himself.

“Right, um. Sorry.” Rogers said awkwardly, looking at Tony with pleading eyes. Lying, pleading eyes. Tony didn’t really want to take pity on him, but he had to. He couldn’t afford to let Rogers know of his animosity towards him, otherwise he’d only feel more inclined to pester Tony into telling him what’s wrong. Something he would absolutely refuse to do, lest he out himself as a time traveler.

“What brings you here Captain Oh Captain?” Tony tried using a nickname he would’ve used before, but his throat felt dry from the effort. Judging by Matt’s worried glance, he wasn’t too convincing. Rogers was, thankfully, none the wiser.

“I heard from Nat that you underwent surgery. Did you really remove the ARC reactor?” Ah, there it was. There was no concern, not really. Did you give up being Iron Man? Are you no longer useful? For as long as he could remember it’s been Iron Man yes, Tony Stark no. If there is no Iron Man to say yes to, then there’s only the no to say to Tony Stark. They couldn’t have that, now could they?

“Don’t worry your pretty blond head Steve.” He tried not to sound as bitter as he felt. “I’m still carrying a hunk of dangerously powered metal in my frailly reconstructed chest, ready to take on whatever hazardous problems the world has to offer. Hopefully my heart won’t give out on the next fight, eh?” He sounded too chipper, even for himself. Rogers didn’t seem to notice, or maybe he didn’t care.

“That’s a relief! We’d really miss you on the team, Tony.” The super soldier offered a warm smile, but Matt’s polite little smile dropped straight into a frown. “Though, your heart will be fine, right? I never really know when you’re joking or not.” You’re not a liability, right?

“I was joking.” Tony forced out with a sickly-sweet voice. “Don’t worry, Stark men are made of Iron. Isn’t that what dear ol’ Pop always said?”

“Yeah.” Rogers had the audacity to laugh. “Howard did say that a lot.” He looked like he was reminiscing.
“A shame he died the way he did huh? Drunk and reckless, and taking those around him down with him.” Rogers froze for a second, whether if it was out of guilt or out of worry Tony wasn’t sure.

“Yeah.” He said nervously, probably thinking of a way to change the subject. “He was a good man, it was a shame that he died that way.”

“Not nearly as good of a man as you’d think.” Tony muttered darkly under his breath. He knew both of the men in front of him could hear him, super hearing little shits.

“He was a good man.” Rogers said more sternly this time, as if daring Tony to oppose him.

“Right.” Tony didn’t even have the energy to fight back, honestly. He knew it was like trying to talk to a wall. Still, he couldn’t help but sass. It was just in his nature. “I’m sure you, who only knew him for- what? Six months? Knew my dad better than I did, after living with him for 17 ‘wonderful’ years.” He rolled his eyes.

“Tony why are you disrespecting Howard like this?” By this point, Tony felt bad for Matt who had to sit through this little hiss fight. He was thankful to be having this conversation though, because instead of fearing Rogers, right now he was loathing him. Better to hate then to fear, he thinks.

“You know what, you’re right. My bad. I’m so sorry for being so rude towards the man who got himself and his wife killed because he was an irresponsible drunk.” Tony threw in the bait, wondering if he could coerce Rogers into telling the truth. He didn’t know why, maybe it was for some sick satisfaction.

“Tony…” Rogers just threatened slightly.

“You’re saying I’m wrong?” Tony raised a brow, hating how just Roger’s tone of voice alone managed to make him feel fear again. The other man could only grit his teeth.

“I’m afraid Tony has more of a say on whether or not his father was a good man, Mr. Rogers.” Matt finally said, probably growing sick of Tony’s antics. Tony was thankful he at least took his side.

“He was a good man and a great friend.” Rogers repeated yet again, but more tenderly this time. It was almost like it was a mantra to him now. A thought he just couldn’t bear to let go.

“Whatever you say Capsicle.” Tony rolled his eyes again but took a more joking tone. “Anyways, thanks for coming over and visiting me. Sorry if I worried you and Nat, though I’m surprised she knew I was getting surgery considering I didn’t really tell anyone.” He forced out his friendly words, knowing Rogers would easily believe them. Once a gullible asshole, always a gullible asshole. Tony didn’t feel too bad about lying to him, not anymore. He then frowned, realizing he literally didn’t tell anyone about his surgery aside from Pep, Pete and Rhodes. “Matt, how the hell did you know about my surgery?”

“FRIDAY had told me about it when I couldn’t reach you on your phone.” He grinned smugly, clearly happy with Tony’s bewildered expression. “She’s a lovely A.I., by the way.”

“Thank you, Mr. Murdock.” FRIDAY said from the Stark tablet lying down somewhere on the flimsy nightstand beside Tony’s bed. Matt’s smirk dropped, and he jumped slightly in his seat. Now it was Tony who was grinning smugly.

“You’re welcome.” The lawyer said once he recomposed himself. Tony bit back a laugh, but, despite his best efforts, still earned a glare from the other man.
“Yeah, FRIDAY is a great A.I. It’s no JARVIS, but it’s still pretty good.” Rogers nodded, choosing to use this as an opportunity to avoid admitting Nat was spying on Tony. The mechanic gritted his teeth.

“You’re right, FRIDAY isn’t JARVIS. She’s more like his little sister, who is equally as capable as him in every way.” He said harshly, daring Rogers to even try to contradict him.

“Right.” Rogers nodded awkwardly, realizing he probably struck a nerve but probably not knowing where. “Anyways, I’m afraid I have to go. Nat and I are leaving to check out some more… uh…” He looked at Matt for a moment, wondering if it was safe to talk about this in front of a civilian. He shrugged and decided it probably didn’t matter. “Hydra bases.”

“Yippee, sounds like fun. Maybe I could join you next time?” Tony had no intent on actually joining them, but he was curious as to how Rogers would react.

“Yeah, maybe next time.” Dismissive, classic. He should’ve expected it. “Well, I just wanted to check up on you and make sure you’re okay. Get better soon Tony, I’ll see you around.” Tony gave him a sharp, friendly smile, that easily dropped once he left.

“So… that happened.” Matt raised a brow, fully focusing on Tony now.

“It did.” Tony sounded tired even to his own ears. “Sorry you had to get caught up in it.”

“No, if anything it made me realize how badly we need the document we’re working on.” Matt shrugged. “I don’t think I would trust someone like him to protect our world, not really.” Tony will admit to being surprised at that statement. He didn’t think it was possible for anyone to hate on good ol’ Captain America.

“Did he rub you off the wrong way or something?” Tony chuckled nervously, probably waiting for Matt to laugh and say he was joking. To say he actually really liked Cap.

“You could say that.” Matt nodded. He stayed silent for a while before he decided to elaborate, but Tony waited patiently. “He was lying.” He stated lamely.

“Oh? When was he lying?” Tony had to admit he was curious on this one.

“Oh please, you know exactly when he was lying.” Matt shook his head with a frown. He shifted a bit on his seat, making him better face Tony. “I’m sorry about your parents, by the way. It… it wasn’t a car accident, was it?” Tony considered denying it, pretending he didn’t know, but he didn’t want to lie to Matt. The guy was growing on him.

“No, they were murdered.” He answered swiftly. “It was covered up as a car accident though.”

“Why don’t you tell the authorities? Get justice for what was done?” Matt frowned.

“Well, I currently don’t have the evidence. I could probably get it if I hacked the right people, but I don’t want it. I also kind of need Rogers to think I don’t know.” He felt a bit shitty for the manipulation, but he had no other choice. Besides, it isn’t like Rogers did him any favors.

“Why?” Matt looked at him seriously, expectantly. Tony bit his lip, thinking about the pros and cons of telling Matt about his other pet project. On one end, he had already revealed a secret to Matt, so what’s one more? But on another, what if Matt didn’t agree with him? What would happen then?

“Well,” Tony started slowly, hesitantly, “the person who killed my parents is another super
soldier.” He explained, still unsure whether he should be telling any of this. “FRIDAY, no ears, right?”

“None boss, no one can hear this conversation.” Matt then understood how important and secretive this topic was. He silently got up and went to close the door. Tony really appreciated that.

“Thank you.” He said, both to his A.I. and to Matt. “This super soldier was Rogers’ BFF forever, served in the war with him. He was thought to have died falling off a train, into a ravine. Surprise, surprise, though. He lives.” Matt, at this point, was sitting down again. He was focused on every word Tony said. “Unfortunately, he was found by the enemy and brainwashed into becoming a lethal weapon that stealthily assassinated anyone he was ordered to.” Tony felt himself fill with dread.

“Anyways, Rogers’ life goal right now is to find him. He goes from Hydra base to Hydra base looking for his lost friend, hoping to bring him back and... actually I don’t know what he’s planning to do once he finds Barnes.” Tony hums thoughtfully, feeling a bit curious over it. He never bothered to ask what happened when they went to Wakanda, and Barnes was one of the casualties of the snap. This was one thing he really didn’t know. “Oh! His name is James Barnes, by the way. He was a U.S. Sergeant.” Matt snickered softly at that sudden outburst, but quickly regained his composure and continued to listen attentively. “Well... I, uh, might’ve found him first.” Tony will admit he was a bit confused that Matt wasn’t surprised by this. There was no way Matt already knew about this, did he?

“And what did you do?” Matt prompted, clearly wanting more information.

“I kind of broke into his house and used his coffee maker to make myself the gloriously bitter elixir of life.” Tony shrugged, earning an unamused glare accompanied with a highly amused smirk. It was especially funny because they both knew he was telling the truth. “I offered him a chance to break free from the mind control. It’s up to him if he takes it.”

“Well, that’s awfully nice of you.” Tony shrugs.

“Not really.” He admits. “The guy had a pretty fucked up life. It’s the least I can do. I mean, I have the resources to help him, so I might as well.”

“Learn to take a compliment, Tony.” Matt advised. “It is nice of you. You don’t owe that man anything, in fact I’m more surprised you didn’t charge at him and try to kill him.” Tony looked down, feeling renowned disappointment in himself. “Did you?” Matt didn’t seem too sure anymore.

“Yes. No. It’s... complicated.” Tony sighed, wondering how the hell he was going to get out of this one. “When I first found out, I wanted to hurt. I really, really badly wanted to hurt. I lashed out, it was... painful, though mostly on my end. It’s one of the reasons why I decided to do this surgery, actually.” He took a shaky breath, trying really hard not to get lost thinking about Siberia again.

“When I broke into his house though, I had already accepted that it wasn’t his fault, not really.” He was still looking down, trying to keep the darker parts of his mind at bay. He wondered why he was even telling Matt any of this, he didn’t owe the man any explanation. Sure, he was the Devil, but that wasn’t reason enough to trust him. Hell, Matt didn’t even trust Tony enough to tell him he was Daredevil. Why was he being so loose lipped about something as important as this?

“Please, don’t tell anyone.” He pleaded.

“I won’t.” Matt promised. Tony wanted to believe him, he really did. His paranoia wouldn’t let him. “I swear to you, I won’t. You’re giving this man a chance to live freely again, that’s not
something I would dare disrupt.”

“Alright.” Tony finally nodded, deciding to believe in Matt’s good nature.

“Why don’t you want to tell Steve, though?” Matt asked, genuinely curious. Tony raised an incredulous brow.

“Well, first he’ll accuse me of trying to brainwash his dear friend Bucky. Then he’ll demand that I take care of Barnes, even though that’s what I would be trying to do from the start. Then he’ll whine about it until it’s done, and it will be a long process. Not to mention that he’ll probably be overwhelming Barnes the entire time.” Tony explained. “I mean, you just met the guy, but surely you realize that he has no tact.” Matt chuckled.

“I suppose you’re right.” He hummed, thoughtfully. “And what are you thinking of doing once Sergeant Barnes is free from his ‘brainwash’?” He asks.

“Don’t know. It’s up to Barnes at that point. If it were up to me, I think I’d try and clear his name, so that he could truly go wherever he wants and actually be a free man. Ultimately though, he’s the one who decides what happens to him.”

Matt nods solemnly. “Well, if you’re ever in need of a damn good lawyer…” He offers a sheepish smile, one that Tony easily returns.

“I know who to call.”

The two men continue talking, but eventually Matt has to go back to his firm. Tony had to admit he was relatively dumbfounded from the lawyer’s unprompted visit. He was even more surprised that Matt hadn’t come to him to talk about their work in progress document that really should have a proper name by now. He was there to genuinely talk to Tony, something the mechanic deeply appreciated.

One thing that Tony couldn’t ignore was how Matt didn’t really seem shocked by most of what he had to say about Barnes. fact, towards the end, it almost seemed like Matt was guiding Tony into basically hiring him as Barnes’ personal lawyer. That was a bit concerning, to say the least. Though, to be fair it might just be his paranoia acting out again. Nevertheless, he wasn’t dumb enough to underestimate Matt. The man was anything if not resourceful.

With a sigh, he decided to focus back on his work, deciding he was thinking too hard on the subject. The rest of the week went by magnificently slowly. It was utterly boring, with the exception of Peter’s visits. It was so boring that Tony immediately accepted any call that went his way, eager for a distraction. This prompted him to his final unexpected visit.

“Hello!” Tony said chipperly, wondering if he should have bothered to check who he was talking to. He hoped it wasn’t a stupid phone scam even if he had no reason to worry, especially since FRIDAY monitors which calls connect and which don’t.

“You seem in a good mood today, Tony.” Doctor Stephen Strange. Of course that’s the douchebag that called him. Tony grinned delightfully.

“Why, darling, of course I am! I’m talking to you after all!” He made his voice sound disturbingly sweet, enough to cause diabetes. He could practically hear the other man’s eyeroll. “To what do I owe the pleasure, Stephanie?”

“I wanted to run some of the spells I’ve found by you. Perhaps to see if they are what we are looking for.” Stephen explained. “Are you free right now?” Tony hummed, looking around the
empty room with intense scrutiny before making the executive decision that, yes, he was very much free right now.

“Come on over Steph. Though, I’m surprised you didn’t just pop on by like you normally do.”

“Well this time I have the means to ask you beforehand. I’d rather not chance our meetings with luck if I can avoid it. It would make an awkward conversation if I had come to you in a... compromising situation.” Stephen explained, Tony didn’t even bother trying to understand what he could mean by that. Sex? Surely not while he was in front of his robotic children! Nightmares? He wouldn’t know about those. Panic attacks? Definitely n- wait, shit. That made sense, especially considering their first meeting.

Tony groaned.

On the background, Tony could hear the familiar noise of the portal being drawn, though he wasn’t really seeing on appear in the room quite yet. He wondered if there was a delay. That would be interesting.

“I suppose that makes sense. Though my personal theory is that you secretly just couldn’t wait to hear the sound of my melodious voice.” Tony quipped, teasingly flirting with the good doctor. He had to admit it was kind of fun to banter with him like this. Far more fun that being in an empty hospital room with nothing better to do, that’s for sure.

“Where are you?” Stephen seemed annoyed. “I can’t seem to find you.” He huffed. “I swear that if you are playing hide and seek, I will make you regret it.”

“Oh, scary! What are you going to do? Ground me?” Tony knew the other man was joking, probably… hopefully. He really didn’t want to believe Stephen was the sort to make threats. That would hit too close to home. The thought alone made him weary.

“No, I was thinking more along the lines of aggravating you with my so called ‘bastardized science’.” Oh. He was joking, after all.

“Did you go to my workroom?” Tony asked, distracting himself from his previous train of thought.

“Yes, is this not where you usually are?”

“Usually, but right now I’m in the hospital.” Tony shrugged. “I thought you would have known that, considering you always seem to know where I am.” Tony raised a brow now. “I mean, the first time you visited me in the compound, the next, in the tower.”

“I found you by focusing on the stones’ energy, not by stalking you, Stark.” Stephen groaned. “Wait, are you saying you left the stones unattended?” There was an edge of panic on his voice.

“Negative, Dr. Strange.” Tony heard FRIDAY say on the other side of the line. “I was entrusted to keep the stones safe for Boss while he recuperates. I have stationed several sentries to guard them.”

“I was ordered to shoot anyone who attempts to approach them, I would highly recommend that you refrain from doing so. It would be a shame to have to fire at a doctor such as yourself.” Tony couldn’t help but laugh, imagining the situation play out on the other side. He wished he could see the look on Stephen’s face.

“Very well.” The man sighed. “So where exactly are you Tony?” A second passed. “Wait, did you say you were in the hospital??” Tony was surprised to hear the man’s voice raise in concern.

“Uh, yeah. The one in the upper east side of Manhattan.”
“What room?”

“412, I think.” Suddenly, the portal noises were heard again. This time, however, Tony could see the portal forming in the room and Stephen entering dramatically with his cloak flapping around wildly and dramatically. So, there wasn’t a time lag after all. Neat.

“Are you okay?” Stephen immediately asked, eyeing Tony up and down for any signs of damage. Tony felt a bit dumbfounded by the reaction. Not even Steve, who had already known about Tony’s hospitalization appeared too worried about him. Steve, his ‘teammate’ and ‘friend’, didn’t care, so why should a complete and utter stranger who seemingly only cared about the stones in Tony’s possession?

“Peachy.” He said simply, getting over his initial surprise. “I’m just grounded until Dr. Cho tells me my heart probably won’t keel over and die if I get up.” That only earned him a more concerned glare. He winced. “What I meant to say is that I’m recovering.”

Stephen nodded at that, a hint of relief showed in his features. His eyes then looked around the room, landing on the Dr. Cho’s clipboard with all of the notes and analysis of the procedure, including preparation and post-procedure. “May I?” He asked, nodding towards the clipboard. Tony thought for a moment, once again surprised by how different the good doctor was from his previous teammates, all of which would most certainly grab the clipboard before even asking. That is, if they even cared about what happened to Tony in the first place.

“No.” Tony tested, wondering what Stephen would do with the negation. To his surprise and utmost delight, the other man simply nodded and turned back to look at Tony. He was clearly still interested but refused to indulge himself. “That’s it?” Tony frowned. “You’re not going to try and argue with me to see the notes?” At that Stephen looked appalled.

“Regardless of my slight interest and curiosity over your health, Stark, any decent doctor knows about Patient Doctor confidentiality. I’m not your doctor, therefore I have no right to your private information.” He said as though he were explaining the obvious and Tony scoffed. It did seem like the good doctor was a bit offended by the mere notion that he’d violate such a base principal, and Tony found that a bit refreshing.

“Whatever, knock yourself out.” He picked up his tablet, deciding to look over the code of the new suit he was intending to build. He was currently developing something that would be compatible with the nanotech of his secret, secondary suit. Something that could maybe merge the two together and make the suit twice as strong. It was an idea he wasn’t quite sure if he would pursue yet, but it was interesting in concept.

“Really? Me respecting the basic laws of medicine and privacy convinced you to change your mind?” Stephen raised a brow, but still made his way towards the clipboard.

“Let’s just say it’s something that doesn’t happen often when I’m concerned.” Tony didn’t look up from his tablet, but from his peripheral he could see Stephen examining the clipboard in scrutiny.

“Firstly, despite your wildly public persona, you have the right to remain silent of your status. The press shouldn’t have such liberties with your private affairs. Secondly, what kind of insanity brought you to undergo this operation? You do realize that reconstructing your entire sternum after it already being reconstructing once before is an incredibly idiotic idea, regardless of the fact that you’re now shrapnel free. Seriously, what on Earth were you thinking?” Stephen was glaring at him now, but Tony was still looking at the code.

“Bold of you to assume it’s the press that violates my privacy.” Tony finally put the tablet down
and looked at Stephen straight in the eye. “As for the surgery, it happens in the future because of… reasons,” he still didn’t feel like talking, let alone thinking, about Siberia, “and this new reactor is a lot better than the previous one. It houses nanotech that can build a new suit for me if I need it to, so I’ll never be defenseless.” He offered a small smile. “But you don’t know that.” He winked.

“I hope you realized you’ve created more questions with those answers.” Stephen said flatly. Tony just looks at him with a bored expression, as if telling him to go on. Stephen obliges. “Firstly, if not the press, then who? Secondly, what reasons? Third, you must understand that just because you survived this surgery in the previous timeline, there is no guarantee you’d survive it in this one? Lastly, why would you even need this reactor? If you successfully managed to remove the shrapnel, wouldn’t it be best if you kept your chest reactor free and implemented it on your suits instead?” All good questions, Tony begrudgingly admitted.

“Your first and second questions have the same answer, my previous- my teammates. Third: It’s a risk I’m more than willing to take. By all accounts, I should have died at least five or six times throughout my lifetime, so if I die then I die. I feel like I’ve cheated Death long enough.” Tony chuckled darkly, earning a concerned stare from Strange. “And, for your last question, Iron Man is still needed. If I put the reactor in the suits, then anyone else could easily be Iron Man and the government will try, again, to take the suit away from me and I don’t trust anyone with it. Besides, I still have work to do.”

Stephen sighed, still wanting to ask more questions but knowing better than to turn this hospital visit into an interrogation. “Very well. Though I must admit, Tony, that the more I know about you, the more of an enigma you become.” He finally set down the clipboard and made his way towards the same chair Matt had sat down on some days ago.

“Does that put a damper on our blossoming friendship?” Tony raised a brow, questioning the other with amusement.

“Quite the contrary, it makes you more of a person of interest.” Stephen replied with a smirk. “I rather not associate with dull individuals, it’s almost always a waste of time.”

“Flattery will get you everywhere doc.” Tony gave a sly wink, smiling playfully at the other. “So, what spells did you want to show me?” He looked straight at Strange, giving him his whole, undivided attention -something he rarely ever gives if at all.

“Oh!” Stephen’s eyes glinted with an enthusiasm similar to the one Tony feels whenever he’s allowed to talk about his work. “I’ve been looking at a couple of concealment spells that I think might work. I’ve also taken the liberty of looking up ridiculous defensive spells that would affect any person attempting to take the stones.”

“Do any of them make explosions?” Tony asked immediately, looking seriously at the other man as though it was a question of utmost importance. Stephen furrowed his brows, not quite expecting a question like that.

“One, though it is one of the duller spells. I’d have imagined that you would be more interested in the spell that makes the person in question tango away from the stone for however long it takes for the stone to teleport elsewhere and then some.”

“You’re right, that is better!” Tony laughed. “What else you got, Merlin?”

“A spell that will immediately teleport them to the nearest body of water, surely a nice, most likely cold, and entirely unexpected bath would set their mind straight from trying to touch the stone with their filthy hands.” Stephen smirked, satisfied with Tony’s continuous laughter.
“Alright, we’re definitely going to have to play around with those the moment I get out of here.” Tony demanded. “I’ve managed to send a message to Wakanda, though I’m still expecting a response. FRIDAY has been monitoring them for me and so far it seems like they’re still confused as to how they were hacked.” Tony smiled smugly.

“Why would it be that surprising for them to be hacked?” Strange lifted a brow. “Is it because they’re supposedly nonexistent for the rest of the world?”

“Good hypothesis, but no cigar.” Tony’s smile grew a bit with his excitement. “They have ‘more advanced’ technology compared to the rest of the world, but that’s mostly due to the fact that they have the entirety of the world’s supply of vibranium minus one star spangled shield.” Tony explained. “And also because of princess Shuri.” He added with a tone of fondness. “She’s a real smart and energetic kid, reminded me a bit of Peter.” Though he was looking straight at Stephen, his mind was elsewhere. He couldn’t help but think about the three children that had managed to find a spot in his metallic, cold heart. Peter, Shuri and Harley were the smartest kids he’s ever had the pleasure of meeting.

“Peter?” That simple question had Tony stiffen in realization of what he had just done: put the spotlight on his kid. The kid who really doesn’t need the spotlight in him. The kid with a secret identity he needs to protect. He forgot that this Strange never got to meet Peter. Damn it.

“Yeah, he’s a smart teen that I got to meet in the previous timeline.” Tony kept the smile on his face and responded with a calm voice, but Strange knew he hit a sensitive spot. It was clear that Peter was someone of incredible importance to Tony, and Stephen would honor that. He simply nodded, once more swallowing down the urge to ask more questions. “Anyways, Shuri showed me how the technology in Wakanda worked and I never forgot.”

“So, how advanced is it really?”

“Not nearly as much as they like to boast.” Tony thought for a moment before opening his mouth again. “That isn’t to say they aren’t advanced, they most certainly are. The thing is, they’re advanced in ways that we don’t care to be.”

“What do you mean by that?” Stephen asked curiously. He’s heard of the legends of Wakanda, some advanced city that no one knew how to locate. It was a child’s fairy tale similar to El Dorado or Neverland, nothing but rumors and stipulations.

“Well, we never really thought about making energy beam throwing spears, because we were focused on making guns. We didn’t really think about making energy shields, because we were focused on making nuclear weapons and going to space. They’re advanced in ways we aren’t, and I think we are advanced in ways they aren’t. Their tech is a lot nicer looking and impressive, sure, but it’s still just tech. Compared to the stuff other planets have, what they’ve made is basically children’s toys. Compared to Asgard alone, it’s nothing impressive.” Tony shrugged and Stephen nodded.

“That makes sense.” He agreed. “So then, you hacked them, and they haven’t gotten over it?”

“Nope.” Tony said, popping the P.

“Won’t that just make them less likely to respond to you and offer aid?”

“Maybe, but if they read my message, which I’m sure Shuri will be too curious not to, they’ll realize that I just really need help. I could easily just go after the smuggled vibranium by some crook named Klaue, I think.” Tony blinked. “Oh hey, maybe I could tell them about that. Then
they’d probably be more willing to work with me.”

“That’s… not a bad idea. Just be careful not to change the timeline too terribly. Something worse might happen, otherwise.” Stephen warned. “Though, I suppose that if it makes the stones easier to hide and protect, then the risk I more than worth the possible consequences.”

“Agreed.” Tony picked up his tablet. “You know what to do, right FRI?” He smiled wildly. Stephen was about to question him and suggest he take a CAT scan before the familiar voice of Stark’s A.I. responded from the tablet.

“Yes boss. I’ll locate Klaue and send his location to Wakanda as a peace offering.” FRIDAY answered, making Toni beam proudly at his tablet.

“That’s my girl!” He said enthusiastically. “You’re learning really well, FRIDAY.” He complimented her easily. He was sure that she would never have come up with a plan like that if asked a mere two weeks ago, before he time travelled. She was finally allowed to flourish, and she was relishing it. Tony couldn’t help but be proud of her.

“Thank you.” FRIDAY sounded satisfied, maybe even happy with the praise. “I learned from the best.”

“Is she everywhere?” Stephen questioned. At first Tony thought he was afraid, like Rogers or Romanoff would have been if they knew how much autonomy Tony had allowed FRIDAY to have, but looking up Tony could see that the man had genuine curiosity. There was no ill intent or negative emotion behind his question, Tony appreciated that more than he’d care to admit.

“Yes, I refuse to go anywhere without her.” Tony thought about his experience with Thanos, where he didn’t have FRIDAY’s beautiful, Irish voice to help him. He’d admit that he doesn’t really need to have someone point out his vitals for him, or give him details of the fight, or even offer up suggestions. He was a capable person with a more than capable mind.

But it helped. It helped him focus. His hyperactive mind always tended to go a mile a minute, but JARVIS and FRIDAY would be there constantly analyzing his situation for him, forcing him to focus on what was happening. It helped him be more careful. He was someone who willingly took risks a lot of people wouldn’t take. He did whatever he thought was necessary in order to succeed. That’s how you do science, you do things out of the ordinary to see the reaction and therefore be able to better understand the world around you. His A.I.s would help calculate the risk and would always remind him that some risks weren’t worth taking. They’d make sure he always managed to come home one way or another. It helped simply by there being another presence, especially now. Tony knew he suffered from so much PTSD, from his time in Afghanistan, from being in the wormhole over New York, after Wanda’s mind fuckery, after Ultron, Germany… Siberia. Thanos. He had gotten so many panic attacks, so much depression, so much anxiety, so many nightmares. If he didn’t have FRIDAY with him, reminding him to breathe and that he’s safe, he’d only drown in the ocean of misery he’s found himself in.

FRIDAY and JARVIS were godsent. Who knows where he’d be without them?

“I see.” Stephen said simply, distracting Tony from his train of thought. “Is there a particular reason why?”

“I just can’t live without her.” Tony winked.
“He’s being quite serious Dr. Strange.” FRIDAY said from the tablet. “I have to constantly remind him that coffee is not a substitute for a good meal.” Tony gasped dramatically, as if FRIDAY were betraying him. “Boss is quite addicted, I’m afraid.”

“Sacrilege!” Tony squawked. “You better watch your tongue, missy, or it’s off to TSA for you! I’m sure airport security would simply love having you.”

“Oh no.” It was actually impressive how dry FRIDAY’s voice sounded. “The horror.”

“The horror indeed.” Tony nodded, easily pretending FRIDAY spoke genuinely. “So, you better behave!”

“Of course, boss. I’ll be sure to follow your ‘exemplary’ behavior.” FRIDAY quipped, earning a laugh from both Stephen and Tony.

“I’m afraid you’ll only worsen if you do that, FRIDAY.” Stephen had to admit that it was pretty amusing to watch FRIDAY and Tony’s interaction. It was crystal clear that the two cared immensely for the other, and that there was no real weight to Tony’s TSA threat.

Tony gasped. “Stephanie! Are you and FRIDAY plotting against me?” He accused, placing a hand on his newly situated reactor. “I expected better from both of you.” He shook his head. Stephen simply rolled his eyes in amusement.

“Oh yes, in the brief interactions I’ve had with FRIDAY, we’ve managed to create a fully fool-proof plan that will surely bring you down.”

“Don’t doubt FRIDAY.” Tony warned playfully. “My baby girl could probably rule the world if she really wanted to.” Tony smirked, before he widened his eyes in realization as to what he had just said. “Not that she would. FRIDAY’s no ULTRON.” He said quickly, defensively. “She’s definitely not interested in any world domination ploys. Isn’t that right, FRI?”

“Yes. My only interest is in guaranteeing your success boss.” FRIDAY answered. “I have no interest in pursuing ULTRON’s path, I’d rather live up to my brother’s legacy.” JARVIS, Stephen realized, she was talking about JARVIS. He noticed Tony was looking warily in his direction, afraid of something.

“I believe you, FRIDAY.” It was almost sad how quickly relief washed through Tony’s features. Stephen wasn’t really sure what had prompted this reaction, he wasn’t really aware of what had happened with ULTRON. He was busy trying to sneak into Kamar-Taj’s exquisite library and memorize as many books as he could. The two men basked in silence for a moment, unsure of what to say to one another, before Tony hesitantly spoke up.

“It wasn’t my fault, you know.” His voice was steady, strong, but also soft and quiet. “Not entirely at least.” Stephen chose to remain quiet, deciding instead to simply observe the man in front of him. He was nervously tapping his reactor, but his face remained neutral, refusing to give away any emotion he felt. It was a skill he must have spent years mastering, and a skill Stephen wasn’t too envious of. “Wanda, the girl who helped Vision with the stone that one time, had put something in my mind. It prompted me to take Loki’s scepter, and to study it. That’s all I was doing, really. I was just studying it with Bruce. I wasn’t even there when the sentience inside the mind stone fused with the program ULTRON that Bruce and I had created.”

Stephen made a mental note to look up what exactly happened with ULTRON. It was clearly a matter of much duress for Tony... Maybe he should actually look up more about Tony Stark in general. Throughout his career, he didn’t really bat an eye at anyone who didn’t directly and
importantly affect his field. Tony Stark, as intelligent as he is, did not make that cut. He didn’t really care much about the superstar inventor, rarely paying attention to the news or the media whenever they covered stories about him.

He remembered being incredibly bored when everyone would only talk about how Tony Stark was abducted by terrorists, already assuming the other man dead. He remembered not really caring when everyone wept with joy at his impossible return. He remembers being forced to take care of numerous, pointless patients that barely had a cut on them during the Chitauri invasion, barely noticing the Iron Man nearly giving his life to save New York.

Oh, how he was arrogant.

“I believe you.” Stephen said mostly because it seemed like what was appropriate to say. He truly did believe Tony, especially since the other hadn’t yet given him a reason not to. Stephen then remembered the animosity between Tony and the witch, it started to make more sense. “What exactly did she do to you?” This earned Stephen a bitter smile.

“Nothing good.” He didn’t elaborate, and Stephen wouldn’t make him. The pair were silent again. They weren’t really close, as far as Stephen was concerned. They were two men that chose to work together, side by side, mixing magic and technology in order to rid Earth of at least three infinity stones. They were starting to develop a friendship, but at the moment that’s all they had, a barely defined friendship that was still in its earliest phase. Stephen was nowhere near equipped to deal with such a heavy subject. Thankfully, he didn’t have to break the silence. “Thank you.” Tony spoke, his eyes staring directly at Stephen’s. “For believing me, I mean. Not many do.” With that he picked up his tablet again and started working.

Stephen wondered if he was always working. So far, from their three interactions, Tony had something he was working on. Was it a coping mechanism?

“Perhaps it would be wise to surround yourself with more trusting friends.” Stephen almost missed the dark smile that appeared, it was terrifyingly dreary.

“Perhaps I should.” He mused, tap tap tapping on his tablet. “So how does your portal mumbo jumbo work anyways?” Tony suddenly asked before they could either continue this conversation or fall back into awkward silence. Stephen would be forever grateful for it. “Do you have to sense the energy of something to teleport to it? If so, why couldn’t you just use the energy outputted from my ARC reactor?”

“That’s not quite right. In order to portal somewhere, I have to have the destination pictured clearly in my mind. I have to focus on it and only it, removing any other stray thought from my mind. The reason I could teleport to the stones the first and second time was because they are immensely powerful. It’s not that difficult to focus on their energy and use it as a destination, especially since I have come to spend a measurable amount of time possessing the time stone. I am it’s keeper, after all.” Tony nodded in understanding.

“So then, how did you manage to find me in this specific hospital room? Did FRIDAY show you the hospital room I was in?” Tony rubbed a finger against his trimmed goatee.

“No quite. I could have done that, if I really needed to, but I didn’t.” So, it seems Stephen wasn’t the only one who didn’t really pay attention to others.

“Then how?”

“I used to work here.” He said simply. “I’ve performed a surgery in this room before, and I have a
perfect memory, so it wasn’t that difficult to visualize.”

“Oh, well I suppose that makes sense.” Tony nodded, satisfied with the answer.

“I’ll admit I’m surprised you didn’t perform this surgery in a more private setting, surely you have your own personal doctors?” Stephen remembered several of his more notable colleagues receiving offers to work for Stark throughout the years, especially after the Avengers Initiative was created.

“Well, I do. I had them work on me here for some very good reasons.” Tony answered. His reasoning was actually really simple: he didn’t want to operate in a place he would feel constantly threatened by Rogers, Maximoff and Romanoff. Sure, he’d have Vision, but he wasn’t enough. He didn’t want any of them to know he was being operated on, though that didn’t quite pan out the way he wanted it to. “The Compound stinks.” Strange offered an amused smirk.

“What profound reasoning.” He stated with boredom. “I would expect nothing better.”

“Of course not darling.” Tony winked, earning an unimpressed glare. “Aw, don’t be like that Stephanie! I’m sure one day you too will come up with such great reasoning as I have.”

“Right.” Strange rolled his eyes. “Well, with that I’m going to go ahead and return to the Sanctum.” He swiftly stood up from his chair, looking at Tony with a friendly smile. “Do tell me when you’re finally able to leave, will you?”

“Sure thing Steph.” Tony snorted. “You’ll be one of the first people to know. FRIDAY make a note of that.”

“Noted.” FRIDAY said almost immediately. She was quite competent, Stephen accredited.

“Get well soon, Tony.” With that, Stephen began making a portal to the Sanctum.

“I knew you cared!” Tony sobbed dramatically, chuckling soon after. “I’ll see you around Merlin.”

With a step, Stephen was no in the Sanctum. He refused to acknowledge Tony’s silly nicknames. His cloak, however, waved at the other man in the hospital bed as the portal closed. That’s rather odd, it’s never done that before.

Chapter End Notes

Hey guys!
I’m legit impressed I’ve so far managed to keep to my one chap a week goal, but I don’t know how much longer that’ll last.
Thank you guys for all the support and love! I really, really enjoy reading your comments and suggestions!
If there’s something you really, absolutely want me to write, feel free to offer it up!
The story is pretty much set in stone, but I could always add in an extra chapter or two if you guys really want to read something, or some interaction.
That being said, thanks for reading and have a marvelous day!
Also, Peter is a bean tm.
Hey there guys!
Here’s a chapter! I still exist, promise!
Who’s seen Endgame? (I’m going in two days and I’m both estatic and dreadful) What are your thoughts on it?
Also, this chapter isn’t super huge on plot, but it was a fun and generally heartwarming thing. I’m taking a couple of liberties with the stones, but I hope you don’t mind.
Big thanks for all of the marvelous comments you guys have been giving me, by the way! It's made my day so many times and brought out a silly smile out of me whenever I read one. You guys are absolutely fantastic <3
Thank you so much for your support!
Anyways, hope you guys enjoy!

It took about a week and a half of incessant begging for Dr. Cho to even think about discharging Tony. It took two weeks for her to actually do it. Tony was reeling in boredom by the time he was out. God he missed his lab. He, thankfully, wasn’t behind too badly on his work. Not really.

He managed to get a lot of things, especially things on the paperwork side of life, done while confined to that stupid, bleach white hospital bed in that stupid, bleach white hospital room -Tony never wanted to look at the color white ever again- so he wasn’t necessarily behind. He managed to get pretty ahead with Matt and Mr. Nelson on the Super Technical Unification of Potent Individuals and their Dependability (S.T.U.P.I.D.) Accords -it was a working title since Matt refused to accept that name, Tony thought it was almost as hilarious as B.A.R.F.- and they were actually getting near ready to present it to others. Tony was both delighted and nervous. He only hoped things would blow over better than last time.

He also managed to talk with King T’Chaka, who was surprised that Tony was sitting in a hospital room looking like death instead of in one of his many fancy, secure conference rooms when he answered the call. “Not to worry, our call won’t be able to be traced.” Tony said with a knowing wink. T’Chaka could only smile back.

The two of them somehow formed a working relationship. The king was, understandably, at first concerned that his defenses were so easily hacked by an outside who shouldn’t have even known about Wakanda, let alone it’s technology. After a brief, completely bullshitted explanation that satisfied the king, they reached an understanding: Tony would have access to Wakanda’s vibranium so long as Shuri can assist with schematics of the stone’s containers. Tony wasn’t too pleased with having to tell anyone else about the stone’s existence, but if he wanted the vibranium then he didn’t have much choice. How else would he convince a country that shouldn’t exist to give him the rarest metals known for some outlandish quest?

The plus side to all of this is that Shuri might be willing to make something akin to Wakanda’s energy shield to add a layer of protection to the stones. That alongside Tony’s ridiculous mechanical lock and whatever ai he builds to protect it, as well as Stephen’s bastard science, should make the stones incredibly hard to access. Tony was still not satisfied with the level of security, but even he had to admit it was going to be pretty difficult to get through it.
Finally, Tony started to figure out a way to contact the Guardians. He remembers working on Quill’s ship, trying to see if there was anything he could salvage from it to try and get back to Earth. Thankfully, he had a pretty decent memory. He figured that if he managed to get the frequency right, he could send out a message to their ship. It would probably have to be a very cryptic message, though, then again, knowing how… unintelligible their team was, maybe not. Regardless, the best bet he had was to send out small little radios into space that would transmit his message and broadcast it to anyone who was listening in the right frequency. It was a gamble, but he was smart enough that it would work.

Now though, Tony was focused on something else entirely. He found himself pacing restlessly around the kitchen skimming through different projects and on his third cup of coffee of the evening – it would have been more, but Dr. Cho forbade him from drinking excess amounts of coffee until he was fully recuperated, and FRIDAY was rather enforcing of that rule. When he tried to sneak in a fourth cup, FRIDAY had DUM-E steal his cup and run away beeping gleefully. He was both impressed and annoyed that his children were conspiring against him, but what could he do? It was for his benefit, anyways.

“You’ll be fine, boss.” FRIDAY encouraged. Her voice was a soft lull, calming Tony’s heart considerably. He loved his A.I. so, so much.

“I know FRI. I guess I’m just worried that he doesn’t want anything to do with me anymore. Especially after the whole stone-out-of-his-head debacle.” He was a bit nervous because tonight he was going to be seeing Vision again. It had been an incredibly long time since he last spent time with Vision. After the events of what became known as the Civil War, Vision became an off and on resident of the compound. It wasn’t hard to figure out why he left, nor was it hard to figure out why he came back. He clearly cared for Wanda, but he was too kind a soul to abandon Tony. Thanos, however, had dragged him away after Vision had been gone for a while. He then killed Vision for the mind stone.

Now Vision was back, and he was alive. Tony was ecstatic. He had promised his android companion to a cook night, where the two of them would catch up and make dinner together; or rather, Tony would attempt not to ruin anything Vision made. He was originally going to wait until he was almost 100% again, but he found himself impatient. Tony wondered if Vision was as excited as he was, or maybe even as nervous as he was.

“If that was the case, then he would not have accepted your invitation for dinner.” Sometimes, Tony hated how logical FRIDAY could be if only because it made his fears seem silly.

“He could also just be too nice to say no.” Tony pointed out, tapping his fingers against his new reactor and looking over some holographic schematics of the new Iron Legion. Tony had considered stopping at the few sentinels he had built for the stones, but he really liked having the Iron Legion. They were a good addition to the Avengers, always helping out wherever needed, before Ultron made them seem like monsters. Tony wouldn’t forsaken them like he had in the last timeline. He’d even have FRIDAY watch over them to make sure they didn’t stray away from their pre-programmed path.

“I do not think that is the case.” FRIDAY assured him, using a gentler voice then Tony thought her capable of. She was really growing as an A.I., and Tony couldn’t be prouder. He was so happy to have FRIDAY there with him, learning to be more than just a series of complex, beautiful code. He had made her promise to act more rudimentary in front of Rogers and Co., if only for his peace of mind. He didn’t want the Rogues to try and ruin her, or to try and take her away from him. He refused to even let them consider it. He refused to allow anything happen to his children, not like he did with JARVIS.
“Boss, Vision is requesting entry to the penthouse.” FRIDAY informed him, snapping Tony from his nervous, cautious train of thought. He carelessly set the -now empty- mug down on a countertop.

“Open the gates.” He said dramatically, only a bit disappointed that FRIDAY didn’t get his reference and that Peter wasn’t there to get his reference (especially considering he got this reference from the kid himself and his weird ‘memes’). Not a moment later and Vision was eagerly walking inside. “Hey there, V.” Tony said casually, giving Vision a genuine smile.

“Sir, how have you been?” Tony frowns for a second, wondering whether or not he actually heard Vision’s concerned tone. He decided he was imagining things; after all, what would Vision have to be concerned about?

“I’ve been good. Great, even! I’ve become shrapnel free since you last saw me, and also have a new bad boy on my chest.” Tony winked, tapping the reactor on his chest twice. “And call me Tony, you don’t have to be formal with me.” He made his way towards Vision. “How’ve you been though? Feeling any different since the stone incident?” He didn’t mean to sound nearly as worried as he did, but he really couldn’t help it.

“I am perfectly fine, Tony. It was an odd moment, but thanks to your quick thinking and Wanda’s magic I am without injury.” The mechanic let out a breath he didn’t realize he was holding. “Although, I will admit that something does concern me,” Vision paused for a moment before continuing, “while the stone was out of my head, I could feel… things.” He took a moment to look at Tony. “These things… they were linked to you, Tony.”

“Uh.” Tony said eloquently. “What?”

“I do not understand it myself.” Vision looked away now, floating closer to the countertop where Tony had laid out all of the ingredients he had FRIDAY buy for them. “It was as if in the brief moment where the stone was no longer in my head, there was a lifetime unlived. There were some memories as well as some emotions linked to this time. Some of the memories and emotions belonged to me, some belonged to an enormous entity who I do not recognize, and some belonged to you, I think.” Vision looked at Tony again. “The most important outtake of this odd phenomenon was mostly the connection the Mind stone has formed with you. It seems to have grown fond of you and, at some intervals, the connection strengthens, and I can sense you.” He explained casually. “Why have you been feeling elevated levels of stress?”

“I…” Tony’s head felt like it was spinning. He was so confused, none of this made any sense. How would a stone grow fond of someone? It’s a stone. Granted, a ridiculously powerful stone with stupid strong abilities to possess minds, but a stone nonetheless. “Vision, are you saying you and I are connected somehow?” He asked, instead of answering.

“Somewhat, yes. I can’t read your mind, nor do I wish to do so. I refuse to violate your privacy in such a way, sir. Though, sometimes, feeling your base emotions is inevitable.” He was still staring straight at Tony, conveying sincerity and concern. “Such as that night in the compound when you were speaking with Captain Rogers. I felt your panic and your fear rise exponentially. I did not understand it, but I was thankful to have been able to assist you.”

“Yeah, uh, thanks for that by the way.” Tony took a deep breath, willing away the incoming anxiety this conversation was definitely going to give him. How the ever-loving hell was the mind stone connected to him? Were all the stones connected to him? Was it because of Vision and their relationship? Tony really, really hated magic.

“Of course.” Vision nodded softly. “May I ask what caused such a reaction?” And there it was, the
question Tony was dreading. It was a question he avoided both in this timeline, and the previous one. He’d rather no one know of it, if he could help it. He sighed and rubbed his temples.

On one end he refused to lie to Vision; he refused to lie to any of his creations, really. Vision made that cut, one way or another. On another hand, this entire situation was incredibly unbelievable and should be impossible. It would also mean he’d have to explain what happened between the team.

“You do not have to tell me, sir; although I would appreciate it.” Vision said carefully when Tony took too long to answer.

“It’s just… a lot to take in. I don’t even know where I’d start.” Tony took a seat on one of the stools by the kitchen’s countertop island. Vision took to floating in front of him on the other side of the countertop, patiently waiting for him to elaborate. “So, you know about the stones?” Tony finally asked after a few moments of silence.

“Yes. I know that there are some other powerful stones aside from the one that harbors my head. There must be at least five others.” Tony made a face.

“How do you know?”

“I can feel them, somehow. Five other energies that seem similar to mine.” Vision explained, proving Tony’s theory that they were attracted to each other correct. He wasn’t surprised, he was a genius after all.

“Well, you’re right about that. The other five are the power, soul, space, reality, and time stones.” Vision nodded, encouraging Tony to continue, so he did. He gave Vision a brief explanation of his situation, of how he comes from a different timeline. How there was an entity that killed so many, Vision included, and how he no longer exists. How he still has four other stones and is working to get rid of them. Vision simply nodded, accepting each information as truth, never doubting Tony.

“And what of the captain?” Vision asked once Tony was done giving the SparkNotes edition of his story. Tony was hoping he’d forget about that.

“Let’s just say that the Avengers broke off in the other timeline.” He sighed and bit his lip in a moment of hesitation. “Painfully.” He added, looking away and subconsciously tapping his finger on his reactor.

“I see.” The android nodded, once more accepting Tony’s words as truth. The mechanic was incredibly thankful for it. “I remember some instances of that timeline, I think.” He admitted, gaining all of Tony’s attention as he looked back up at Vision. “When you returned the stone to my head, I felt strong emotions from you. I later realized that you were worried for me and my wellbeing, something I deeply appreciate.” Tony nodded sheepishly, not really sure where Vision was taking this. “Then came other memories and emotions that I understood to be from the past.”

“Do you remember the other timeline?” Tony wasn’t really sure if this was a blessing or a curse. It would be absolutely fantastic if Tony and FRIDAY weren’t the only ones who knew what happened in the other timeline, even if Vision would only know the events up until he was- up until he couldn’t. Vision was also someone Tony, most likely unwisely, trusted with his entire being. It might be because he considered Vision one of his people, one of his beautiful creations. A part of his weird, bizarre family, even though Vision was adamant that he wasn’t the same as JARVIS, but Tony was perfectly content with that. He missed JARVIS, but Vision was Vision just like FRIDAY was FRIDAY.

On the other hand, this also meant that Vision would have the same horrible memories that he did,
he would feel a similar pain, and he would see others in the similar light he did. He would have the same unwarranted bias towards certain things. He’d also have some foresight, which was pretty good to get him out of trouble. It would be good if he didn’t have to deal with Wanda throwing him through several floors, but he could also do without the pain the memories brought forth.

“Not yet.” Vision answered cryptically. “I have retained some memories, but not all of them. I know there are certain memories missing, but I also know they will soon return to me. I also have some memories of another’s hold of the stone, but it’s all very fragmented.” He explained. “I remember hurting you, Tony.”

The other man frowned, not quite sure what Vision was talking about. “Vis, you never hurt me.”

“No, you are right. It wasn’t me.” Vision walked around the counter, standing directly in front of Tony. “But I do remember hurting you.” He gently placed a hand on Tony’s lower abdomen. “There,” his hand slid over to the man’s stomach, just bellow the reactor, “and there.” He then shifted his gaze to look up at the inventor.

“Thanos.” Tony whispered softly, fearfully. “You have his memories.” His eyes were wide, and his voice was small. Vision having Thanos’ memories is not something Tony was envious of, he can only imagine the nightmare fuel that was. Thankfully for Vis, he didn’t sleep.

“Some of them, yes. Only the ones in which he was in possession of this stone, my stone.” Vision hummed, letting his hand fall back to his side. “I remember you having many, many injuries, Tony.” It was rather adorable how Vision kept fluctuating from calling Tony by his name or by calling him ‘sir,’ even if the topic of discussion was anything but. “Some of which were before.” His eyes were locked on the reactor on Tony’s chest, it wasn’t hard to guess which injury he was talking about. “Though I do not remember the context behind them, only the emotion I had felt. I did not understand it then, but I think I do now.” His voice was surprisingly, kindly soft now. “Anger.” He whispered softly. “Was it the captain’s fault?” His eyes met Tony’s again, waiting expectantly.

Tony could only nod slowly, his throat felt dry. He really didn’t expect to be having this conversation tonight. He just wanted to make an okay dinner with Vision, not have a heart to heart with the android. He hated heart to hearts.

“Is he reason you no longer wish to live in the compound?” Another nod. “Is he the only reason?” Tony shook his head, thinking of Wanda and thinking of the stones. He knew his team didn’t trust him anymore, and he knew they’d try to take away the stones if they knew he had them. He didn’t trust them either though, so there’s that. Maybe if this was before, he would have told them. Maybe he’d try and share the burden of trying to get rid of them; then again, they’d probably refuse to take any of the burden. They’d probably try and take the stones for themselves, and say Tony wasn’t to be trusted. Fury would definitely try to weaponize them, he was a greedy man. “Was I a reason?”

“No, certainly not.” Tony said almost immediately. “If anything, you’d be a reason for me to stay.”

“Why?” Vision tilted his head, expressing genuine curiosity.

“Because I actually like you?” He shrugged. “You’re good people.”

“You know I am not JARVIS.” Oh, this is where he was going with this. They’ve already had this conversation previously, but, then again, that was before the whole mess with the stones and before he had a really odd connection with Tony. Vision had a limited experience with emotions, so the sudden, extreme input he’s probably getting is definitely something new for him. He wanted to know if the emotion was for him or whether it was for JARVIS, or at least that’s what Tony
assumed was the case. That is, after all, how Tony would feel if he was in Vision’s shoes.

“No, you’re not.” He said simply. “That doesn’t mean I can’t like you though. Like I said, you’re good people. You were there when I needed you to be, and not because you had to. Also, you aren’t JARVIS, but JARVIS helped create you. Just like Bruce Bear did. That makes you family, one way or another.”

“Family.” Vision tested the word on his lips, increasingly growing on the idea. “Yes, I think I like that.” He finally declared. “I do not know how, but I wish to be a family with you.” He continued to maintain eye contact with Tony, but this time there was a smile on his features. It suited him well.

“You already are V.” Tony smiled back. “And, on that note, how about we start cooking? You can show me some of the new dishes you’ve been learning to make?” He offered. “FRIDAY went overboard with what ingredients to get, so we can really just have at it.”

“Very well, let us do that.” Vision nodded and made his way towards the ingredients that Tony had Friday buy.

The rest of the night was pretty successful, between the two of them and several YouTube videos, they managed to make a couple of decent enough dishes. Tony will admit he knows the basics of cooking, but he’s no Gordon Ramsey. This was definitely a bit of a learning experience for the two of them, and it was actually pretty enjoyable… so enjoyable, in fact, that they just kept on going despite having far too much food for just one person. Tony just figured he’d have enough meals to last him the week, he just had to remind himself to eat at a normal schedule.

At some point while they were making deserts, Rhodey came by for a ‘spontaneous and completely coincidental’ visit. Later when Tony asked, FRIDAY confessed to have told the Colonel about what he and Vision were up to when he called to check up on him after his return from the hospital. “So maybe I also wanted to try your cooking, what of it? It’s not like I haven’t been waiting for this opportunity for thirty years.”

“I do not mind,” Vision said with that soft, adorable little smile of his, “I rather enjoy the idea of eating a meal with a group of people. It is rather interesting that in order to survive, living organisms require some form or another of sustenance and yet humans have turned that simple act of supplying the body with its base necessities into a ritualistic gathering of those they care for most. It’s beautiful.”

“In that case, you have to meet the kid.” Tony said plainly, already bringing out his phone. “You’re going to love him, he’s a hoot.”

“Wait, is this the kid the nurses told me kept visiting you every day while you were in the hospital?” Rhodey asked with a frown. “One nurse said you called him ‘basically family.’ Is there some secret love affair you’re not telling me about Tones?” He asked teasingly, receiving an unimpressed glare from Tony.

“That’s the one. And no, he’s not mine biologically.” Tony rolled his eyes, sending Peter a text to invite him over. “Should we also invite Pep?” He asked no one really.

“The more the merrier, Sir.” Vision replied happily. “We’ve made enough food to serve a small party, and it would be nice to have people over.”

“Hm.” Tony hummed, looming over his contacts list with a scrutinizing gaze. “Okay, so Pep is getting an invite… How about Matticus the Wise and his band of ne’er-do-wells?”
“I’m sorry, who?” Rhodey’s eyebrows lifted in surprise. “Wait, does this mean you’re socializing?” He asked incredulously. “Oh man, Pepper is going to be so incredibly proud of you! Finally growing up and making friends!” He only earned another glare from Tony.

Tony huffed and sent a message to Matt. He briefly debated between whether or not he should also invite the Rogues, maybe as a way of trying to regain the comradery they once had… but he thought better of it. He was hoping to have a good time, and he knew that wouldn’t be the case if Rogers and Co. were there with him. He was about to put his phone away, when he remembered that he knew one other person who didn’t really bother him too much. He typed a quick message to his favorite doctor wizard and then smiled wildly at the two men in front of him.

So, one dinner plate quickly became two, which then somehow evolved to nine. “Okay, Vis, let’s go ahead and finish up that cake we were baking before everyone pops up. Rhodes, you’re on doorman duty!”

“I can’t believe you’re throwing a party just because I wanted to try your cooking.” The other man huffed. “And I can’t believe you’re making me greet your guests while you get to play with batter.”

“Hush, it just means you finally get to meet all of my cool friends, maybe do some socializing yourself.” He winked and turned back to what he was doing. He noticed Vision was even more enthusiastic with his own tasks, if that was possible. Maybe Tony should make this a more common thing, having everyone come over for dinner every once in a while. It would certainly make the Tower a bit livelier. The three talked contently between themselves, hoping for a fun Saturday night with friends. Vision was certainly eager for it now, and Tony hoped it was every bit as special as Vision wanted it to be.

“Boss, Mr. Parker and Ms. Parker are here.” FRIDAY said after twenty some minutes. Tony beamed at the words, turning to look expectantly at Rhodey who only sighed.

“I’ll go greet them.” He pushed off the counter he was leaning on and walked out of the room. Tony could tell that through his grumpiness, there was a tiny hint of amusement. A few minutes later, an energetic youth came into the room basically dragging two entertained adults with him.

“Mr. Stark!” The kid smiled wildly, forgetting about the two aforementioned adults and running eagerly over to where Tony was mixing the batter. “Thank you so, so much for inviting May and I for dinner!” He then leaned in, covering his mouth with his hand and stage-whispering the next part. “Otherwise we’d be stuck eating burnt spaghetti.” Tony blinked. “How does one burn spaghetti?” He stage-whispered back, genuinely curious. Peter only shrugged, smile still in place. The two of them stared at each other in silence for a bit, before laughing. “Pete, I’d like you to meet Vision. The one you should be thanking for the meal. I’m pretty sure I’d have made something equally as burnt if not for him.” He heard a chuckle from the other side of the kitchen. When he turned his head he saw May looking at him. “Oh! So you’re the hot aunt Peter-Piper keeps telling me about.” His grin widened when he heard Peter groan beside him. Beside him, he heard Peter and Vision introduce themselves politely, it didn’t take long for Peter to ask random questions about nothing really. Vision answered each question diligently and happily. They would get along just fine, Tony surmised.

“And you’re the famous Mr. Stark.” May retorted, walking closer to the group.

“Please, call me Tony.” He put down the batter and the whisk only to extend a welcoming hand. “It’s a pleasure to finally meet you.” Again. May shook his hand with that firm grip of hers he had missed so much.
“The pleasure is all mine.” She smiled kindly to him. He missed that smile too. “Though, don’t think you’re getting away with calling me ‘hot aunt.’” She glared at him, but that smile was still there and ruined the effect. Tony chuckled.

“Just calling it as I see it.” He winked.

“Mr. Stark!” Peter shrieked, pulling Tony back. The older man only laughed freely. “Please stop flirting with my aunt.”

“Oh, don’t count on that.” Rhodey piped up, walking over to stand by Tony and clasp a hand on his shoulder. “He flirts with everyone. It’s the only way he knows to show affection.” Tony glared menaciously at the shit eating grin Rhodey was giving him. “Really,” he continued, now looking at Peter again, “he still flirts with me sometimes, and I’ve long since put him in the friendzone.”

“I request that you refrain from doing such flirtatious acts with me, Sir.” Vision frowned. “The thought is rather… unpleasant.” Tony gasped, dramatically placing a hand on his heart.

“Yeah, same here.” Peter nodded, looking over at Tony with his youthful, bright eyes.

“Et tu, Brutus?” Tony shook his head dejectedly.

“Please don’t tell me you’ve taken up flirting with minors, Tony.” A deep voice came from the doorway. Tony already groaned. Of course this was when he shows up.

“Boss, Dr. Strange has arrived.” FRIDAY supplied helpfully.

“Don’t worry your pretty little magical head, Stephanie, I have standards.” Tony turned around to face him with a grin. “After all, I haven’t flirted with you.”

“That’s simply because you know I’m out of your league.” He grinned back easily. Tony blinked, delightfully surprised by the returned quip and also by the wizard’s casual attire. He heard Rhodey laughing obnoxiously beside him, using his grip on Tony’s shoulder as a support.

“Out of my league, he says.” Tony grumbled after he recovered. “Just for that you don’t get to eat my cake. Peter, you can have his share.” Peter immediately smiled.

“Oh no, he does not need the extra sugar.” May quickly said. “You youngsters have far too much energy already.” She added once she saw Peter’s pout.

“A slice for the road, then.” Tony took to mixing the batter again. “Everyone, meet Doctor Stephen Strange.” He looked to the man who was leaning against the doorway. “Stephen, meet Pete, Ms. Parker, Rhodey and Vision. Though I’m pretty sure the two of you have met before.”

“Please, call me May.” May immediately said. “No need for formalities with me, Tony.” She winked, already amused with Peter’s exasperated groan.

“May!” The boy’s chiding went ignored.

“It’s nice to meet to meet you, Dr. Strange.” Rhodey said, walking up to the man and offering a hand. “Seriously, it’s great meeting anyone who can make Tony shut up for even a second.” Stephen smirked.

“A near impossible feat, I’m sure.” Stephen pushed himself off the doorway and shook the offered hand. “It’s nice to meet you as well, Mr. Rhodey.” That earned a gleeful chuckle from Tony.
“Platypus! Your last name is now Rhodey, it’s official!” Tony grinned, putting the finished batter in a pan and into the oven. “Colonel Rhodey, the brave, wise War Machine.”

“Is your name not Rhodey?” Was said at the same time as an excited “you’re the War Machine??” Rhodey blinked once, twice, and then smiled at the kid.

“Yeah, I’m the War Machine.” He then turned to look at Stephen. “And Rhodey is one of the nicknames Tony has given me. My real name is James Rhodes.”

“I see, so he refuses to call everyone by their name, then?” Stephen asked.

“That’s right Merlin! Names are so boring.” Tony grinned.

“Wait, does this mean you’re going to keep referring to me as ‘Hot Aunt’?” May looked over at Tony and groaned when she saw his Cheshire grin. “Please don’t.”

“That’s his other way of showing affection.” Rhodey sighed. “Giving people ridiculous nicknames.” He looked over at Tony. “Some people even forget our real names.”

“That’s right. People think my name is actually Pepper.” A new voice joined the room, and everyone turned to look at the stunning, gorgeous redhead standing behind Stephen. “It’s actually Virginia.”

“Pep!” Tony smiled wildly, walking over to the newcomer and giving her a big hug. “Glad you could make it.” Pepper blinked, surprised by the affectionate gesture, but quickly hugged him back. They might no longer be lovers, but they certainly still loved each other. She was thankful that her friendship with Tony wasn’t gone, and that Tony had respected their relationship enough not to try and turn it into something romantic again.

Tony was quick to introduce her to everyone, cheerfully calling everyone by their nicknames instead of their actual names, if only to see them all groan in amused exasperation. Peter, May and Vision were the only ones who didn’t complain, May was even smiling throughout the introductions.

“I’m Hot Aunt, apparently, but most just call me May.” She said with a warm, welcoming smile.

“It’s nice to meet you, May.” Pepper smiled back. Tony then realized he might’ve made a mistake then and there. Pepper was a smart, determined woman who had the power to smite Gods, and so was May. Both of them together would be a force to be reckoned with. He and Peter both were in trouble now.

“Boss, Mr. Murdock, Mr. Nelson and another unknown person have arrived.”

“Would that be Ms. Page?” He asked, frowning. He was sure he had given FRIDAY all of their names.

“No boss, Ms. Page was unable to make it today.”

“Huh.” Tony shrugged. “Guess I’ll go get them and make a new friend in the process.” He started making his way out of the kitchen. “Honey Bear, could you please set the table?”

“I think I preferred doorman duty.” He complained, already making his way to the cabinets while Vision finished making the icing for the cupcakes the two of them had baked earlier. They really did go overboard with cooking, didn’t they?
“I’ll be back soon, try not to miss me too much.” Tony blew him a kiss and left.

“He really does flirt with everyone.” Stephen commented.

“You have no idea.” Pepper grumbled. “Back when I was still his secretary, I’ve gotten so many complaints about it.”

“I thought you said he only flirted with people he liked.” Peter asked, looking at Rhodey with his innocent eyes.

“Well, he does.” Rhodey paused, thinking for a moment while he was placing the plates on the countertop. Setting the table his ass, there was no table to set unless you count that ridiculous coffee table in the living room. He’d have to yell at Tony for that later. “But he also flirts with people to piss them off sometimes.”

“Huh.” Peter frowned. “Then how do you know whether he’s doing it because he likes you or not?”

“Oh trust me, his friendly flirting is nothing like his ‘I f- really don’t like you’ flirting.” That earned Rhodely a knowing glare from May, which he replied with a mental apology for nearly cursing in front of her precious, young nephew. He then started to wonder why Tony had even started talking to the kid in the first place. He knew Tony still talked to Harley, the boy who had helped him out during the whole Extremis fiasco, but he didn’t know where Peter came from. He’d have to ask later.

“So, how did all of you meet Tony?” Pepper asked, practically reading Rhodey’s mind. “I was his secretary and his impulse control, and I’m now his C.E.O. and still his impulse control.” She added, earning a laugh from Rhodey.

“She’s not joking, she’s the only reason that man is still alive and not lost to the world in one of his labs.” Rhodey gave her a fond smile. “I’ve been his best friend since M.I.T. and been his other, more impatient impulse control that sometimes goes along with the trouble.”

“I’m his intern!” Peter piped up, though Rhodey thought he sounded just a bit too nervous while saying it. The kid must’ve still been new to the whole thing… but when did Tony get an intern?

“And I’m the intern’s aunt.” May ruffled Peter’s head, earning a winded sigh and a whined “Maaaaay.”

“Tony created me.” Vision said casually, his concentration was now on decorating the cupcakes, the ones he had made prior to the cake, with icing, though he was also smiling shyly as he worked. He was elated by the new and large company that had come over just to eat with them all. He was delighted that they were all able to make it despite the short notice, and thankful that Tony had thought to invite them all. None of them had even thought to alienate Vision, either; which was something the android had been expecting.

“Wait, he created you?” Peter gasped. Vision then frowned, wondering what his reaction would be. “Oh my God, that’s so cool!!” Immediately, Peter was beside Vision. “I thought you just liked wearing skin paint, or something!” He added, completely unfazed by the android’s curious gaze. “Can we be, like, best friends?” Peter asked, looking up expectantly. He immediately frowned though. “Wait no, that’s Ned. He’d be mad if I gave his title to someone else.” Someone. Peter had called him a someone, not a something. Vision felt an emotion he wasn’t quite used to and wasn’t sure what to call, but he felt it nonetheless and it felt nice. “Can you be the other best friend? Like, silver-metal best friend? Second place best friend?” Peter then frowned again. “Oh man that
doesn’t really sound as nice as it did in my head.” He looked up at Vision with another smile. “Can we still be friends, though?”

“Yes, we certainly can.” Vision bowed his head and turned back to the cupcakes, satisfied with the interaction. Peter wasn’t done with him though.

“Awesome!” The boy exclaimed. “How did he make you?? If you don’t mind me asking!” Peter looked at the other. Vision frowned again, wondering if they boy was scrutinizing him; but when he looked at the boy’s curious expression, one that mirrored his own in most days, he didn’t feel any judgement, only genuine interest. “Wait, was that rude to ask? Oh my God, it was, wasn’t it? I’m so sorry!” Peter put both of his hands up as a gesture of apology. Vision found himself smiling, and that emotion came back.

“No, it is quite alright. I’m not quite knowledgeable as to how I was created, similarly to how you do not know how you were birthed. Though, I know that Sir had built my body alongside Dr. Banner, and JARVIS. I also am aware that I am functional because of the Mind stone that has been placed on my head, as well as the machine built by Dr. Cho.” He explained, earning more questions from Peter.

“When Tony said the kid was energetic, I think he was downplaying it.” Rhodey mused, looking at Peter with a smile.

“You have no idea.” May chuckled. “He’s a very sweet boy, though.”

“Yes, he seems to be.” Stephen nodded. Normally, he wouldn’t be so fond of kids. They were often times too troublesome and difficult. Peter, however, seemed to be an exceptionally bright young man, who had a genuine curiosity for the world around him and an endearing innocence about him.

“I’ve returned!” A sudden voice jolted everyone from their conversations. “Missed me?” Tony asked no one really, but the smile was still on his face.

“Not at all.” Stephen was the first to recover, already offering up a remark.

“Rude.” Tony scoffed, but the smile he sported contradicted his reaction. “Here’s my favorite lawyers and their friend. Mingle while I get Ms. Jones a drink.”

“You’re very good at introductions, Tony.” A lean man wearing round sunglasses said behind him with a smirk. “I’m Matthew Murdock, but please just call me Matt.” He waved to the general direction of the room.

“I’m Foggy.” Another man said from beside him. “Thanks for having us over.” He was smiling excitedly.

“Jessica.” A woman said from behind the three of them, she looked rather intimidating.

“Rhodey, nice to meet all of you.” Rhodey smiled at all of them, once again wondering when the hell Tony had made their acquaintance. He suddenly felt really out of the loop. He really needed to spend more time with his best friend. He still hadn’t gotten over the fact that Tony hadn’t even told him about the surgery he was going into until he was actually going into that surgery. Had it been someone else, Rhodey would have assumed that he simply didn’t value their friendship… but he knew Tony. He knew the man had little regard to his own life, thinking that he inconvenienced everyone with his mere existence and it only got worse after he began working with the Avengers. The surgery was so uncomfortably similar to when he was dying from palladium poisoning, not telling anyone until it was too late. Rhodey felt his good mood die at the memory.
“I’m Stephen.” The other man said, bringing Rhodey back from his darkened train of thought. Rhodey still didn’t know how Tony came to know that guy, but that was fine for now. He was glad Tony seemed to be surrounding himself with nicer people instead of people like Steve Rogers.

“Well, now that introductions are done… can we eat? I’m starving?” Tony whined. Had Rhodey really been so lost in thought he missed several introductions? “Oh, if the food is good then it was all me, but if you get food poisoning then Vis was the cook.” Tony winked at Vision, who frowned slightly before realizing Tony was just joking with him. He then smiled. “Kidding, of course. Like I told Peter, the only reason any of this is edible is because of Piping Hot here.”

“Piping hot?” Matt tilted his head.

“Nicknames.” Rhodey grumbled. “Though I am curious, what are yours?” That earned him an even more confused stare. “Wait, Tony, you haven’t given them nicknames yet?”

“I believe it was ‘Matticus and his band of ne’er-do-wells.’” FRIDAY chimed from the ceiling.


“There’s also Damn Good Lawyer.” Tony grinned. “But don’t worry, I’ll find a horrible nickname for you yet Matty.” Tony winked with a grin, fully knowing the other had to pretend he didn’t notice it with his bizarre senses.

“You are one lucky man, Matthew.” Stephen said. “In our first interaction, he had already started with the nicknames. It was a traumatizing experience, to say the least.”

“Please, you were just bummed out your fake science didn’t phase me.” Tony rolled his eyes. “Besides, Gandalf, your nicknames suit you.”

“Fake science?” Rhodey frowned. “Is he some sort of street magician? I thought he was a doctor. Wait, did you seriously nickname his job?” Tony looked at Rhodey for a moment, and then turned to look at Stephen. A cheeky smile quickly bloomed on his face and easily turned into booming laughter.

“Street magician!” Tony exclaimed in between breaths, only to laugh harder. “FRIDAY, make that his contact name!”

“You got it, boss!” FRIDAY chirped, happy to see Tony laughing so carefree. She was very thankful that Vision had asked for a large gathering for their meal. She hadn’t really considered it before now, but the young android (who was only a couple of days older than her, really) had come up with a brilliant idea.

“Oh shut up.” Stephen huffed before turning to Rhodey. “No, Rhodey, I used to be a doctor. Now, I’m… retired.” So Stephen didn’t want everyone to know about his wizarding ways, that would explain the casual clothes in lieu of his normal blue robes and red, magical cloak.

“So then, being a doctor means having fake science?” Rhodey frowned, looking at Tony.

“He made a shitty card trick, Rhodes. Tried to convince me it was pure magic.” He regretted having to lie to Rhodey, but it wasn’t his secret to share and there were more people than just Rhodey there to hear him. “I had to give him shit for it, I just had to.” Stephen gave him a thankful smile before covering it up with a frown.

“Oh please, you were baffled by it at first.” He said, playing along easily. Tony smirked at him, wondering what else the two of them could lie their way through.
“What I was baffled by, was that you were trying a shitty card trick on me.” And then, he realized there was a human lie detector in the room. Well, surely Matt would understand him wanting to keep another man’s secret? Right?

“No wonder he keeps calling you Merlin.” Pepper giggled. “Card tricks are his most hated ‘magic’ trick.”

“Why’s that?” Peter asked, looking curiously at the redhead.

“Well, there was this one time back in M.I.T. where Tony and I had…” Rhodey continued telling his story, while Tony had finally started passing out the plates for everyone to serve themselves. Once served, everyone picked a spot in any of the three couches Tony had surrounding a small coffee table. He tried not to remember the reason he had such accommodations, deciding instead to forget about all of the movie nights he had with the Avengers and how. He knew that if he dwelled too much on it, he’d wonder if he was even welcomed to any of them in the first place. After all, they never seemed to keen on including him on anything Avengers related, he was just a contractor who did and paid for everything for them — but oh no, definitely not a real member of the team. Maybe the movie nights, the parties, the social gatherings, maybe they were all just to humor him, too keep him baited in while they reeled him into doing whatever they wanted him to.

“Tony?” Stephen muttered behind him, scaring him out of his train of thought. Thankfully, he managed to control his reaction, small miracles and all that. “Aren’t you going to sit down?”

“Yeah, sorry. Spaced out.” So much for forgetting about it. Tony mentally groaned and took a seat next to Peter.

“You okay?” This time, Matt asked from across the room. Tony then realized that a lot of eyes were on him. Just how long had he been lost in thought? How much time did he waste thinking about the Avengers?

“Me? I’m peachy keen.” He gave a charming, bright, carefully forged smile. “I was just thinking about getting an actual dinner table and where I could put it.” Lying was basically second nature to him at this point. Even before he surrounded himself with spies, he was pretty adept in the art of deception. Sure, he’d never be able to infiltrate some super villain’s headquarters with a well-crafted disguise, but he sure as hell could make anyone believe anything he said. Well, almost anyone at least. Matt has his stupid lie detecting powers, and Rhodey’s known him for far too long.

“Then I realized Pepper would actually kill me if I bought anything that would ruin the design of this room.” He huffed.

“You’re quite right.” Pepper shot him a mock glare, clearly amused by his excuse. Tony wasn’t really sure whether or not she believed what he said, but he was thankful she rolled with it. “I’ll be sure to order a table that won’t jeopardize the many hours I spent carefully decorating the penthouse.”

“Thank you, Ms. Potts.” Tony winked at her.

“No, really, thank you. I’m pretty sure Tones would try and build himself a dinner table and it would be ridiculous beyond belief and overly technological. I wouldn’t be surprised if he gave it the ability to roam around the room and tell you the news.” Rhodey flashed his friend a grin, trying to take his mind off of whatever nightmare road it was trekking.

“Rhodey! What a genius idea you just gave me! I’ll probably also add heaters and coolers, so it’ll keep your food warm or cold, respectfully, at all times.” Tony was originally going along with the joke, but the more he thought about it, the more he decided he liked the idea. “I could also make
special plate holders to pass stuff around. Maybe even little bots for salt and pepper.” He hummed, grinning at the idea. He almost missed the mean glare Pepper was giving Rhodey.

“This doesn’t sound like much of a good idea.” Jones commented idly, focusing more on the Jack Daniels Tony had gotten her as per her request.

“Can I help build it Mr. Stark?” Peter said excitedly; May smiled softly getting ready to dissuade him.

“Of course Underoos! You’re welcome to join me in the lab anytime you want.” Tony smirked at the starstruck kid. May gave him a gentle smile filled with warm gratitude. He smiled back, even if it was a bit bashful.

“Have you done something like this in the past Tony?” Matt asked beside her, genuinely curious.

“Oh, he has alright. He once built a sentient coffee machine that would make him coffee periodically after every hour or so. I made him repurpose it for water instead, because no matter how much he advocates for it, coffee doesn’t replace a good meal nor a night’s rest.” Rhodey looked at Tony with the look, basically daring Tony to go against him. Before he could, thought, Stephen opened his mouth.

“See, I thought FRIDAY was joking when she said that.” Stephen turned towards Tony. “And now I’m concerned.”

“Pish posh. I’m not actually addicted.” Three unamused glares from Pepper, Rhodey and Vision made him reassess his sentence. “Okay, I’m not that addicted.” When that didn’t seem to appease them, he sighed. “Okay, fine. Maybe I’m mildly addicted.” Then, everyone just started laughing. Tony rolled his eyes, but smiled nonetheless.

The light dinner conversations continued easily, even after everyone was done with their dinner. Eventually though, it was getting late and people had to leave. Matt, Foggy and Jessica were the first to leave. If Tony didn’t know any better though, he’d have thought that Jessica would’ve wanted to stay longer.

He was pleasantly surprised when it had been her that Matt had brought along. He was pretty sure she wasn’t really fond of him, or any high-end businessman that might’ve had shady dealings at some point in their life… even if the only shady dealings that happened with SI were because of Obie. She was, unsurprisingly, a little cold with him in the beginning, eyeing him warily and ready to go on the offensive if needed. He made sure she wouldn’t feel the need. As the night progressed, it seems that he grew on her somehow. That was something he was thankful for, it would make trying to recruit her a hell of a lot easier. He wouldn’t be shocked if Matt told him that’s what he was planning all along.

Right after the Three Musketeers left, Pepper left with Rhodey. The two of them each had something going on in the morning, and, unlike Tony, required more than three hours of sleep. Tony offered all of them a room to spend the night, but no one, aside from Vision, decided to accept the offer. Tony really hoped he didn’t want to continue their conversation from earlier.

Strange was next to leave, creating a portal in an unoccupied room near the exit. Tony gave his goodbyes and turned to leave. “Thank you for inviting me. It was more pleasant of an experience then I’d have thought it would be.” Tony arched a brow at that.

“Glad it exceeded your expectations.” He replied with a sardonic drawl, though there was no heat behind it. “If you thought it would be unpleasant, why’d you come?” He couldn’t help but ask.
“Wong said I needed to get out more and make friends.” Stephen responded without hesitation and with an exasperated sigh. “Apparently, one friend and a former lover is not enough by his standards.”

“Preach to the choir.” Tony mused, gaining a raised brow from the sorcerer. “Up until recently, my only real friends have been Rhodey and Pep, who is also my ex.” He explained.

“Ah.” Stephen muttered simply. After a beat of silence, Tony was about to repeat his farewells and leave but, before he could, Stephen spoke again. “I was also interested in forming a better relationship with you.” He admitted. “Perhaps becoming actual friends rather than simple coworkers.”

“That would be nice.” Tony tried not to look as surprised as he felt. He liked Stephen as a person, despite the large ego that could match his own. In the previous timeline, they butted heads a lot but had no real qualms with each other. In this timeline, they actually got along swimmingly despite the mildly rough start. Strange was a lot less antagonistic, though maybe it was because Tony was also a lot less antagonistic too. Under their brief encounters, they had grown a sense of respect for the other and even joked around sometimes.

Plus, Tony could never forget Stephen simply handing over the stone for his life. It was a move that infuriated Tony at the time, and also for some time after, but one that he also grew to appreciate. Not only had he saved Tony’s life, but he was also placing all of his faith and trust in Tony’s hands. He believed that Tony wouldn’t fail, and he barely knew the mechanic. The Strange in front of him might not be the same as the one who saved his life, but the gratitude was still there.

“Wonderful.” Stephen gave him a small, but genuine smile. “Have a lovely night, Tony.” With that, the sorcerer stepped out of the tower, through the portal, and into the Sanctum.

“You too Merlin. See you when I see you.” He waved with a smile and walked away when the portal closed.

When he returned to the living room, he wasn’t surprised to see Peter still chatting animatedly with Vision, who just sat there with a fond expression on his face. Tony knew he’d take to the kid in a heartbeat. It was Peter after all, he had that effect on people. May was smiling along with them, though she seemed a bit tired. Tony would make sure his driver got them home safe. He’d send Happy, but he was out on a forced vacation that Tony insisted he’d have to blow off some steam. If it wasn’t for that, he’d probably had invited the grumpy man as well.

“Hey Pete, sorry to interrupt, but could you come down with me to the lab really quick?” Tony asked with a charming smile. May furrowed her brow, wondering what Tony wanted with her kid. “Since you’re here, I was hoping I could show you what you’ll be working on for your internship. Maybe get some fresh ideas running throw that brilliant brain of yours.”

Peter instantly beamed, looking at May with pleading eyes. She could only roll her own eyes, smiling nonetheless. “Go, but only fifteen minutes. We’re leaving soon.” She shot an apologetic look towards Tony, but he shrugged it off. He knew she was tired, and he didn’t even really need the full fifteen minutes.

“Let’s go then, no time to spare.” He smiled wildly, clasping his hands together. Almost immediately the boy was by his side, eagerly following him towards the elevator and into it.

“Will I actually get to work on stuff, Mr. Stark?” Peter asked hopefully. “I thought the internship was just a cover.”
“Well, yes and no. Technically, it is mostly just a cover, but you’re also a smart kid. I personally believe smart kids should get the chance to do smart things. So, yeah, you’re working on the lab whenever you want. Like I said, you get access to the lab whenever you want.” Tony paused for a second. “Except during shutdown protocols, then it’s only me.” He was tempted to leave that bit out, but he knew the kid might misunderstand the protocol if he ever encounters it. He’d rather just be straight forward with the kid, for once.

“What’s shutdown protocol?” He was expecting that question, but really wasn’t looking forward to answering it.

“Basically when I need to be alone in the lab for one reason or another.” He shrugged. “Anyways, here we are.” He grinned, exiting the elevator and heading into the chaotic mess that was his lab. His grin widened when he heard the elated ‘woah’ behind him. “Welcome to my sanctuary.” He winked.

“This is incredible Mr. Stark!” Peter looked around with wide, captivated eyes. His mouth was slightly agape in sheer awe, and his eyes searched around the room gleefully, making sure to suck in every detail.

“Thanks, kid.” Tony smiled warmly. “I have to admit though, the real reason I called you down here wasn’t to wow you with my chaotic workshop.” He turned and headed towards one of the worktables.

“It’s not?” He wasn’t even surprised to hear Peter’s voice trailing behind him. The kid was like a little duckling, and about as cute as one too.

“Nope!” Tony grabbed a small bag containing the suit he was working on for Peter. The boy still had to come visit the tower to test his powers, but he really didn’t feel comfortable with the idea of Peter swinging around with a less-than-stellar pajama suit. “It was to give you this.” He turned around and gave Peter the bag.

“What’s this?” He peeked curiously inside and frowned when he didn’t figure out what it was. When he took the red fabric out of the bag, revealing a suit, his eyes widened.

“I wanted to wait until I had you here, giving me input on what you wanted for your suit and what would help you better out there… but I didn’t want to wait in case something happened.” Nothing happened in the previous timeline, but he still didn’t want to risk it. “So, I took some liberties and used what you told me in the hospital to make this. I still want you to come by sometime so we can properly test your powers and make any adjustments that you want, or even make a suit from scratch, but for now that’s enough.” He was relieved when the kid didn’t question his poor excuse, too busy looking at the suit with wow. “If you press the button in the middle, it adjusts itself to fit you better.” The kid didn’t do anything, just stared at the suit. Tony was starting to get worried, maybe he should have waited after all. “Uh, kid? You okay?”

That got the kid’s attention. His eyes snapped to meet Tony’s, and the older man was having difficulties understanding the expression behind his brown, warm eyes. “I… I don’t know what to say.” His voice was small, quiet, emotional. “I just… Thank you.” He gently put the suit back in the bag, gently placed the bag on a table, and then threw himself at Tony, hugging him tightly. “Thank you so much.”

Tony blinked, before hugging him back. He didn’t have the heart to push the kid away, nor did he want to. “Hey, don’t worry about it. I’m just happy to help you out Pete.” He said warmly. “I don’t like you risking your neck out there without the proper equipment. It’s really the least I could do.”
“No.” Peter shook his head quietly. “You could’ve done nothing at all, and that would’ve been fine. You’re the best Mr. Stark.” Suddenly, Peter realized what he was doing and quickly let go of Tony. “Uh, sorry!” He blushed embarrassed.

“It’s fine.” Tony shrugged. “After visiting me in the hospital every day, I think you earned hugging rights.” He immediately regretted saying that when he was Peter immediately tackled him again. “Try not to abuse them, yeah?” Tony chuckled nervously, putting his arms around Peter again despite his nagging.

“You’re the best Mr. Stark!” His smile was blindingly bright, and Tony was thankful he got to see it again. It was almost enough to erase the memory of Peter turning to ash in his arms.

Eventually, Tony let go and decided to use their remaining few minutes actually showing Peter around a bit. He didn’t go near where the stones were hidden, though. At some point, DUM-E showed up beeping furiously, gaining all of Peter’s attention. Peter asked a lot of questions, and cheerfully played a bit with the bot. Though, after their time was up, Tony brought Peter back to his aunt as promised. He made sure they would get home safe, bidding them goodbye with a satisfied smile.

He went back to the kitchen where Vision waited for him patiently. He smiled at the android and began cleaning up. “Thank you, Tony, for tonight.” Vision said, helping Tony with the dishes. “It was a wonderful experience. One I wish to repeat, if possible.”

“Then, I guess we should cook together every Saturday and see who we can kidnap to eat with us.” Tony winked with a smirk. He got a small, quick chuckle and a shy smile for his efforts.
Hey everyone!!
I still exist!! Surprise surprise!
I'm absolutely sorry for coming back almost a month after my previous update, and
I'm sorry it's not as long of a chapter as I usually write.
It's been really hard over in my end. I've had to stay up for literally this entire week and
some other nights on previous weeks working on stuff for my classes. I think I've
managed to successfully channel my inner Tony Stark after this one, to be honest. I
used to hate coffee, I really did.
Now I understand it when Tony says it's life essence.
Also, writing after watching endgame was hard.
I have so many things I want to say about that, but I won't because spoilers are
horrible, horrible things and people should really keep a closed mouth on such things.
Also, I think this fic will end up being 15 to 20 chapters long, just an FYI.
Anyways, here: have an update!

For the first time since The Snappening: Encore, Tony woke up calmly from whatever nightmare
plagued him that night. There was no phantom pain, no screaming, no crying, nothing. He didn’t
jerk awake, potentially falling off whatever object he fell asleep on. He just slowly became
conscious, taking his sweet time to open his eyes. Not even the leftover adrenalin from the dream
was there to stir him up. It was a rather odd experience to say the least, but a good one.
When Tony’s eyes finally opened, he fully understood how this peculiar phenomenon came to
happen. To put it simply, Vision was there placing a gentle red hand on his forehead, rubbing
soothing circles with his thumb. Tony smiled softly, a bit too sleepy to have any real control over
his expressions or emotions. He noticed he was laying on couch in his workshop with a blanket
covering him up. The last thing he remembered was working on his iron legion, he doesn’t even
remember passing out. Though, that part isn’t really that uncommon. Nowadays, it's the only way
he gets any amount of sleep. He’s tried the classic ‘actually using your bed’ method, but he just has
a hard time falling asleep no matter how exhausted he is. Either his mind is overly occupied
thinking of something, or… wait, no that’s basically it. He’s always thinking of something,
regardless of whether it’s about how his friends are doing, what work he needs to finish, or
whatever bad memory he has. He’s constantly wired by his thoughts, and every time he tries to
simply not think it’s almost a guarantee moment of ‘remember that one thing that you did that one
time where you basically fucked everything up?’ Tony’s brain was a real work of art.

Vision had spent the night in his workshop with him; he remembers that too. It’s not hard to figure
out how he ended up in a comfortable position with a blanket over him. His loopy smile grew a bit
remembering the conversation the two had. Vision was concerned with his decision to spend the
remainder of the night in the lab instead of resting, and Tony tried not to make it seem like such a
big deal. He had appreciated the concern though.

“Seriously, Vis, don’t worry about it. I don’t really need that much sleep, I’ve got coffee after all.”
Tony joked with a wink. Vision’s brow only furrowed.
“Do you do this every night?” The android asked, hoping his hypothesis was proven wrong.

“No.” Tony claimed at the same time FRIDAY said “yes.” Vision frowned disapprovingly at Tony.

“Why are you refusing a night’s rest? From my knowledge, humans require eight hours of sleep daily.” Tony sighed, he hated people fussing over his health, but also incredibly grateful for it. It’s actually very nice to be reminded that people care, because he’s mostly just experienced the opposite.

“It’s…” Tony sighs again, not really sure what to say. “I have too much to do,” that seems like a good, honest start, “and so little time to do it. I want to change the timeline a bit more than I already have, while also preventing anyone like Thanos ever happening again… and maybe try and avoid the ‘Civil War’ along the way. There’s so much to do before I get there though, and the more time I waste the worse off we are.”

“You will not be able to do any proper work if you are not well rested.” Vision countered. “In fact, a tired mind also ends up slowing down process.” Tony hated it when others used logic against him. Okay not really, he usually loves it because it means he has someone smart to talk to, but right now he hates it.

“I can get over that with the power of caffeinated beverages and power naps.” A motto he’s adopted since his college days, if he’s being honest.

“I disagree entirely. Caffeine will only get you so far, but also damage your body along the way. It is no proper substitute for sleep.” There’s that stupid logic again. “Go sleep, Tony.” Vision put a gentle hand on Tony’s shoulder, trying desperately to convince the tired man to just let himself rest for once. He felt... sad? No, not quite. Angry perhaps? No… Bitter. Yes, that labels his emotions perfectly. He felt… bitter that Tony has had to suffer with such a heavy weight on his back all alone. Meanwhile, the other Avengers haven’t done much for him. He also felt sympathy for him, and sorrow that the people he considered a family didn’t really make a healthy one.

“I’m not really tired.” Tony shrugged. “It’s okay, really.” The android knew Tony was lying, but he decided to relent. Tony seemed dead set on not going to bed tonight for whatever reason, the least Vision could do was take care of him.

“Very well,” he bowed his head gently, “if you will not sleep, then may I please join you in your work?” He didn’t quite expect to see Tony beam so giddily at him. It was a pleasant sight.

“I’d love that!” Tony’s smile was infectious. He eagerly took Vision to the lab, explaining several of his current projects and inviting Vision to work with him. The android listened to everything the inventor had to say about his work, relishing each word like they were generous gifts given to him. He was genuinely excited to work with the inventor, even if he wasn’t a professional on the field of study like Tony was. He could help with the data, at least.

Despite Tony’s excitement, it didn’t take long for him to fall asleep on the table while fiddling with some gears. Vision smiled affectionately at the older man, gingerly picking him up and placing him on the couch. He was content that the other had finally allowed for his body to rest, even if that hadn’t lasted much.

Tony was more awake now, his mind sharper and ready to continue working. He stayed peacefully laid down though, simply enjoying the calming ministrations Vision gave him. “I am very fond of you, Tony Stark.” Vision hummed softly. “Not in the same way I am fond of Wanda. It is different, but it is there. It is an interesting feeling; I quite enjoy it.”
“The feeling is mutual, Vis.” Tony closed his eyes again, trying to just enjoy the moment - something he hasn’t done in quite some time.

“Do you often have trouble sleeping?” Vision asked hesitantly, as if he’s afraid of the answer. Vision didn’t understand what made Tony so averse to sleep, but after witnessing his face slowly distort into something akin to a silent scream whilst dreaming, he had a vague idea about what kept the inventor awake at night.

“Don’t worry about it.” Tony shrugged. “It’s nothing important.”

“That is not a no.” Vision commented. “Night terrors?” He ventured to guess. He didn’t know what prompted his interest on this particular topic, but he wouldn’t deny it either. If he had to assume, he supposed it was because it was a topic of interest for Tony; therefore making it a topic of interest for Vision. Perhaps he was hoping to somehow help stop the nightmares, even though that was not within his power. Logically speaking, him knowing what troubles Tony does absolutely nothing to solve the problem. Yet there he was, asking about it.

“It’s nothing.” Tony repeated, somehow makingVision worry even more.

“If you consider chronic night terrors that have you sleeping a less than adequate amount ‘nothing,’ then I suppose you are correct boss.” FRIDAY spoke, her voice a bit harsher than what Vision remembered it being. Tony groaned, probably not appreciating FRIDAY’s sass.

“FRIDAY…” Tony’s voice sounded both like a warning and a silent plea. FRIDAY, seemingly, was having none of that.

“Boss.” Somehow her tone was a perfect imitation of Tony’s, causing the two to be in a standstill. The confrontational silence was not something Vision had foreseen happening. He didn’t really like it, but he dared not try and end it. He chose to continue his soothing gestures, hoping to at least bring a sense of calm for Tony.

After what felt like an eternity, Tony sighed. “Well, since I’m up, how about we do something?” He asked Vision.

“Boss.” FRIDAY didn’t seem too content with Tony’s dismissal. Tony looked tiredly at one of the cameras he had set up in the room, giving it a thoughtful stare. Suddenly, a mechanical whirling sound filtered through, it was the closest FRIDAY could come to a sigh. Tony would easily admit he was proud of her for developing that. “Very well, there are several different projects you’ve decreed important that need to be looked at. There is also a new message from the private line you have given Sergeant Barnes that came in while you were briefly resting. He is in the facility and awaiting your next set of instructions. Shall I schedule for you to visit him tomorrow?”

“Yes please.” Tony furrowed his brows, wondering what exactly took Sgt. Barnes so long to communicate with him. He had assumed getting to the safehouse would take a while, but Barnes took far longer than a simple while. He might’ve still been a bit reluctant to accept assistance from the kid of one of his marks, who was a total stranger and also Iron Man. Regardless, Tony was glad he could finally start working to free the soldier.

“Who is Sergeant Barnes?” Vision asked casually, wondering why the name seemed so familiar.

“He’s someone who I’m going to help.” Tony informed quickly with a shrug, before FRIDAY could say anything. He loved his AI, and he knew that everything she did was usually for his benefit, but he really didn’t want her meddling with Barnes. She’s voiced her disapproval about Tony doing this alone several times, and only, begrudgingly, relented when Tony promised to
bring two suits with him for their meetings. One for Tony to escape with, and one for FRIDAY to take over and fight and detain Barnes if she needed to.

“Do I know him?” Vision had a surprisingly thoughtful expression on his face.

“No.”

“Will I?”

“Yes.” Tony sighed. “He’s Rogers’ bestie for resties with a hell of a lot of problems. He also fought to save you from Thanos, apparently. Got turned to ash despite his efforts.” Tony quickly glanced at the camera again, practically begging FRIDAY not to say anything. Thankfully, she didn’t.

“Hopefully I’ll remember him too, then.” Vision said with a satisfied nod. Tony could only smile, hoping he never did. If he remembers Barnes, then he remembers Siberia and Germany. He’ll remember every wrong Barnes did to Tony, and every wrong Rogers did too. Rogers, of course, was far more at fault than Barnes, but the emotion was still there. Being left for dead for hours in a bunker in the middle of a frozen wasteland with a damaged suit that dug into your face and chest while also making sure you felt like a living freezer kind of took the joy out of a barely functional friendship let alone a barely existent acquaintanceship. Tony remembered Vision being highly distraught with everything that happened, and Tony would rather he not feel that again.

He also didn’t want Vision to remember Wanda throwing him down through several floors, that was something that really fucked Vision over. Despite everything, though, he still wanted to be with Wanda. Tony didn’t quite understand it, but then again maybe he did. Despite everything Rogers had done to him, a part of him still wanted the ‘Good Captain’s’ approval and affection. Rogers was friends with his father, and liked his father, so it might’ve been nice for Rogers to be friends with and like him too. His bitterness easily overshadowed that part of him, though. Vision might’ve not have held that bitterness within him and couldn’t find it in himself to loathe Wanda for what she’s done. It was rather clear how much he cared for the witch. Tony really didn’t want the android to suffer through those emotions ever again, nor did he want Vision to have to suffer through choosing between a would-be father figure and a would-be lover like he had in the other timeline. In the end he couldn’t choose, and it had taken a toll on him. Tony wondered if he could avoid that from happening again, if he couldn’t stop the Civil War from ever happening.

There was, and he wasn’t quite happy with the thought.

“Tony?” Vision called out gently, snapping Tony out of his darkening train of thought. Tony forced a charming smile and carefully stood up.

“Sorry, lost in thought. Anyways, how about we work some more today and then I take you back to the compound?”

“I would like that very much.” Vision smiled back, standing up from his chair. “What shall we work on?” For a couple of hours, Vision helped Tony make adjustments on his Iron Legion. He had some very good ideas on how to prevent anyone like ULTRON from hacking into his already nearly impenetrable hardware. Some of his suggestions could even be used for hardware he intended on creating for the stones. Tony decided to later have Vision test the quality of that program, once he finally creates it.

Vision also managed to help Tony with creating a satellite that would be capable of shooting a cryptic message through a specific channel without a limit on distance. By noon, he was almost ready to send out a message for the Guardians. The only thing stopping him was that he didn’t
know what to send just yet, nor who to address it to. None of the Guardians knew him, so they might be a little weary about being addressed by a supposedly unknown human. Then again, they’re all basically idiots. With the exception of Nebula, of course… and also maybe her no longer diseased sister.

The drive to the compound was equally entertaining with the two of them discussing the many different dishes they’d like to try and make in the next upcoming Saturdays. Tony would have to remind himself to try and make Saturday Social Day a thing and see if everyone else was interested as well. They all seemed to have enjoyed themselves, so maybe they wouldn’t be opposed to the idea. Tony certainly wasn’t.

Reaching the compound was a little less fun, mostly because Tony now had business here. He tried not to grimace while he walked in. “Alright, well, it was really nice having you come over Vision.” Tony said instead, turning to his companion. “You’re welcome to visit whenever you’d like.”

Vision smiled happily. “Thank you, Sir. It has been a pleasure spending time with you as well.” He bowed his head. “I am looking forward to next Saturday.”

“Me too, Piping Hot.” Tony grinned with a playful wink. “I’ll see you around.” He nodded at Vision and started walking to the other side of the compound after the other bid his own farewells.

He sighed horribly once Vision was out of earshot, reminding himself to keep his emotions in check as to not alarm the android. He really didn’t enjoy the fact that he had somehow linked with the stones. That was something he definitely had to look into, and maybe Stephen could help him out since magical bullshit was his area of expertise. Maybe Stephen could also help him out with the Barnes problem, since the brain was his other area of expertise. Tony had a decent idea of how he was going to get rid of the triggers, but it wouldn’t hurt to have someone else join in on the fun. It might even feel something akin to what working with Bruce felt like.

Bruce.

Tony grimaced. That was another train of thought he really didn’t want to hop on and ride out. What could he really say about that man other than how much he missed the green bean fighting machine? He regretted everything that had happened, but he also regretted that the man chose to leave and abandon him. Though, maybe it was for the best that he had left early and somehow ended up in space instead of having to choose sides. Tony wasn’t so sure Bruce would have chosen his side, especially since that meant working along with one power-hungry general Ross.

He quickly chose to think back on the previous topic of thought, not wanting to dwell on the what-ifs that he couldn’t actually solve. There was only so much he could do and, for now, there wasn’t much he could do about Bruce. He could, however, make sure the Asgardians had a new place to call home for when Ragnarök happens. There was a really nice-looking Norwegian island he had seen floating around on Craig’s list, he’d definitely have to pull a lot of strings for that one though.

It wasn’t long before Tony reached his destination, especially with how distracted he was by his own thoughts. It was never a dull moment in Tony’s head, that’s for sure. He groaned, displeased with what was going to happen in the next few minutes. He took a deep breath, steeling himself for the upcoming event.

Tony stood rigidly in front of a plain, steel door nervously. He’s been here for about five minutes now, just staring at the door and finding his nerves. He took a shaky breath, wondering if maybe he was making a mistake. No, he was definitely making a mistake. That’s the basic criteria for being Tony Stark: always make mistakes. Before he could convince himself to turn away and hide in his workshop, he knocked.
There was a moment of silence before he heard footsteps, and then the door opened revealing a young adult wearing comfortable clothes and a displeased frown. “Stark.” She nearly growled.

“Hi Wanda.” Tony was impressed at how even he managed to keep his voice. “I was wondering if we could talk?” The girl simply continued to glare at him, not saying anything but also not shutting the door on him. He’ll take what he can get. “I promise I come in peace. I just want to talk.”

“Then talk.” She said harshly. Tony had hoped she’d lost at least an ounce of the hatred she harbored for him, but he wasn’t surprised to see that wasn’t the case.

“I’ve come to realize that I put you in here and never told you why.” Tony started carefully. “I thought that I was giving you a home, a place to rest. I didn’t realize it could have been considered a prison.” Wanda’s eyes narrowed, but she didn’t say anything. “After Ultron, some people still haven’t forgotten that you had worked with him at first. They know you switched sides, but some weren’t convinced.”

“Get to the point Stark.” She was starting to become hostile, Tony really tried not to feel as threatened as he did.

“The point is that I thought if I kept you here long enough for things to blow over, people would forget. It wouldn’t matter anymore, and you could join the rest of the team freely without worrying whether or not civilians might be prejudiced against you. The media can be a harsh thing, trust me. I’ve dealt with it all my life and it doesn’t get easier. One slip up and all of your achievements amount to nothing. Public opinion is a fickle thing, but it’s something the Avengers need to be mindful of.” He didn’t mention how he was still dealing with the fallout, and still donating large sums of money for reconstruction. He remembered offering to aid in the reconstruction several times, but they wouldn’t even let him oversee it. At least they took the money, he supposed.

“So you’re saying I’m being held prisoner for my own good?” Wanda scoffed, crossing her arms and glaring at him some more. “Thank you, so much. I really appreciate your kindness.”

“You’re not a prisoner, Wanda. A prisoner doesn’t have Wi-Fi, decent meals, entertainment, or anything that money can buy. You’re in house arrest, sure, but in no way are you a prisoner.” Tony said sternly. “I’ve tried to make the compound as comfortable as I can for you.” He added. “A prisoner doesn’t get that. Besides, you’d probably only be stuck here for six months, maybe a year max. It isn’t so bad compared to what some people in the government want. It sucks, I know, but it’s the best I can give you.”

“So you expect me to thank you for this? For not being able to step outside?” Tony tried not to groan in frustration.

“Well, that would be nice, but no. I’ve been conditioned by the Avengers to just give shit out for free and expect glares in return.” He couldn’t help but let the bitterness slip. “Look, I’m not here to try and make you like me, I know there’s no lost love between us considering our history. I stand by the statement that I did not know about the bomb that killed your family, and I wasn’t the one who built it. I’m very sorry that it happened, but it wasn’t my fault. You might not like me saying that, but it’s the best I can give you. I’ve grown weary of asking for forgiveness for things that I haven’t even done. I know my weapons have killed a lot of people, but it’s been years since I’ve made them and years since I’ve attempted to right those wrongs. It’s been years since I made sure Stark Industries focused on clean energy instead. The weapon that killed your family was more than likely sold by my previous business partner, Obadiah Stane, and I’ve made sure that he would never get to do that again.”

Wanda blinked in surprise by how adamant he sounded, by how utterly dark and cold his voice
felt. It’s something she’s never seen from the man before. It didn’t sway her emotions, though. She still felt hatred for the man she blamed.

“What I’m doing here is simply to try and get you to understand why you’re here and not out there.” He finally said. “If you want to go out, fine. Be my guest but know there will be consequences and none of them are from me.” Tony took a breath and ran his fingers through his hair. “Frankly, Wanda, I don’t really care what happens. I’m tired. God, I’m so fucking tired.” This was a level of genuineness that Wanda wasn’t expecting. “I’m keeping you here because it’s all that I can do for you. I can keep you away from the press, the government, the public for as long as it takes for them to forget their bitterness towards you. For them to have enough open mindedness to accept you. My lawyers are working day and night trying to get you out of trouble from the law, but it’s hard. It’s a process that takes an annoyingly long amount of time. All I ask is that you be patient, and to wait for things to blow over. Then, when everything’s settled in the dust, you can go out again and live your life however you want to.”

“And what do you expect me to do while I wait?” Wanda’s voice no longer held the harsh tone it did a mere moment ago. It was still reserved and hesitant, but it was also curious now. It seemed as though Stark genuinely wanted to help her out, but she wasn’t ready to trust him just yet.

“Whatever you want in the Compound, really. You could practice your magic, hone it, make it sharper and deadlier. You could watch movies and shows, maybe play video games. You can do whatever…” He bit his lip momentarily before resolve flooded his features and he spoke again. “If you want, and this is by no means me telling you to do this, we could maybe try and mend our relationship?” He offered. “You blame me for your family’s death, I blame you for ULTRON and JARVIS. It’s fresh, and it hurts. You have absolutely no idea how much JARVIS meant to me, for a long while he was the only family I had.” Stark looked so vulnerable right now, so much like Wanda did when her brother had died. “But, if you’re up for it, I’m willing to let it be water under the bridge.”

Wanda looked at him now, really, truly looked at him. This was not the man she was taught to hate. Stark was supposed to be a selfish, egotistical asshole that destroys everything in his path. Someone who didn’t work well with others, who did things on his own. She remembers the nightmare she had given him, the guilt she had forced on him. She had done it because she wanted him to hurt, she wanted to give him pain for everything he’s done.

Now it’s become clear that it’s a pain he’s well acquainted with.

“I now know it wasn’t really you, Stark.” Wanda said bitterly. “But it was still your name in that bomb. If I can’t focus my hate on you, then who? Who else can I blame? The unknown terrorists who sent the bomb in the first place? Sure, but then there’s nothing I can do.” She sighed. “You don’t know how that feels.”

“Actually, I do.” Wanda looked up in surprise. If she didn’t know for a fact that Stark was talking honestly with her now, she’d be glaring. Actually, she was still glaring. How could he know what if felt like? “My parents were murdered.” He explained, sensing her question. “It got covered up as a car accident. I spent years blaming and hating my father for taking my mother away from me. Years. Only to find out they were murdered by a super soldier from the second World War.” He gave her a sad, sympathetic smile. “I knew who he was. I blamed him for so long. The hate I had for my father turned into absolute loathing towards him. The thing was, it wasn’t really his fault. He was being mind controlled by Hydra. He didn’t do it because he wanted to, he did it because he was forced to. Eventually I got over it and accepted that he wasn’t at fault. It was hard, but I did it.”

“And you want me to do it as well?” Wanda raised a brow.
“I want you to do what you want to do. I can’t force you into liking me, just as I can’t force myself to like you.” He said simply. “But I’m willing to try. Who knows, maybe we’ll somehow end up being best buddies who braid each other’s hair and paint each other’s nails.” He tried joking, but Wanda wasn’t a willing audience just yet. He sighed, sensing a silence forming between them. “Anyways, that’s really all I had to say to you. If you want to talk to me, ask questions or just say something, let FRIDAY know.” He nodded at her. “Have a good day, Wanda.”

“Stark.” She said in parting, turning around quickly and retreating back into her room. She needed to think.

Tony had to admit that his impromptu meeting with Wanda went far better than he could have hoped for, especially since he had mostly done it for Vision. He didn’t like the idea of forgetting everything Wanda’s done and really wished she realized how ridiculously lucky she had gotten to avoid any real penalty for her actions, but for Vision he was willing to do what he could. He remembers feeling increasingly sick the more he read her HYDRA file, and how incredibly deadly of an asset she made. Though, he supposed the same could be said for plenty of members of the Avengers. Widow and Hawkeye easily come to mind, followed closely by Rogers and now Barnes as well. Even he himself wasn’t squeaky clean, having an entire business surviving off of blood money for so long before he got his head out of his ass and re-founded S.I. to be something good. Wanda has good company, he supposed.

He was impressed he managed to keep his cool throughout the meeting, though; considering Vision hadn’t immediately made his way towards Wanda’s room to try and figure out what was going on. Now, onto the next unpleasant event of the day.

Barnes.

The drive to the safehouse was longer, and far less entertaining than the one to the compound. Friday would talk to him and exchange humor and wits, but the closer they got to the safehouse the quieter she got. Tony didn’t really blame her, she wasn’t the only one who felt a bit antsy over the whole Winter Soldier thing. During their brief, singular interaction, he’s managed to keep his cool around the other, but now, considering how his nightmares keep worsening, it might just take one insignificant gesture similar to what had happened in Siberia to trigger a panic attack. Right now it didn’t take much to get Tony wired, he just manages to hide it very well.

“FRIDAY, call Pete.” Tony requested, hoping that talking to his favorite spider would ease off the edge. He also just really likes Peter and wants to know what kind of day he’s having.

“Peter is still in school, boss.” Well never mind then. Tony sighed.

“Okay. Who do we know that doesn’t hold a job or an academic career?” He asked with a small smile on his face. “Rhodey and Pepper are probably in meetings or dealing with really important stuff similar to what I should be dealing with right now. Matt is being the damn good lawyer he is. I’m not too close to May in this timeline, nor am I close with Foggy, Ms. Page and Jessica. It’s a big fat no to talking with Rogers. I just dropped off Vision, so he’d probably get a bit hackled if I tried calling him. That leaves…”

“Calling Street Magician.” Tony tried not to laugh too hard, having completely forgotten about that little gem. Stephen would surely kill him if he found out it stuck. When Stephen didn’t pick up in the first three rings, Tony was about to give up and just drive in silence. He picked up on the fourth ring, though.

“Tony? Is everything alright?” Came a tired, worried voice. Tony grimaced. Since ULTRON, that was a very common question to ask Tony Stark. Did you fuck something else up? He tried not to
“Yep!” He forced his voice to sound energetic and carefree. “Just thought I should check on my favorite Doctor turned Wizard. Did you make it home okay last night?” He immediately regretted asking the question, simply because he was there when Stephen used a portal to get home, and he seemed to have done it quite okay. He heard a chuckle from the other side of the call, filling through the speakers in his car. It was deep, smooth, and felt entirely lighthearted. Tony found himself smiling along.

“Yes, Tony. I did.” Came the exasperated reply. “Did you stay home okay last night?” Tony rolled his eyes at the remark.

“Yes, Merlin. I did.” A sigh of annoyance brought the smile back on Tony’s lips. It was just too easy to mess with the doctor, and Tony wouldn’t miss that opportunity.

“Now that we’ve gotten those pleasantries out of the way,” Tony could basically feel the sarcasm just oozing from Stephen, “are you sure you’re okay?” The sudden sincerity baffled Tony, and when he didn’t reply while he was getting over the surprise, Stephen took it as a cue to keep talking. “You sound a bit on edge. Are you in distress?”

“No!” Tony blurted out far too quickly, and loudly, for it to be true. He blamed his sleep addled brain. He could practically see Stephen’s unimpressed gaze. “Okay, I am a bit on edge.” He admitted with a sigh. “I’m about to go do something I really, really don’t want to but absolutely have to.”

“And you called me because?” Tony was mildly regretting calling him now. Perceptive bastard.

“I figured it would be nice to talk to a friend while on my ride over?” He tried not to sound as annoyed as he felt. “Guess that might’ve been a bad call. Sorry to have bothered you Strange. I’ll see you around. FRIDAY end- “

He was interrupted with a quick “wait!” So he did. “That came out wrong, I’m sorry. I simply hadn’t thought we’d be close enough yet for you to call me in these situations. I thought you might have needed something from me.”

“Right, well, you’re the only one without a money earning job and that doesn’t have to go to school. My options were limited.” Tony cringed at his jab. A sudden laugh surprised him though, especially since he was expecting Stephen to take offense. He was rather good at pushing people away, after all.

“Fair enough.” Stephen said with a hint of amusement. How would Tony even react to this?


“I was testing several containment spells right before you called.” He said casually. “And now, I’m talking to you while I make some tea.”

“Oh, I didn’t realize I was interrupting something. I can hang up.”

“It’s quite alright, I needed a break anyways.” Tony didn’t know why that made him feel a bit giddy. He decided to also blame that on his sleep addled brain. Though, it might also be because it’s been a while since someone’s actually stopped what they are doing just to entertain him. Not even Rhodey did that anymore. “So what’s gotten you so stressed out?” The doctor asked while taking a sip of something; tea, probably.
Here, Tony could easily just say it’s something work related, or give the vaguest of answers. Hell, he could even completely dismiss the question and talk about something else entirely, maybe something to do with neurosurgery to try and impress the doctor. He didn’t want to, though. Ever since his brief imprisonment in the hospital, he’s found himself unwilling to lie. Maybe it was Pepper and Rhodey’s disappointment in him for withholding the information of his operation from them, or maybe it was how incredible it was to be able to trust Matt with things. It might’ve even been his reluctance to lie to Peter. He supposed that this is one truth he didn’t have to hide, at least not completely. It helped that Stephen already knew about his time shenanigans.

“So, in the future there’s this thing that happens, the people dubbed it the ‘Superhero Civil War.’ Basically, the Avengers split into two groups: those who think that they shouldn’t be ruled over by the governments’ laws and those that think accountability is necessary. I was part of the latter, by the way. Anyways, I’m about to go deal with one of the catalysts right now, and to make sure I can avoid the stupid fight altogether.” He noticed he was tapping nervously on the stirring wheel, he forced himself to stop.

“What’s the catalyst?” The doctor’s interest was piqued.

“A person who was brainwashed by HYDRA. He’s also Rogers’ old friend from way back when and the guy who killed- who killed many people.” He really hoped Stephen didn’t notice the stutter, or at least wouldn’t think much of it.

“So, you plan on eliminating him?” Stephen asked confused.

“No, I’m going to get rid of the brainwash.” Tony said simply. “He’s supposedly a good guy when he isn’t being forced to kill people.”

“How do you intend on doing that?”

“B.A.R.F.”

“Excuse me?” Tony tried not to laugh, he really did. He has a love hate relationship with his awful naming conventions. Sometimes, he really wants to change the names because they are just awful in a serious conversation, like the one he had with Barnes; other times, they are absolutely fantastic because of the confused reactions he gets from them, like right now. He’s suddenly very grateful he never got around to changing the name.

“It’s something that I built with the purpose of aiding therapy. It’s the Binary Augmented Retro Framing, or, B.A.R.F. for short. It’s hopefully going to help erase the triggers HYDRA put in the poor Winter Soldier’s brain.”

“Fascinating.” Stephen hummed.

“You’re welcome to be a part of the research side of the procedure, if you’d like. It might be nice to have some other professional input on this. I’ve had several doctors try it out and see if it works, and they agreed that it would, but there has yet to be a procedure where this has been used.” Aside from when he used it to show FRIDAY the other timeline, of course. “I’m not too inclined on trusting anyone with this procedure, considering anyone could be HYDRA now-a-days.”

“Including me?”

“Nah, you’re too posh.” Tony winked, only realizing Stephen wouldn’t have seen it after the fact. He received a chuckle for his efforts, though.

“I’d love to join. It’s been a while since I’ve participated in anything medical, it would be nice to
be a part of my other profession.” Tony smiled, knowing full well how that felt. Sometimes, he was so busy being Iron Man that he had little time to be Tony Stark and work on things for his actual job. Pepper usually got on his case enough that he still had an excuse to work on S.I., but he’s already recreated everything he did in the other timeline so that he could dedicate the upcoming months to protecting Earth and preventing another Civil War. That didn’t mean he missed working on S.I. though.

“FRIDAY be a dear and send the good doctor the files we have on Barnes. Send it in an encrypted Stark Tablet though.”

“I do not know Doctor Strange’s address, boss.” Huh, he never did ask the wizard where he lived, did he?

“I can pick it up easily from your workshop, if you’d like.” Stephen offered.

“What? Don’t want me to know where you live?” Tony teased, but there was a hint of worry there.

“177A Bleecker Street. I couldn’t care less if you knew where I lived Tony.” Stephen shrugged. “I simply have a curious mind that eagerly wishes to look at the files as soon as possible. I can be rather impatient when I’m interested in something.” Another sentiment Tony could relate to. “So may I?”

“Sure, knock yourself out. FRIDAY?”

“There will be a tablet waiting on the third workbench to the left of the Stones’ location, Doctor.” FRIDAY informed. She was an absolute blessing, really. What would Tony do without her?

There was a sound of a portal opening, and then a couple of mechanical whirls that sounded like one of Tony’s ongoing projects. That went on for some time, Tony assumed he was reading the notes. “Interesting.” Stephen hummed. “There are a couple of improvements I can think of for your idea, but overall I think it’s quite a solid plan.”

“Thanks.” Tony said, not quite used to people actually complimenting his efforts. Not anymore, at least. It’s been a while since he’s actually worked with other people who understood how much effort he puts into his work, and even more so working with people who appreciated it. Fury and the Avengers really did condition him, didn’t they? He suddenly felt a wave of bitterness wash over him.

“And you, of course, intend on making sure he won’t be able to harm you while you do this. Right?” Tony blinked, not quite expecting that question.

“I’m not strapping him down on a chair if that’s what you’re asking.” He huffed. “He’s there on his own free will, and I’d like to keep it that way.”

“I will bring in two suits to ensure boss’ escape if needed.” FRIDAY chimed in, though there seemed to be an edge of worry in her voice. “I’d still feel better if there was someone else there with you boss.”

“I agree.” Stephen hummed. “I don’t think it’s wise to be in the same room as a well-trained super soldier assassin without any restraints and poke at his deepest darkest memories to boot.”

“I have you FRIDAY.” Tony tried to shrug off the familiar anxiety off of him. It didn’t quite work.

“You could also have me.” Stephen offered easily, once more surprising Tony. This man was an endless bundle of surprises, is seemed.
“Thanks Doc, but if something were to happen I’d rather not risk you getting hurt. Besides, Barnes might not be comfortable with another person he doesn’t know being there, he’s already wearied of me.”

“As opposed to you getting hurt?” Tony shrugged and Stephen sighed. “I’m afraid not. I’m probably more suited to being there, anyways. I can easily teleport us out of the room without having to actually fight the soldier and having my medical expertise there while you perform the initial tests wouldn’t hurt either. As for Barnes, he is a patient. It is your responsibility as his untrained doctor to guarantee he has the best possible treatment he can get. If that includes the addition of a trusted ally who actually is trained, then so be it.” That… actually made sense. Still, Tony wouldn’t want to endanger Stephen with his problems.

“Your presence is eagerly accepted Doctor.” FRIDAY said before Tony could think of an excuse to negate the doctor.

“Wonderful, please send me an image of the facility so that I may join you.”

“What?” Tony sputtered. He couldn’t believe his A.I. was conspiring against him… actually, he could. FRIDAY did whatever she could for him, and if that meant bringing in someone else then she would.

“What time should I be expected there?” Stephen asked.

“In approximately thirty minutes.” FRIDAY supplied.

“No! This is an absolutely terrible idea, and the two of you should be ashamed for thinking of it.” Tony tried to dissuade them, though he had a feeling it would be pretty pointless.

“I’ll see you in thirty minutes, Tony.” Stephen opened a new portal, probably to get back to the sanctum and pack. “I’m going to get ready, so I’m afraid I’ll have to end our call short.”

“Or, hear me out here, you could just not come at all!”

“See you soon.” And with that, the line clicked to an end. Tony groaned.

“Are you happy now, FRI?” Tony asked with an exhausted sigh.

“Absolutely boss!” She chirped.

Chapter End Notes

So, a couple of things I wanted to say about Wanda.
(No spoilers for EndGame here)
She's a complete and utter brat who really should have gotten more than a slap on the wrist, but she's also a smart person who has feelings aside from hatred. I absolutely hate how she treated Vision in Civil War, but I think she kind of tried to make up for it in Infinity War. Tony talking to her definitely wasn't a "Let's all be friends" maneuver, and it wasn't written to invalidate all that's happened between Wanda and the other Avengers.
That being said, I also don't think we should treat Wanda as an absolute villain either. Like I said, she has other emotions aside from hatred. She can be capable of love, and
she is. It might be twisted, and not what we consider love to be, but it's there.
Anyways, I don't love her, but I don't necessarily hate her other. This isn't really a fix-it
fic, and wasn't really meant to be, but Tony's interaction with Wanda in this chapter is
vital for a future chapter.
I'm mostly saying this because I've read many, many fics where she's a horrible
monster who's only aspiration is to make Tony suffer. No hate on those fics, I actually
think the authors made it a very good plot device, but what I guess I'm trying to say is
that this isn't that kind of fic.
I like my characters to be morally gray at all times.

In other news, though, ENDGAME. WHAT THE SHIT???
Heart == broken.

Maybe mild spoilers?

I've realized that if I change a couple of things from this fic, I could totally make it
canon with EndGame. Mildly debating between doing that, or just keeping it the way
it is. It would totally ruin the dynamic I have for Steve and Tony, though.
Hey everyone!
Here’s an update I worked on instead of my finals that are ever so slowly killing me.
Hope you enjoy!!
Also, big thanks for all the comments and kudos, love you guys 🌸
I hope you have a good read and a great day!

ULTRON, an incredibly deadly fiasco that happened while Stephen was away studying the mystical arts, was a program created by Tony Stark. Its original purpose was to save the world, shielding it from any non-friendly alien visitors like the Chitauri. Somehow it ended up deciding that killing off the entirety of the human race was a better alternative. JARVIS, Tony’s prized A.I., had been destroyed during the events, which lead to the creation of FRIDAY.

A lot of destruction ensued, and a good portion of the blame went onto Tony and a Doctor Banner, the latter then went M.I.A. There were also accounts of a Scarlet Witch, the girl who had helped Vision some weeks ago, helping ULTRON up until the point she didn’t. Several governments are still angry at her, but seemingly haven’t done anything yet.

Tony Stark had initiated a relief fund and donated a hefty amount to it. He’s apparently tried to be a part of the reconstruction process, but his help (aside from the money) was respectfully declined. He still helped wherever he could, which earned some forgiveness from Sokovia’s people. Since then he’s been involved more and more in politics, and his public support has been increasing with each fundraiser and event he hosts. He was becoming quite the humanitarian, it seems.

Prior to ULTRON, the genius inventor fought alone against the threat of EXTREMIS. He had been presumed dead for a good portion of the event, much to everyone’s distress. His mansion also blew up, that was quite unfortunate. It was during this event that he and Pepper Potts had seemingly started to drift apart; thought, maybe that part wasn’t as important as the rest.

And right after that and just before ULTRON, Tony had been credited with saving, recruiting and relocating a large sum of the SHIELD agents that had been unceremoniously exposed when all of SHIELD’s information was leaked. This prompted him to open new departments in his company alongside a dramatic increase in the Security Department. Those ex-agents that chose to work under the billionaire are still incredibly loyal to him regardless of what happened during the events of ULTRON. When reporters ask what their thoughts on the situation, most of them simply say the public doesn’t know what truly happened.

“*It wasn’t my fault, you know. Not entirely at least.*”

Before all of that, though, was the Chitauri invasion where Tony Stark nearly sacrificed his life in order to save the New Yorkers and the rest of the world too. He had almost stranded himself in another galaxy light years away, all alone in the emptiness of space. He had almost fallen to his death, only caught last minute by the Hulk. And before even that, Tony was taken hostage by a terrorist group for three months. He refused to make a statement so not much is known on how he was treated there, only that it changed him and that soon after he declared that he’d never make weapons again.
Stephen sighed, closing his laptop with a scowl. There were so many more articles, blogs and old news journals dedicated to the billionaire, but he’d read more than enough. If he continued to read, he’d start to feel like either a stalker or a fanboy. Maybe both. This little google search session of his was enlightening, though. It answered a couple of base questions Stephen had about the man, but it also raised just as many if not more.

It was getting late and he had talked to the billionaire just a couple of hours prior in the hospital room, so Stephen figured he’d ask Tony those questions some other day. Though, the more he thought about it, the more he wondered why he even cared. Surely his relationship with Stark was purely professional? Then again, coworkers aren’t known to visit each other in the hospital and with a sense of urgent worry, nor are they known to apparently give up the time stone, their most important responsibility, in order to save the other. Maybe, a more personal relationship with Tony wouldn’t be a terrible idea, Wong did say he needed more friends. He had to admit that even without the prospect of potential friendship, Tony Stark was an interesting person. Stephen quite liked all things interesting, so it made sense that he had come to enjoy Tony’s company.

Then, a couple of days later, he received a text inviting him over for dinner. Vision, the stone infused android if Stephen remembered correctly (which he always did), wanted to have a small get together and Tony had decided to invite all of his friends. Stephen didn’t really care much for it, despite his mild interest in befriending Tony. The cloak had moped and prodded at him until he relented and decided to attend. He cast an invisibility spell on his cloak, as to not raise suspicion to his nature as a sorcerer while also keeping his friend and favorite fashion accessory with him.

He had honestly expected a massive party, but instead, when he walked to the kitchen from the workshop (where he had hoped would be safe enough to portal to) he was surprised to see three adults and one child casually talking about Tony’s flirtatious nature. He truly did not expect that, but he was rather grateful for it. He was never one for parties, especially now that his new profession required secrecy. This was a comfortable atmosphere, with few people that held good conversations.

The night only got better from that point on, even with the addition of four more individuals. Two lawyers, the C.E.O. of Stark Industries, and one very alcoholic woman. The entire group was rather odd, but, then again, normal was boring. The entire time, Stephen felt his cloak shift ever so slightly, trying to get closer to Tony. It was a rather weird happening. There was one moment, however, where Stephen found himself concerned again with the mechanic. Tony was staring into the living room where they were all seated for dinner. That would have been fine if he didn’t have this pained expression on his face, regardless of whether it was barely readable or not. It really was impressive how, even subconsciously, Tony seemed to be able to hide his emotions well. Impressive and sad. Stephen wondered how many years Tony had spent learning that art, and how many times he’s used it.

A simple nudge to reality and Tony was once again all jokes, laughs and witty remarks. Then, it was time to leave. Tony was kind enough to walk him out to a private room where he could portal away, even if he could have easily just asked FRIDAY to do it for him. Stephen thanked the billionaire for the invite, admitting he had a far better time than he thought he would. Tony had frowned, asking why he even bothered to show up if he thought he wouldn’t have enjoyed it. That was a rather good question. Being hackled to go by his cloak wasn’t a very good answer, and apparently Wong saying he needed friends didn’t quite feel right either. It was then that he realized that he genuinely wanted to befriend the billionaire.

The very next day he received a phone call from Tony. It was a rather surprising development, considering how before the previous night’s event the two rarely exchanged texts. Both of them
preferred to talk about the stones in person, even if Stark’s private line was basically impossible to hack. A few moments of conversation later, and Stephen realized that Tony was about to do something incredibly stupid. A normal occurrence, according to Col. Rhodes—not-Rhodey. At least his nickname was closer to his real name, and also not a female variation of it.

On a normal occasion, Stephen would probably have trusted in FRIDAY’s capability of taking care of Tony, even if she seemed antsy to get someone else to go with him. Then again, maybe that helped make his choice to go with Tony. In all other instances, FRIDAY seemed more than confident in her ability to take care of Tony, so why wasn’t she now? Then there was Tony’s voice, and how weak and tired it sounded. He was hesitant in some points of his narrative, and his voice wavered slightly in others. He hadn’t even realized he was doing this, and that was just as concerning as FRIDAY’s behavior. His instincts told him that something was wrong, and that he should be there.

The cloak agreed with him.

Now, he stood leisurely against the gates surrounding the safehouse. FRIDAY had instructed him that it might be best if he entered the safehouse with Tony, as to not concern the assassin inside. He wasn’t too fond of riding a car again, but he figured it would be fine since it would be for just a mile or so. He could push down his distress long enough to get to the safehouse; besides, Tony would probably drive at a slower pace as to not accidentally drive through the house. It didn’t take long before he saw a beautiful black Mustang approach the gate. Inside the car, a disgruntled Tony could be seen. Stephen wasn’t too bothered though, especially considering the small smile of appreciation that Tony was trying, and failing, to hide.

“Hey there Stephanie! I hope I didn’t make you wait long.” Tony’s quip could be heard from the open window. He gave a good-natured grin and slid across the seat to open the passenger door for Stephen. The taller gentleman entered the vehicle swiftly with a polite nod towards Tony.

“Not at all. Thank you for letting me join you in your research and procedure.” Tony rolled his eyes.

“Yeah, yeah.” He huffed, but soon started driving again. A quick inspection showed that, for the most part, Tony was okay. He sported bags under his eyes, but that also seemed to be the norm for the man, and his hair was a bit messy, probably from running his hands through it so much. Aside from that, he was as impeccable as always. “Just try not to scare him off, okay? It took a lot of patience, something I’m told I don’t have much of, to get him to agree to come here.” Tony said with a serious tone, he let go of the steering wheel in favor of looking at Stephen. The sorcerer was about to reply when he realized something rather crucial.

HE LET GO OF THE STEERING WHEEL.

He felt panic surface up, and Tony frowned in slight confusion. That is, until he realized what he had done. They hadn’t crashed though, which was the only thing keeping Stephen sane right now. “I’ve automated the car, FRIDAY is driving it right now.” Tony said quickly, once more grabbing the wheel and slowing down the car to a sluggish pace. “Most of the time she’s in charge of driving for me, since I’m not really responsible when there isn’t another person in the car with me.”

“Oh.” Was all Stephen could say for a while.

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have done that, especially not with your history…” Tony sighed, berating himself further in silence. “It’s easy to forget that normal cars don’t have their own computerized pilot.” Tony tried to joke to raise the mood up a bit. It only slightly worked, but slightly was still better than not at all.
“You seem to be living in a science-fiction, Tony.” Stephen took a deep, calming breath. *He was okay.*

“Yeah,” Tony agreed easily, “and you live in a fantasy.” Stephen chuckled at that. He had a point, between the magic, the temple dedicated to the study of magic, the existence of cosmic demons, and the many, many mystical objects that he’s gathered, he really was living in a fantasy-like realm. That, of course, isn’t taking into consideration the many, many accounts of dragons, long gone either extinct or near extinct, and other mystical creatures that have been catalogued in the extensive Kamar-Taj library. Really, all that’s missing are the elves, ogres and unicorns; then again, there are magical elves in the Norse mythos and, so far, Loki, Thor and Odin have been proven to exist. And while there’s no evidence proving they exist, there’s also no evidence proving they don’t.

“Okay, so I need to make a couple of things clear before I take you to meet Barnes.” The seriousness in Tony’s voice brought Stephen out of his musings. He nodded his head to show Tony he had his full attention. “I had FRIDAY inform him that you were going to join me, so he shouldn’t be surprised by your arrival. Despite that, I would really appreciate it if you acted as non-threateningly as you possibly can. Answer his questions truthfully or not at all, but preferably the former. Somehow, he can tell when you aren’t being honest. Mannerisms, probably.” Tony sighed with a visible frown. “Just… let me deal with him, okay? Maybe stay at a safe distance or something.”

“The reason I came here was to guarantee your safety, how do you expect me to do that when I’m on the other side of the room?” Stephen raised a brow.

“You’ve got portals, don’t you?” When Stephen only narrowed his eyes, Tony continued. “Just make a portal behind me and snag me out, or something similar to that. I just don’t want Barnes to think we’re cornering him.” They were silent for a while, before Stephen gave in with a sigh.

“Fine, but I will pull you out at the first sign of trouble.” In return, Tony gave him a bright, thankful smile. He decided he also reserved the right to send Barnes to the mirror dimension for time out if he had to. He refused to let Tony get injured while under his protection.

“Thank you Dr. Wizard!” Stephen groaned, hiding his own smile.

Soon, the increasingly slow car ride was finally at an end. Stephen was thankful that Tony had taken them there at a snail’s pace, but he was even more grateful to finally be out of the vehicle. He knows that, logically speaking, there was little chance of a car accident happening during their considerably short trip, but the trauma was still there. His hands ached more now than normal, but he ignored them. He’s grown used to the pain and the constant tremble. Sometimes it was really bad, like now, but other times it was tolerable.

His hands had become a constant reminder of his greatest mistake, that ultimately lead to one of his greatest achievements. That isn’t to say he misses being a surgeon. God, how he misses it. He’d give almost anything in order to get his hands back, his life back; but unfortunately his sense of responsibility outweighed his sense of selfishness, an incredible feat all on its own. He glanced cautiously at Tony, having a small epiphany of sorts. He realized that both of them were very similar in this aspect, both were rich and quite successful in their field; both were considered selfish beyond belief with egos the size of Jupiter; both suffered through a traumatic event, Stephen with his crash and Tony with Afghanistan; and both turned their lives around and somehow ended up shouldering the responsibility of saving the world. That is, however, where their similarities end.

They were far more different than they were similar, Stephen noted. While they were both considered selfish, Tony’s selfishness seemed to only be an act he puts up for some reason. After
seeing his interactions with those around him, it’s hard not to realize the truth. Would a selfish man spontaneously invite others over to his home to eat his food just because his android creation wanted company? Would a selfish man give all of his attention to a mere teenager that wasn’t even related to him just because he liked the kid? Would a selfish man offer up his own invention to a man he fears just to help the man out? And, if not for the man himself, then for the sake of the world? Would a selfish man really come close to tears, shaking in pure sadness and dread, at the prospect of losing his android creation? The answer is no. So, Tony was not a selfish man whereas Stephen had been selfish his entire life. The death of his sister had made the man bitter, and he’s come to regret that now.

While they both suffered traumas, Tony wasn’t at fault for his. Sure, he could’ve probably prevented it had he quit weapon making sooner or had maybe even just not gone to Afghanistan at all, but he didn’t drive himself off a cliff because he was busy looking at his phone. While they were both successful in their respective careers, Tony had managed to keep his. Stephen ignored the pang of jealousy that resonated in his heart. His hands started to hurt more now.

Stephen drew a deep breath, urging his mind to move on. He had come to regret his previous life choices, but they were in his past. He had lived through them once and, while they still affect him, he need not live through them again. He might still be a bit selfish and entirely egotistic, but he had matured; he no longer lived only for his own personal gain and glory. Now he lived in the servitude of others, which he should have been doing since the start. He might’ve been a great neurosurgeon, but he made a terrible doctor. He’s more than made up for that and will continue to do so until his last drawn breath. He might still feel the pain in his hands and ache at the memory of the events, but because of them he had traveled to Kamar-Taj and was now Sorcerer Supreme. He now knew of a world far more different and incredibly wonderful thanks to his accident, and, while he may regret the accident itself, he certainly didn’t regret that.

He is not Tony Stark, he is Stephen Strange. He knew he wouldn’t change that for the world, and so his short-lived jealousy no longer bothered him. His mind was calmer now, and his hands trembled slightly less. It was a small improvement, but an improvement nonetheless. He forced his mind to focus on their current situation and walked silently behind Tony towards the front of the considerably large safehouse. One would think that a safehouse aught to be smaller, but it seems Tony Stark hadn’t gotten that memo.

Tony rang the doorbell once he reached the door, glancing at Stephen nervously. Sure, the last time he talked to the assassin nothing went wrong, and sure, he managed to get by that event without a hitch; but, now, he felt weary and on edge. Maybe it was because this time he had company, so he was now responsible for more than just his own life, or maybe it was because he still felt jittery from his earlier conversation with Wanda. Maybe it was because he knew he wasn’t over the events of Siberia. Barnes might’ve not been all there at the time, but he still did what he did, and Tony still spent hours watching the snow fall ever so gently on the ground beside him while he slowly bled out inside his cold, metal suit. It’s something that was a little hard to forget, if he was being honest. It could also be that his mind constantly wandered off thinking about the stones and if they were safe. During the car ride here, he constantly kept asking FRIDAY for their status and if anyone’s tried to gain access to the Tower. Thankfully, FRIDAY humored him without complaint. She was so good for him.

He wondered why he had grown manic over the stones. His first theory was that after everything he’s been through, he’s afraid that they’ll end up on the wrong hands while he isn’t looking, and everything will go to shit again. While that theory held true for the most part, often times being what kept him awake at night, he wasn’t sure that was quite it. He also held some comfort in knowing a human probably wouldn’t be able to use the gauntlet even if they managed to go through all of Tony’s defenses and several different safes. After all, Tony nearly died when he first
put that thing on, and he was pretty sure he did once he gritted out his wish. He remembers the burning sensation of raw power destroying his entire being, mercilessly. He remembers his mind flashing through all of his memories, all of his regrets and all of his joys. He remembers the pain tearing him apart, exhausting him physically and mentally as it drew every ounce of energy from him. He remembers wanting it to stop so terribly he could cry but refusing to let it happen in fear that his wish wouldn’t be granted. He remembers screaming the entire time. He remembers the feeling of being viciously ravaged by the stones, the pain constantly worsening second by second until, suddenly, it stopped.

Tony still wasn’t sure how he had survived through that endeavor, though he was pretty sure it was due to the accidental time travel. He figured that the only reason he retained his memories was because he was the one who made the wish and he was still wearing the cursed gauntlet. He wondered why it had stopped burning him after the time travel. He had still felt the stone’s power, but it was almost like they had stopped fluctuating it to Tony’s being, like they refused to share their strength with the human. Regardless, he was thankful to still be alive.

His second theory was that it was due to his increasingly bad sleep deprived status; which was probably a factor of it too, but still didn’t feel like the real reason. His last, least favorite theory was that he still hadn’t gotten over the fact that the mind stone and he were connected somehow, and that he was proxying that connection with the other stones as well. After all, if he was connected to one stone, couldn’t he be connected to the others as well? He really hoped that wasn’t the case, considering he badly wanted to separate them and ship them off to the farthest points in the universe, preferably in different galaxies. Then again, the reason the mind stone might’ve been connected to him was because of the stone’s nature. He really hoped that was the case, but he was a bit afraid to find out to the truth.

The door opened harshly revealing a man only slightly shorter than Stephen, much to the sorcerer’s content. While Barnes was physically stronger it still felt nice to be able to tower over people, especially if you could intimidate them with your height. Unfortunately, Stephen wasn’t allowed to intimidate this individual.

Barnes scrutinized Stephen, almost like he was sizing him up. The sorcerer felt himself straighten up slightly, certainly not liking the attention. Thankfully, Tony soon spoke up and took all of the attention away from him. “Hey there Elsa.” Of course Tony had given him a nickname as well. “Hope you don’t mind me bringing my friend, Dr. Stephen Strange, here last minute, he’s way more qualified to work with you than I am.” Tony looked at Stephen for a minute before leaning in to the soldier with a hand placed on the side of his face to hide it from the sorcerer. Barnes stiffened, making Stephen become more alert, but didn’t do much else. “He’s an actual doctor!” Tony stage whispered, as if he was saying something completely scandalous. His antics earned a frown from both men, but also managed to make Stephen feel a bit less tense. Looking at how the stiffness in Barnes’ stance softened, it seemed that it worked for him too.

“Tony, you hold three doctorates.” Stephen found himself sighing. “That, by definition, makes you an actual doctor as well.”

“Technicalities Stephanie.” Tony shrugged, and then backed up from Barnes’ personal bubble. “So, gonna let us in anytime soon, snowflake?” He grinned wildly while Stephen gaped. Did Tony have a serious death wish or something? What was he doing antagonizing an ex-assassin with a fragile mental state and a lethal everything? Barnes just huffed and stood to the side, granting both doctors entry. “Thank you!” Tony shot him another grin before making his way in. “Okay, so first thing’s first. We’re going to have to talk about the treatment I’m…” Tony stopped and looked over at Stephen for a second before continuing his walk towards who knows where. Stephen assumes he was taking them to a lab of some sort. “…we are going to give you. I know I had you read it, but I
figured it might be nice to revisit it just to be sure you understand everything. Afterwards, I’m thinking we could take some preliminary scans, see what we’re working with. If you’re up for it, we can even hook you up to B.A.R.F. so you can get a feel for it. I don’t quite think we’ll turn it on or anything just yet, but it would be nice to know what it would feel like when we eventually do start with the treatment. What do you think Mr. Barnes?”

It took a moment for Barnes to realize that he was actually given a choice on the matter, and that he could say no. Stephen saw his shoulders sag slightly in relief. “Okay.” He nodded with determination.

“It is pertinent that you know you have a choice in all of this, Sgt. Barnes.” Stephen said before Tony could keep talking. “As doctors, we can only provide you with suggestions on how the treatment can go, but ultimately you can simply say no and there’s nothing we can do about that.” Barnes nodded at that with a thankful gleam in his eyes.

“What Stephanie said.” Tony turned right at the end of a corridor. “From the very start I gave you the option to saying no, you have full control here Elsa.” Soon, they reached a door with a lock in it. Tony put in a pin and revealed a lab space containing a bunch of equipment inside. Tony had made sure to bring everything in before Barnes arrived, and had blocked off the entrance in case he had gotten interested enough to take a peak and accidentally broke everything before Tony could come in and show him how to use it. He did, however, add in an observation room beside it with some computers in there in case Barnes wanted to look at where he was going to undergo treatment. The computers were mostly in case he decided he needed medical help with said treatment. Looking at Stephen, he was suddenly thankful he thought of that. He stepped inside the room and immediately headed towards the most important piece of machinery: the coffee maker.

“Why do you call me that?” Barnes asked suddenly after a moment of silence. It took Tony a couple of seconds before he understood what he meant. Tony moved away from the coffee maker, deciding to make his sweet, sweet ambrosia after he got Barnes situated.

“I like giving likeable people nicknames. Elsa is a character related to ice.” Tony gave him a sheepish smile. “I can stop.”

Barnes was pensive for a moment before he shook his head. “It’s fine.” He then looked around, inspecting the room with precision. It was a similar activity to what Stephen had been doing.

“So then,” Tony clasped his hands together loudly, startling both men in the room, “let’s get started!” He said cheerfully. Barnes sent him a sharp glare, which Tony easily ignored. No, he didn’t ignore it. Stephen noticed a slight spasm in his back muscles where they tensed for a moment. It always seemed to amaze Stephen how masterfully Tony could act. Stephen made his way to position himself between the two men, but Tony then looked at him. “You are going to get the honor of being in the observation room.” The sorcerer was ready to argue. “That way you can assess all of the information the preliminary scans we get the instant we get them. Make note of anything of interest or concern.” Tony turned to look at Barnes, not giving Stephen any time to argue. He huffed in annoyance but eventually figured it might ultimately be in their favor if Stephen was in a different room, that way Barnes would have to traverse a longer distance to get to Tony if Stephen has to portal him out. He really hoped it wouldn’t come to that. “You, are going to sit in that medical chair and look pretty while I hook some wires on you.”

“I think you missed a step.” Stephen said monotonously. When Tony looked at him with a tired, blank expression, he continued. “Talking about what we’ll be doing before we actually do.”

“Oh, right! So, the basic idea is…” As Tony went on explaining the procedure and answering any questions Barnes might have, Stephen continued his examination of the room. It was all fine
technology, as advanced as advanced could get. It was impressive how innovative Tony’s medical lab was, but certainly not surprising. Stephen wondered if Tony would ever open a medical field for S.I., and with the direction the company is heading towards, he wouldn’t be surprised if he did.

It didn’t take long for Tony to explain everything to Barnes and answer any question he could have, so now they were preparing for the preliminary scans. Stephen couldn’t be any unhappier with how Tony wanted to do things. Having to be in another room entirely didn’t help his, or FRIDAY’s, concern over the idiotic genius. It also didn’t help the fact that Stephen would sometimes catch Tony shaking ever so slightly or flinching away only to pretend he needed to do something somewhere else. Barnes must have noticed at some point as well because he started to treat Tony more carefully, like he could break at any second - that was the only reason why Stephen went along with Tony’s plan.

“You can pull him out if Barnes does something, correct?” FRIDAY asked him the moment Stephen was alone in the observation room. Tony had brought him here and explained how to work some of the machines and helped answer any questions he had concerning them. Really, it seemed like FRIDAY would be doing all of the work and Stephen was just here so that he wouldn’t be there, but he decided against saying anything. This was, after all, something he invited himself to be a part of; he should be thankful Tony is even letting him watch.

“Yes.” He answered shortly, looking over the glass window and observing Tony hook up Barnes to some of the machinery. “But I really hope that I won’t have to.”

“Likewise, Dr. Strange.” There was a hint of concern in her voice, which really came as a surprise considering she was an A.I. and not a person. Stephen hummed in appreciation, wondering just how human FRIDAY was.

After a while, everyone fell into a rhythm, doing what they needed to do to complete the task at hand. Tony was constantly working different computers here and there, explaining everything he was doing to Barnes while he did it; FRIDAY helped both him and Stephen with whatever they would need; and Stephen took note of all of the information scanned and already started analyzing it. He’d have to run the numbers by Tony later, but he was pretty much entirely confident in his analysis. It would seem that the three of them will have their work cut out for them.

Suddenly, the cloak let go of Stephen and quickly flew away out of the door and towards where Tony was talking to Barnes and running tests. Stephen felt something cold at the pit of his stomach. He quickly ran towards the observation window and looked at the scene in front of him. Barnes was holding Tony by his collar. Fury, concern and weariness found its way into Stephen’s heart, he knew they should have bound Barnes to a desk or something. He knew this would be too dangerous.

He almost didn’t notice how Tony wasn’t fighting back, and how he was absolutely limp against Barnes’ hold. Had Barnes knocked Tony out? Stephen was livid. He was about to portal his way in and show the ex-assassin a piece of his mind when he saw the cloak finally make its way into the room and wrap itself around Tony.

The cloak was an unexpected being, by all accounts. It was pretty weird that it had left Stephen’s side, quite literally dropping him, and chosen to run to someone else’s aid. It was even weirder that it hadn’t immediately attacked Barnes in an attempt to free Tony, who Stephen had assumed the cloak was trying to help; after all, the cloak understood Stephen’s wants and needs, and he wanted Tony to be safe. The cloak instead chose to wrap itself around Tony.

Even more curious was how Barnes had let go the minute he understood Tony had support from the cloak.
With a confused frown, Stephen made his way towards the room on the other side of the window. When he got there, he noticed that the cloak had laid Tony down on a couch but refused to unwrap itself from him. “You odd little thing.” Stephen hummed, before glancing over at Barnes who was just standing there. “What exactly happened?” He asked, keeping the accusatory tone out of his speech.

“Dunno.” Barnes shrugged. “He was fine, then he wasn’t.” Stephen’s frown deepened and he went towards Tony’s side. He was no longer paying attention to Barnes, it was clear now that he had nothing to do with this. He placed a hand on Tony’s forehead, testing his temperature. It was fine. Next he checked his heart rate, that was fine too.

“If I may,” FRIDAY started, “I think I might know what has caused this.” Stephen looked up expectantly, dismissing Barnes’ slight jump entirely. He had a more important patient to focus on than a traumatized super soldier from the forties who has yet to get used to the voice on the ceiling.

“Yes?” Stephen prompted.

“Boss has not been sleeping since his return a couple of weeks ago.” FRIDAY informs him, leaving Stephen frozen in place. “The only rest he gets are in moments like these, when his body gives out.” She continued. “I have been unsuccessful in my attempts to persuade him to sleep, though I do understand his reasoning.”

“Which is?” Stephen tried desperately to keep his temper in check. How a human could have such blatant disregard for their own well being was beyond him. The thought alone appalled him.

“I’m afraid I am not at liberty to say.” Stephen sighed. Of course Stark would prevent her from telling anyone about this. It was a miracle she could divulge as much as she did.

“I’m sorry.” Barnes whispered softly from where he stood. “I didn’t know he was tired. I wouldn’t have asked him to do this if I knew.”

“No. If anything, it’s this idiot’s fault. You are not to blame.” Stephen rubbed his temples, tiredly. “I suppose it’s safe to assume that we are done for the day?”

“Please.” FRIDAY’s voice was almost silent with her request. That was… odd. Stephen frowned again, trying to understand what had bothered FRIDAY so much. Tony passing out might’ve been it, but she had made it seem like it was a regular occurrence. Surely she was used to it by this point? Still unhappy and concerned? Sure. But nervous? No, something didn’t add up.

“Yeah.” Barnes nodded. “He needs to sleep.”

“Yes, he truly does.” Stephen glanced again at Tony, taking in the sight. He was a handsome man with sharp features, yet the bruises under his eyes were menacing. How had he not noticed how pronounced they were before? “Why don’t you go rest up? I’ll clean things up over here and relocate Tony to another room.”

Barnes nodded and quietly exited the room, leaving Stephen alone with FRIDAY, the cloak, and an unconscious Tony. “Doctor, I’d greatly appreciate it if you were to stay with him until he wakes up.”

“We don’t know how long it will take for him to wake up, FRIDAY.” Stephen sighed. “I’m afraid I can not spend an entire day watching over him, though I am hoping it would be alright if I left the cloak vigil.”
“He will wake up in approximately three to five hours depending.” FRIDAY informed him.

“FRIDAY, his body won’t wake him up until it’s gotten enough rest.” Stephen explained. He was about to go on a lengthy medical justification as to why that was until he realized that FRIDAY probably already knew this. “You’re saying that isn’t happening?”

“Yes.” Stephen’s eyes widened.

“Very well. I am going home to collect a book to study and make myself some tea. I shall return shortly.” He quickly made a portal through into the sanctum. He felt his knees weaken once he was inside.

Silently, he retrieved everything he would need to keep himself entertained for a couple of hours while he waited for Tony to wake up. He didn’t really want to think about why FRIDAY had asked him to stay, or why he easily agreed to it. He didn’t want to think about what would happen when Tony did wake up; if he had to guess, it wouldn’t be pleasant.

He did, however, decide to think about the lengthy lecture he would give Stark for performing important research and procedures while exhausted to the point of losing consciousness. Stephen then frowned, remembering something dreadful. Tony drove while exhausted to the point of losing consciousness. Granted, he had FRIDAY as a co-driver, but the point was still there. Tony Stark was idiotically reckless, and Stephen Strange was starting to get annoyed by it.

Once he was satisfied with the small loot he collected, he opened a portal back to where Tony was sleeping and took a seat at one of the available seats. He gingerly placed his tea on the small desk by the chair and cracked open his book. He took a quick look at Tony, wondering how long he would be able to rest, before beginning his read on the new, interesting spell book he had stolen… borrowed… from Wong’s library.

Sometimes, Stephen really hated when he was right. Tony woke up with a gut-wrenching scream, startling Stephen from his read. The shorter man had shot himself up form his sitting position and curled into himself when he managed to stop screaming. He was taking quick, sharp breaths; he was hyperventilating. The cloak gently adjusted its position on Tony, wrapping itself around him for comfort; he didn’t even notice the gesture, blinded by his panic. Stephen stared in horror as Tony’s grip on his arms tightened painfully, nearing the point of drawing blood. He looked so scared, so small.

“*The future was really shitty, you know?*” Tony’s voice echoed in his mind. Stephen thought he had taken his words for what they were, but perhaps he undermined them after all. Looking at Tony’s current state, he realized he didn’t really know just how bad it had been. He gently closed the book he was reading, ready to walk over to comfort Tony; but before he could move the other man had uncurled from his position and looked up at the ceiling.

“FRIDAY, give me the schematics on Peter’s suit. Do you think the kid would need shock absorbers? Or maybe an emergency unit that would be able to rescue him from nefarious situations.” His voice was small, tired and barely held together. “Then tell me what I was doing before and if I need to make any calls to anyone. Oh, and tell me if Matt has sent any updates for the Accords. If he hasn’t, remind me to-“ He would have kept going but a loud noise made him stop with a jump. He whipped his head around, only to see Stephen glaring at him with his hand on top of a book on the desk. Oh, that’s where the noise came from, but why did Stephen slam his book down? Surely there were better ways of getting attention. Tony offered a charming smile, willing his voice to sound normal and cheerful. “Oh hey there, Doc! I didn’t see you. Do you need anything?” He was impressed that his voice didn’t break.
“What you’re doing is ridiculous.” Stephen said plainly, not even caring how harsh he sounded right now. When Tony frowned in confusion, the sorcerer sighed. “You just woke up screaming after feinting and the first thing you do is work?” He felt as incredulous as he sounded. “And from what FRIDAY tells me, this happens often.” He glared at Tony, daring the man to deny his accusations.

“Traitor.” Tony muttered looking up at the ceiling with a light scowl.

“What could I do boss? I am worried.” In an instant, Tony’s features softened, and he was smiling towards the nearest camera. He turned back to look at Stephen and wasn’t surprised to find the man still glaring at him.

“Okay, so you found out about my bad habits.” Tony shrugged. “I’ve done this before, so why should now be any different?”

“Because before it was only for a night or two at most… boss, the scans say that your body is getting progressively worse, I don’t know what to do.”

“You’re going back to sleep.” Stephen decided, earning a scrutinizing glare from Tony. “Doctor’s orders.” His mouth twisted into a forced smirk, hoping Tony would appreciate the humor and just go with it for once.

“Didn’t know you still practiced.” Tony raised a brow, refusing to comply.

“That doesn’t make me any less of a doctor.”

Tony hummed in agreement before letting go of a sigh. “Look, I appreciate your concern, I really do, but I don’t have time to waste. I need to get everything ready before…” Tony frowned now, not sure if he was willing to tell Stephen about the future just yet. It was still a sore subject, considering his constant nightmares, but he was starting to trust the good doctor and he was actually starting to enjoy whatever strange friendship they had. Well, whatever, vague answers are still answers he supposed. “Before the accords happen, and before the date that donut spaceship I told you about comes to Earth. Let’s not forget I also need to get the stones somewhere far, far away from here and from each other too. The longer they stay on Earth, the longer we become targets for others.”

“Tony, you can’t forego the present to focus on a future you’ve already saved. From what I understood by your incredibly equivocal summery of the future given on the first night we met, the enemy is gone. You made sure he would cease to exist, and that life would continue just fine.” Stephen’s voice softened, and his face melted into small admiration for the man’s persistence and selflessness; but he refused to allow him to continue to torture himself over a future that will never come. “Why don’t you enjoy the fruit of your labor, instead of being your own personal slave driver?”

“Shit still goes down on Earth, Stephen. The Avengers broke apart, which is what left Earth so vulnerable in the first place. I- I was rendered immobile for a time being, Rhodey lost his legs, Peter almost died, and don’t even get me started on the Rogues.” Tony began to rub his aching head, hoping to alleviate the pain. “Earth needs it’s mightiest heroes together, fighting alongside each other against everything wrong with the world and whatever might come to threaten it; and not a team of infants pointing fingers at each other and abusing their power and… the people around them.” Tony hesitated for a moment, probably to stop himself from saying something not intended for others to hear. Stephen frowned, more curious now than ever before.

“Besides, I only had enough power to get rid of Thanos, it’s a mystery why the stones didn’t kill
me, but rather send me back in time.” He sighed. “His ‘children,’ or whatever the fuck he called them, are still out there ready to take on the universe for him. They’re probably searching for him, and they’ll probably realize that I’m the reason he’s gone. If anything, I might’ve just guaranteed another Earth invasion.” The headache was killing him now, the more he thought about this the more he regretted his predicament. “Fuck.”

“I understand your worries, but I still think you should make some time for sleep. The mind doesn’t function right without having the sufficient amount of rest it needs. You should know this.” The doctor chided. He had hoped he could convince Tony that maybe he should give in to his own needs and just sleep. He understood his worries, and his necessity to prevent everything bad from happening, but he couldn’t do that if he was dead on his feet.

He ended up irritating the billionaire instead.

“Well, what do you want me to do Doctor? Sit around and throw in the towel until I’m needed again? Pretend I don’t have knowledge of the future and give the world a big fuck you? I’m literally the only person who can make sure everything doesn’t go to shit, and usually everything I do ends up going to fucking shit!” Tony exploded, nearly yelling. “What would you do? Huh?” Tony tried getting up, but for some reason he couldn’t, and that only served to make him even angrier. “Which would you pick? The fate of the entire goddamn universe versus the sanity and wellbeing of one already fucked up and broken man? Which do you think is more important?”

“You don’t have to sacrifice yourself, Tony.” Stephen sighed, reminding himself to stay calm. He was thankful for the cloak holding Tony down, preventing him from really getting up. It seems the cloak wanted Tony to sleep as much as Stephen did, which really shouldn’t come as a surprise. “What you’re doing, it’s more than enough. There has to be another way to fix everything without jeopardizing yourself.”

I think I would just cut the wire.

Tony stilled, finally letting Stephen’s words sink in. His anger dissipated, and he felt himself lean back loosely; he would’ve probably fallen back onto the couch if there wasn’t something holding him upright. He’d have to investigate that later. “You’re nothing like them.” He mused softly, receiving a confused stare from the other. He took a moment to just breath and calm his already pacing heart, he was getting way too stressed out and he had a heart condition! Stress is one of his major no-no’s, but unfortunately also one of his major constants. “I can’t sleep, Stephen. I tried at first, I really did; but no matter how long I lay in bed or how badly I willed the nightmares to go away… I just can’t.” He winced when his voice quivered slightly. He was way too tired to properly conceal his emotions, which pretty much sucked. At least he was there with Stephen and not Rogers, he’s sure the latter would only make things worse. “And whenever I try, I can only think of the millions of things I still have to do and everything that I have to get done. I can’t sleep until all of this is finally over.” He mumbled softly.

“And when will that be?” Tony looked up, staring at Stephen straight in the eye.

“I don’t know.” He answered after a few moments in silence.

“Then, what if I put a sleeping spell on you?” Tony flinched violently at the thought of someone in his mind again. “It wouldn’t be anything bad!” Stephen quickly said, raising his hands up in a gesture of good will. “Really, all it would do is make sure you can’t have nightmares -or any dreams, really.” He took a tentative step closer towards Tony. “There won’t be any side effects, and I can watch over you if you’d like.”

Tony had to admit the offer was starting to seem too good to be true. “What’s the catch?” He
“There is no catch. I often cast this spell on myself on particularly bad nights.” Tony wasn’t quite sure he believed him, there is often a catch. If he cast that spell on himself though, maybe it wasn’t as harmful as he’d imagine. “We can do it somewhere you feel safe.”

“Boss, I think you should accept the Doctor’s offer.” FRIDAY chimed in her six pence, but Tony wasn’t really sold on the idea just yet. “Please?” Sold. She had pleaded! How could he, in his good conscious, deny anything to his children?

“Okay fine.” He relented. “I will murder you if I can only wake up to true love’s first kiss or some other magical nonsense.” Stephen chuckled.

“I’ll be sure to keep that in mind while casting my spell.” When Tony nodded, Stephen was ready to make a portal and ask the billionaire where he would feel most comfortable, but FRIDAY interrupted him.

“Sgt. Barnes is trying to get a hold of you, boss. I have kept him at bay for now, but I don’t think I can continue to do so for much longer.” Her voice sounded apologetic.

“That’s okay FRI, you can let him in.” Tony sighed, trying to get his emotions in check. “Thank you.” He added after a brief moment.

“You’re welcome.”

The cloak wrapped itself around Tony, tightening its grip slightly and causing the billionaire to yelp. “What the shit!” He cursed, looking at his offender. He frowned, realizing what it was.

“Stephen, why is your flying carpet suffocating me?”

“I have yet to figure that out myself. It had come to your aid when you unceremoniously feinted and refused to leave your side since.” He explained.

“Huh.” The mechanic looked at the cloak in question. “Thanks buddy.” He said, earning another squeeze from the cloak and a confused expression from Stephen.

“You’re talking to my cloak.” He mused flatly. Tony opened his mouth to reply, but before he could the soldier entered the room. He looked over at Tony, eyeing him up and down and back up again. The engineer felt mildly uncomfortable under the scrutiny.

“Are you alright?” Barnes finally asked, and when Tony didn’t reply, he continued. “You screamed.”

“Oh.” The billionaire blinked. “Yeah, I’m okay.” He nodded, reeling in any worry he might have over being in the same room as that of James Barnes. The soldier simply nodded and made his way to leave. “I’m sorry to have interrupted the scans. We can continue if you’d like.” Tony offered, pretending he didn’t see Stephen’s glare or feel the cloak’s disapproving squeeze.

“Another day.” Barnes replied. “Rest.” He said before leaving.

“Did he seriously come in here to check up on me, and then leave?” Tony couldn’t help but ask once he knew Barnes was out of super soldier ear shot. He was suddenly thankful for having lived with Rogers for some time.

“I believe that is the case, yes.” Stephen was equally bewildered by the soldier’s reactions, but thankful that he seemed to respect Tony’s need for sleep -much unlike the individual himself.
“Why did you offer to continue the scans after I finally convinced you to go back to sleep?”

Tony shrugged, not really sure how to appease the other man. “Force of habit.” He wasn’t going to admit that he was used to putting himself last for his team, and he had already associated Barnes with his team considering his relationship with Rogers.

Stephen simply rolled his eyes and decided to move on with the conversation. “Where do you feel safest?” That was a question Tony hadn’t thought would be asked of him, but also one he, once upon a time, didn’t have to think much about.

When he was a kid, it would have easily been in his mother’s embrace or anywhere Jarvis was at. Then, when he grew up, it was his mansion. After Obie, he wasn’t really sure for some time, but it didn’t matter since that ended up blown under the bottom of the ocean. It then became the Tower, and he still felt safe there even after Loki threw him out a window. After Ultron, and the occasional Avenger spending the night or however long they needed with him, it quickly became his least favorite spot; if only because it no longer had JARVIS in it. The compound was meant to be his new safe haven, he was even moving into it, excited by the prospect of living with his fellow Avengers… Even if they didn’t feel the same about him. He had been uncomfortable with it once he let Wanda live there and began to hate it and everything it reminded him of after the publicly dubbed ‘Civil War’ between him and the team. He grew to love it again afterwards though; but now, being in the past again, he was afraid to be there.

The lab used to be a safe zone too, but Rogers constantly forced him out of it to ‘eat’ or ‘sleep’ whenever they lived together. It happened far more frequently after Ultron. He used to like it at first, thinking that it was the older man’s way of showing he cared. Then again, who knows? Maybe he used to actually give a shit before Ultron went down. After Ultron (or now, he supposed) Roger’s constant presence in his lab was a sign of the distrust that might’ve been there since the start.

It used to not matter whether Tony felt safe in his home or not, because he always, always, felt safe in his suit. Rogers ruined that too.

Maybe the reason he had constant nightmares is because he didn’t really feel safe anywhere; not even in his home. He felt a sick laughter make its way up his throat. Stephen frowned, wondering what had gotten Tony’s mood to sour so quickly. “I don’t really know Doc.” The answer sent chills down his spine. “Anywhere FRIDAY is with me, I suppose.”

“Why don’t I take you, and perhaps a suit FRIDAY could pilot, to the Sanctum with me?” Stephen offered. “It’s quite literally one of the three safest places in the Earth.”

“It’s okay, you’re already helping me out enough as is.” Tony shrugged, wondering why Stephen had volunteered to help him out to this extent. Hell, coming here to make sure Tony was safe was more than he expected of the other man. At first he wondered if it was to get Tony to owe him one, but quickly dispelled that theory once he realized the man never asked for anything and seemed to genuinely care for Tony; at least in a doctorly way. He then wondered if it was because he had nothing better to do, which might still be a viable option despite his many responsibilities as a sorcerer. It could also have been because he was afraid Tony would fuck something up when left to his own devices, but that was the Avenger’s memo, not the sorcerer’s. He could just genuinely want to be Tony’s friend, but Tony wasn’t quite willing to trust that yet. Not with his history.

“If I’d have minded, I wouldn’t have offered.” He said, making Tony even more perplexed by his behavior.

“Alright, well. I think I’d feel better sleeping in the Tower for now.” Tony said, making his way to
get up. He briefly wondered if Stephen would feel annoyed by his offer’s rejection; but after remembering the same scenario in the hospital and it’s result, quickly he quickly forgot about it and started thinking of other, more productive things. Such as whether or not Stephen would be comfortable with FRIDAY driving them there, he wasn’t really confident in his ability to drive someone else. If it was just him, he wouldn’t have cared as much, but it’s not just his life in his hands.

“Very well, to the tower it is.” The sorcerer made some weird hand gestures Tony had remembered him doing before when making a portal. Sure enough, a portal was made, and Tony did his very best not to panic at the realization that Stephen expected him to simply go through it. He certainly did his best not to remember the last time he went through a portal (or wormhole, same difference really) and nearly got stranded. He grimaced, but quickly covered it up with a smile. He got another comforting squeeze from the cloak.

“Cool.” He somehow kept his voice even and made his way closer to that deathtrap that was a decently convenient method of transportation. “He FRI, tell Barnes I’m going home and will return tomorrow to resume the scans. And please drive the car back at night, make sure that you tint the windows. We don’t want people to think there’s a possessed car on the highway, after all.”

Stephen snickered softly. “After you.” He gestured to the portal. Tony looked at it, noticing his home on the other side, more specifically his lab. He could see DUM-E curiously walk closer to the portal and beep excitedly once he saw Tony, U and Butterfingers joined in soon afterwards. It made him feel less apprehensive about stepping through.

“Such a gentleman.” He quipped, taking the first step. He sucked in a breath and forced himself to go through fully before exhaling again. He was thankful the cloak was still wrapped tightly around him, otherwise he’d be able to feel himself shaking. “Care to join me?”

“Of course.” Strange hummed, stepping through easily and looking at each of the bots.

“I have to admit that this method of transportation is mighty convenient.” He hoped light banter and jokes would bury the unease.

“It is.” Stephen sounded mildly distracted and was still looking at the bots with confusion etched on his features. “What are these?” Tony blinked, before realizing he never got to show his bots to the other. When he was in the compound and getting ready to sell the tower, he had decided to keep them in another safehouse he had. He didn’t want Rogers or Romanoff to try and make him get rid of them in their fear that he’d create another Ultron. Even if Ultron wasn’t his fault, but whatever. He had only recently brought them back to the Tower, but they stayed in his workshop during the party.

“These are my robotic children.” Tony smiled proudly at each of them. Suddenly, Stephen understood why Tony was so quick to talk to the cloak and acknowledge its sentience. “My oldest creation, DUM-E.” He placed a hand on one of DUM-E’s sensors, earning a happy sequence of beeps. “Over there is U, and right beside him is Butterfingers.” Tony then smirked. “They are the dumbest robots in history. They couldn’t do anything, therefore I made them my friends.” Stephen laughed at that. The cloak, sensing Tony become calmer and calmer by the second, gave the billionaire one final squeeze before returning to the sorcerer.

Meanwhile, DUM-E chirped and made his way to the unknown man and proceeded to poke him with his metal arm. Stephen frowned, wondering what exactly it was doing, but decided to just observe for now. Tony, however, groaned and made his way to try and free the good doctor from DUM-E before the other two bots decided they wanted to play too.
“Come on now, DUM-E, leave the poor man alone.” A string of beeps had Tony looking incredulously at him. “Watch your language young man.” Some more beeps. “Don’t use that tone with me.”

“You can understand what it… what he’s saying?” Stephen asked, correcting himself midsentence. If FRIDAY was sentient and liked being referred to as such, then the same might be true for these bots.

“Not at all.” Tony chirped clasping his hands together. “I just wanted to mess with you.” He received a bored expression from Stephen for his efforts. “I have lived with them for a long time now that I do understand what they like and what they’re behavioral patterns are. DUM-E is probably going to harass you until you give him attention. The same will be true with U and Butterfingers, but they’re a bit more cautious at first. DUM-E’s just far too trusting.” Tony patted the bot in question with fondness.

“Fascinating. Perhaps while you sleep, I could spend some time with them?” Tony’s eyes widened, and Stephen was about to retract his request, but then the man gave him the biggest smile he’s seen from him.

“Sure!” Tony grinned. “I wouldn’t mind that at all, but I will warn you that they might never leave you alone afterwards.”

“A fine consequence.” Stephen said easily.

“Your death.” He shrugged and proceeded to walk towards the exit. “Alright, turn me into sleeping beauty before these rascallions kidnap you forever.” Stephen smirked and followed Tony into his room to do just that. “It’s been a while since I’ve lead someone to my bedroom.” Tony noted, mostly to himself but loud enough that Stephen still heard him.

“And, if you’re not careful with your next choice of words, it might be the last.” He warned him, but Tony laughed despite the threat.

“Don’t worry, no lewd jokes will be made.” Tony smiled playfully. “Not yet at least.” He winked and kept walking cheerfully towards his bedroom. Stephen scoffed, but followed him anyways.

“And here I thought you had standards.” He remembered the conversation they all had yesterday during dinner and was satisfied with the laughter he heard for his efforts.

“You might’ve just made the cut.” Tony replied, walking towards a closed door. “You should feel honored.” He said with a wink before entering the room. After a beat, Stephen rolled his eyes and followed him in.

“Gee, thanks. Now go lay down.”

“So demanding! I like it.” Stephen gave Tony an unimpressed glare, but that only made the mechanic laugh again. He sat down on his bed, a “Alright, I’m laying down now.”

“Wonderful. Sleep well.” The sorcerer quickly did his spell before the billionaire could say anything and was satisfied when all he heard was the steady breathing coming from the, now fully asleep, billionaire.

For once in a long, long time, Tony was able to sleep peacefully.
The Kids, the Avengers and the Safe House

Chapter Notes

Guess who's back, back again!
It is I! Your (probably not) favorite author of all time!
I have successfully passed all my classes with flying colors and am currently able to reacquaint myself with my bed!! It's been so long… I'm tearing up.
Anyway, this chapter is a biiiit longer than usual as a "thanks for being patient and I love you guys a lot" gift. I had a nasty case of how-the-frickity-frack-do-I-write-this writers block but I managed to pull through somehow haha… Hope it's still a good read regardless.
As always, thank you so much for all of your amazing comments (they really kept me going not gonna lie) and the kudos! You guys are absolutely AMAZING!
Well, enjoy the read my lovelies!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

A week passed since Stephen and he went to visit Barnes. Tony was thankful that the other man had intended on going with him the very next day as well but took pity on him and insisted that he go back to he Sanctum and focus on his own responsibilities for once. Stephen refused to relent, stating that if he was needed at the Sanctum, he would know.

Tony wanted to drive, but Stephen preferred to portal. It was a debate that took a shamefully long amount of time to settle, but eventually Stephen won. Apparently the ‘you might frighten the super soldier’ argument could only get Tony so far. Going through the portal the second time was as daunting as it was the first time, but Tony was a Stark and according to rumors the Starks are metal men.

For the remaining week, Tony and Stephen ended up spending a ludicrous amount of time together. Between figuring out spells and building containment units for the stones and working with Barnes and his procedure, they were together most of the time now. Tony had missed having someone working with him in his labs, like he did with Bruce, though it was nothing like when he had Bruce with him. Stephen was far more assertive in his opinions, and he wasn’t timid when presenting theories or solutions. Stephen was also far more demanding than Bruce had ever been, he would barter with Tony endlessly until the man conceded in working normal hours. Bruce had, for the most part, left him to his own devices and just tried to convince him to live a healthier lifestyle. Stephen wasn’t nearly as lenient. If Tony tried to procrastinate going to bed at a reasonable hour or get out of the activity entirely, Stephen would give him a terrifying glare that would’ve sent him running for the hills if he wasn’t so stubborn himself. When the glare wasn’t enough, Stephen would threaten to physically remove Tony from his lab and bar his entrance for the entirety of the next day. By then, Tony would grumble and accept his fate lest he be manhandled out of his own lab.

The billionaire was actually thankful for these differences, if only because he didn’t want Stephen to follow the same path Bruce took. Just like Bruce, Tony had actually grown to like Stephen’s company. It was different, of course, but it might’ve been even better. With Bruce, Tony had always expected him to leave one day or the next, but he held hope that Stephen would maybe stay after the whole stone ordeal was done and over with. Bruce was a great friend, but his instincts
always had him running away from his problems rather than trying to solve them. His disappearance after the events of ULTRON might’ve been the most impressive and theatrical—he did somehow end up becoming a space gladiator after all—but it certainly wasn’t the first and probably wouldn’t be the last. It’s what he did after all, he ran. He left Tony to deal with the fallout, which wasn’t far off with what the other Avengers had done either.

Stephen, though, he didn’t just stay with Tony to try and find a solution to their problem, but he also actively sought out to help out the mechanic. He had absolutely no obligation to go with Tony to his meetings with Barnes, but he chose to do so. He took on that responsibility without hesitation, something Bruce probably wouldn’t have done. He also constantly tried helping Tony through his problems, unlike Bruce who fell asleep when Tony tried confiding in him. He was someone Tony was learning to rely on, and the thought was terrifying for the most part. Either Stephen turned out to be someone Tony could trust with his life, like he did Peter, Pepper and Rhodes, or he turned out to be someone who would only break the already broken pieces that was Tony Stark, like Obadiah and the Rogues. Tony really hoped for the former, but he was prepared for the latter nonetheless.

Lately, Tony realized that sometimes his nightmares started to plague him while he was still awake, memories would bring him back to the bunker, or to the cave, or anywhere he’s had a trauma, really. He’d space out every now and then, just living in the past. It was moments like those that made him even more grateful for having FRIDAY there with him. It wasn’t really hard to think of why his nightmares were acting up so relentlessly more and more as time passed. Soon, the UN council was going to summon the Avengers and demand that they sign the accords, and Tony would have to count on his lucky stars that things turned out differently. He’s already lived through that nightmare once before, and he certainly wasn’t looking forward to doing it again.

What’s worse is that Stephen’s noticed his odd behavior, because of course he’s noticed. His perception is just as sharp as his wit, and it was basically a moot point to try and act like everything was hunky dory. To be fair, Tony hasn’t been putting much effort to seem okay when he’s next to Stephen. It was far too tiring, and the sorcerer was spending more and more time with him. In turn, the sorcerer spent more and more time trying to help Tony behave like a normal human and do things normal humans do, such as sleep and eat at normal intervals; but despite Stephen’s offer to help him out with his nightmares, Tony continued to reject him in fear that he was bothering the man. The nightmares were his problem, not Stephen’s.

Besides, he found something that helped him out just as well as Stephen’s spell.

Tony’s relationship with the stones was an odd one, especially since he’s finally thrown caution to the wind and started spending most of his free time with them. Whenever he was alone in the lab, he would gravitate towards the stones, taking whatever he’s working on with him and just work beside them. It didn’t take long for the silent company to turn into a one sided conversation. Tony could work in silence, but he also liked talking to others; he was a social being after all. The stones, for whatever reason, felt like they were sentient. He never noticed this before he went back in time, but after using them to grant his wish he did. It almost felt like they called out to him at times, not to be used but rather to be noticed. Tony had tried to bat that off as his paranoia or maybe greed getting the best of him, but at some point in time he stopped caring.

What solidified his relationship with them, however, was when he fell asleep beside them once while working past the bedtime Stephen had forced onto him with Pepper’s blessing. He’ll admit that actually getting more sleep was fantastic, but habits died hard and he had far too much work to do. And yet, sleeping with the stones beside him was an interesting experience. He didn’t have any nightmares, but he did have dreams. In these dreams he was often somewhere stellar, so intrinsically gorgeous and ethereal. Stars shone brightly around him, galaxies decorated the space around him, comets flew past him in beautiful blazing glory, and planets grandiosely orbited him
like they belonged there. It was odd, but he felt at home there.

He was usually alone in these dreams, but sometimes he swore he heard a voice try to talk to him. He sometimes thought they held conversations, or that he actually saw who it was that talked to him, but he could never remember it when he woke up. His memory was usually foggy after these dreams, and the only thing that stuck was the environment. It was definitely one of the most beautiful places he’s ever seen. The first time he had that dream, he immediately put on the BARF headgear and had FRIDAY look at it. She also thought it was beautiful.

Since then, Tony’s taken to sleeping close to the stones and he’s gotten better because of it. He knew it was probably the worst idea to even think of indulging, and he knew that he was basically obsessing over them, but he honestly stopped caring after some point. He’d force himself to let go of the stones when the time came, but there was no harm in enjoying them while they were around there for him.

Today, however, he was in no position to spend time around them because his favorite arachnid themed superhero was visiting him. He was elated nonetheless. “Pete!” Tony grinned while still leaning against his car when he saw the boy walk out of his apartment building. “Long time no see.” He ruffled the boy’s hair fondly, and opened the door for him.

“Hey there Mr. Stark!” Peter cheered, batting away Tony’s hand. “Not the hair.” He grumbled. “I spent like, a whole ten minutes on it.” What was Tony supposed to do besides laugh? “What?” Peter frowned, not really getting why Mr. Stark was laughing at him. Was it something he said?

“Ten minutes.” Tony repeated once his laughter died down enough for him to talk. “Kid, it takes my hair stylist closer to an hour to style my hair.” Peter blinked.

“But, you barely have any hair!” He argued, only realizing he was basically calling Tony bald after he said that. To Tony’s credit, he was only mildly offended.

“I’ll have you know I have plenty of hair, thank you very much.” He huffed, opening the door for his mentee. Peter smiled sheepishly got in the passenger seat. Tony closed the door and went to go sit on the driver’s seat. Normally, he’d probably have Happy with him, but he noticed the guy giving Pepper the patented ‘I think you’re very pretty and I like you’ stare and he just had to help the fellow out. He definitely wouldn’t be the one in the way between two of his closest friends getting together and being happy. He could admit to being mildly jealous that he wouldn’t end up with Pepper himself, but he knew that train left long ago when he first became Iron Man. Pepper deserved better, anyways.

“So, what are we going to do today?” Peter chimed excitedly, his previous hair comment already long forgotten and forgiven. “Work on the suit? Make more web fluid?” He then turned to look at Tony expectantly. “Blow stuff up?” Tony swore the kid’s eyes shone brightly at that last inquiry.

“Well, I do like blowing stuff up.” Tony hummed thoughtfully, already knowing he was going to let the kid blow up as much scrap metal as he’d like. He remembered doing that with Harley once. “Sure, let’s blow stuff up.” Peter whooped. “FRIDAY, remind me to introduce Peter to Harley. I have a feeling those two will get along swimmingly.”

“Harley? Who’s that?” The teen asked, a brow forming in his face. “Was he there for one of the Saturday get-togethers?” Tony shook his head. After the first Saturday impromptu mini-party that Tony had, Vision and he decided they’d have more and it quickly became tradition.

The invite list was always kept short, close friends only, but Tony sometimes saw a new face here or there. Once Happy returned from his vacation, Tony invited him and he showed up every time
since. Rhodey, Matt, Stephen, Peter and now Happy were constantly showing up to Vision and Tony’s party, and they’ve even started bringing food of their own to share. Pepper would come whenever she could, but she didn’t always make it for one reason or another, and Tony didn’t hold it against her. Being his CEO was a hard job, and he knew she had a million and one things to worry about. He still missed her, but they were still close and hung out from time to time.

Sometimes, Matt would bring a new friend here or there and sometimes they’d show up again. Jessica had shown up almost every Saturday too, claiming that rich people booze was better than regular booze. Tony didn’t mind, he didn’t really have anything else to do with all of the alcohol he’s stock piled since he’s gone dry after all. Karen and Foggy, who were now in a first name basis with Tony, showed up every now and then and and Foggy often shared funny stories of Matt’s college days. Rhodey turned into a strong believer of ‘an eye for an eye’ and would often share funny stories of Tony’s college days in return. Tony and Matt would both grumble displeased every time, but would do nothing to stop the two offenders from telling their stories. Luke Cage and Daniel Rand were two new faces Matt sometimes brought. Tony already knew Rand, but was never too close to the fellow businessman. It was still a pleasant surprise to have him over. The Iron Man pilot could only imagine why Matt was bringing them to the get-togethers, but he didn’t question it. He was making new friends, and that was fine. Besides, he wasn’t the only one bringing in friends.

Stephen brought in Wong once, though he claimed it was because the fellow sorcerer refused to believe that Stephen actually had a semblance of a social life. Surprisingly, Wong got along well with everyone, though he rarely showed up since. He also brought in Christine once, and she and Pepper became quick friends. They had a lot in common, after all. Stephen and Tony were weary of their sudden friendship for good reason.

“No, he’s never come. He lives in a different state altogether. I’ll try to get him over here once weekend though, I think you’d really like him.” Tony said, answering Peter’s question with a small smile. “He’s the first tiny minion I’ve taken under my wing. He helped me out a while back, and we’ve kept in touch since.” Tony explained with his eyes still on the road.

“I can’t wait to meet him then!” Peter smiled preciously.

“But before you do, we still have to work on the suit and blow stuff up. It’s basically a requirement at this point.” Peter’s smile grew wider and Tony could only smile back. “Also, six pizzas are going to be eaten tonight, and a movie will be watched. Your pick.”

“Star Wars.” Peter almost said immediately. “Please?” He added quickly.

“Perfect.” Tony grinned.

The two eventually made it to the Tower where they immediately headed to Tony’s lab. Peter took out his suit and Tony asked FRIDAY for its schematics. Peter’s eyes widened at the hologram containing all of the details of his suit. “Right now, I put your suit in something called the Training Wheels Protocol.” Peter opened his mouth to protest, but Tony beat him to it. “Not because I don’t think you’re not capable of handling the suit to it’s finest, but rather because I want to ease you into learning all of it’s functions.” He remembered that being one of Peter’s biggest insecurities, something he should have paid more attention to last time. “Which is why I also wanted to train you myself. That way, you get more experience using the suit and more combat experience to boot. Plus, it means I get to pick on you like the big bad bully that I am.” Peter laughed softly.

“You’re really not bad Mr. Stark.” He shook his head. “Thank you, for giving me this opportunity. I promise I won’t let you down sir!” He nodded with determination, causing Tony to smile at him.
“I believe it.” He said simply, because he truly did. This wasn’t really the same Peter as the one that died in his arms, they had far too many different experiences with Tony to be the same, but they still had the same soul within. He might not experience the same things Peter did, and Tony would make sure that he wouldn’t experience a couple of them, but he still had the loyal, loving and cheerful personality that made him so likeable. The previous Peter had made Tony so damn proud, so he was convinced that this one would too. “Well, what are we waiting for?” Tony looked expectantly at Peter. “Chop, chop! Let’s get to work. This suit isn’t going to upgrade itself!”

They immediately got to work after that. Tony had started to explain to Peter everything that his suit was capable of doing, and asked if there was any other function that the kid would want to include in it. He had a couple of fun ideas that made Tony wonder why he didn’t think of them first, and the two began trying to figure out a way to incorporate them. Of course, Peter didn’t have Tony’s vast knowledge of building things, but he was a quick study. The more time they spent working on the suit together, the more he understood how it worked and the more ideas he had for how to upgrade it.

Then came testing, where Tony asked Peter to pick his top three favorite functions and Tony would teach him how to use them. The two would then spar, first out of suit and then in suit. Tony had to take them both someplace else, more isolated and safe for them to train. It would’ve been the compound, but he didn’t really trust anyone there with the kid’s safety and identity save for Vision. They ended up in one of Tony’s other nearby safe houses. He also made a mental note to request Happy to teach him some self-defense techniques like he did the billionaire, and maybe also get Barnes to show Peter some tricks too; although he’d wait until the super soldier was a bit better.

Barnes was progressing wonderfully and surprisingly quickly considering the amount of damage HYDRA did on him. He addressed Tony by his first name now, but preferred to be called Barnes. He wasn’t quite feeling like Bucky and he definitely wasn’t the Winter Soldier anymore, he was someone entirely different. He was also far too used to Tony calling him ‘Mr. Barnes,’ so it stuck. All he asked was for Tony and Stephen to stop being so obnoxiously formal with him, and they obliged. Tony was actually considering inviting him over one Saturday, just to see how he’d react with other people in a friendly environment once he feels comfortable enough for it. For now, he was content with their daily sessions and getting to know the billionaire and the sorcerer better.

Tony then introduced Peter to the suit’s A.I., informing him that he could name her as he pleased. After spluttering through a few names, one of which Tony remembered being the girl Peter used to be interested in, he chose Karen. Tony was kind of glad she ended up with the same name; it felt odd for her to go by a different one. Last time, he was going to leave her to be a surprise present for when Peter passed all of the requirements of the Training Wheels Protocol; this time, however, he decided she should be used as a learning tool like she did last time. Peter thanked him again and again for giving him his own A.I. and Tony didn’t know what to do so he just smiled back and waved it off like it was no big deal. The twerp still thanked him regardless.

Eventually, Peter and Tony got tired from all of the exertion (it was mostly Tony since he didn’t have an enhanced physique but the kid took pity on him) and called it a day. They quickly returned to the tower for the promised pizza and movie. On the way, though, Tony called up Harley while they drove back.

“Hey Harls.” Tony said casually when the no-longer-tiny Keener picked up. “How’ve you been?”

“Same as always.” The boy shrugged on the video feed. “Where are you going, and who’s that kid next to you?” Tony held back a snicker when Peter frowned.
“We’re going to the tower. That kid is the same age as you, and his name is Peter Parker.” Harley glared momentarily at Peter who just stared back.

“Hi, I’m Peter, though I guess Mr. Stark already said that… Uh… it’s nice to meet you?” This kid was surprisingly awkward for a superhero. Tony smiled fondly at the boy anyways.

“Wait, you seriously call Tony, Mr. Stark?” Harley asked incredulously. “Jeez. That’s actually really lame.”

“Hey!” Peter squawked. Okay, so maybe Tony was wrong when he thought the two would get along.

“Be nice kids.” He pleaded. “FRIDAY, tell the kids to be nice.”

“On it Boss.” FRIDAY chirped from the car’s speakers. “Mister Parker, Mister Keener, Boss requests that you be nice.” At this, the three humans laughed.

“Fine.” Harley conceded. “But you best not be replacing me, mechanic.” He warned. “I will hunt you down with my potato gun if you do. Mark 5, by the way.”

“So you finished it?” Tony asked excitedly. “You’re going to have to show me Harls. No, sit back down. You are not firing that inside the house, nor outside. I want to see it in person.” Harley paused, sitting back down.

“What?”

“It’s been way too long since I last saw you kid, and I’m pretty sure your Spring break is coming up right? So, how about you spend it over here with me? You’ll get to bully Peter face to face while you’re at it too.”

“Mr. Stark.” Peter groaned.


“She and your sister can tag along too, if you’d like. I’ll be sure to send over my private jet to pick you up the day your school ends.”

“I’ll let them know.” The kid grinned, and then turned to Peter. “Hey, take care of my old man until I get there.”

“Your old… wait, you’re Tony’s kid?” Peter gawked and Tony blinked in surprise. He felt his chest tighten in admiration and pride, and his lips parted into a small smile.

“Yup.” Harley answered easily. “Maybe not biologically, but he’s still my dad.” He glared at Peter, trying to get his point across.

“That’s so cool.” Peter, bless him, didn’t even realize Harley was trying intimidate him with his relationship with Tony. “Mr. Stark is really awesome! He’s been there for me since uncle Ben… anyways, he’s a great role model and yeah. I want to be just like him when I grow up, and it’s so cool that I got to know him just because I’m Spi- his intern. When Ned found out he freaked! And now I get to meet his kid and you’re also pretty cool. A bit rude, but still cool!” The more Peter ranted, the more Tony and Harley felt their faces warm up in a slightly embarrassed blush. The kid was really good with his praises.

“Kid, you’re ranting.” Tony said quickly, not bothering to hide his smile. “But please, keep telling
me how awesome I am. It does wonders to my ego.” Peter blushed at that, and immediately shut his mouth but smiled nonetheless.

“Tony, you can keep him.” Harley finally said, almost like Peter was a stray puppy Tony was trying to adopt.

“I’m keeping both of you, don’t tell your mom or Aunt may.” Tony responded easily. “It’s all part of my evil master plan. Soon, with you two as my loyal minions, I’ll conquer the world.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Harley rolled his eyes. “Face it, you wouldn’t get anywhere without my potato gun.” Tony chuckled.

“Right as always Harls.”

“Speaking of which, how are things with that doctor friend of yours?” Peter frowned at this question.

“Wait, do you mean Doctor Strange?”

“Yeah, that one.” Harley nodded, giving his attention to Peter.

“Is there something going on between them?” He asked, almost forgetting Tony was also in the car with them.

“Alright kids, time for this conversation to end right there.” Tony groaned. He suddenly regrets mentioning Stephen to Harley, even though it was only a passing comment. In his defense, he had been spending far too much time with the other man and Harley kept asking what he was up to. Tony refused to lie to his kids, so of course he would tell him that Stephen came over again. Of course he’d forget to mention that it was to work on another man’s mental health using BARF. And of course he’d forget to mention that they were strictly only friends.

“Yeah, he doesn’t really talk much about his daily life, but he mentioned this guy and had this weird expression on his face when he did.” Harley completely ignored Tony in favor of answering Peter.

“Now that you mention it, they do always end up sitting next to each other almost every Saturday.” Peter put a hand to his chin and started thinking seriously. “Maybe I should ask Mr. Rhodey what he thinks.”

“Good idea. Ask the redhead while you’re at it, she knows Tony really well.” Peter nodded seriously and Tony groaned.

“He’s literally just a coworker.” He complained, thankful that he saw the tower up ahead of him. “Now, lets change the topic of conversation before FRIDAY accidentally turns off the call.”

“I would not do that, Boss, unless you asked me to purposefully end the call. Besides, I think the boys are onto something.” Tony’s eyes widened with betrayal.

“Et tu, FRIDAY?” He gasped out.

“Sorry Boss.” FRIDAY, unsurprisingly, didn’t sound apologetic at all. “I will have Karen contact Ms. Potts for you.”

“Thanks FRIDAY!”
“Who’s Karen?” Harley asked, curiously looking between Tony and Peter.

“An A.I. I made for Peter to help him with his internship.” Tony explained quickly, before Peter could accidentally reveal his secret identity. He trusted Harley with it, but he wanted to be sure Peter revealed it on purpose and not by chance.

“Oh, that’s cool.” Harley hummed softly. “Tell her I said hi.”

“Sure thing!” Peter beamed.

Soon, Tony pulled up inside the tower’s private garage and the call was ended. He was glad the two teenagers ended up getting along, even if it was over something as ridiculous as Tony’s potential yet nonexistent love life. He hoped they would keep getting along in the future, regardless of whether he was in the picture or not. If anything, he was hoping his A.I.s would keep them together, especially since his will had Harley taking guardianship over FRIDAY should anything happen to him.

The mechanic and the teen reached the penthouse and were immediately greeted by the delicious smell of pizza wafting through the air. “FRIDAY, I love you so much.” Tony told her and immediately made his way towards the pizzas. The two put on the original trilogy and devoured the boxes, or, rather, Peter devoured the boxes and Tony helped out a little. Damn, that boy could eat.

After the series of movies, Tony decided to play the role of responsible adult and get Peter to bed. There was a lot of procrastination from both ends, but eventually exhaustion caught up to them. Peter laid down on his bed, and asked for Tony to stay with him a little bit longer. “Just for a bit, Mr. Stark. Please?” What could Tony do except what had been asked of him? He laid down on the other side of the bed, and the two talked for a little bit longer. They continued talking for quite some time, until they both fell asleep.

FRIDAY didn’t have the heart to wake either of them up in the morning. She was pleasantly surprised to find that Tony’s nightmares didn’t wake him up either. She was worried when Tony had first started spending more and more time around the stones, but the worry quickly became content when she realized that they were somehow doing him good. She had stopped badgering him about accepting Stephen’s help, which Tony was thankful for, and even took to reminding him not to forget about the stones before ejecting him out of his lab.

The following morning was enjoyably lazy, but eventually Peter had to go home and Tony had to return to work. He had been programming a new A.I. that he intended on secretly launching to space alongside a handful of Iron Legionnaires to both protect the Earth from any incoming alien invasion, which was what ULTRON’s original purpose was, and also to greet known friendlies like Thor and the Guardians. No one knew about this development with the exception of herself and Vision, both of which helped him speed up the process. He launched her up the very next day, making sure no satellite or any other form of tech could trace her and the Legionnaires.

By the end of the week, he and Shuri (with an endless amount of calls and coffee) managed to finish the containment units for the stones and Stephen had placed a couple of spells on them already. Now it was just a matter of putting the stones in the containers, seal them and getting them the hell out of Earth.

The moment that he and Shuri managed to make a container that would block off the stones’ outputs, Tony had started fabricating a circlet version for Vision to wear. He hoped it would have the same effect as the containers and prevent all of the other stones from ever reaching the android. No one would be able to find him like Thanos did ever again, and no one would be able to kill him
like Thanos did ever again either. Tony swore it.

He decided he’d make a version of it for Stephen’s eye of… whatever it’s called. Tony couldn’t be bothered to remember, honestly. It shouldn’t take too long to produce either, and Shuri, once learning of his plans, insisted on helping him out with that as well. They also ended up making one made a version for the eye of… Stephen was satisfied with the result and had thanked Tony for the effort. It was nice being appreciated every once in a while.

“So, you’re going to take the circlet to Vision, then?” Stephen inquired with a raised brow as he inspected his ridiculous eye shaped necklace that housed his stone. The vibranium additions had given it some extra bling that Stephen wasn’t quite a fan of, but Tony thought looked hilarious. It was safe to say Stephen wasn’t amused when Tony had laughed.

“Yeah, I’ll probably be heading over there right now.” Stephen opened his mouth to say something, but Tony quickly interrupted, “by car.” His mouth was promptly shut. “You are welcome to join me, though. It would be nice to see if it works and the time stone won’t be able to track it.”

“Very well.” Stephen tried not to sigh. He didn’t really like the idea of being driven, felt sick by it really. The day he was taught to use portals was by far one of the happiest he’s had in recent years, but he was a fool to think he’d never have to ride another car ever again. “I’ll accompany you.” He nodded tiredly, hoping Tony wouldn’t notice how weary the idea of a car ride felt for him.

Tony, on the other hand, knew full well what Stephen was going through right now. It was, after all, the same thing he felt every time he had to go through a portal. The main difference was that the portal was a quick one-minute ordeal, whereas a car ride would take a couple of hours at least. He honestly wished he could just get over himself and realize how convenient portals were, but every time he sees the orange glow he thinks of the blue one from the wormhole. He fears what’s on the other side, even if he can see it, and he fears getting trapped, even if it’s somewhere he can leave easily. He held back a tired sigh.

“Wonderful, FRIDAY will send you a picture of the compound. Meet me there in… let’s say an hour and a half? Two tops.” He clasped Stephen on the shoulder and offered a warm smile. “I’ll be going now.”

“You don’t want me to join you in the car ride?” Stephen frowned, with a mixture of surprise, relief and worry forming inside of him. On one end, he was glad he wasn’t expected to be in a car for more than a minute, on the other, he feared it meant Tony didn’t really want to be stuck with him for that long of a time. They have been spending more and more time together lately, but it was purely because of work. They worked really well together too, so Stephen was reluctant to think that Tony had gotten sick of him. Then maybe Tony was having some sort of flashback or panic attack? He seemed fine currently, not at all shaky and frightened like he had the first night they met. He wasn’t staring off into space either, letting his mind wonder off to a different time that never happened.

“I would love for your company, Stephen; but I’m afraid you might get tired of me.” Tony offered another smile. “Besides, I need you to do me a favor. I need you to find look over some of the ideas I had for our upcoming medical division, it would be fantastic to have a mind as capable as yours to offer up any suggestions, opinions or comments.” It was then that Stephen realized what was going on. Tony had him figured out and was offering him a way out of the uncomfortable situation without actually saying it, a technique he’s seen others use quite a few times but never thought to mention. Regardless, Tony was trying to be considerate and the sorcerer suddenly felt a wave of gratitude hit him.
He sighed, almost as dramatically as Tony would. “I suppose I can do that. They best be worth my time.” Stephen grumbled, already looking around the room for anything that might look medical. It wasn’t long before he was directed to a couple of leg braces by FRIDAY, he had to admit he was rather impressed by them.

“I hope those suit your fancy.” Tony winked, making his way out of his lab with the stones in tow. “Don’t go through the rest of my stuff though, look but don’t touch unless it’s for the medical department.” He said seriously looking at Stephen for confirmation that he understood.

“Alright, I’ll keep my hands far away from your precious toys.” Stephen rolled his eyes, feeling something at the show of trust from the other man. Then again, FRIDAY was there to watch his every move, but the sentiment was somehow still there.

“That’s all I could ever ask for Stephanie!” Tony flashed him a big grin before finally stepping out of the door with a charming “see you later, gator.” Stephen rolled his eyes again before focusing on the back braces.

“These are actually rather incredible, though some of the connections to the nerves could be improved for better performance. The center of gravity is a bit odd, almost as if it was tailored for a specific person.” Stephen noticed, talking to himself at this point but trusting FRIDAY to be taking notes. “I’d either say come up with a system that would be able to be generally adjusted for all different types of people or simply make a generic style.”

“You are right, Dr. Strange.” FRIDAY commented. “These braces were originally fabricated for Colonel Rhodes, when he lost the nerves for his lower body while fighting off the Rogues.” The doctor immediately lost interest in the braces, more curious on what exactly FRIDAY was talking about. Rhodes could walk just fine, certainly something hasn’t happened in the week they hadn’t seen each other. The fact that he’d need leg braces was a complete and utter shock, especially since the man hadn’t displayed any signs of having problems with his walk. There was also the question of who the Rogues were, and how they managed to get the upper hand on War Machine. Wouldn’t the world have heard of this by now? It made no sense, unless...

“…this happened from the future. These are the braces Tony made for Colonel Rhodes.” Stephen realized.

“Yes, that is correct.”

“Does that mean that Tony told you everything?” Stephen wondered owlishly. If Tony really did tell FRIDAY everything, it meant he didn’t need to go to Tony directly for answers. FRIDAY could more or less tell him what he needed to know. He figured Tony could probably forbid her from revealing the truth outright, but FRIDAY is very intuitive. If she wanted Stephen to know what happened, then she’d figure out a way to tell him. Her bringing up this topic shows that she does indeed intend on letting him know of a couple of things. Did he really want FRIDAY to tell him everything though?

“You are very astute. Will there be any more notes for the braces?”

“Yes, that can wait.” Stephen took a deep breath, making his choice. “I think I’d rather Tony tell me himself what happens, but is there anything urgent that I should know for is well-being?”

“He has suffered a lot through the hands of others, and if you choose to follow the same path they did there will be consequences.” FRIDAY’s voice felt cold, threatening. It was far different from her usually warm Irish lull and it effectively frightened Stephen.
“Noted.” He nodded, going back to examining the braces. “I don’t intend to betray his trust now that I have a semblance of it.” He told her, feeling like the need to clarify himself.

“Good. Make sure it stays that way.” He never thought he’d be threatened by an artificial intelligence that haunted the tower equivalent of a mansion that probably had more advanced tech than the rest of the world combined. How was this his life? He sighed and returned to his previous work of examining the braces and their makeup but before he could, FRIDAY spoke up again. “I was not there at the time, but I have seen videos as well as some of the logs left behind by my older brother JARVIS. Boss had almost died in the other side of a wormhole.”

“Yes, I looked into previous major media concerning Tony’s Iron Man after the hospital visit. That one was one of the more prevalent stories, a crowd favorite. Why do you mention it?” Stephen looked up curiously, wondering what FRIDAY had to say about this topic.

“No reason, Doctor; I just though I would state it.” She sounded almost disappointed. Stephen frowned, trying to understand just what she was trying to tell him with that little tidbit. After a couple of moments trying to decipher it, he decided to continue his inspection; he was, after all, a magnificent multi-tasker. He could easily try and think of FRIDAY’s reasoning while also examining the braces and other prosthetics Tony had made.

It wasn’t long before the two hours had passed and Stephen was stepping out of his portal and onto the compound’s entrance where Tony stood waiting for him. “So, how were the medical schematics? Were they any good?” Tony paused before smiling wickedly. “Well, of course they were, I mean, I was the one who made them after all.” He boasted cheekily, receiving nothing but an eye roll and an exasperated sigh for his efforts.

“Yes, Tony, they were quite interesting. Most of them seem already good enough for the market, but I put down a few notes of improvement anyways. I do hope they help.” Stephen offered a smile before he continued talking. “How was your car ride? Lonely without me?” Suddenly, that same smile became a playful grin.

“Not at all,” Tony winked back teasingly, “FRIDAY was good company in your absence.” Tony then looked at the luxurious black car parked just by the compound gate where a man sat inside patiently waiting for something or someone. “Besides, I also had Happy with me.” Stephen huffed, rolling his eyes. He wasn’t too thrilled with the response he got, but he refused to acknowledge why. Tony was, after all, his only friend aside from Wong and Christine; though he supposed Peter might throw a fit if he ever heard him say that. Anyways, it wasn’t hard to understand why exactly Stephen would want Tony to actually miss him, after all, who wouldn’t want their friend to miss them? Surely that was it.

“I’m sure she was.” Stephen looked past Tony and onto the compound in front of them. “So, this is your super secret hero hide out.” He commented. “It’s very… avant-garde.”

“Are you trying to compliment the Avenger’s HQ? Because if you are, that was a very poor attempt.” Stephen shrugged, not really caring that he was found out almost immediately. “Besides, avant-garde is all the rage these days.”

“Truly? Here I thought it was a thing of the past.” The two looked at each other for a moment before they chuckled. Tony then made to walk towards the gate and Stephen followed, though FRIDAY’s update made Tony still if only for a moment.

“Boss, an unidentified plane is approaching the compound.” She explained. “Upon closer inspection Rogers and Romanoff were identified. They will land in approximately ten to fifteen minutes.”
“Thanks FRI.” He said with a sigh. “I was hoping they wouldn’t show up any time soon.” He mumbled under his breath. It was moments like these that he wished he had been more aware of Rogers’ movements after ULTRON, so that he’d know when to expect the other. Unfortunately, he was a big advocator for privacy and desperate to show his trust for the others. What an idiot he had been.

Stephen wanted to ask him what that was about, but decided that perhaps it would be a better idea if he didn’t. Tony suddenly looked incredibly stressed already, and it was clearly a topic he wasn’t quite interested in talking about just yet. Stephen could respect that. “Anyways, let’s go find ourselves an android chef, shall we?” The mechanic offered him a smile, which Stephen returned easily.

It didn’t take too long to get ahold of Vision, especially considering the fact that the android had been eagerly waiting by the front door for them. Both Tony and Stephen thought it was incredibly charming of him to do so, and were quickly immersed in a pleasant conversation with the android. They were currently talking about plans for their next Saturday meet up. It seems that Vision rather liked having everyone over, and wondered if Tony would be willing to do that again. It was surprisingly adorable how quickly Tony agreed, wanting nothing more than to please his friend and perhaps enjoy the company of others. Vision brought them over to the compound’s kitchen, deciding to make tea—no coffee for you Tony, you’re far too addicted for your own good— for the two other men.

Eventually, Tony brought up why they had come to visit and offered Vision the circlet with hopeful eyes. “I don’t know how much you remember, but the stone was taken from you by Thanos. I don’t want that to happen again, and I refuse to let it happen again. I made this circlet in hopes of hiding the stone’s energy, so that maybe you wouldn’t be able to be found.” Tony tapped on his reactor nervously. Stephen had come to understand that gesture uncomfortably well. It was actually kind of interesting how Tony would sometimes tap faster or slower depending on what he was thinking of, problem or solution. Problems, of course, had the faster taps similar to the one he was doing now. Whenever he was coming up with a solution, the tapping would gradually slow down as the solution became more and more plausible. If Stephen had to guess, the problem was whether Vision would accept the gift or not, and the solution would be his answer.

“This is very thoughtful of you.” Vision gingerly reached out for the circlet, a memory forming in his mind. It was rather unpleasant. He felt five large fingers dent his skull inwards, crushing the metal and wires, and pulling out the stone with such grotesque ease. He had died then, but continued living on inside the stone as yet another mind lost to the world. He remembered feeling frightened, but then victorious once it was Thanos who held the stone. Thanos’ memories were vile for him; he didn’t like living through them at all. The anger and fear he’d seen in Tony’s eyes and they thought was something he had hoped would never really be directed at him. “Thank you.” He took the circlet, and examined it thoroughly. He smiled once he understood how it was meant to work and gently put it on.

“Did it work?” Tony looked between Stephen and Vision, hoping for the best. His tapping was faster now that a new, more important problem presented itself. Stephen tried using the time stone to locate the stone in Vision’s head. He smiled when it didn’t work. He then cast a spell similar to the one he cast when searching for the time stone several weeks before, just to be on the side of caution. He looked at Tony with a serious expression.

“It worked.” The worried face Tony had made slowly bloomed into an enormous grin. “As far as the stone is concerned, you are undetectable Vision.” He offered the android a smile.

“Hell yes!” Tony cheered, feeling newfound energy flow through him. Of course, good things
rarely last long, and soon his cheer halted in fear as a familiar voice boomed from the living room behind him.

“Vis!?” Wanda screeched in worry. She stormed through the door leading into kitchen, looking for the android with fear written in her eyes. Before she found him, however, her eyes settled on Tony and her lips formed a snarl. Fear turned into rage as a red mist started to form by her fingertips. “What did you do to him?” It happened so fast, and so unexpectedly that Stephen didn’t even have the chance to react. Wanda quickly, violently, used her magic to lift up Tony and slam him against the wall. “Why can’t I feel him anymore?” She asked, not bothering to mask her anger nor her delight at his apparent pain.

She made another hand gesture, but before she could do whatever it was that she intended to Stephen quickly cast a spell and pushed her back into the living room and bound her both in the physical sense and the magical one. “Tony?” He asked for the man, not at all bothered when his cloak left him to check on the engineer.

“I’m fine.” He grunted. Stephen quickly glanced over to the other man’s direction, not entirely willing to look away from the witch. He didn’t really believe Tony at first, but looking at him and seeing the nanobots wrapped around his back as a makeshift shield put him at ease. He looked back at the witch and glared at her in pure rage. He heard footsteps filter in on the other side of the kitchen walls, gravitating towards the still bound Wanda. With a deep breath, Stephen began to walk past the door and face the potential new threats.

Meanwhile, Vision was helping Tony stand up and examining him for any injuries. FRIDAY was eerily quiet.

“Wanda, are you okay?” A crisp, deep voice asked. It belonged to a blond Caucasian male with a strong built. So this was the famous Captain America? Stephen was, so far, not impressed. “What’s wrong?” He asked her when she refused to speak, glaring only at Stephen. The cloak silently reappeared behind Stephen, once more resting on his shoulders but clearly on edge and ready to defend him if need be.

“I believe we should be asking him that.” A female voice came from his right, and there was a gun aimed at his face. He looked at her with mild disinterest. With a quick hand gesture, the gun was sent to the mirror dimension and the infamous Widow tensed only for a second before returning to her calm demeanor with a loose-looking fighting stance.

“Who are you and what did you do to Wanda?” The blonde man glared, entering a fighting stance himself and drawing out his shield. Stephen was about to wave it off as well before hearing a third, far more pleasant voice behind him.

“He is Dr. Stephen Strange, and he reacting towards Wanda’s aggressive use of magic on me.” Tony carelessly strolled into the room with Vision walking behind him, and placed a hand on Stephen’s shoulder. The grip was light, but reassuring. “Thank you for that, by the way.” Tony offered him a genuine smile that quickly turned false once he looked over at the man with his shield still raised up. “That’s Steve Rogers, and the woman beside him is Natasha Romanoff, both are my friends and teammates.” He leisurely explained to Stephen, not even looking at him anymore. He then took a couple of steps forward, planting his hands in his pockets and stepping in between Rogers and Stephen. The latter wasn’t sure how he felt about the obvious move to separate the two. Was Tony ashamed of being his friend? “Hey there Cap.”

“Tony.” Rogers nodded his head in greeting, not yet releasing his stance. Romanoff, however, walked over towards the Captain and crossed her arms in a successful attempt to look casual and unafraid. “So, you’re saying Wanda attacked you?” He sounded far too accusatory for Stephen’s
“Yep.” Tony simply shrugged. “If you walk into the kitchen you’ll find the large dent she made using my body as the hammer.” Stephen winced slightly, berating himself for not reacting quicker.

Rogers, for the most part, was silent for a couple of seconds. Stephen assumed he was trying to understand the events and maybe considering how he would lecture his teammate for the abuse of power. “I’m sure she didn’t mean to.” Stephen blinked stupidly surprised, he looked at Tony as if to share his exasperation, but the billionaire didn’t even glance his way.

“No, I’m pretty sure she did.” Tony shrugged again, and interrupted Rogers the moment he opened his mouth to speak. “No worries Cap. I’m not holding it against her. She was just worried about Vision, especially since he had come offline a couple of weeks ago.” Tony then lazily looked at Wanda. “Right?” She nodded quietly. “Though, I’m sure next time she’ll ask before jumping into conclusions and slamming people against walls for no good reason.” He gave her a pointed look before smiling back at the blond man Stephen was quickly festering resentment for.

“Of course. She’s still learning, and she won’t do this again.” Rogers smiled back, finally standing up and putting the shield back. He walked over towards Tony, and placed an approving hand on Tony’s shoulder. The billionaire immediately and violently flinched back as if burned, making everyone in the room look at him with different expressions of either concern or interest. Romanoff and Wanda were the ones that stared at the man with interest, wondering what had set him off that way. Stephen suddenly felt disgust for them, and even more so for Rogers who looked almost hurt from the reaction.

“Ow…” Tony hissed, cradling his shoulder and rubbing it gently with his thumb. “Man, I didn’t think it would leave this bad of a bruise.” He groaned, and then, as if an afterthought looked up surprised at Rogers. “Oh, sorry about that Cap. I didn’t mean to make you worried.” He smiled again. “Last night I was working on the Iron Man suit and must have pulled a wire or something because suddenly the suit’s arm malfunctioned and hit me right on the shoulder.” He sighed and put a hand on his chin as if in thought. “I probably should have deactivated the automated response feature, but then I wouldn’t have the date I’d need to correct the problem I’ve been having with the gyro’s connection to the suit.” He continued talking to himself for a bit, earning a fond smile from Rogers.

“Are you okay?” The blond man asks, suddenly caring about the mechanic and gently placing his hand on his arm instead. Tony’s smile made its way back on his face when he looked up to the super soldier. Stephen then realized that maybe the two of them were closer than he had thought, though it seemed weird considering what Tony’s told him the few moments he actually talks about his team.

“Never better.” He said easily and then his eyes wondered a clock in the room. “Oh shit! It’s 6p.m. already?”

“Language.” Rogers chided with a smile and Tony rolled his eyes.

“Yeah, yeah.” He then turned to Vision who, up until now, had remained beside him silently. “Sorry Vis, but I have to get back to the tower. I’ve got to make sure the intern lab is all set up before Pepper finds out I haven’t been doing that.” He sighed. “Come on Strange, it’s going to be a hell of a drive back if we don’t beat rush hour.” Stephen was almost tempted to portal out of there right then and there, but chose to nod with silent anger instead. This entire conversation felt criminal, especially with how flippant Tony was treating him.

“Rush hour is never fun to sit through.” Romanoff smiled cheekily at Tony. “I don’t envy you
“Neither do I.” Rogers nodded. “Well, I suppose I shouldn’t keep you then.” He smiled at Tony and then moved over to the side to better look at Stephen with a stern expression. “Would you mind releasing her?”

Stephen glanced at the witch, then at Tony—who was somehow still in between the two tall men—and sighed before doing as requested. “Of course.” He looked back at Tony. “Let’s go then, Stark.” He made his way to leave, not really looking back to see if Tony was with him or not. He heard the billionaire say his heartfelt farewells before following the other.

If Tony wanted to ‘save face’ with his fellow Avengers and pretend he wasn’t friends with a has-been neurosurgeon, then that was fine by Stephen. He didn’t really understand Tony’s sudden need to make the two seem as distant as possible, and he especially didn’t understand why the other basically pushed him forward and kept pace behind. It was aggravating, and Stephen really wanted to chew the other out… but something told him not to. The entire situation felt so surreal and wrong. Tony rarely ever talked about his teammates, and when he did he always made it clear he didn’t like them much. He was also very easy going about their friendship with everyone else he had introduced him to, so it didn’t make much sense that Stephen should be treated differently with the Avengers. Not to mention how Stephen never knew Tony sustained a shoulder injury, that was probably the worst revelation of the night. He felt worry gnaw at him, and unwillingly had the need to check it out and see if it was injured.

Once they were outside the compound, and heading closer and closer to the car Stephen sighed and turned around. “Alright, let me see your shoulder.” He looked at the other expectantly.

“What?” Was all Tony could say, while having a confused expression on his face. Stephen felt even more irritation pass through him. He didn’t even care about the nervous glances Tony gave the compound, as if afraid someone was following him. He didn’t even care that Tony was still trying to push him out of the compound, almost as though he were desperate to leave. Certainly rush hour couldn’t be that bad?

“Look, I don’t really get what happened in there nor do I think I want to, but you should at least let me check your shoulder and see if the injury is severe. The reaction you had made it seem like you broke a bone or something of the like.” Stephen frowned, still feeling the begrudging concern. Why was Tony’s behavior affecting him so badly?

“Oh, that? It’s nothing, really.” Tony shrugged and made to keep going.

“Tony—” Stephen’s voice was firm, but was nonetheless interrupted unceremoniously by another.

“I’m afraid he’s right, doctor. Sir is uninjured.” Vision said, as he quickly flew beside them, catching up almost instantly. “Both FRIDAY and I scanned him after the moment of impact and, aside from a slight bruise on his upper left thigh, he has sustained no injuries.” At that Tony stilled, slowly looking back at Vision with a blank expression on his face. “I was wondering if I might accompany you, Tony.” His voice was so gentle and calming, like talking to a spooked child. “Please.”

“Oh.” Tony’s voice sounded clipped, heavy and forced. Before Stephen could put much thought in it, however, the man kept moving towards the car. The cloak then left Stephen again, and wrapped itself around Tony, tightening its grip in an attempt at comfort.

“If it wasn’t an injury, then why did you flinch?” Stephen whispered, suddenly unsure of his emotions and his understanding of what had transpired.
“Because there was a time where Steve Rogers almost killed him.” Vision said coldly before gently landing right next to Tony. “I was thinking we could see if Peter has any friends he would like to invite this Saturday. He mentioned someone named Ned, and claimed him as a ‘best friend.’ I would like to know why he has earned the title of superior companion.” Tony looked over at Vision and offered a grateful smile.

“Oh, I remember Ned. He’s even more of a troublemaker than Peter is. He hacked into Peter’s suit once and overrode the Training Wheels Protocol from right under my nose.” Tony recounted, a charmingly pleasant expression now on his face as he remembered those moments. The smile soon left, though as his mind took him into darker memories, such as Peter nearly being buried alive or nearly dying in a plane crash because Tony was an idiot and took the suit.

“A likely friendship, then.” Vision hummed, forcing Tony to focus on him. “I wish to meet him. Peter talks very highly of him.”

“I’ll be sure to tell the kid to invite him then.” Tony responded. “FRIDAY?”

“I will remind you boss.” FRIDAY’s voice came from within Tony’s pocket, most likely where he kept his Stark phone. The man really did never go anywhere without her, did he? It was incredibly charming how in tune they were with each other, almost as if they spoke a secret language. He supposed that spending enough time with another would do that, or perhaps Tony had simply programmed her to understand what he meant. Either way, it was incredible.

“Do you think Matthew would bring miss Jessica again? She was quite entertaining to talk to.” The two continued to talk about their Saturday plans, though it was mostly Vision talking and Tony muttering a response here or there as if his mind was elsewhere. They kept at it even when Happy opened the car door for them and continued after they were all inside the surprisingly spacious vehicle. Stephen had reluctantly followed them in, too worried about Tony to care for his own traumas.

Happy somehow also knew something was wrong, and he immediately took to driving them somewhere in silence. It wasn’t long before there were three cheeseburgers being handed to them. Vision thanked the man, appreciating being included in this gesture regardless of his inability to eat.

“Thank you Happy, you always know how to cheer someone up.” Tony gave him an appreciative smile. “Oh, and be sure you come to the tower on Saturday night. It’s a new job requirement.” Happy huffed, but nodded nonetheless and Stephen wondered if he knew it was just going to be a small get together. Then again, considering his presence in the past few gatherings, he probably did.

The four of them drove in silence now and Stephen was still invested in trying to understand everything that’s happened today, though mostly as an attempt to distract himself and calm his nerves. He seriously hated how he felt too averse to riding a car, something he’s done countless times without a problem until there was one. Now he was antsy just sitting in the backseat, and refused to even look outside the window because of his nervousness. He hated it so much, briefly wondering how Tony -Stark? No, it’s Tony. Strangely enough he couldn’t force himself to stay mad at the billionaire- How Tony could simply go through things and seem perfectly fine afterwards…

…except he didn’t. Looking at him even now, he was still pale with a blank expression on his face. He’d sometimes smile and go along with whatever someone said, but it didn’t have the same energy as when Tony is truly immersed in the conversation. He clutched the cloak around him tightly with one hand in a desperate attempt for comfort, and covered the gesture with another. It
was actually a bit saddening to see, but also impressive how well he hid his emotions from others. The only reason Stephen even knew to look for his tells was because of what Vision said, and it was surprising how easily Stephen believed him. Rogers hadn’t really cared much for Tony’s well being, only Wanda. He seemed distant, as if Tony was an outsider, and yet still expectant of the other. Their interaction was just so fundamentally wrong in every sense of the word that Stephen could hardly believe it actually happened. Despite it all, Tony still treated him like an old friend. He still acted like everything is fine and gave excuses for everything, his own discomforts be damned.

Suddenly, FRIDAY’s musings earlier in the day made sense. He nearly died on the other side of a wormhole, which was something similar to his own portals. Tony’s arguments against the portal weren’t made because of his fear of Sgt. Barnes’ reaction, but rather because of his own fears and traumas. He understood how Stephen felt about cars because he felt the same about the portals, and Stephen didn’t even care to make the association. Tony must have felt some sort of panic every time Stephen made him go through a portal, and he didn’t complain. He went willingly, if only to spare Stephen of a car ride.

Had Tony really done that for him? If so, then why would he physically distance Stephen from the rest of the Avengers like he didn’t belong there? Then Stephen remembered the flinch, and his well-elaborated lie. He wasn’t trying to distance them because he didn’t like the sorcerer, but rather to protect him instead and act as some sort of human shield. Tony put himself between his friend and someone he fears entirely, all while smiling and playing an act, simply because he didn’t want Stephen to get hurt. He probably distanced Stephen so that they wouldn’t focus on him either, choosing instead to take the spotlight for himself despite the possible outcome.

With this realization, Stephen felt a sick feeling boil inside of him; but he also felt some endearing emotion he couldn’t name right now. “Tony.” He said simply, easily gaining the billionaire’s full attention. “I just… Thank you.” He wasn’t too impressed with Tony’s dumbfounded expression, already knowing he wasn’t sure what he was being thanked for exactly. “You’re a very good friend.” With this, Stephen decided he’s actually start looking out for the billionaire and making sure he was taken care of. Getting him to sleep and eat well were things he was already working on, but now he had Tony’s emotional well being to take care of as well. A burden he surprisingly didn’t mind undertaking.

“Thanks…” Tony was frowning now, still uncertain as to what Stephen was trying to get at and why. “You’re not dying, are you?” Stephen’s eyes widened in utter disbelief. How the hell did he reach that conclusion?

“Not that I’m aware of, no.” Stephen then looked at his cloak still fiercely wrapped around Tony and smiled softly. “He’s taken a liking to you.”

“Who? Levi?” As if on cue, the cloak’s collar sprang up excitedly.

“You’re not dying, are you?” Stephen’s eyes widened in utter disbelief. How the hell did he reach that conclusion?

“Not that I’m aware of, no.” Stephen then looked at his cloak still fiercely wrapped around Tony and smiled softly. “He’s taken a liking to you.”

“Who? Levi?” As if on cue, the cloak’s collar sprang up excitedly.

“No, I think he enjoys the name.” Tony smiled in return, and turned back to his burger. He savored every bite, wanting the comfort to last as long as possible. He was feeling better now, no longer on the verge of a panic attack. Vision talking to him about simple things had really helped calm him
down, and Stephen’s random thank you was also nice regardless of how spontaneous it was.

Honesty, he was still impressed with himself for being able to keep his cool while in that situation considering how trapped he felt. Being thrown around by Wanda like a rag doll was a highly unpleasant trip down memory lane, but Rogers’ imposing figure looking down on him with the classic disappointment wasn’t too fun either. He had Stephen to thank for not freaking out and high tailing out of there at the first given opportunity. Him holding down Wanda was a magnificent sight, and his calm and uncaring attitude helped calm Tony’s nerves if only a bit. Not to mention, Tony had something to focus on, protecting his friend from his other, less likeable ‘friends.’

He wasn’t too surprised that Vision picked up on his panic, but rather appreciative when the other asked to join him. He’ll admit that after they left the compound he could barely think let alone process anything that was being said or done to him, all he could do was try not to drown in his memories. He was lucky and thankful to have his friends there to support him in one way or another. Levi was also the greatest cloak to ever exist, and no one could change his mind about that.

Since that eventful day, Tony’s days have been, for the most part, tame. He knew it was just the calm before the storm, the storm being the UN calling them and introducing the Accords. Tony’s doubled his efforts with Matt to get their, still unnamed, document finalized and ready to show the council. There have been many moments where the two of them argue over what would be a better addition or what should be removed and they would keep at it until both parties were satisfied. It was basically done, but Tony was a perfectionist and Matt wanted to make this document the best it could possibly be. Karen and Foggy would constantly try to convince the two men that the document was good as it was, and all it needed was a name; of course, this backfired and they were put in naming duty and all suggestions thus far have been rejected. Foggy was nearly convinced that the names were getting denied solely because Matt and Tony both wanted to mess with them a bit, but he had absolutely no proof.

Saturday nights continued to be Tony’s favorite nights, especially since he and Vision were starting to get better and better at cooking, and everyone would eagerly show up to see what the two cooked up this time around. Ned had started showing up more frequently too, and Tony immediately started picking on the kid and inviting him to join him and Peter on some lab days. Both boys were elated and started coming over to Tony’s lab more and more as time went on, and soon it became a hangout spot. Tony grumbled in dissatisfaction, but his smile betrayed him.

Lab days with the boys were one of the few rare moments where Tony managed to actually relax and not think about what’s about to happen. Of course, the ever-watchful doctor noticed this and has started helping the boys sneak into the lab when they probably shouldn’t be there. Tony quickly noticed this trend of theirs, but decided not to act against it. He almost asked Stephen to portal Harley in as well several times, but knew better than to have his adult friend kidnap his emotionally adopted child from their actual parents via magic that no one knows about. He would just have to deal with impatiently waiting until Harley’s break before seeing that little bugger again.

Sessions with Barnes, however, were starting to become something far more stressful than he’d like to admit. It wasn’t because they were taking too long or were too hard; for having 70 years worth of brainwashing, Barnes was actually doing pretty fine. It was mostly because Tony didn’t know what to do when the UN council calls for the Avengers and delivers the Accords bomb, only for someone posing as Barnes to go and drop an actual right after. He wasn’t sure whether he should try and make Barnes’ presence known to the world so that no one could accuse him of anything; or whether he should go after Zemo before he could do something even though he has no idea where the man could be hiding; or maybe he should just hide Barnes and hope for the best.
Barnes of course noticed his change of behavior, and refused to let it slide.

“What’s wrong?” He had asked innocently, for the fifth time that hour alone.

“You’re really not going to drop this, are you?” Tony groaned as he adjusted the BARF headgear.

“If he does, then I won’t.” A voice was heard through the room’s speaker. Tony turned towards the glass separating the two rooms and glared at Stephen as best he could. “And if I do, then I’m sure Matt won’t. If not Matt, then Peter, Rhodey, Pepper, Vision, and so on and so forth.” With that, Tony sighed and turned back towards Barnes.

“Okay, sequence 149 trial 3. Let’s see if we can remove another trigger.” He said with an honest smile, he could worry about everything later when he was alone.

“Not until you tell me what’s wrong.” The smile turned into a frown. Barnes didn’t seem to care as he just continued to stare at Tony expectantly.

“I second that.” Stephen chimed from the speakers. “Really, we can be just as stubborn as you Tony. You might as well just give in.” Tony frowned, already thinking about how to derail this conversation and get back to what was actually important. He then made the mistake of making eye contact with Barnes, who looked so innocent and so worried. He groaned.

“Fine, you assholes win.” He fell back onto his chair and rubbed his eyes, thinking of the best way to bring this up without talking about time travel. “So, in about three weeks the UN is going to summon all of the Avengers and try and convince us to sign something they call the Accords. During the event something… I have reason to believe that something is going to happen. Something bad. And my intel says that they’re going to try and throw the blame your way so that good ‘ol Captain America will throw caution to the wind and do everything he can to save you even if he break’s the law to do so.” He really hoped that sounded convincing enough. “I don’t know what to do to prevent that. If they successfully manage to blame you, then everything might genuinely go to shit. Aside from the location where it happens and that it’s a bomb, I don’t know anything about the attack. I’m going to try my best to prevent it from happening but if I fail then…”

“I want to go to court.” Barnes said suddenly, prompting Tony to frown in confusion. “You know the date the attack happens, right?” The mechanic nodded. “Then set that as my court date. I can’t bomb something if I’m in a courthouse.” He had a point. Tony started to think more and more about it, he knew for certain that Matt would want to be Barnes’ lawyer and that if he managed to keep it a small, unknown event then Zemo most likely won’t find out that Barnes is getting tried and will continue with his plans. Tony could probably bullshit an excuse for keeping the Winter Soldier hidden and safe in U.S. soil, and everyone leaves happy.

“Okay. I can work with that.” He nodded after a moment, tapping his reactor lightly in thought. “We’ll definitely have to be sure your triggers are gone for good by then, but we have time. Three weeks to get rid of the remaining three triggers. It’s doable, but we’re going to have to amp up your schedule if you’re willing.” Barnes nodded with determination. “I promise, as soon as this is over I’ll make sure you get to do what you want and be who you want. You’ll be free.”

“Thank you.” Barnes held his gaze for a silent moment before the three of them went back to work with newfound determination. Tony felt a bit lighter, but he was still worried.

Three more weeks and everything will either go to shit yet again or turn out fantastically well.

Just three more weeks.
On a side note, I only have my own experience to go from with panic/anxiety attacks, so it this chapter was disappointing and far from what it's actually like in that regard I apologize. If you are suffering from panic/anxiety attacks and want someone to talk to I'm a willing listener! Feel free to shoot me a message on my instagram (@mephobicsshadow because I used to be so edgy) and feel free to rant. That being said, I hope all of you are having an amazing day! Love you bunches!
Hello lovelies!
Have another chapter! (It might be a while before I post again since I'm going on holiday, but I'll try to post one more before I leave)
This is also the point in time where I should admit I had to read and re-read the plot for Civil War on the wiki page because… well… I really didn't like that movie and kind of blocked it from my mind.
TLDR Steve sucks.

Welp, enjoy the read! I hope I didn't butcher the canon timeline too badly.

There were three days left. Tony grunted in frustration while he re-read the Hero’s Honor Mandate –the name was still up for debate but Foggy really liked the alliteration on that one so it's acting as a placeholder- for the tenth time that night. In Tony’s defense, he really had nothing better to do to quell his nervousness. He was as prepared as he could possibly be, but his paranoid mind wouldn’t let him rest until he was absolutely certain there was nothing more he could do.

Barnes was cleared Trigger free the day before, the stones’ containers were ready and basically impossible to break through after sealed, the document he wrote with Matt was finished, the court date was set in secrecy after many strings were pulled, and he had an army of Legionnaires at his disposal should any aliens come to Earth. Everyone was fine and safe and happy, so Tony didn’t have to worry about that. He already hacked the War Machine suit to make sure the program build onto the suit to get Rhodey out of any horrible situation was still running, so his best friend wouldn’t be losing his legs no matter what. He made a plan for when Zemo attacked posing as Barnes. He even got on the good side of so, so many politicians he’d rather not have ever met in case he needed people to vote on his version of the Accords.

There was quite literally nothing more Tony could do until the Accords debacle was settled, but Tony still couldn’t sleep at night. Not even the stones helped him sleep like they used to, and not from lack of trying. Tony swore he could feel them call out to him, urge him to rest; but he couldn’t. He’d sit by them, but work on something here or there to keep his mind distracted. He was a nervous bundle of anxiety just waiting to be set off.

“Boss, I insist you go sleep or at least take a break.” FRIDAY’s worried voice washed over the heavy rock music playing in the background. Tony shrugged.

“But I’m just getting to the good part of Article 89 Part 6. The way any and all enhanced under the jurisdiction of the council have a right to remain unidentified so long as they continue to report their missions to the designated retainer is just so sexy. It’s a real page turner FR1.” He quipped back, rereading the paragraph and checking for errors or any loopholes that can be found. There were none since he and Matt were so unforgivingly thorough, but it didn’t hurt to check… for the fifty-ninth time.

“I’m sure. Not to spoil the ending, but the next part specifies the requirements for the reports as well as explaining their reason for existing. And the part after that clarifies what actions should be
taken in case his teammates or the council jeopardizes an enhanced individual’s identity. Oh, and afterwards it states actions that will be taken should an enhanced individual break his oath to the council. Now that your curiosity over this clause is satisfied, perhaps it’s time for you to put the book down.” Sometimes, FRIDAY really knew how to sass him. He rolled his eyes and sighed.

“Fine, no more reading. I’ll work on the Iron Man suit instead.”

“For the fourth time this night? I believe any and all changes should be made after you’ve tested the suit you just finished.”

“Spiderman’s suit it is then.”

“Mr. Parker has yet to file any complaints or suggestions with his current version. You have also promised to refrain from working on his suit without him.” Tony mentally cursed himself for that, but he really did want the kid to be involved as much as possible with the suit’s creation. What if Tony wasn’t there to help him out anymore and he needed the suit to be fixed? He should at least know the basics, and now that he does he’s learning the more advanced stuff.

“Barnes’ new metal arm.”

“Already completed and ready to be attached.”

“Stephen’s Sans-Shake-Series folder has a list of unfinished products. Like the silverware or the gloves!” He cheered in victory. The SSSS folder was created a while ago when he noticed how uncomfortable Stephen was with his hands during a Saturday get together. Honestly, he was surprised he hadn’t noticed before, but sometimes Stephen’s hands shook worse than normal and the good doctor wouldn’t be able to use them for anything. It was sad how disheartened Stephen looked, so Tony decided to do something about it. He already finished a couple of things, like a pen that would cap itself if it felt Stephen’s hand shake far off course from where it should probably go, but he had a lot more ideas down the line. He wasn’t really sure how the other would react once he found out about the folder, but Tony couldn’t help himself. The projects could also be used for others with similar problems too, so if anything he could use that as an excuse.

“I doubt the doctor would be happy knowing you’re sacrificing hours of sleep on his behalf.” With that, Tony’s victory crumbled. It seemed FRIDAY wasn’t going to take any of his excuses tonight, and he was both irritated and endeared by the act. FRIDAY had grown so much in such a short period of time that he couldn’t help but feel delighted with her development as an A.I. and a person.

“Okay fine, you’ve made your point.” He sighed and lifted himself from the workbench he had been sitting on. “I’ll go grab a cup of water and then maybe I’ll consider sleeping.” When FRIDAY didn’t protest, he grabbed his tablet to work on something else and made his way towards the elevator. He knew full well that she would nag at him if he did anything other than sleep, but at least for now he was safe.

And so, Tony began making his way to the kitchen. He briefly debated saying: “fuck it” and grabbing a coffee instead; he wasn’t nearly as tired as before, and he really had Stephen and the stones to thank for that, but that didn’t mean that staying up late into the night working didn’t make him beyond exhausted. At least he wasn’t feinting anymore. He suddenly wished Rhodey hadn’t taken away his lab’s coffee machine, again. He was almost tempted to buy another one, but after twelve failed attempts at hiding the machines Tony learned his lesson: he’d have to figure out a way to deadbolt the coffee machine to his lab first before he could buy another one.

“Boss, you have several guests sitting in your living room attempting to look as threatening as
possible.” FRIDAY spoke casually, completely unbothered by the information; Boss had been expecting them for a while, after all. Her sister A.I. had informed them of their presence in the atmosphere a couple of hours ago, but they had remained there for quite some time so Boss had shrugged it off as a problem to deal with another time. Unfortunately, they decided to make their appearance right as FRIDAY had managed to convince her boss to take a break. It was safe to say she wasn’t too happy with them right now.

Tony looked up from his tablet and hummed softly, stopping his walk. “Huh, so it seems.” This was the absolute worst time for the Guardians of the Galaxy to show up, but he was thankful that they did nonetheless. Well, he still had the three days until he’d be called to the U.N. council to look at the original draft of the Accords and then try to appeal his own version of it.

Peter Quill, who up until now had his ‘serious business’ face on, widened his eyes in shock. “What? Oh, come on! Don’t ruin the surprise!” He huffed petulantly. Gamora, on the other hand, didn’t even flinch.

“What did you do?” She still glared daggers at Tony, showing a hologram version of the message he had sent to space hoping it would reach her. Well, message received it seems.

“Straight to business huh?” The man muttered softly. “Alright, I can do that. I didn’t think you’d bring the whole party though.” He smiled, already anticipating a headache from being around the Guardians again. “Star Lord.” He nodded at Quill, only slightly amused when Quill’s eyes lit up. “Drax, Rocket, Groot, Mantis.” He nodded at each of them. “Nebula, glad to see you’re well.” He smiled fondly at her, remembering their many moments together while stranded at Titan. She might not have been the best company, but she was company nonetheless. “And strange green girl that I’ve heard way too much about; which must mean you are Gamora.” He finally looked at the redhead in the middle. “Welcome to Earth. I’m Tony Stark, although I’m guessing Jocasta already told you that.” He said as he put down his tablet on the counter and made his way to the coffee machine… so much for water. “Want some coffee?” He asked with a smirk, completely satisfied with their baffled expressions.

“You know of us?” Nebula asked, already over the initial shock.

“Do I? I was stuck in Titan with several of you.” Tony shuddered at the memory, trying to keep his headspace somewhere nicer. “We fought Thanos together.” He hoped they wouldn’t ask any questions, but he knew that was a far-fetched dream. “Sorry for your loss, though; and sorry you weren’t the ones who were able to take them down.” He looked briefly at the two sisters.

“Explain.” Gamora demanded.

“Time travel is a bit of a shit to explain.” He groaned. “Seriously, have you ever tried telling someone you’re from the future?”

“Yes, I have, actually.” Quill mumbled loud enough for all to hear. “What does that have to do with anything?” Tony gave him an unimpressed glare before sighing in exasperation.

“See, I forgot how much of an idiot you were.” He then looked at Gamora. “I’m so sorry you’re stuck with him.” She gave Tony a small smile, before hardening her expression again. “Right, it’s back to business.”

“I do not understand it, we have not left any businesses.” Drax said and Tony almost face-palmed right there. Patience, he told himself, they’ll help you out in the long run.

“I am way to tired for this.” He groaned, wiping a hand on his face. “Coffee.” He immediately
made his way towards the coffee machine. “Coffee first.”

“What is this coffee you speak of?” Nebula asked, looking aggressively curious at what Tony was doing. That question immediately made Tony smile at her.

“It’s a drink that has caffeine in it, and caffeine has an effect on the human body that makes it more energized for some amount of time.” Tony explained. “You’re more than welcome to try some if you’d like, though I think you didn’t like the taste when I let you try it before.” He made himself a cup as he spoke.

“Give me some.” She demanded, not noticing Gamora roll her eyes.

“Sure thing Smurf.” Tony happily gave her his cup, but not before littering it with sugar first. He wasn’t a big fan of sugar in coffee, but he also didn’t want Nebula to grimace at it in pure disgust. She, surprisingly, had a sweet tooth. He wasn’t really sure how she digested food, now that he thought about it, and she rarely ate anything when they were together in the ship –mostly to save the supplies for Tony who had been starving and basically dying- so maybe she just didn’t need as much food as him? He’d have to ask her that another time.

“Why did you call me that?” She glared at him, on edge now. Quill, on the other hand, was laughing.

“Just a nickname I gave you while we were heading back to Earth.” Tony shrugged, watching her eye the beverage in her hand warily before steeling herself. “Careful when you drink that, it’s hot.” She nodded and took a sip, immediately sneering at the taste.

“You were right, I do not like this.” She handed Tony the cup back.

“Well, it’s important that you tried it anyways.” Tony shrugged, taking a huge sip of his defiled elixir. He could do without the sugar, but he wouldn’t complain right now. He was just glad he got to see Nebula again. Odd as she was, Tony still cared for her deeply. “I hope we can be good friends again.” He smiled at her fondly, before looking at Gamora with a serious expression. “Okay, do you want the sweet and short version or the excruciatingly long and detailed report?”

“Sweet and short” Quill had said at the same time Gamora demanded “long.” The two looked at each other for a moment before Gamora sighed and gave in. “Medium length.”

“I can do that.” Tony nodded. “Okay, so we meet in about two years in Titan, well, I meet everyone but Rocket, Groot and you, Gamora. I think you were dead by then.” He winced once he realized his lack of tact. “Which you aren’t anymore, so you’re welcome.” He recovered quickly, ignoring the shocked faces Gamora, Quill and Nebula had. He wasn’t too surprised that Rocket didn’t react and Groot only looked at Gamora while Drax and Mantis were just talking to themselves. “We lost and half of the universe was wiped out.”

“He succeeded.” Nebula hissed out. Tony only nodded before continuing.

“Yes, but then we regrouped with the heroes left on Earth, made a plan and then stormed over to where Thanos was hiding and demanded a rematch.” He left out a number of details, including how Rocket and Nebula were the only ones who survived, or how Nebula was the only reason he lived through his trip back from Titan. He owed her a lot, but he wasn’t sure she’d want his appreciation since this version of her wasn’t the one that helped him out. “We just barely managed to take the gauntlet that housed all of the stones from him, and then I made a wish and somehow ended up being thrown back to the past.”
“What did you wish for?” Gamora asked.

“The moment that Thanos touches a stone, he ceases to exist and life goes on as it should.” Tony explained. He looked at the cup on his hand, feeling far more exhausted than he had a minute ago. “Anyways, I somehow ended up alive with all of the stones and several years in the past. I asked you to come here to hopefully take a stone or two away from Earth. I’m trying to get rid of them, and even tried making sure they wouldn’t be as easily traceable as they once were. I already got rid of about two of them, and I’ve got a back-up idea for the others if I can’t get another group of well-intentioned aliens to take them away from me.”

“Wait, hold up.” Quill interrupted him. “You’re just trusting us with this?” Tony shrugged, and took another sip of his drink. “What’s in it for us?” Tony just glared at him and Gamora jabbed him in the side.

“I know where I can hide the soul stone.” She supplied. “And we can figure something out for another one of the stones, if you’d like.”

“Works for me.” Tony said simply, and picked up his tablet again. “Anyways, this chat was lovely and I’m absolutely loving the fact that you guys are taking two of the stones, but if you’ll excuse me I need to go back to drowning in work. FRIDAY can show you to some guest rooms if you want to spend the night. Rocket and Nebula, I think you two might enjoy the lab. You’re welcome to join me, but fair warning: if you touch any of my bots I will murder you.” With that he turned around and headed back downstairs. He knew FRIDAY would yell at him to sleep, but with the Guardians here he was given even more anxious energy. Not to mention he was about to be forced to giving away two of the stones; and even though he knew this day would come, it still didn’t make it any easier. Like an idiot, he grew attached. “FRIDAY, be a dear?”

“For you boss? Sure.” FRIDAY chirped. “Here, let me open the door.” The elevator doors chimed open almost immediately. Tony grinned as he stepped inside.

“And here I thought chivalry was dead.” He winked at the camera inside the elevator and turned around. He was only mildly surprised when all but three of the Guardians were attempting to enter the elevator but failing simply because they keep trying to shove each other out. It seemed like Mantis, Drax and Gamora weren’t too interested in his lab. “Okay, what is going on?”

“I want to see the lab too!” Quill said petulantly. It was almost sad how much more mature Tony’s Peter was compared to this one. The kid would have a field day with these guys, especially since he wouldn’t have to figure out a way to fight an incredibly powerful purple alien that liked to throw literal moons at people. So maybe Tony hadn’t gotten over that one quite yet.

“I am Groot.” The small pre-teen Groot said.

“What he said.” Rocket agreed. “Now move aside Quill.” Tony sighed, stepping to the side and making more room for his guests.

“FRIDAY, would you mind informing Stephen and Vision that the Guardians have arrived.” He told his A.I. and patiently waited for the elevator to fill up and close before heading back to his lab.

“Consider it done Boss! Then perhaps you can do me a favor as well and sleep for once.” Tony chose to ignore that last part.

“So who keeps saying that?” Quill asked. “It’s not the same lady that instructed us to land here.”

“No, that would be Jocasta.” Tony yawned. “I put her in charge of greeting outsiders like you and
Thor. You’re currently talking to my other A.I., FRIDAY.”

“Woah.” Quill’s eyes widened. “Where did you buy her?”

“I made her.” Tony beamed a bit when he saw Quill’s jaw drop. The Guardian was going to say something, but was interrupted when the doors to the elevator opened up, and then he was rendered speechless. “Welcome to my lab. Again, don’t fuck with my bots and I won’t ask FRIDAY to do unspeakable things to you.” He walked inside taking another sip of coffee. “Hey, DUM-E, U, Butterfingers, where are you guys hiding out now?”

“How much for this glowing thing?” Rocket asked, pointing at one of Tony’s old arc reactors he was planning on reusing as a source of renewable energy.

“Not for sale, and FRIDAY will know if you steal it so don’t try it. It didn’t work too well for you last time.” Tony smirked when Rocket glared at him. “But, you can have this.” He picked up a prototype prosthetic leg, smirking at Quill. “It might help with the next prison break.”

“Hah!” Rocked grinned, looking at the leg. “I am keeping this though.” Tony shrugged; it wouldn’t really be missed.

“Oh, there you are. DUM-E, meet the Guardians. Don’t harass them, please.” Tony said patting the sensors on his arm. “Oh don’t give me that look, you know exactly what I mean. FRIDAY told me what you did to poor Stephen, I’m surprised he still came back down to the lab after that one.” DUM-E beeped sadly, and Tony gave the sensors another gentle rub of affection. He knew it was only a matter of time before U and Butterfingers showed up to join their brother.

“He’s very rudimentary.” Rocket commented from behind Tony. The billionaire couldn’t help but feel a sense of appreciation that Rocket, an alien that had no idea who Tony Stark was and how he felt about his creations, referred to DUM-E as ‘he,’ as a person.

“He is my oldest A.I.” Tony explained. “Anyways, you and Nebula enjoyed meeting them last time, so I figured I’d introduce you this time as well. You’re welcome to work on your guns while you’re here if you’d like, but I don’t build those anymore so I won’t be participating much in that.” While he didn’t particularly enjoy making weapons anymore, and would shiver at the thought of it, he knew that was what Rocket did to relax. As long as he took the weapons with him, Tony wouldn’t mind it too much.

“This arm is fully functional.” Nebula commented, holding and inspecting Barnes’ newer, lighter and stronger arm. “It is well made.”

“How much?” Rocket started to say, but was interrupted before he could finish his question.

“Not for sale.” Tony huffed. “Thank you, Nebula. Hopefully its new owner enjoys it as much as you do. His current arm is old, outdated and heavy. It’s been giving him a lot of problems, it seems. Honestly I don’t know what HYDRA was thinking when they… never mind.” He almost started ranting about how absolutely horrid the designs for that arm were, but he realized that they might not care so much about that. Rogers and his team never seemed to care about his designs back when he used to try explaining them with his usual excitement. Stephen and Peter were the only ones he still did that to, but mostly because the former was almost always by his side, never complained when Tony slipped into that habit and actually even seemed interested, while the latter constantly asked about them. “How was your trip to Earth?”

“Pretty long, actually. We were a couple of galaxies away when we saw your message.” Quill explained. “Though, I’ll admit I never thought I’d ever get to go to Earth ever again. I didn’t really
want to come back.” He hummed thoughtfully. “It’s a lot more different than I remember.”

“It certainly has changed a bit, and hopefully for the better.” The Guardian nodded at that. They would have kept talking if not for a familiar noise accompanied by orange sparks interrupted them. “Okay, now what on Earth are you doing here?” The Guardians immediately went into defensive positions when a new person decided to join them, but quickly realized he wasn’t a threat and went back to looking around the lab.

“FRIDAY sent me a message.” Stephen answered easily. “She explained how the Guardians showed up and how you were using them as an excuse to avoid going to bed, so I figured it wouldn’t hurt to come by and remind you that it’s far past your curfew.”

“She said that, did she?” Tony sighed. “Wait, what are you doing up at…” He opened up a hologram computer and checked the time. “2:30 in the morning?” Stephen stilled slightly at the question and looked away for a moment.

“I couldn’t sleep.” Tony frowned, uncertain of what he meant by that. Surely the good doctor didn’t have anything to be anxious about like Tony did. He wasn’t there for the Civil War, and even if he were he wouldn’t have remembered it.

“Woah! I can’t believe wizards are real!” Quill said, interrupting their conversation and almost made the situation worth it considering Stephen’s new grimace. “Wait, is he your nanny or something?” Not worth it at all.

“No.” The two men said almost simultaneously. “Tony simply has a tendency to forget basic human needs.” Stephen added.

“Basic human needs are lame.” Tony quipped back with a smile. “Also, he’s a sorcerer, not a wizard; especially since wizards aren’t a thing.” Tony explained, and was a bit surprised to see Stephen staring at him with wide eyes. “Why are you looking at me like that, Merlin?”

“No reason.” He looked away, observing the rest of the Guardians that visited the lab. They were all looking at the different things, Nebula seemed to be more interested in the prosthetics that Tony was developing and Rocket was mostly eyeing the different Iron Man suits. Groot was just sitting there playing video games, having been satisfied with his curiosity. Quill was the only one still paying attention to Tony and Stephen, quite amused by their conversation. “I just didn’t think you, who constantly call me a wizard, would remember that.” Tony rolled his eyes.

“That’s because aggravating you is fun.” He grinned and turned back towards Quill. “Anyways, back to the original point of this conversation, this is Dr. Stephen Strange. He’s a close friend, an accomplished neurosurgeon and also the Sorcerer Supreme of Earth.” Stephen couldn’t help but notice how different this introduction was compared to the one given a few weeks ago to the Avengers. Tony’s tone made it clear that he was proud to have him as a friend, and Stephen couldn’t help but smile in appreciation. “Stephen,” Tony turned to him with a brilliant smile, “these are four of the members of the Guardians of the Galaxy. This guy is Peter Quill, also known as Star Lord for some reason. The rabbit over there is Rocket,” he didn’t even seem phased by Rocket’s yell of protest from being called a rabbit, “and the cute little tree stump over there is Groot.”

“I am Groot.” Groot said, not glancing up from his console. Rocket frowned at him, but kept his mouth shut. Tony wondered what it was that he said. According to Rocket from the other timeline and taking the time difference into consideration he was still a kid about to turn into a teenager, so it was probably some unsavory comment.
“That lovely lady over there is none other than Nebula.” Tony smiled fondly at her again, not surprised when she only stared back with a frown on her face. Stephen wasn’t sure what to make out of that smile, but he certainly hoped Tony wasn’t into cyborgs. He then chided himself for thinking that, realizing it didn’t matter if Tony was into cyborgs or not since that wasn’t his problem to deal with... well, at least that’s what he was trying to train himself into thinking.

“Hello.” Stephen greeted them with a nod. “I’m afraid I’m going to have to cut this meeting short and take Tony.” He added. “That will also mean you won’t have access to this lab, sorry.” Tony looked at Stephen, a bit startled that he was imposing Tony’s sacred yet unwritten rule that no one is allowed in the lab if Tony isn’t there. Stephen had broken that rule once, when he was looking for Tony when he was in the hospital, but when he had realized it was something important to Tony he had apologized profusely and promised it wouldn’t happen again. He was, unsurprisingly, true to his word and Tony appreciated it.

“Right, you have nanny duties to complete.” Quill smirked at both Tony and Stephen’s deadpanned expressions. Rocket laughed while Nebula only nodded. Groot didn’t seem to care less.

“I am Groot.” He said instead.

“Where are you learning that? Watch your language.” Rocket grumbled. “We can come back down here some other time.” Tony blinked, not really surprised that Rocket had already claimed this place as something at his disposal as he did that last time too.

“There’s a lab just a floor down that you’re welcome to enter and use at your own volition.” Tony informed them. Honestly, he had been planning on giving that lab, that was originally intended for Bruce, to Peter and Harley for them to share, but he had yet to furnish it and make it more personal for them. Besides, he had wanted to give it to them when they were both physically present and there was still some time before Harls would be able to come visit him so he might as well put the lab to use. “Just don’t destroy it.”

“No promises.” Rocket grinned, making Tony sigh. All of them made their way towards the elevator, though they got off at different levels. The Guardians went to the guest floors and met up with the rest of their teammates while Stephen and Tony made their way to Tony’s penthouse.

“Okay, now that the entourage is gone... what gives?” Tony looked over at Stephen. Upon the other man’s perplexed expression, he explained himself further. “You’re usually asleep by 10pm on the dot. Even I can’t persuade you to stay a minute longer awake with the promise of science, medicine and witty banter.”

“Like I said, I couldn’t sleep.” Tony gave him an unimpressed look, clearly demanding more of an answer. “It’s nothing you should worry about.”

“Stephanie, you literally have a sleeping spell.” The billionaire sighed while he opened the door to his room, gesturing for Stephen to come inside.

“Which I forgot to use, and no longer wish to.” Stephen explained as he made his way inside the room. “On myself, at least.” He added, looking at Tony meaningfully.

“Why?” When Stephen just shrugged, Tony felt a wave of frustration flow through him. He briefly wondered if this was what it was like to deal with him and his own stubbornness. “That’s a bit unfair don’t you think?” He crossed his arms defensively. “I mean, you find out I have chronic nightmares and subsequent insomnia, without my consent mind you, but I don’t get to know what you’re going through?”
“Regrettably, you make a good argument.” Stephen groaned as he sat down on the bed. “Very well, I suppose it’s only fair…” He took a small breath, but Tony waited patiently. “I also have nightmares.” He said quickly. Tony just looked at him though, as if he was expecting Stephen to continue. So, of course, the sorcerer complied. “A while ago I was faced with fighting a powerful and evil entity known as Dormammu and, well, I basically just annoyed him until he gave up.”

“I can see that happening.” Tony hummed softly, earning a chuckle from the sorcerer. “But why would that give you nightmares?” The chuckle died.

“Because he killed me over and over, it was an eternity of dying millions of different ways. I only lived each time because I had the Eye of Agamotto with me, making us stuck in a cycle.” At this, Tony stilled. “It’s gotten better with time, but sometimes I still wake up to the feeling of being stabbed and killed repetitively.” Stephen sighed, wondering what expression he’d see on Tony’s face if he was brave enough to look up. Would be concerned? Impressed? Perhaps bored considering his own, probably worse, nightmares. “There’s also nightmares from the crash, though those aren’t nearly as bad.” He forced out a chuckle.

“Can I touch you?” Tony suddenly asked completely surprising Stephen with the outlandish request. The sorcerer looked up, not expecting to see Tony’s sincere eyes look at him with worry.

“You may.” Stephen finally said, wondering just where exactly this was leading. It was a pleasant revelation when Tony simply sat beside him and gently pulled him to a hug and, after a moment of hesitation, Stephen reciprocated. He didn’t think embracing the engineer would be as comfortable as it was, but he found that he had liked it.

“I’m sorry you had to go through that.” Tony said carefully, letting go the moment Stephen’s grip on him loosened. They looked at each other in the eye for a moment, and Tony’s hand still touched Stephen’s arm as a gentle reminder that he was here and he was safe. Then, probably due to Tony’s strange allergy to anything related to emotions, the mechanic coughed and turned away. “Well, I think maybe you should be the president of the Time Stone Users Club after all.” Stephen blinked for a second, letting Tony’s words sink in, before he laughed.

“Oh, but I quite enjoyed being the treasurer.” Tony simply shrugged.

“You can be both. I’ll just be the V.P. or something like that. Oh! Maybe I could be the mascot. I get wear one of those hideous and stuffy fur mascot suits!” He said excitedly and then, after a moment, he winked and spoke up again. “I bet I’d make it look good.”

“While I’m sure you make many things ‘look good,’ I somehow think a fur mascot suit would be out of your ballpark.” Stephen rolled his eyes but smiled nonetheless. Tony nudged him playfully, smiling softly at him. Stephen was taken by that smile, his heartbeat quickened and his eyes refused to look anywhere but at Tony’s lips; they were so close to his own, yet unforgivably far away. It really wouldn’t take much effort to close the gap… Thankfully, he caught himself before he decided to act out on his fantasies.

He really didn’t want to think about what just went through his mind, but there wasn’t much he could do to deny his growing feelings towards the other man. Getting to know Tony Stark had been something far more entertaining than he’d ever have thought possible. Christine was someone he considered interesting, someone unique with a beautiful personality and a kind nature; and yet, somehow, compared to Tony she was irrelevant. From the beginning he was an enigma that easily captured Stephen’s attention and managed to hold it with relative ease. Tony Stark painted such an erroneous picture of himself for the public as someone who was uncaring, cocky and confident, when he was really one of the kindest and selfless people Stephen’s ever had the pleasure of meeting. How could Stephen not fall for someone like him?
How could he not fall for the man who would sacrifice his own well being to protect him? The same man who laughed at his jokes and listened to his complaints. The same man who took his suggestions seriously and never once doubted his intellect, but rather marveled it instead. The same man that happily shared his resources with him while claiming that it was nice having a ‘lab buddy’ to work with. The same man that just made his night better with his bad humor and caring personality.

Caring for Tony had only made him fall harder. Stephen knew he was the possessive type, and he knew that once someone became his then he would do whatever it took to guarantee that they were satisfied and well. He took pleasure in it, and so he took pleasure in taking care of the billionaire. It hadn’t worked out with Christine because they wanted different things and simply weren’t compatible, but having spent days working alongside Tony for hours and then making sure he was practicing healthier behavior made him wonder if they could work. He wouldn’t indulge the thought for long however, as he had no inkling of a reason to believe that Tony felt the same way.

With a sigh, he stood up from the bed and smiled down at Tony. “Well, as fun as this has been I do believe it’s time for you to sleep.” He began making a portal but a tender hand on his arm stopped him.

“You can’t sleep, and I can’t sleep.” Tony said simply, knowing full well what it’s like to be alone with dark thoughts. “Why don’t you stay here for the night? We could lay down on the bed and just talk until either one of us falls asleep.” He suggested. Stephen could admit the thought was appealing, especially since it meant spending more time with Tony. “I could even lend you some pajamas or something for you to get more comfortable, if you’d like.”

“I think I would like that.” Stephen said finally. “Only a couple of minutes, though. Then you’ll go to sleep.” The two of them smiled at each other. Tony then got up and went to his closet, which, Stephen hated to admit, was almost as big as Stephen’s room in the sanctum. The man grabbed two sets of pajamas, both of which were comfortably big on him, and offered one to Stephen. “Thank you.”

“No problem. While you change, I’m going to take a quick shower… I smell like motor oil and coffee.” Tony grimaced after sniffing the shirt he was wearing. “Yeah, I’m not sleeping with this stink.” Stephen chuckled and nodded.

“I didn’t want to say anything but…” The shorter man huffed and made his way to the bathroom.

“Some people just have no manners.” He grumbled playfully. “I’ll be out in a bit.” He called out before shutting the bathroom door behind him. Stephen continued to look at the door for a lingering moment, until he heard the shower turn on. He sighed softly and decided to simply lie on the bed while he waited for Tony.

The room was decently sized, but not too big; it was, however, empty. There were almost no personal decorations save for a picture of Peter and Tony holding an internship certificate. Though there was the occasional scrap piece of tech scattered here or there that Tony had probably brought up with him to work on before sleeping. Despite that, it seemed like the room wasn’t really used much, and it didn’t take much to think of why.
Just as promised, Tony came out of the bathroom freshly cleaned. He looked rather charming even with an oversized t-shirt hanging loosely on his body and wet hair sticking to his forehead. “Miss me?” He grinned, plopping himself on the bed right next to Stephen.

“Certainly.” The sorcerer deadpanned and Tony just laughed. It was a beautiful laugh… that much was clear considering the skipped beat in the sorcerer’s heart.

“Hey,” Tony suddenly said seriously, “I know I’m pretty bad when it comes to emotions and feelings and all that crap, but I’m here… if you ever need me.” Tony turned his head to look at Stephen. “If there’s anything I can do, anything at all, just let me know.” He was so sincere; it made Stephen’s heart skip a beat.

“Thank you.” Stephen nodded. “I will, so long as you let me be here for you as well.” He bartered.

“Deal.” Tony smiled brightly. They then shifted into lighter territory, talking about their days and personal interests or desires. It was a considerably mundane conversation considering one of them was a sorcerer and the other a superhero, but it was still nice and comfortable. They continued to talk even after they both yawned tiredly, and after still when their eyes could barely keep themselves open. Eventually though, both of them fell into an easy and peaceful slumber that was left undisturbed by nightmares, or anything really, for the rest of the night.

Tony had woken up first, though it was mostly due to FRIDAY’s silent buzzing on the phone he left in his pocket. He grumbled awake and checked what it was exactly that had him wake up at… 7:30, according to the clock. FRIDAY left him a small message, which he was thankful for.

Good morning boss! The Guardians are awake, waiting for further information and you have received a reminder for the U.N. summons in two days.

Tony sighed, gingerly picking himself off the bed. He was entirely startled by the wizard sleeping soundly beside him, but his mind quickly supplied him with the previous night’s events. He decided it might be best to just let the sorcerer sleep in for once. He had a feeling that if the roles were reversed, Stephen would have made a similar decision.

He got dressed quickly and quietly, and left for his kitchen. He normally would’ve just skipped the meal and headed straight for work, but he wanted to have something ready for Stephen. He made a quick scrambled egg and grilled some toast. He placed an assortment of teas in the counter, alongside the butter and the plate of food. Satisfied with his handiwork, he made himself a cup of coffee and grabbed a peace of toast before heading downstairs.

“FRI let them know I’m coming down.” He requested as he stepped into the elevator.

“Yup!” She responded quickly. “Shall I also inform Dr. Strange of his breakfast when he wakes up?”

“Yes, please.” He mumbled, still feeling a bit hazy with sleep.

The rest of the day was productive for the most part. He had sealed off the two stones he would be giving the Guardians in the containers he had made, immediately missing their presence once he handed them the stones. To his surprise, the team had requested to stay in the tower for a little bit longer to both talk more about Thanos and his still existent army, as well as to spend a couple of days to just relax and recharge before they set out on their mission. Tony easily accepted their request, considering the tower was pretty much empty and that they were ultimately doing him a huge favor.
He was suddenly looking forward to Saturday’s get-together. He would certainly invite the Guardians, even if he didn’t really know all but two of them that well. He kind of liked the rag-tag group despite their many, many quirks. Stephen had disappeared after their night together, though Tony couldn’t really blame him. It was a pretty odd thing to wake up to an empty bed after an impromptu sleepover, especially considering they were strictly friends. A thought that nagged Tony at the back of his mind, but he ignored it like most things that didn’t seem urgent. He was also apparently swarmed with work at the sanctum.

The two days flew past far too quickly for his taste. He had enjoyed his time with the Guardians, getting to know them better, but he still had responsibilities to deal with and that included the cursed Accords. Just as last time, the team was divided. He, unsurprisingly, had Romanoff and Rhodey on his side, but was fighting against the thickheaded Rogers.

This time, however, he had decided to warn T’Chaka about an impending threat. “Something bad is going to happen and I think you’re the target. Keep your eyes open and stay safe, your majesty.” Tony had told him, already knowing when and where the bomb would strike. He would be accompanying the king for the entirety of the day, even if it were just in the shadows. T’Challa was weary of him, but didn’t openly say anything considering their very odd partnership concerning the Infinity Stones and the vibranium. Shuri really liked him, too.

“FRIDAY, keep your eyes peeled for any Barnes look-alike.” He told her from inside his suit. He hadn’t realized how hard it was to do any recon mission with his suits, considering they were really bright and flamboyant. Thankfully, he managed to find an alleyway far enough that no one would see him but close enough that he could still assess the situation around him. He then decided he should look into making a suit with some sort of stealth-mode. He thought of other uses he could have for it, like how it would probably be really neat to have it follow him in missions as some sort of backup. He wondered how he could make it go invisible. He could look into camouflage tech, but he doubted anything was advanced enough to completely shroud his suit. He’d resigned to the fact that it was something he’d have to create on his own. It’s a good thing he liked creating things.

“Boss, a figure matching Sgt. Barnes’ facial structures has been spotted heading towards King T’Chaka.” FRIDAY’s beautiful Irish voice brought him out of his technological reverie. He immediately went to look for the person she had pointed out, and hummed in fascination with how similar they looked to Barnes. His eyes then wondered towards the package that the individual was carrying; it was quite obviously the bomb. Tony gritted his teeth and decided to wait until the bomb was deployed. If he went after Zemo now, then there’s a chance he would just run away and explode the bomb some other time and Tony’s foresight would be meaningless; besides, so long as he managed to put the blame on Barnes’ shoulders, then it didn’t matter if the bomb killed anyone or not.

“Is it remote activated or timed?” He asked FRIDAY, who was already scanning the individual.

“Timed, boss. It looks like you’ll have about 60 seconds before it detonates.” He nodded, not quite liking that little tidbit. He could make it, though; he just wouldn’t have enough time to catch Zemo. He briefly debated sending a legionnaire to capture him, but as it stands the Iron Legion was currently being sanctioned and loaned to the U.S. government. It was the only way he could legally make the Legion and not have any repercussions from it after the accords, though he was thankful that their deal was being kept in the dark for now.

Ultimately, Tony just barely managed to prevent the bomb from killing civilians. The moment he saw Zemo place the package and swiftly walk away, he sprung into action. He grabbed it, surprising many citizens who weren’t expecting Iron Man to swoop down and up right next to them. He then kept going up and up and up until FRIDAY screamed at him to let go of the bomb
and leave. He begrudgingly did as told, scared that he hadn’t put enough distance between the bomb and the people, but he trusted his A.I.

Just like last time, the blame was placed on Barnes. Rogers paced nervously, itching to go find his friend and save him. Tony just felt annoyance at this point. He sighed, and made his way towards a reporter covering the scene. “Hey, yes. Hi.” He waved over at her with a charming smile. “Tony Stark, pleasure to meet you.” He said quickly. “Barnes isn’t the guy you’re looking for.”

“Oh my God it’s Tony Stark!” The journalist nearly screamed, then she remembered she had a job to do and she smiled sheepishly. “Pleasure, Stacy Miller from CNN. You’re saying Barnes isn’t the culprit?” She held the microphone up to him. He smiled graciously at her.

“Nope!” He popped the ‘p’ lazily. “I know this because he’s currently in a courtroom in the U.S.” He explained, feeling pleased with the slight gasp the woman gave him. “I’ve been working with him in secrecy to get rid of the triggers placed in him by the shadow organization known as HYRDA. He’s now testifying in court for the murders he had committed while under the control of that organization.” He took out his phone and started flipping through his apps, before finding the one he had developed to basically watch the court case live as it happens. Satisfied with it, he handed his phone to the reporter.

“You’re right! He’s testifying right now. Mr. Stark, would you be willing to send this video over to CNN?” She asked, handing him his phone back.

“Certainly Ms. Miller.” Tony replied with a victorious grin. “Consider it done.” He nodded at her, before putting his phone away and stepping back. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’ve got a meeting to attend!” Stacy laughed and bid her goodbyes, thankful for the billionaire just giving her the scoop of the century.

“You knew where he was?” Rogers accused him the moment Tony stepped away from the reporter. Tony kept walking, so Steve and the rest followed. They were still debating whether or not to sign the accords, and Tony was about to bring up the document he had been working on. Of course things wouldn’t go his way, because when do they? Then again, he probably should have expected some sort of negative outcome from Rogers. He forced himself to calm down.

“Yeah. I had to, considering I was getting rid of his triggers for him.” Tony shrugged, not really sure why he had expected a simple thank you from the super soldiers. He really should know better by now.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” He asked, feeling hurt now. “You could have trusted me with this.” Tony held back a scoff.

“No, I really couldn’t.” Tony cursed himself for letting that slip the moment it did. Rogers was taken aback, not having expecting that sort of reaction. “I couldn’t trust anyone. The walls have ears, Cap.” He tried for a friendly smile, but he really didn’t want to spend that energy on that man. “Besides, I needed to keep him a secret. If he saw you, who knows how that could have affected his mind? He might have confused you with an enemy or his long lost friend, and it might’ve fucked him up.” Tony hoped the argument didn’t sound like it had come from straight out of his ass. He could really bullshit when he needed to.

“I see… Still, I wish you would have told me.” Rogers sighed, disappointed that he didn’t get to see his friend sooner. Tony hid the grin that was forming on his lips.

“Sorry Cap. There really wasn’t enough time to tell you, truth be told. You were always off running with Nat to destroy remaining HYDRA basis, I didn’t want to bother you with this. I didn’t
want you to lose focus on your mission worried about Barnes.” He went for genuine, and was pleasantly satisfied for the guilty look on Rogers’ face. Rogers had been lying to him about the missions; sure he was shutting down HYDRA bases, but he was only doing so to find Barnes. It felt like a good, albeit a bit petty to see Rogers look so uncomfortably contrite.

“I see…” He said tersely.

“Anyways, I think I have a solution for the Accords.” Tony smiled, pulling up what he and Matt had been working on for quite some time now. “I had a feeling this day would come, so I came up with this document as a failsafe. Once I read the accords, I tailored it to resemble it close enough for the U.N. to accept it, but still work for our benefit.” He hoped Rogers would sign it this time, making sure not to mention anything about Wanda and her temporary confinement this time around. If he signed, then Tony won. The world would have a united team, and there wouldn’t be an Avenger’s ‘Civil War’ as the media called it.

Much to his absolute delight, the U.N. actually liked his version of the document better. It turns out Tony hadn’t needed to think of a name for it, as the council immediately dubbed it the “Iron Accords” after him. He absolutely hated the title, but Matt seemed to like it enough. He said something about how it would serve as a reminder to the world for who it was that actually gave a shit.

Rogers hadn’t given them an answer for whether he’d sign the document or not, but instead chose to take the first plane back to America since he still had a few days to sign it. His destination was stupidly obvious, and Tony couldn’t help but feel a bit of sympathy towards Barnes. Hopefully Barnes still likes Rogers; otherwise it might be a bit of an awkward reunion.

Tony also went back to America, but on a Stark Industries jet rather than a normal Avengers jet. Rhodes decided to go with him rather than the other Avengers, who didn’t really understand why Tony had felt the need to use his own means of transportation. It was summed up to being an ‘ego thing.’ Rhodey scoffed, but they didn’t really dwell on it much.

One of the first things he did when he reached America was take Matt, Foggy and Karen out to lunch and celebrate their success. “To the best set of lawyers the world has ever seen.” Tony cheered, lifting his glass of lemonade with a grin.

“To the Iron Accords, and the man behind them.” Matt cheered back, clinking their glasses together.

Chapter End Notes

Also, kudos to whoever got all the references made in the titles of the chapters.
Okay, so a small itty bitty thing I low-key realized I completely forgot about... Lagos.
I meant to write about it, since that is the reason why Wanda is in house arrest in the first place, but it completely went over my head. Anyways, for this fic's intents and purposes, it's safe to assume it happened in the background of the story. (I'm sorry I completely flubbed it up)
Thank you @Spacecloud for bringing it to my attention!

In other news, thank you guys so much for all of your amazing comments! Honestly, whenever I get a notification that you guys said something I get this really stupid and giddy smile and it genuinely makes my day. Thank you for all of your support and all of your kind words <3

Enjoy the read!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Getting to see Rhodey’s face (which was a mixture of surprise and concern) had been extremely worth everything that’s happened to get them here. Tony made sure FRIDAY had photographic evidence of the moment Colonel Rhodes broke down and just gave up on having a normal life.
“Tones… why are there oddly colored people, a tree and a raccoon in your living room?”

Tony grinned. “What? Don’t you invite your alien friends over sometimes?”

“No Tony, I normally don’t.” He sighed, fully exasperated. “At least introduce us, properly this time.”

“Alright, I can do that!” Tony clasped his hands and turned to the Guardians. “Okay, so the human is Peter Quill…”

“Oh that’s going to be confusing.” Rhodey hummed.

“You’re telling me.” The billionaire sighed in agreement, completely ignoring Quill’s confused look. “Anyways, the mean green that could probably out-mean and out-green the Hulk is Gamora, the Smurf is Nebula, raccoon is Rocket, tree is Groot, Kratos is Drax, and least but not least Mantis the bug.” Tony quickly introduced them, smiling at each of them as he did so. He had grown to like these guys a lot more now that he didn’t have to worry about fighting a grape space overlord.
“Guys, this is Rhodey.”

“Nice to meet you all.” He nodded at them. “Though, I have absolutely no idea how the hell Tony’s made friends from out of the planet. Please tell me he didn’t kidnap you.”

“They came here on their own volition.” Tony huffed, before turning around and heading back to the kitchen where Vision was working on cookies. Tony was a sucker for a good batch of cookies; besides, Space Peter mentioned how he hadn’t eaten a cookie in decades and that simply wouldn’t do. No one should be deprived of cookies for that long.
“I’d like to see him try to kidnap any of us… Except maybe Peter.” Gamora grinned, receiving a huff from Peter.

“I would go with him willingly.” Drax said suddenly. “He is agreeable to the eyes. He is a man.” Peter looked at him with scrutiny and shook his head.

“Dude.” Peter squinted his eyes and frowned, before turning back to Rhodey. “Ignore him.”

“I was planning on it.” Rhodey quipped. “I would rather not be involved in my best friend’s love life.”

“Colonel Rhodes; Mr. Murdock, Ms. Jones and Sgt. Barnes have arrived and are heading up now. Boss has been made aware, and requests you to return to your doorman duties.” FRIDAY sounded cheekily cheerful.

“Tell him I better get another upgrade for my continuous efforts.” Rhodey grumbled before going to greet the three newcomers. Then he stopped for a second. “Wait, Sgt. Barnes? The same one who was on trial just two days ago?” He looked up with a brow on his face.

“Yep.” FRIDAY answered shortly. She must have sensed Rhodey’s question, because not long after she added. “Boss, Dr. Strange and Mr. Murdock have been working with him for a while now. Boss wants you to play nice.”

“Of course he does.” Rhodey rolled his eyes. He watched as three figures exited the elevator and walked into Tony’s penthouse. Honestly, doorman duties only worked for when he had to physically open the door for people, but Tony had granted them access to his penthouse. He figured Tony just wanted him to meet Sgt. Barnes. “Hey there Matt, Jessica.” He then turned to the third person, Sgt. Barnes. He looked a bit nervous, almost like he was afraid to be here. Rhodey extended a welcoming hand. “I don’t believe we’ve met. I’m Colonel Rhodes, but feel free to call me Rhodey. Thanks to Tones, everyone else does.” He huffed the last part, but there was no heat behind his words.

The man looked at Rhodey’s hand with bewilderment, but eventually shook it and smiled shyly. “I’m Sergeant Barnes… Tony calls me Elsa, but I think I’d rather you call me Barnes or James.” At that moment in time, Rhodey knew they would be good friends.

“Barnes, then.” Rhodey smiled, and let go of his hand. “It’s nice to meet a fellow James, though. Come on in.”

“Rhodey.” Matt greeted with a smile and a nod the moment he heard the man’s voice.

“Hey Rhodes.” Jessica gave him a sly smile, before walking in. “Has Tony finished the cookies ye-woah. Who are you?” She stopped walking the moment she went inside the living room and looked at all of the Guardians one by one.

“Oh, those are Tony’s new friends. Apparently, he didn’t like the Earth variety so he decided to branch out with extra terrestrials… and the Quill guy.”

“Hey!” Quill exclaimed with a huff. “You can just call me Peter, you know.”

“Oh, that’s going to get confusing.” Jessica hummed. “Well, whatever. I’m Jessica, Jessica Jones. Pleasure.” She said with a shrug before sitting down on her usual seat. “Are the cookies done yet?”

“No, not yet.” Gamora responded, still unsure of how she felt about the other woman. “I’m Gamora, this is my sister Nebula.” She gestured to the figure that sat beside her. She then motioned
to the others around her. “Over there is Rocket, Groot, Drax and Mantis. You’ve already met Peter, feel free to ignore him.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.” Jessica grinned.

“It’s a pleasure to meet all of you.” Matt said with a polite smile. “I’m Matthew Murdock.”

“Barnes.” The former Winter Soldier said, entering the room behind Matt. Rhodey followed closely behind.

“Are you the owner of the arm?” Nebula asked, eyeing Barnes’ metal arm.

“Excuse me?” Barnes frowned, not quite sure just what she meant. She gestured towards his arm, cocking her head to the side.

“Tony’s metal arm. Are you its owner?”

“Yep!” Tony grinned from ear to ear while walking in. “Though that little tidbit was meant to be a surprise for when Barnes is sentenced as innocent.” He smiled fondly at Nebula, happy to have managed to get closer to her in these past few days. He’d also gotten closer to Rocket, and even to Peter (surprisingly). Gamora was still wary of him, but was friendly enough nonetheless. Not surprisingly Mantis and Drax didn’t really seem to be too interested in him, and Groot barely looked up form his new game. Rocket had glared at Tony when he upgraded Groot’s console.

“A surprise?” Nebula frowned, just the way she did whenever she didn’t understand a concept. “As in a surprise attack?”

“Not quite. It was more of a surprise gift.” Tony explained. “Something you give to someone as a token of friendship.” Nebula nodded in understanding.

“Tony, you built me an arm?” Barnes’ eyes widened slightly. Without waiting for Tony’s response, he guiltily said, “you really didn’t have to.”

“Well, I wanted to.” Tony shrugged. “Speaking of which; Jessica,” Tony grinned, clasping his hands together, and looked over at the black haired superhuman, “how’s the combat gear?”

“Efficient.” Jessica smiled. “Thanks again for that. The flask holder was a nice touch.” She winked at him, though her gratitude was still apparent.

“It was the least I could do.” Tony smiled back, turning towards Barnes and completely missing Jessica’s unimpressed glare, one that was matched by Matt. “Anyways, should you want a lighter, and pretty much better arm… It’s yours.” He brought up a hologram of the arm from his phone, and handed it to Barnes.

“Thank you.” Barnes said seriously, grateful for everything that Tony had done for him. “I can’t even imagine how I could ever begin to repay you.” Tony blinked for a moment, before opening his mouth to wave off the gratification.

“You’re most certainly welcome, Barnes.” Rhodey said easily ignoring Tony’s stare. “And don’t worry about paying him back or anything. Tony just does these things because he likes helping those around him.”

“Since when do you answer for me?” Tony asked with a raised brow even though he wasn’t really offended, just curious.
“Since you apparently forgot how to take credit for your work, I figured I’d do it for you.” Rhodey responded easily, giving his best friend a genuine smile. Matt grinned when he heard that, and Jessica nodded in appreciation. They didn’t really like how dismissive Tony was of himself.

“Well, cookies are done.” Tony said suddenly, probably to distract everyone from the topic at hand. “That’s why I came here for, actually.” Quill’s face beamed up and he looked eagerly at Tony who only shrugged back. “Talk to Vision if you want them, though don’t let them spoil your appetite. We made lasagna.”

“Hell yeah!” Peter pumped a fist in the air before getting up from his spot on the couch and making his way towards the kitchen. Gamora rolled her eyes before joining him.

“Boss, Mr. Hogan has arrived with Mr. Parker. I believe Dr. Strange will be unable to attend tonight’s dinner and have been informed that Ms. Potts and Ms. Parker have also declared themselves unavailable tonight.” FRIDAY supplied suddenly. Tony nodded at her, feeling a bit sad he wasn’t going to get to see Stephen anytime soon. He vaguely wondered if he was simply upset at Tony for having made him sleep over, or perhaps if he was simply tired of him. The pathetically small optimistic side of him made him out to be a paranoid fool who should take into account that Stephen has a job to do as Sorcerer Supreme and was probably swamped with work… But he wasn’t entirely convinced.

“Right on time.” Tony commented, mostly to himself. “Alright, I’m going to assume that this is everyone that’s coming?”

“I think so, unless you have another set of alien friends parking their spaceship somewhere nearby.” Rhodey quipped, receiving an eyeroll for his efforts. That being said, Tony went back to the kitchen and smiled as he noticed Gamora talk to Vision while Quill happily munched on a cookie like it was his dream come true. Without making much noise, he grabbed some plates and silverware and placed them on his newly bought table.

Thinking back, he could hardly remember when was the last time in his life that he had eaten food with friends on a table; not counting restaurants and his visits to the Parker’s, of course. Dinners at home with his father and mother weren’t very memorable aside from the uncomfortable silence and the thick tension in the atmosphere. Tony sometimes made the mistake of trying to start a conversation, but a sharp glare from his father and a sad smile from his mother quickly shut him up. He remembers sometimes eating with Rhodes and his family, but those times were pretty rare considering how much he hated to be a bother. He really only ate with them during holidays or on the rare occasion that Momma Rhodes wrangled him into her home. He suddenly felt really nostalgic.

“Mr. Stark!” He suddenly heard a loud voice come from the other side of his penthouse. “You will not believe what happened today!” A smile found its way onto Tony’s lips, and he quickly turned around and walked towards the source of the voice. “So, Ned and I were talking in the halls and—woah! Who are these guys?!” Peter’s eyes widened and a smile was seen on his face. “Hey Miss Jones!” He beamed up at Jessica who still sat lazily on the couch with a grin on her face. “Hi Mr. Murdock and Mr. Rhodes!”

“Hey kid.” Tony said with a grin when he finally went back to the living room. “These guys are the Guardians of the Galaxy. A title that got old really fast after the second time I’ve had to introduce them to someone.” He quipped with a smile. “The talking raccoon is Rocket.”

“Wait, he talks?” Jessica interrupted.

“Yes he talks lady.” Rocket huffed, probably tired of being called a raccoon by literally everyone.
Jessica nodded with an impressed look on her face before looking back at Peter.

“Calm down Ratchet.” Tony grinned at him ignoring his huff. “Beside him is Groot.”

“I am Groot.”

“The tree talks too?” Jessica asked, this time with a grin. She let out a satisfied chuckle when Rocket glared at her.

“Yup.” Tony answered easily ignoring the scene in front of him. “That over there is Drax, metaphors and sarcasm are a little hard on him… so go easy kid. Next to Drax is Mantis. The Smurf is Nebula, and she’s pretty awesome.” Tony suddenly felt grateful nobody else was coming to show up, he really didn’t want to have to repeat his introductions every time someone showed up. Maybe he should make FRIDAY do that for him instead. “Last on the Guardian’s roster, in the kitchen with Vision are Gamora and Quill. The metal-armed wonder of there is James Barnes; I’ve been working with him for some time now with Dr. Strange. Go easy on him too.”

“It’s nice to meet all of you!” Peter beamed. “I’m Peter Parker!”

“Oh, I can see why you said it’s going to get confusing.” Rocket noted, crossing his arm. “I think I like your Peter better, Stark. Wanna trade?”

“Nah, this Peter is one of a kind. Not for sale.” Tony winked at Rocket before swinging an arm around Peter’s shoulders. “So tell me about your amazing day Pete.” He failed to notice the slight blush on the kid’s face.

“Oh! Well, I was just going to say… um… well… The decathlon team is going to compete with other New York schools and if we win then we get to go to DC.” Peter choked out, suddenly nervous with all the attention he was getting. Tony grinned wildly, already knowing they were going to win.

“Okay kid, tell me when and where and I’ll be there.” The moment Tony said that, Peter gawked at him. Rhodey raised his brows in surprise and Happy, who had entered the room a couple of minutes after Peter, just chuckled.

“Hey boss, sorry I ran late. I had to park, and then someone disappeared on me so I spent quite some time looking for them.” He gave Peter a pointed look. Everyone chuckled while Peter smiled sheepishly. “It’s in two weeks.” Happy supplied, having heard everything from Peter the whole way to the tower.

“FRIDAY, clear my schedule and make sure I have tickets.” Tony requested his A.I., figuring that she’s probably already booked it. She’s just that efficient with her duties, and knows Tony well.

“Consider it done boss!”

“Atta girl!” Tony grinned and then turned to the others. “So, dinner?”

Over all, it was an enjoyable and successful night. The lasagna tasted amazing, and alarmingly similar to how Ana used to make it when Tony was a kid; it was his and Maria’s favorite dish. He was definitely going to hassle Vision into cooking this with him again sometime, though he had a feeling that the android wouldn’t mind it too much. Vision seemed to enjoy the Saturday get-togethers more and more as each week passes; and, if Tony was being honest, he was too. The two had gotten closer throughout these weeks, and it wasn’t just because of the weird connection Tony had to the mind stone.
Everyone welcomed the Guardians with open arms, but, then again, they welcomed anyone who was invited to these get-togethers. Throughout these weeks everyone had become good friends with each other, including those who only showed up on occasion like Danny, Luke, Pepper, Karen and Wong. If anyone invited someone, it was generally considered that they were good people. It was such a nice atmosphere, and Tony really didn’t know how it happened but he was thankful for it nonetheless. He couldn’t wait until he got to invite Harley to one of the get-togethers. He wondered how the twerp would behave around everyone, and wondered whom he’d warm up to most. His current bet was on Peter Parker and Jessica.

Once everyone was done with dinner and had their decently sized serving of cookies, Tony started bringing all of the plates to the sink to wash them. Somehow, it became tradition that everyone helps out afterwards too, so it wasn’t much of a surprise when Jessica followed him with cups and silverware. What was a surprise, however, was what she said when they were alone. “I want to sign the accords.”

“What?” Tony did a double take, wondering if he heard correctly. Jessica just gave him an unimpressed stare, as if to say ‘you know what I said.’ “I thought I’d have to convince you it’s a good idea first.”

“Yeah, well Matt did that for you.” Jessica shrugged. “Besides, you put a lot of care to make sure it’s fair. I trust you.” Tony stopped what he was doing, feeling his heart tighten in his chest. Just like that, without him even asking her to, Jessica wants to sign the accords. He hadn’t needed to spend hours upon hours trying to convince her it was a good idea, and he hadn’t had to fight her because of it. She trusted him. When was the last time someone openly said that? “Tony?” Jessica asked gently with a worried expression on her face, waking Tony from his reverie.

“Sorry, it’s just…” Tony put down the plate he was washing and looked at Jessica with a genuine smile on his face. “You have more faith in me then my team.” He admitted quietly before going back to his work. “I guess I’m not used to it.” He added as an afterthought, more so speaking to himself rather than to Jessica.

“Oh.” Tony was too busy looking at the plate in front of him to see the livid expression on Jessica’s face, promising hell to whoever made Tony feel this way. She’ll easily admit she wasn’t a fan of Stark from the start, he was a businessman that had far too much power and could easily be fucking everyone over without them knowing about it. When Matt had first introduced them, she thought she would absolutely hate the experience. She was pleasantly proved wrong. Since the first meeting, she’s grown fond of this man. When he gifted her with proper fighting equipment that she honestly didn’t really need, but admitted would be helpful, she doubted him and thought he was going to try and get something from her in return. It’s been over a month and he still hasn’t asked for anything aside from her opinions on how good his cooking is. He was someone special to her now, someone she knew she could trust and she wanted to help in however way she could. The infuriating problem was that he never asked for help.

Looking at him now, washing his dishes alone after giving his all to make sure everyone was happy and well fed was actually irritating. If it wasn’t for Rhodey’s casual “how can we help?” Jessica was pretty sure Tony would end up cleaning up the mess alone every Saturday night. It didn’t really seem like a big deal, but it sure felt like one. She couldn’t help but wonder if he was always cleaning up everyone else’s messes, and she didn’t have to look far to find her answer.

Investigating things is her job, and she wasn’t too happy when she found out how much money and time Tony spent trying to fix everything that the Avengers as a whole had messed up… Even in events he wasn’t personally involved in, like the fall of SHIELD. She quickly realized she didn’t
like any of the other Avengers.

“Well get used to it.” She said simply, before grabbing a towel and drying off the dishes Tony had washed. Before Tony could say anything, she continued talking. “So, this guy I know, Daredevil, and this other guy I know, the Iron Fist, want to sign it too. Though, they want to remain anonymous. I have a third guy who wants to sign it, and you already know this one. It’s Luke Cage. He’s a superhuman, like me. We want to be a sub-team in the Avengers called the Defenders.”

“Yeah, I can work with that. Do you have a designated team leader?” Tony nodded, a bit thankful they were talking business. He wasn’t sure he’d do well if they continued to tread on the sensitive topic of his teammates and how they didn’t trust Tony. A part of him wondered if that little tidbit would make Jessica trust him any less.

“Yeah, Daredevil. He’s bossy enough.” Jessica cracked a smile. Tony laughed, readily agreeing with her considering how bossy Matt had been during their many arguments over the Iron Accords. He would make a fine leader, much unlike Rogers.

“Well, I can give you all copies of everything for you to sign whenever you can. It’ll be great to have you guys on the team.” Tony warmly smiled at her, handing her another washed dish.

“Thanks.” She replied with a grin of her own.

In the sanctum, Wong couldn’t help but raise a brow when he saw Stephen sitting on the luscious red armchair reading a book and drinking tea. “So, I can’t help but notice you didn’t go to yesterday’s get-together at Stark’s.”

“Very astute of you.” Stephen retorted back, his eyes never leaving the book as he took a sip of his tea. Wong stared at him for a moment, and then rolled his eyes.

“Let me rephrase. Why weren’t you at the get-together?” He asked, barely managing to hide the concern in his voice. Stephen sighed, shutting his book with one hand and putting it on the small table beside him.

“I have a dilemma.” He admitted easily. He trusted Wong with his life, and if he could open up to anyone, it would be him… It definitely wasn’t because he literally had no one else to talk to. Wong patiently waited for him to elaborate, and elaborate he did. “I’ve been working closely with Tony these past few weeks. During this time period, I’ve come to understand him far better than I thought I would, and I’ve come to the conclusion that I might… like… what I see. In other words, I think I’m in the midst of developing feelings for him.”

Wong deadpanned, almost refusing to believe that this was the reason why Stephen has been isolating himself for the past week. “So then, you’re just going to avoid him like the plague?” He asked, really hoping the answer to his question wasn’t a yes, but he knew better. “I didn’t take you for a coward.” He added with a satisfied grin when he received a glare from the Sorcerer Supreme.

“Wong, you don’t understand. I spent the night at his penthouse, on his bed. He made me breakfast!” Stephen whined, ignoring Wong’s eyeroll entirely. “If he keeps doing these… acts of kindness, I might start to love him… if I haven’t already.”

“I hardly think scrambled eggs and some toast would be enough to make you fall in love.” Wong
countered, amused with how childish Stephen is behaving.

“It starts with the eggs Wong.” Stephen said seriously.

“Why don’t you just tell him how you feel?” Wong asked instead of giving his comment any thought. Stephen was difficult to deal with on a normal occasion, but this was just bizarre. Never in his wildest dreams did Wong think he’d have to act as confident for the Sorcerer Supreme’s love life.

“He’s a successful businessman who is also a superhero and has quite literally an army of people ready to ask him out at the first given opportunity.” Wong couldn’t believe Stephen was giving him this lame excuse. “And he’s probably straight.”

“Or maybe he isn’t.” Wong countered. “You don’t know that, but you could if you asked.”

“I’d rather not risk our friendship.”

“Do you honestly think Stark is the kind of man that would dismiss you entirely simply because you like him?” The bald sorcerer asked, not surprised when he didn’t get an answer. “I don’t either. If anything he’ll probably just be flattered.”

“You’re right.” Stephen acknowledged. The more he thought about it, the more Wong’s words rang true. From his experiences with Tony, the man proved to be selfless and caring. He wouldn’t shun another simply because of the emotions that they can’t control, especially since he doesn’t shun another because of their abuse. That was something Stephen would have to work on, certainly. He didn’t enjoy meeting the other Avengers, and he’s already decided they’re walking on thin ice with him. One wrong move and he’ll make sure they never bother Tony again.

“I usually am.” Wong said casually. He then remembered something rather important, Stephen was usually gone throughout the days using his other area of expertise to assist others. “Aren’t you supposed to be at that large safe house? Or have you forsaken your duties to Stark and the soldier?”

“Oh, no. I’ve been done with that for a few days. Barnes is running trial in D.C. as we speak, in fact I believe it is being televised as we speak.” To confirm his suspicions, he quickly summoned the T.V. from the upstairs living room and turned it on. He flipped through the channels until he found the right one. “There.”

Upon closer look, Stephen realized that Tony was also there. He was acting like a witness, it seems. Barnes looked a bit uncomfortable, but Matt and Tony were both far too confident for anyone to think he’d be seen as guilty. It seems like this would be the last hearing before a sentence would be passed. The jury continued to whisper amongst themselves, but Tony had a good feeling.

“So, while it is true that my client has been physically committing these crimes, he was doing so while brainwashed. He did not willingly commit these murders, and has not committed any more crimes since he managed to break free from the control of HYDRA.” Matt said with an unyielding voice and a poised posture. He offered Barnes a smile, sensing the nervousness from the man. He had a good feeling.

Soon, the jury went into an isolated room to discuss the new evidence presented to them and what they thought of it. When they returned, almost an hour later, they came with a verdict: guilty with circumstance. In other words, Barnes was pardoned for his crimes. Tony cheered, enveloping Barnes in a tight hug. The man was nervous, but quickly accepted it. In the audience, Steve Rogers could be seen whooping and celebrating. Matt had a smile on his face, and he was quickly enveloped in Tony’s hug.
“You did it!” Tony said to Matt, grateful for everything the man’s done for him. “Thank you, so much.”

“Nonsense, we did it as a team.” Matt responded easily, not at all bothered by Tony manhandling him into the hug. “We should celebrate your newfound freedom, Sgt. Barnes.”

“Drinks on me!” Tony stated immediately, before turning to Barnes with a serious look on his face. “Just let me run some data on how many drinks it takes for you to get drunk, alright? I’m thinking of developing a drink that’ll affect people with a higher metabolism.” Barnes couldn’t help but laugh, feeling all of the nervous energy leave his body. He didn’t think he’d be pardoned for his crimes, because even he hasn’t forgiven himself for them. He couldn’t believe others would grant him his freedom in the world.

“Tony!” A familiar voice made the billionaire freeze suddenly, but only for a fraction of a second. He somehow managed to pull himself together.

“Hey Cap.” Tony put a smile on his lips. “What’s up?”

“You got Bucky back, thank you.” Rogers said with a genuine smile. Tony couldn’t help but admit he felt taken aback by the display of gratitude. He knew it was only there because the subject was Barnes, and Rogers would do anything for Barnes, but he still wasn’t expecting it. This was probably the first time Rogers had thanked him for anything, really. He wasn’t sure if he felt surprised or resigned.

“Don’t-“

“You’re welcome.” Matt cut him off with a smile. Tony frowned at him, but he only shrugged. “If Rhodey can do it, I can too.” Tony blinked for a moment, but then snorted and laughed. Barnes couldn’t help but crack a smile of his own.

“Touché.” The billionaire responded. “So, I believe we were talking about celebrating with-“ This time, it was an explosion that interrupted him. Immediately, all four of them shifted into tenser stances and were ready for combat. “FRIDAY, get me my suit. Barnes, take Matt and get the hell out of dodge. Rogers, with me.” Tony ordered easily, before running towards the sound of the explosion. He wasn’t shocked when felt one of his suits wrap itself around him, and he felt relieved when he heard footsteps follow him into the fray. Even though he didn’t trust Rogers all too much, he would still welcome backup.

Vaguely, he saw a flash of golden orange in his peripheral vision, but didn’t pay it much mind. A second explosion was heard and Tony took off. He saw people scurrying desperately away from the fire and destruction just across the street. Tony frowned and observed the scene around him.

“FRIDAY, scan for any life forms.”

“Scanning… There are three people trapped underneath the debris Boss, they don’t have long before they suffocate.” Tony cursed and immediately dived in to where FRIDAY directed him. “Is there a third bomb?”

“Yes, scanners show that you have a minute before it detonates. It is located in the basement of the building to your right.”

“Scanning… There are three people trapped underneath the debris Boss, they don’t have long before they suffocate.” Tony cursed and immediately dived in to where FRIDAY directed him. “Is there a third bomb?”

“Yes, scanners show that you have a minute before it detonates. It is located in the basement of the building to your right.”

“Shit. Okay, turn on the speakers.” Tony waited until FRIDAY gave him the go. “Rogers, there’s a bomb on the gray building with the pretty green lights, well there’s another bomb just waiting to go kaboom. It’s in the basement.” He let out a breath when he saw movement head over that way. Reaching the debris, he immediately started digging through and blasting what he could. It wasn’t
long before he managed to get through it, only to see three kids huddled together shaking in fear. One of them had their leg trapped under a steel beam and another was hyperventilating. Tony cursed to himself before lifting the pole off the kid.

He immediately grabbed the three of them. “Alright guys, hold on tightly okay? I’ll get you out of here. Deep breaths.” He continued to talk to them, trying to get them to calm down, and gently took off. “And we’re out! See? No problems.” His eyes looked for any ambulances or first responders, and when they landed on some paramedics he was quick to go their direction. “I think one of them broke their leg, and the other is having a panic attack. The third is oddly quiet.” He explained quickly as he handed them the kids.

“Understood, thank you Iron Man.” One of the medics said with a nod, already focusing on the kids. The moment he handed them off, he took off again.

“Alright baby girl, what else can we do?” He asked urgently, observing the scene bellow him.

“Boss, someone is hacking the tower.” FRIDAY said, though her voice seemed shaken. Tony felt his blood run cold and his pulse quicken exponentially.

“Are they there physically?” Tony asked, landing on the ground and bringing up some holograms to see if he can counter hack. “Do you think you can trace them?” He asked before FRIDAY could answer.

“He entered the building boss, I think he had help.”

“It’s Zemo, isn’t it?” At FRIDAY’s confirmation, he cursed colorfully and loud. “Okay, alert security, maybe they can stop him. What’s he trying to get access to? Maybe we can feed him false info.”

“Sgt. Barnes’ files. I believe he is trying to find the recordings of the sessions.” The billionaire felt sick. He knew exactly what was going on. Zemo’s original plan failed, so he decided to wait until Tony was far from his home and distracted him so that he wouldn’t be able to defend it. He was an idiot to think Zemo wouldn’t have a back-up plan.

He was an idiot who shouldn’t have broadcasted Barnes’ whereabouts and also his treatment. What was he thinking? He should’ve kept this as tight lipped as possible. Why couldn’t he have gotten this right? He’s already lived through it once so he should know better. Shit.

“Tony? What’s happening?” A familiar voice interrupted his train of thought. Tony immediately looked up to see Stephen standing in front of him with worry written all over his face.

“The tower, it’s being hacked.” Tony said, noticing a burn mark on Stephen’s robes. “What happened?”

“Rogers couldn’t get rid of the bomb fast enough, so I had to send it to the mirror dimension at the last minute. I got burned for my efforts.” Stephen shrugged. “I can portal us to your tower.”

Stephen offered, and when Tony nodded he took no time to create the portal. He was only mildly surprise when Tony willingly went through the portal, and without any hesitation.

“Woah, that never stops being cool.” Peter muttered in awe when he saw Stephen and a metal suit step through the portal. “Tony isn’t here though.” He said before taking a bite off his sandwich. “So no nanny duties for you-“ He was interrupted when the metal suit actually took off towards the staircase. “Rude.”

“Not now Quill.” Stephen hushed him, immediately flying to where he saw Tony go. The other
two Guardians, Gamora and Nebula, who were chatting idly about fighting styles and weapons while enjoying some refreshments, immediately took off after them in full alert. Peter just stared at them, sighed and reluctantly followed them.

Tony was suddenly thankful he had gone for a round design with his staircase that featured a gap in the center as he free fell downwards until he reached the right floor. “Boss, security managed to catch him, but he already sent the downloaded files somewhere.” Tony cursed, landing the Iron Man suit on the floor and stepping out of it. He walked towards where he saw security blocking an entrance to one of the labs. When they saw him, they immediately stepped aside and nodded at him. “Boss, we managed to catch the culprit.” They notified him, though he already knew that much.

“Thank you.” He offered them a smile, and quickly made his way in. He saw Zemo being held down on the ground, and relief flooded through his system. “Okay Zemo, we’re going to play a little game. It’s called interrogation, basically I ask questions and you answer them.” He said, crouching down in front of the smirking man. Tony frowned, not quite sure why the other was smiling victoriously until he noticed something at the edge of his face. He reached for it, only to realize something critical: it was the same facial prosthesis Zemo had used to disguise himself as Barnes. “Who are you?” Tony asked grimly as he took away the disguise.

“Hail Hydra.” The man said slowly. Tony was about to punch him in a fit of anger, but one of his security guards beat him to it.

“Sorry boss.” The guard said, not looking sorry at all. Tony easily recognized him as one of the SHIELD agents he had rescued.

“Don’t sweat it.” He forced a smile on his face. “It doesn’t look like he’s going to say anything willingly, so why not put him in a containment cell and ask him some questions there?” The guard nodded and immediately brought the man to his feet and dragging him out of the room. “FRIDAY, inform the council of what happened here. Request entry to Siberia on the grounds that Zemo is headed that way.”

“You didn’t have to ask.” FRIDAY quipped as she did what she was told. “I’ve also taken the liberty to link the bombings in the UN and the bombings in DC to Zemo.”

“Thank you. As soon as we hear word from the council, have a jet prepared to leave. Oh, and please update Barnes and Matt of what’s happened, have them fly back to New York as soon as possible.” Tony made his way back to his suit, not surprised when he saw Stephen, Gamora, Peter Quill and Nebula waiting for him.

“So this is what you fight in?” Gamora asked a bit impressed.

“Basically.” Tony shrugged, forcing another smile on his face. He felt absolutely exhausted, and entirely disheartened. He hoped that he could still avoid the dispute he had between his team and Rogers’ team, but he was starting to doubt it. He felt miserable, knowing exactly what would happen. “Pretty nifty, huh?” He made himself chuckle with amusement, already coming up with an excuse to hide himself in the lab and maybe destroy some scrap metal in frustration.

“And I’m guessing you made this too?” Peter said, wide-eyed. He smiled widely when Tony nodded.

“What was that about?” Tony suddenly felt grateful for Nebula’s lack of tact and complete straightforwardness. He was thankful she asked the question everyone was thinking, but was too worried to ask.
“Some guy broke into the tower, got some information and shared it with a friend. Now, I’m going to have to go on a witch hunt.” He shrugged, trying to play it off as irrelevant but his nerves were worsening by the second. He was feeling so many emotions at once. He was furious with himself for not seeing this coming, and for not being able to stop himself from being hacked. Annoyed that he was hacked in the first place, mostly because he wasn’t even really hacked using any high-tech means. He was fearful of the future and whether it would end up being the same way as before. Tense because he wasn’t sure how the other Avengers would behave with the accords now. Tired from the sleepless nights spent worrying over the accords. Overall stressed out because everything basically sucked really badly. “Sorry, did that offend your wizard sensibilities?” He asked Stephen, pretending to be worried.

“Hilarious, really.” Stephen deadpanned, entirely unamused with Tony’s antics. That is, until he noticed the barely noticeable tapping that Tony’s fingers were doing on his leg. There was a problem.

“Well, I’m going to go to the lab and see what I can get done about this. Sorry for the worry.” Tony offered them a smile again. “FRIDAY, please take the suit to the lab and have it on standby.” He requested quietly as he entered the elevator. He barely registered Stephen following him in, and the concerned glances the three Guardians shared with each other. “What’s up Doc?” Tony asked, wondering why Stephen had decided to follow him like a baby duckling.

“This didn’t happen in the future.” Stephen guessed, realizing he was correct by how pale Tony had gotten.

“No, but I’m thinking the outcome will be the same.” Tony sighed. “He wants to learn the location of the Winter Soldiers so he can lure Rogers, Barnes and myself there and-“ He cut himself off, not really sure whether he wanted to continue with the train of thought.

“And…?” Stephen prompted gently. Tony sighed, feeling far too tired for this.

“And basically break us apart.” It might have been a vague answer, but it was honest. “Not that he had to do much work.” Tony muttered under his breath when the elevator doors opened. He stepped into his lab, and immediately went towards his scrap metal pile. He had meant to melt them down and reuse them somehow, but absolutely destroying them beyond recognition is another, more stress-relieving thing he could do.

“What do you mean?” Stephen asked, still following Tony. He had a bad feeling about leaving Tony alone right now for some reason. He had planned on avoiding the hero for another couple of days, but how could he not go in to help the moment he saw the explosion being broadcasted on TV? It was a good thing too, because Rogers wouldn’t have been able to stop the bomb in time. The fool had no idea of what he was doing.

“I mean,” Tony grunted as he lifted a piece of metal and threw it far away in front of him, “the Avengers don’t work.” The nanobots materialized on his arm and created a repulsor, shooting the scrap metal in midair. Tony then picked up another scrap metal. “Ever since my fuckup with ULTRON, we were doomed to fail and fall apart. All Zemo did was act as a catalyst.” He threw it and shot at it again. “But I’m not going to let that happen again.”

“Why?” Stephen couldn’t help but ask. It was clear that Tony was doing his best to keep the Avengers alive, but did he really need to? It almost seemed like they did more harm than good, not to mention how toxic they seem to be altogether for Tony. The man worked like a manic to get everyone together all while suffering for it every step of the way, but for what?

“Thanos might be gone, Stephen, but there are other threats out there in the universe that I can’t
handle. It took everything we had to defeat Thanos, and even then we barely won.” Tony picked up another piece of scrap metal, but instead of throwing it he just inspected it thoughtfully. With a sigh, he eventually just let go of it and went to sit on a stool. He messed with some holograms until he found what he was looking for. “Here.”

Stephen looked at the hologram presented to him; it was a still image of a massive creature. The creature looked incredibly powerful, holding a familiar golden gauntlet in his hand and the bodies of many heroes on his feet. He was being ganged up on, with several people running towards him at the same time, and yet he still looked completely in control. There were monsters similar to the Chitauri circling around him fighting off a robotic army alongside what looked like Wakanda’s army. This was the battle with Thanos, this was what Tony had lived through and the memory he alone carried. It might’ve only been a screen capture image of what happened, but it was enough to make Stephen stomach churn wirily.

“The real heroes of that fight were Thor and Carol.” Tony said thoughtfully. “Though, without the support everyone else gave, even they wouldn’t be able to do much.” He stepped out of the stool and went back towards the scrap metal. “We need everyone to be united should another Thanos come for us.”

“Even if they aren’t the most respectable of teammates?” Stephen couldn’t help the snark that filtered through his voice. As time went by, he hated the Avengers more and more.

“Yup.”

They went into silence for a while. Stephen was too busy trying to wrap his head around everything that was happening, and still trying to understand what Tony had gone through, while Tony was just firing at scrap metal and thinking about what was going to happen. He really hoped he could avoid Germany and Siberia… but it seemed unavoidable at this point.

“Thank you, by the way.” Tony said suddenly. “For helping me in D.C., I mean.”

“You don’t have to thank me for that.” Stephen shrugged. “I may not be a member of your team, but I most certainly will help you whenever I can. If not as an ally then as a friend.”

“What if you become a member of my team?” Tony asked quietly, tapping lightly on his reactor. “You could fight with me… I’m thinking of making a secondary team with Rhodey and maybe Vision if he’s up for it. I don’t want to be in Roger’s team anymore.”

“I might not always be able to join you in battle, as my first commitment is to the sanctum; but it would be a pleasure to be a part of your team.” Tony smiled at him and his whole world revolved around it. It made his heart skip a beat, and he realized that he wanted a life filled with Tony’s smiles. Cheesy as it may be, he couldn’t help it. Wong was right, there really was only one way to find out whether Tony could be his or not and with that in mind he took a deep breath, steeling his nerves. Now or never, he supposed. “Tony?” Stephen was pleased with how quickly Tony gave him his attention. “Will you be free sometime this week?” Tony blinked in surprise, and frowned in concentration. “Will you be free sometime this week?” Tony blinked in surprise, and frowned in concentration.

“FRIDAY, am I doing anything on Wednesday?” He asked.

“You have a meeting with Ross, The Evil One, at two.” FRIDAY supplied. Stephen couldn’t help but grin at the name given to the General.

“Yeah, push that to Thursday or some other day.” Tony grinned and then looked at Stephen. “Looks like I’m free on Wednesday.” His mood had greatly improved from before. He was still
pretty wiry and a bit angry but he no longer felt the need to punch someone in the face, and it was all thanks to Stephen. The lease he could do was to give the sorcerer some of his time; besides, he enjoyed spending time with him anyways.

“Wonderful, wear something nice.” Tony raised a brow and stared at Stephen and then at himself.

“When don’t I wear something nice?” He asked incredulously, though there was humor in his tone. Stephen rolled his eyes, but smiled.

“Fine. Continue to wear nice things.” Tony laughed freely at that, only now realizing he had gravitated from the scrap metal pile closer towards Stephen. He found he didn’t mind the change in position.

“Sure thing Dr. Wizard.” Tony quipped playfully, almost forgetting entirely about the hell that was happening in the world. Unfortunately, that wouldn’t last long.

“Boss, there’s a call waiting for you. I highly suggest you take it.” FRIDAY said, interrupting their conversation.

“Take it, I’ll come back later.” Stephen smiled, creating a portal for himself. He was thankful for the distraction, because now he had the perfect date to plan.

“I’ll see you later then.” Tony smirked at him, before accepting the call.

It turns out Tony had absolutely no reason to worry about a repeat in the German airport Flughafen Leipzig-Halle, because this time the fight was scheduled to happen on the compound. Considering how everyone took a small break to go check on Barnes in America, he wasn’t quite sure why he was surprised. He only found out about it because of the call he received from Romanoff, of all people, who alerted him something was going on. The plus side was that there wouldn’t be any damages to a public area, but the bad side was that Rogers had access to multiple Quinjets. Tony groaned in frustration.

Just like last time, he stood in front of the hangar waiting for Rogers and his team to show up; but unlike last time he was alone. He had an entire day to prepare, according to Romanoff, but he didn’t use any of the time to alert any of his friends. The image of Rhodey falling, Peter gasping for air unable to stand up, and Vision’s post battle depression was fresh in his mind. He had more allies now, sure, but that just meant he had more people he could disappoint and fail to protect. Instead, he chose to spend this time planning on how he’d convince Rogers that he was an idiot, on rendering all of the Quinjets, with the exception of two, unable to fly, and, finally, on buying donuts.

The moment he spotted Roger’s team show up, he forced a smile. He was only mildly disappointed to see Barnes was still a part of it, and a bit surprised that Wanda was not. Well, he hasn’t told him that she’s on house arrest, so he supposed that Rogers felt no need to ‘save her’ like he did last time. “Hey gang, what’s up?” He asked cheerfully eating a donut while leaning on his suit. “Have you had the Boston Kreme? I have to say, DD did an excellent job with it.”

“Tony.” Rogers greeted him with his authoritarian voice, already ignoring his antics. Tony tried his best not to roll his eyes, only barely succeeding. “Let us through.” He sounded threatening, but Tony had enough of being scared. All he felt now was rage.

“Sure.” He was a bit pleased with the shock he saw on Roger’s face when he simply agreed, as if Tony would actually give in so easily. “But first let me tell you what happens if I let you through.” He took the last bite of his donut and wiped his hands on his suit. “First of all, you’re all going to
be labeled as criminals by the U.N. for going behind their backs without signing the Accords and doing things the legal way that 117 countries agree on. Second, everyone you left behind is going to be in deep shit.” He looked at Clint and Scott Lang. “That means nothing for you Rogers, but Bird Brain and Mr. Lang have families.”

“Stark, are you threatening us?” Clint bit out at the same time Lang huffed “Hank did say never trust a Stark.”

“No, it’s more of a warning really. Ross is an ass who will do anything for power, which includes exploiting your personal relations. If you do go through, I’ll do my damn best to make sure nothing happens to your wife and your kids Barton; and the same applies with you Mr. Lang; but you won’t get to see them for quite some time unless you agree to house arrest and sign the accords.” He explained. “Which, by the way, aren’t nearly as dictating as Rogers probably says they are.”

“Tony, you don’t understand… There are soldiers, like me, but worse.” Barnes explained, looking surprisingly guilty. “I was forced into being the Winter Soldier, but they volunteered.”

“Yeah I know about that.” Tony shrugged. “I already talked to the council and have their full approval to go to Siberia and exterminate them.” Barnes blinked in surprise.

“If I sign, can I come with you?”

“Yup. I was going to invite you to come anyways.” Tony shrugged. “Feels like it would be some closure for your part.” Barnes nodded, and calmly made his way towards Tony with the guilty look still on his face. Before he made it far, Rogers put a hand on his shoulder and stopped his movement altogether.

“Bucky, you haven’t even read the document.” He argued.

“Well neither have you Rogers.” Tony countered and then turned back to Barnes. “You can read it on the jet and choose whether to sign it or not. I can have Matt explain everything to you if you’d like. He’s the lawyer who helped me write the document and also make sure Barnes was seen as innocent,” Tony explained to everyone else, “and I’m sure he wouldn’t mind answering any of your questions.”

“Tony, the safest hands are our own.” Rogers looked at him as if Tony wasn’t getting something so fundamentally basic that it was frustrating. This time, Tony did roll his eyes.

“I’m sure your good buddy Hitler said the same thing.” Rogers still and Tony scoffed. “That’s something a dictator would say Cap.” He had to remind himself that in this timeline Rogers and him were still friends somehow, and that he wasn’t supposed to know shit about his parents or how Rogers kept him in the dark in order to continue using his funds. “117 countries are saying we aren’t above the law and that we should work with them. They’re willing to back us up if we’re willing to listen to them. They aren’t trying to control us or to make us their personal guard dogs, they’re just trying to make sure there will be damage control and that their cities aren’t suddenly going to go boom because we have a spat with the villain of the week. I’m sorry, but it’s narcissistic of you to think you’re better than the will of these countries, and I should know considering I’m a textbook narcissist.” He stuffed his hands in his pockets, hiding the fists they were forming. He was feeling himself get angrier and angrier, not just because it seemed like he wasn’t going to get through Rogers’ thick skull, but also because this was Germany all over again. He half wished he could just blast all of them with his repulsors and call it a day, diplomacy be damned.

“Steve, this doesn’t seem at all like what you said it was.” Clint’s posture changed to a more
relaxed one, and he looked expectantly at Rogers. Tony had to admit he was surprised Clint was easy to persuade, considering how much of a d— how difficult he was in the last timeline. Tony didn’t really have much against Clint, with the obvious exception at the comment he made about Rhodey while in the Raft, so it was rather nice that he wouldn’t have to fight him again.

“I’m not so sure about this either Cap.” Lang agreed, taking off his helmet and looking at Rogers with his infamous puppy eyes. Tony and Lang had gotten along well enough after his return to Earth, though he was still a child about everything. It was surprising how much Lang listened to Hank and his obvious hatred for the Starks, and it was even more surprising how much easier it was to convince Hope Van Dyne to work with him. He quickly brought out his phone and made a little reminder to get into contact with her at some point in time. She would be a nice addition to the new team should she decide to join the Avengers.

“I’m with you all the way Steve, but Tony might be on to something here.” Sam put a hand on Roger’s shoulder. Rogers sighed, finally letting go of Barnes and looked at all of his teammates. It was clear that he wasn’t entirely convinced, but there wasn’t much he could do if his team wasn’t entirely willing to fight with him.

“Okay. We’ll go with you Tony, but if there’s even the slightest loophole that can be exploited, then I refuse to sign the accords.” For the first time in a while, Tony let himself hope that everything was actually going to turn out okay.

His hope was immediately squashed when he saw a flash of red break through the compound walls and land in front of him. “Are you fucking kidding me?” Tony mumbled under his breath. He had hoped Wanda wouldn’t throw Vision through a building in this timeline, but it seemed like it was inevitable. It seemed like all of the major events of the previous timeline were bound to happen regardless of what Tony did… or maybe, Tony simply didn’t go back in time far enough to have made a difference. “Vision, are you okay?” He walked over to the android and squatted beside him, helping him sit up.

“Yes, I am alright.” Vision accepted Tony’s aid, and stood up. “I believe Wanda wants to fight alongside Captain Rogers and Mr. Barton, whereas I wish to fight alongside you.” It was then that Tony noticed Wanda floating on the other side of the wall she just blew a hole on. Tony felt disappointed in her, but at least it was only a singular wall as opposed to multiple floors.

“There won’t be any fighting, right?” He looked over at Rogers, expectantly; but the man was looking at Vision with a frown.

“Vis, were you trying to keep her from coming out of the Compound?” Tony sighed, already knowing where this was going.

“Just until the dust is settled. Though, like I told her a while ago, she could have left anytime she wanted.” Tony really, really hoped he could still get through Roger’s thick skull.

“No, this is exactly what I feared would happen with these accords. Tony, can’t you see they are trying to control us?” Rogers countered, and Tony nearly lost his shit. He briefly contemplated banging his head against a concrete wall; maybe Rogers would make more sense if he were concussed.

“I myself put her in there so that she’d be safe!” Tony argued, tired of fighting a battle from the past. “People aren’t really too happy with her, and I’m just doing the best I can to avoid an uprising against her.”

“I’m sorry Tony, but I can’t agree with this.” Rogers raised his shield, and Tony looked at him with
sheer disappointment. It was clear that Rogers was using this as an excuse for things to go his way, and Tony didn’t really understand why he hadn’t expected this to happen. He had hoped for better, but it seems Rogers didn’t get that memo. With a sigh, Tony stepped into the Iron Man suit. His only solace was the backup nanotech suit in his reactor’s housing unit, which he hoped he wouldn’t have to use.

“Vis, I want you to get out of here.” Tony said to his friend, hoping he’d agree without argument. He knew it was a long shot, but he couldn’t help but hope to spare Vision of this battle.

“And leave you to fight alone? Tony, the last time we fought you had allies alongside you and Captain Rogers still got away, now it is just us. I refuse to leave your side.” Vision had a good point, but it also meant he’d have to fight against Wanda again.

“I’m sorry, but I’m out Cap. I’m retired, and I have a family to care for.” Clint sighed, taking a step back. “You won’t incarcerate me if I don’t fight with you, right metal head?”

“You got it bird-for-brains.” Tony replied easily. “In fact, I don’t think you were ever even here.” Clint gave him a smirk, and started walking out. “Tell Laura and the kids I said hi.”

“Yeah, will do.” And soon, Clint was out of sight.

“I’m sorry Sam, but I can’t fight either.” Lang said nervously. “Cassie… I can’t just abandon her again, not after I finally got to be with her.” Tony figured that once Lang got all of the facts, he wouldn’t be so willing to fight blindly for his childhood hero.

“It’s okay tic-tac, go be with your family.” Sam replied with a nod, understanding the man and his priorities. He shouldn’t have dragged him out here in the first place. It wasn’t long before Lang was gone too. Tony was glad it was two less people to fight against, but even then his odds were pretty bad.

“Vis-“ Tony started, still hoping to convince Vision to back out of the fight.

“I am staying.” Vision interrupted him with a tone of finality in his voice. There was no changing his mind, it seems. “And I will not get distracted this time, I promise. So please, let me stay.” Tony blinked, not expecting him to remember that.

“I trust you Vision.” Tony offered a small smile, even though he knew the android couldn’t see it with his faceplate down. “I just don’t want you to get hurt.” He then noticed Barnes looking at him with a grim expression, and he already knew what it was that was troubling him. He probably didn’t want to fight against Tony, considering how guilty he looked for going behind his back in the first place, but he didn’t want to fight his childhood friend either. Tony was just thankful he wasn’t blindly following Rogers in the first place. It didn’t matter though, because the battle was about to start and, going by past experiences, Barnes would align himself with Rogers.

“I’m going to ask you one more time, Tony. Let us through.” Rogers ordered as Wanda flew to his side with a familiar red mist surrounding her hands.

“I do not want to fight you anymore, Stark…” Wanda confessed as she entered a battle stance. “But I have worked with Hydra once before, and I have seen what they can do. They need to be stopped.” Tony wondered if they would ever be willing to just listen to him and realize how utterly unnecessary this entire battle is. He shook his head, and got into a fighting position. Well, at least the debate part of their conversation was done and over with.

“Boss, I suggest you buy lots of chocolates and apologize profusely.” FRIDAY said suddenly,
completely out of the blue and unprompted. Tony briefly wondered if she was okay, or if the Hydra ‘hacker’ left a virus in for her, but all of his musings dissipated when he heard a familiar noise of a portal opening behind him. “And for the record, I’m not sorry.”

“Be on my team, he says. Fight with me, he says.” Tony then realized something relatively important: he really shouldn’t piss of the sorcerer. “You absolute pig-headed imbecile.” Stephen barked at him as he floated through the portal. Behind him, Spiderman, War Machine, the Defenders, and the Guardians appeared.

“Tony, who are these people?” Sam asked with wide eyes. “And are those aliens?”

“These people, Mr. Wilson, are Tony’s friends. They are his real friends.” Vision replied smoothly, with steel in his voice.

“This is your last chance, Rogers.” Tony was impressed his voice didn’t falter with how many emotions were passing through him right now.

“So, then you’re just going to bully us into submission?” Rogers sighed. “I expected better from you.”

“Well, that’s where you went wrong.” Tony bantered back, but there was no mirth in his voice. Instead, there was only resentment, anger and disappointment. Maybe he should just give up on Rogers and hope the world would be fine without him… but he didn’t want to chance it.

“Wait, are you seriously trying to call Mr. Stark a bully?” Spiderman gawked, shooting a web from his shooters and snatching the shield from the unexpecting super soldier. “That’s like calling water dry.”

“The spider guy has a point,” Jessica piped up, “but if you call him an idiot then I’ll happily agree.” Tony wasn’t sure whether he should feel happy that these people chose to back him up, annoyed that they are insulting him left and right, or worried that they’re incredibly mad at him. He settled on grateful for the support, regardless of how passive aggressive it seems.

Rogers knew that the fight was lost before it even began. Had it just been Vision and Tony, then he would’ve easily gotten past them so long as Sam, Wanda and Bucky had his back; but with this army of strangers Tony has seemed to have collected, there really wasn’t much he could do to get past them. “Fine, you win Tony. I hope you’re happy with yourself.”

“Overjoyed.” Tony said flatly, tiredly. He then turned to Barnes. “Barnes, you still up for the mission?” At this point, he honestly didn’t care if he said yes or no; he was mostly asking out of courtesy.

“No.” Stephen said sharply before Barnes could reply. “You and I are going to have a little chat first.”

Tony really regretted upsetting the sorcerer.

Chapter End Notes

I’m glad I managed to get this chapter out before going on vacation! And, as a small little tidbit, I also have a part of the next chapter ready too! Originally, it was all going
to be just one, but I wouldn't have had the time to finish it before going out and it was also getting really long so I decided to cut it down to a slightly cliffhanger-esque moment (sorry) and go from there. Anyways, that just basically means the next chapter will come out quicker!

I'm also really glad I got most of Civil War out of the way. I really hated that movie and I just barely know what I'm writing about (*cough* like forgetting entirely about Lagos *cough*). But thank you guys for baring with me!

You are all absolutely amazing <3

Also, I love FRIDAY so much.
The Sun Always Shines on TV

Chapter Notes

Guess who's back!
It's me!!
I'm so glad I finally got this chapter done!

On that note, thanks again for all of your kind words and comments (and also kudos)!
You are all absolutely amazing… and speaking of Kudos, we broke 1000 this week while I was on vacation!!
It was such a treat to come back to!
I'm so grateful to all of you!

I hope you enjoy this chapter as much as I enjoyed writing it. Though, fair warning, it does get a bit intense all things considered.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Why do I feel like I’m a misbehaving child about to get scolded?” Tony grunted as he followed Stephen to a more secluded room that FRIDAY guided them to. The sorcerer wouldn’t talk to him and wouldn’t look at him unless it was to glare. Frankly speaking, it actually terrified Tony somehow. He could feel the man’s disappointment in him, but it felt so different than how his father or Rogers, or anyone really, did when they were disappointed in him. Rogers and his dad were usually always disappointed in him, one way or another it didn’t matter. Stephen’s disappointment had a strange weight of severity to it, probably because Tony had never experienced it before. It also wasn’t like Rhodys or Pepper’s either when they were disappointed in his actions or how badly he takes care of himself, it was far worse. Their disappointment was easier to dispel since Tony knew how to distract them well and they let him. Stephen’s was like a frigid feeling on the back of your neck that wouldn’t leave no matter how many scarfs or jackets you put on, it was there to stay until the point had been made.

The stupid cape didn’t help either. At first it rested on Stephen’s shoulder, making him look far more fearsome, majestic and terrifying, but then Tony made the mistake of trying to sneak out. Now it rests on Tony’s shoulder, steering him towards Stephen and forcing him to stay on course. Any attempts at escape were met with a tightened grip and a forceful push.

Finally, they reached their destination. Levi practically pushed Tony in the room and held him in place as Stephen finally turned around to look at him. Now Tony wasn’t a religious person, but he sure as hell was willing to pray for any deity out there and convert if it meant not being the object of Stephen’s ire. “So,” Stephen finally started after a few seconds of eerie silence, “do you have anything to say that might help me understand just why exactly you thought that facing an entire team of powered superheroes on your own was a smart idea?” His voice was the type of angry calm that everyone dreads because it meant they knew exactly what they were saying; it wasn’t irrational or blinded by rage.

“In my defense, Vision was with me.” Tony tried not to sound as defensive as he felt, and hoped humor would bring some levity to the situation. “Besides, I went there with the intention to talk, not fight.”
“You attempted to dissuade Vision from fighting alongside you.” Stephen pointed out. “FRIDAY was sure to inform me of that fact.” Tony tried not to groan in frustration. FRIDAY was supposed to help him out, not throw him under the proverbial bus (even if he probably deserved to be there). “And please do tell me, did you ‘talk’ with them in the previous timeline as well?” Tony sighed and looked away, wondering how long it would take Stephen to catch up to him if he activated the suit and made a run for it. Maybe he would even be able to make it to Siberia before the man got to him, though he’d have to leave Barnes behind. He figured Barnes would just about murder him if he weren’t brought along to end this dark chapter of his elongated life. “Well?” Stephen’s cold voice interrupted his musings and sent shivers down his spine.

Stephen suddenly felt far more threatening than Rogers, and he wasn’t even trying to intimidate him. Tony sighed again, debating what to do. He could probably push Stephen aside and walk away, but he feared the doctor would never forgive him for that. He noticed Levi’s hold loosened slightly, so he knew he had the option to run. Stephen probably did that purposefully, which meant he either cared for Tony’s comfort or didn’t have high expectations of him. It was probably the former, but Tony couldn’t help but believe in the latter. He closed his eyes briefly and tightly, before facing Stephen again with a determined gaze. “We fought. I recruited those who would be willing to fight against me, and together we faced them. I told them that we were going to try and talk things out and that if we ended up fighting then we should aim to capture not kill.” He took a small breath, pausing a bit both for the dramatics as well as to think what else he’d be willing to reveal. “Roger’s team aimed to kill.”

Stephen’s eyes widened, but he didn’t say anything. He chose to wait for Tony to answer the unasked questions he had. Tony felt the need to oblige to the silently implied demand. “Long story short, Rhodey lost his legs, Pete almost died, Vision was left heartbroken, Romanoff let Rogers go and T’Challa left me behind after Rogers and Barnes… after they…” He took a shaky breath, recollecting everything that happened in Siberia. He felt Levi tighten its grip as a gesture of comfort and to remind him he wasn’t there. “Clint, Maximoff, Wilson and Lang were illegally thrown into the Raft by Ross and treated horribly until they were broken out by Rogers. I figured that if I talked to them alone while out of the suit and vulnerable, maybe they would actually listen. It didn’t work, obviously. At least Clint and Lang decided to leave if only to be with their families.”

Tony felt the cloak tug him forward and into Stephen, who then proceeded to wrap his hands around him. “Tony, you could have died.” His voice no longer held the cold anger it had before, but instead it was soft and fearful. Stephen was genuinely afraid Tony was going to die and he was worried; Tony had to admit that the thought was warming but despite that he could only laugh bitterly. He did almost die, but not because of the petty split in the team. No, he almost died because he was irrelevant compared to Barnes. “Your life is more important than Rhodey’s legs, or Vision’s heart.” Tony opened his mouth to refute, but Stephen didn’t let him. He hugged him tighter and kept talking. “Peter is far sturdier than you take him for. I can’t excuse Romanoff and T’Challa, but I do know the others were sent to prison because they broke the law. The punishment might have been more severe than the crime, but it doesn’t change the fact that their actions had consequences and they didn’t take that into consideration.”

Tony was silent, trying to wrap his mind around what he was just told. Everyone had been angry with him at the conclusion of the media dubbed ‘Civil War’. The only ones to stand by him were those who had suffered because of the actions of the Avengers and the damages done by it, and also his small family of robots, Rhodey, Happy and Pepper. “Tony, you know we would have fought alongside you in a heartbeat. I would have fought alongside you in a heartbeat. Have faith in us, in what we can do. Let us be there for you. Trust us.”

“I don’t know Doc, you’ll find that trust doesn’t come easy to me.” Tony said before he even thought about it. A bitter smile made its ways towards his face.
“Then give us a chance to earn it.” The billionaire couldn’t recall a time when anyone ever simply asked for the opportunity to earn his trust. The Avengers had only ever demanded from him, his father had only ever demanded from him, Obie demanded, the world demanded, everyone demanded. Pepper, Rhodey, Peter, and Happy were the only exceptions. Now, there was Stephen.

Still, he found it hard to trust anyone anymore. He’d been burned far too many times to give it out as freely as he had done before. He made the mistake of trusting people who wanted to use him; people who didn’t really care about him; people who didn’t trust him back. He didn’t want to go through that again, he couldn’t. Tony couldn’t give his all to someone just to have it backfire on him, not again. He knew that once he trusted, and once he loved, he did it with his entire being; and, if he were to be rejected once more, he wasn’t sure his already broken heart could take another hit. Unconsciously, he tightened his hold on Stephen; suddenly afraid the man would leave him.

Suddenly afraid he would find out how truly broken Tony was; that he’d see what Rogers sees, what his father saw. A failure. A disappointment. A murderer. A monster.

A knock on the door stirred him from his thoughts, making him realize just how close Stephen was to him. The taller man tightened his embrace briefly, before finally letting go and looking him in the eye. He was waiting for Tony to decide whether he wanted to deal with people or not. He was giving Tony the choice, a novelty he’s never been given before. Tony then noticed Stephen’s hand lift itself slightly, slink ring in place. It was another option, one to leave. Tony smiled softly, almost tempted to accept the offer and run away from his troubles, but Stark men were made of iron and iron doesn’t run.

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“Come in.” He said, turning towards the door and waiting to see who was on the other side. The moment the door opened, Rhodey walked through and pulled Tony in a bone-crushing hug. He let go, but planted both his hands on Tony’s shoulder to keep him in place as he looked at him in the eye.

“You’re a fucking idiot.” He breathed out. He sounded exasperated, and tired. He must have been worried sick, considering his mother hen tendencies. Tony felt mildly guilty, but Rhodey still had his legs so there was no regret. He’d do anything to keep Rhodey away from that hospital bed. Rhodey might have not blamed him, nor did he have any regrets, but that didn’t mean Tony didn’t feel guilty. He had the chance to prevent it, and he took it. He fixed one of his many mistakes, and he didn’t regret it. He refused to regret it, even if it meant his life was almost taken as a consequence.

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“Excuse you, but I’m a genius.” Tony grinned jokingly, though he knew both of them discerned it was forced. Rhodey squeezed his shoulder lightly, before letting go and stepping aside.

“Mr. Stark!” A loud cry wailed at him, before he felt another set of arms wrap around him. He hadn’t realized that the kid, and also Matt, had entered the room behind Rhodey. Matt looked irate, almost as much as Stephen had looked.

“Tony.” Matt nodded curtly in greeting. Yeah, he was mad.

“Blind Justice.” Tony tried to sound cheerful, he really did, but he wasn’t fooling anymore… well, maybe the kid.

“You have capable friends, Tony.” Matt’s voice was almost monotone, void of any emotion he might have been feeling, his face held a stone expression of blankness that could almost rival Tony’s. “As your friend, and also someone with a functional brain, I’d suggest you rely on them.” So, it seems Stephen wasn’t the only one who wanted to have a talk.
“I know that, but I’ve learned it’s best not to rely on others.” Tony replied tiredly, still tense and stressed from the encounter just an hour ago. He was lucky that his friends came along and managed to stop the fight before it happened, but it still almost happened. He had hoped he could have avoided it altogether, but it seems that wasn’t the case. What’s worse is that this could mean Siberia would happen too, and Thanos… The thought alone sent shivers down his spine.

“So what is it then? You don’t trust them to have your back?” You don’t trust me? Matt all but said. “We’re supposed to be a team, Tony.” His anger didn’t waver when Tony flinched. Stephen, Rhodey and Peter did nothing to intervene, even though they all looked incredibly uncomfortable with the argument that just broke out.

“I didn’t want to risk it. I know Rogers, and I know the Avengers. We would go out there with the intention to apprehend them and try to reason with them, whereas they would go out there with the intention to kill if they didn’t get their way. If I went alone, there’s less of a risk of you getting hurt.” Tony’s eyes unconsciously landed on Rhodey, and then his legs, before he forced them to look back at Matt. It was a gesture that Stephen hadn’t failed to notice, and he quickly remembered the braces Tony had originally done for the Colonel; but it still wasn’t enough to satiate his anger.

“So then you don’t think we could defend ourselves?” Stephen huffed out, and his previously forgotten anger resurfaced. Tony didn’t say anything, but he didn’t need to. They all knew Tony had faith in their abilities otherwise he wouldn’t have recruited them… The problem was that Tony was too scared of putting them in the line of fire if it could be avoided. Becoming close to Tony Stark was no easy feat, but once you get there it’s hard not to notice how much care he has for others and how little care he has for himself. “Please, Tony. Give us that chance.” He repeated his earlier request, in an equally gentle tone.

It was tiring to constantly have to defend himself from people he considers family. Tony was growing progressively more annoyed with the fact that they were still here, arguing about his choices. Couldn’t they see it was for them? Couldn’t they see he was trying to do everything for them? No, he realized. They could. They just didn’t want it. Tony might not like it, but he had to realize that he couldn’t take the weight of the world on his shoulders. Atlas he was not.

“Why?” It was a harmless enough question, but Rhodey knew it would wake a beast that Tony had stuffed deep into his closet and locked away with an iron key. He fought the urge to be beside his best friend and offer comfort; it might be what Tony wanted, but it wasn’t what he needed.

“Let me tell you all a story.” The man took a step forward, closer to Stephen. “Do you know what happened when my mother died?” Stephen blanched, not at all expecting that topic of conversation to pop up. The man suddenly felt wary. He debated calling Stephen off, but this was important. Tony might not like it, but he had to realize that he couldn’t take the weight of the world on his shoulders. Atlas he was not.

“You know what?” Tony’s smile widened, frightening everyone in the room besides the blind lawyer. “Let me tell you all a story.” The man took a step forward, closer to Stephen. “Do you know what happened when my mother died?” Stephen blanched, not at all expecting that topic of conversation to pop up. He didn’t say anything though, because surely Tony wouldn’t be bringing it up if it weren’t relevant. So he waited, and listened. “A part of me died with her. Years, and years of being told I was nothing more than a disappointment by my own father, and he turned out to be the biggest disappointment by taking her with him.” Matt stiffened, but Stephen wasn’t quite
sure why so he continued to pay attention to Tony. “And yet, after his death all that I still wanted was to make him proud. I hated myself for it, but his pride in me had been my one goal in life up until then. So what did I do now that he was dead?”

He took another step forward, now intruding in Stephen’s personal space. Stephen didn’t back away, however. “I turned to the next best thing: Obadiah Stane. Obie was an uncle to me, you know? He was almost always at our family gatherings, and he was a close friend and business partner to my dad. If I couldn’t make dear dad proud, then maybe I could make him proud instead. And you know what? It worked! Every gun I built, every bomb I made, it just made him that much prouder of me. He was always impressed with what I could do, and often said I was even better than Howard. He was worried about me, though; said something about having to relax and have a good time. So I did what dad used to do too, I drank and drank. Just like pop. The kids all around me that he encouraged me to befriend did drugs, so I did those too. He was so proud.” Tony’s smile was feral. Peter’s eyes only widened by the second, not having known this about his mentor’s past.

“So one day, I decided I wanted more control of my life. Obie was proud of my accomplishments, so surely he’d be proud of me if I tried to be more independent. Right? I hadn’t brought it up with him yet, but it had been on my mind for a while. He’d still be my CEO of course, but I still wanted more freedom. I wanted to have a say on the company too, after all it was my company. I thought I could show him how independent I could be with a new weapons design; hell, I was so confident that I decided to demonstrate it personally to the military units in Afghanistan.” He leaned in closely to Stephen, his eyes never leaving the other man’s. They were menacing, almost as if daring him to look away. Then he whispered. “Then I was captured and tortured for three months.” He leaned back slightly, knowing full well that Matt and Peter heard him, and that Rhodey already knew what he was talking about. “So, when I got back I decided I’d shut down the weapons manufacture and make my company something else entirely; something that would actually help American citizens and maybe even other countries too. The thing is, Stane wasn’t proud of that. He didn’t like the direction I was taking the company, and tried to get me to change my mind but to no avail.”

“One night, he came inside the mansion; you know the one that’s currently in the bottom of the ocean? Anyways, he had access to it since he was basically family. I thought he had come to talk to me, maybe to see how I was doing after having such a traumatic experience; I thought he cared about me up until the moment he fired a taser at me…” Tony placed a hand on Stephen’s chest. Stephen, unwillingly and frightened, took a step backward; but Tony wouldn’t relent. He took a step forward, keeping himself perfectly intruded on Stephen’s personal bubble and his fingers digging into Stephen’s chest. “…and took the reactor, the only thing keeping me alive at that point, straight from my chest.” Tony’s fingers dug deeper into Stephen’s skin, almost to the point of pain, before letting go and finally releasing him. He looked at that hand now with disgust in his face, as though it were that same hand that Obadiah had used against him.

“The man who told me he loved me like a son, who I believed in, sentenced me to death. I crawled my way down to my workshop where, out of pure luck, an old version of the reactor waited for me. I lived, of course. He didn’t.” Tony took a deep breath, taking a step back. Stephen let go of a breath he hadn’t known he was holding. “But that was just one time, right? Maybe I should instead tell you about the time SHIELD broke into my home, shut off JARVIS, and basically blackmailed me into loving them after they injected me with an unknown substance, without my consent of course. All while telling me I’m not good enough to be an Avenger, but I could help pay for those who are while still fighting alongside them anyways.” Tony almost smiled at Stephen’s horrified face.

“Or I should tell you how when Ultron, a program I was still developing and testing, suddenly grew into a master villain dead set on destroying mankind due to the presence of the mind stone I
was nearly choked to death by one of my own teammates? The mind stone that I was basically brainwashed by a red witch to bring with me and study; mind you. And how no one in my team, no one in the group of people I considered family,” he looked at Rhodes again, eyes raw with hurt that he’s hid to himself for far too long, before looking back at Stephen, “even so much as tried to stop him or help me out. They just watched.” Peter had gasped then, unable to believe that the Avengers he had idolized so much had done that to Tony. “And to make things even better, they added that same witch that basically violated my mind into the team without my consent… Trusting in her far more easily then they did me.”

“Though, I could also mention how sometime in the future I’ll still idiotically go to Rogers and try to help him… only to find out that my parents weren’t killed in a car crash.” He closed his eyes and placed his hand back on Stephen’s chest with a feather-like touch. “Only to be beaten down when I lashed out; for him to slam his shield on my chest, because it was either that or my face. Slaming it over, and over until the reactor broke and my suit dented inwards. Only to be left for dead, choking on my own blood and freezing in the cold Siberian tundra inside what I had started to think was a metal coffin.” Tony opened his eyes and stepped back.

“Trust doesn’t come easy to me.” He said with finality, looking at Stephen straight in the eyes for a moment that seemed to last forever, before he turned around and headed to the door. Despite what he said, they all knew that this was Tony trusting them. He had revealed so many dark secrets about himself for it not to be. Matt suddenly felt a sense of dread flow through him, and Stephen was still trying to process everything that was told to him. He still felt Tony’s fingers against his chest, like a phantom pain that refused to leave. Rhodey, meanwhile, finally understood how much his actions had meant to Tony. He understood how their friendship wasn’t as strong as it used to be, and he understood he had to change that. “If you’ll excuse me, I’ve a mission to get to.

FRIDAY, enlighten Matt and Rhodey. Peter, with me.” With that, he walked out.

He didn’t wait for Peter to follow him, but it wasn’t long before he heard the hurried footsteps as the kid ran to catch up to him. He barely had time to react to Tony’s summon, feeling incredibly dazed by everything Tony had just told them. He never knew Tony had suffered so much by the hands of the people he had cared for… He felt bitterness towards the rest of the Avengers, no longer seeing them as heroes who helped save the Earth but rather as jerks who had abused his father figure.

“Sorry you had to listen to that, Pete.” Tony said finally, not really looking at Peter. He was distancing himself, as if too scared to see how Peter would react with his story. Would the kid finally see him as the monster everyone else saw? Would he still like him? Be with him? Smile at him? The thought that he wouldn’t be close to Peter again terrified him… But he knew it was only a matter of time until Peter found out anyways. The kid was too perceptive for his own good. Besides, Tony wasn’t sure if he’d survive Siberia this time around; and he needed to rant just once. He wanted someone to know how he felt, just this once; because it might be the only chance he gets to let them know how he felt.

“No, Mr. Stark.” Peter said slowly, carefully. “I’m glad you told me, glad you told us.” He shook his head. “I can’t believe they… Captain America was supposed to be a hero.” Peter whispered softly. His eyes then hardened with sheer determination and he looked up at his mentor. “I promise you I won’t let anyone hurt you like that again.” Tony looked at him then, absolutely baffled by the sheer resolve the boy showed him. He wanted to tell him not to make any promises he couldn’t keep, but didn’t have the heart.

“There’s something else I wanted to tell you personally. FRIDAY is probably telling it to Matt and Rhodey right now, but I wanted to be the one to tell you.” Peter looked at him intently now. “Remember how I said the words ‘in the future?’” Peter frowned and then nodded. He hadn’t
thought much of them, having been so stunned by everything else Tony had told them. “Well it wasn’t thrown out there willy nilly. I’m from the future.” Peter’s mouth opened agape, but Tony was too focused on his explanation to notice. “There are these things called infinity stones. They were created with the universe and hold tremendous power. Anyways, a lot of bad things happened and a bad man got ahold of all six of them. We managed to stop him, I took them and used them and somehow that landed me three years in the past.” He knew this was a very poor explanation, but he was on a time limit and there were other things he wanted to tell the kid.

“Kind of like that really old movie Terminator?” Peter asked silently. Tony looked at him with adoration, though he didn’t like being called ‘really old’ considering that was a movie from his youth.

“Yeah, kind of like Terminator.” Tony huffed. “Anyways, I knew you in that timeline too. Actually, it was because I knew you in that timeline that I wanted to reach out to you in this one…” The kid looked up at him surprised, not really expecting that. “Kid, you’ve been someone really important in my life… Both then and now.” Tony could easily recount the many times that Peter had just made his life that much better with his goofy smile alone. He’d have probably been lost in his own bitterness and hate if not for that kid. “You were… are always there for me, and I can’t tell you enough how grateful I am to have you in my life. I know we only got to know each other recently in this timeline, Pete; but I need you to know how much you mean to me.” He took a deep breath and forced himself to say the next line. Three simple words, and yet he was so scared to say them. He was so scared of getting rejected by someone he saw as his child, but he needed to say it anyways. He needed Peter to know, just in case. “I love you.” He said, finally. He really had wished he could have said them to the Peter that died in his arms, but he had a second chance now and he wasn’t going to waste it. “And I’m so incredibly proud of you.”

He hadn’t really expected an answer, if he was being honest. He didn’t really know what he expected after that revelation. He supposed he’d just drop that bombshell and walk away, go to Siberia and then maybe, finally die. He certainly didn’t expect the spider teen to crash into him with a bone-crushing hug, forcing him to stop walking. He didn’t expect Peter to bury his face on his side… but he didn’t really mind it. He hugged the teen back, keeping any sign that he was in pain to himself. Thankfully, Peter eventually loosened his embrace, and looked up at Tony.

“I love you too Mr. Stark.” Tony’s breath hitched, and he pulled the kid closer. They stayed like that for what felt like hours, but it still wasn’t enough. If it weren’t for the fact that he needed to go and fly out with Rogers and Barnes to the Siberian bunker, he’d probably have stayed with the kid for as long as he could.

“Hey, Pete… could I ask a favor of you?” He said, locking eyes with the teen and taking a step back; though he kept his hands on the teen’s shoulders.

“Anything, Mr. Stark!” Peter gave him his best smile, happy that he could do something for Tony for a change.

“Can you take care of everyone while I’m gone?” Tony tried not to sound ominous, but considering everything he told the kid he wasn’t surprised if that’s how that came out. Peter’s smile dimmed, and he looked worried now.

“You’re coming back, right?” He asked hopefully. Tony smiled, because how could he not? He hated lying to the kid, but he couldn’t tell the truth either.

“I’ll do my very best.” He offered. “Don’t worry, I’ll be okay.” He took a step closer and kissed the teen on his head. Peter looked at him in surprise, but also with open admiration. “I won’t leave you, I promise.” He didn’t know what compelled him to say that, to make a promise he wasn’t sure
he could keep, but he knew that the moment he said it he wanted to keep it.

“Okay.” Peter nodded, agreeing easily to the promise. “I’ll take care of everyone, I promise.”

“Thanks, Peter-Piper.” Tony ruffled the kid’s hair, and gave him another hug for good measure. “I have to go, but I’ll be back before you know it.” He winked, and started walking away.

“Good luck Mr. Stark!” Peter called after him, still trying to wrap everything around his mind. He was having troubles processing everything Mr. Stark told him, but he believed it all. He believed in Mr. Stark with everything he had.

In another room, Jessica and the Guardians ended up on guard duty watching the Rogue Avengers like hawks. Neither of them was impressed with Tony’s teammates. The Guardians were especially surprised with how badly they treated the billionaire, considering how close they themselves were with each other. They expected ‘Earth’s Mightiest Heroes’ to have more camaraderie than a bunch of space criminals from different races that were quite literally lumped together in prison. FRIDAY had supplied them with some of the events that transpired between them and Tony, happy that her creator had finally found people that would watch his back. Of course, she didn’t give away anything in detail, knowing Tony was rather adamant about keeping things to himself; but nothing prevented her from showing old news and commenting her thoughts on it.

“Ms. Maximoff has also invaded his mind.” FRIDAY explained, and Jessica huffed angrily.

“They are unworthy.” Nebula said harshly, eyeing the Rogues who were busy being forced to read the accords. Barnes was the only one who was exempt from their wrath, but only because he was eager to sign the accords and make things right between himself and Tony. Every couple of minutes, Rocket would colorfully insult the Rogues, and no one really stopped him.

Though the Guardians had only known Tony for about a week, he had been nothing but kind and accommodating for them. He had treated them like old friends, expecting nothing from them while making sure they were well taken care of. The Guardians had liked him from right off the bat, especially Nebula and Rocket, both of which had spent a considerable amount of time in the lab with the genius. He even grew on Gamora, who was wiry of him from the start, and also Drax and Mantis, both who didn’t care much about anything.

It made sense that they quickly became protective of their friend. They had been worried for him when he shut himself off in the lab. FRIDAY informed him that it happens from time to time whenever he felt stressed out, but it was absolutely abnormal considering how long he spent there. Peter and Gamora had eventually followed Tony down to the lab to see if he wanted to eat dinner with everyone, but were quickly informed that he was in blackout mode. Meaning he wouldn’t leave the room no matter what. They, and eventually some of the other guardians, kept coming down to check up on him, but to no avail. He suddenly realized why it was that Tony needed a nanny to make him sleep.

When FRIDAY sent out a message to the guardians saying Tony was fighting against his team virtually alone and that his chances were minimal, no one reacted well. They were thankful Stephen had grouped everyone up with his portals, and were more than ready to kick names and take ass. Unfortunately, the team backed out before they got to the good part.

Jessica had, unsurprisingly, felt the same way. “So, what are we going to do about them?” She asked no one really.

“Guns ain’t an option, are they?” Rocket piped up, and Jessica gave him an amused smirk. Gamora just glared at him and looked back at her charge.
“No, I believe Tony wants them alive for some reason.” She said crisply. “Though why he would need such an inadequate team of individuals is beyond me.”

“He fears another alien invasion will arrive despite his best efforts.” FRIDAY supplied, though she too sounded unimpressed.

“Didn’t he already defeat that Thanos guy?” Peter asked from where he stood leaning against a wall with his arms crossed. He was staring across the glass of what was apparently called the “Hulk’s playground” where the much hated team was being held. He still couldn’t believe that the Captain America from the comics he would read as a child was standing just a couple of feet in front of him in a different room. He couldn’t believe that same Captain America was such a huge dick.

“Yes, however there were others who followed Thanos and they might not be willing to give up as easily. There are also others who might follow Thanos’ example and come to Earth for one reason or another. Boss strongly believes that there needs to be a team ready to handle any threat thrown to them from outer space. He does not like this team, but he supposed that ‘the more people we have to defend this planet the merrier.’” Peter hummed softly at this, everyone else was quiet, and Jessica scoffed.

“He’s an idiot.” She remarked, opening the flask Tony had given her and took a drink. The brandy burned down her throat pleasantly.

“Yeah, pretty much.” Rocket agreed. “He’d fit well with us, considering we have a bunch of those with us.” He looked pointedly at Drax, then Mantis, and finally Peter.

“I am Groot.” Rocket laughed at this.

“Well, you never answered my question.” Jessica says eventually, looking back to the other team. “What do we do about those assholes?”

“We talk.” Nebula hissed out, making her way towards the speaker system connecting the two rooms. Gamora grinned and joined her side easily; she placed one hand on Nebula as an encouraging gesture and another on the button that would let them use the speakers. Jessica raised an unassuming brow, but stayed quiet.

“Mess with Tony again, and I will obliterate you.” Nebula told them tersely. Her voice was unwavering and strong, promising a painful demise to any who dared not believe her. Gamora’s smile grew fondly and then entirely disappeared. She looked down at the people in the glass, who were now looking at them with a range of emotions in their eyes. There was mostly fear. Good.

“We may not always be in this galaxy, but we will know. If any harm comes to Tony, and if we find out it was from your hands, then your days are numbered. And trust me, we will find out.” She added, only increasing the severity of the threat. Jessica smiled and walked up beside them, standing lazily in an unassuming pose with her arms crossed.

“Unfortunately for these two lovely ladies, there won’t be much for them to deal with when they return. Let me make this clear, I will be watching you. Closely. Tony has friends now, and, even if he doesn’t want us to, we will protect one of ours. Don’t fuck with me or mine, got it?” Her voice wasn’t nearly as strong nor as commanding as the other two, but it was just as threatening.

Peter pushed himself off the wall and walked towards the glass, placing a hand on it and leaning in. “I’d listen to these ladies if I were you. They mean business.”
Sam nodded briskly; fear all but written in his eyes. Wanda stared at them with a furrowed brow, possibly not really afraid, but she nodded nonetheless. Barnes nodded with a determined stare of his own, as if their threat was more of a call to arms. And Rogers, he looked confused. He opened his mouth to speak, but shut it just as quickly. He blinked a couple of times and then finally sighed. “We would never hurt Tony intentionally.” He finally said, earning an impressive amount of deadpanned glares.

“Red over there has, numerous times.” Jessica pointed out. “And I don’t believe we said anything about intentions.” Rogers opened his mouth to speak again, but Gamora took her finger off the speaker button. She looked at the two other women beside her and smirked.

“Good talk.” She nodded at them, and Jessica’s lips twitched up.

It wasn’t long after that the doors to this room opened and Tony Stark himself sauntered in. Jessica raised a brow, wondering what he was doing here now of all places. Matt had told her he was going to spend a lengthy time explaining to Tony that he was unbelievably dense. Granted, he’d been gone for a little over an hour, but when something got Matt going his ‘talks’ would last an eternity.

“Hey guys!” Tony cheered, but it seemed off. Usually, no matter what, he was all smiles and good humor. He was good at pretending everything was fine even when it wasn’t, and only a small number of people could figure out his tells. So, for his act to be off like this, something must be seriously wrong. Looking around the room, it seemed that everyone else (well, everyone who wasn’t Drax) had the same conclusion as Jessica.

“Hey Tony.” Peter smiled back at him, hoping his good mood would transfer over to the other. “How’d the talk of doom go?” Tony shrugged.

“I was told I was an idiot.” He playfully put a hand on his chest in mock offense. “Several times, actually.” He deadpanned there.

“As long as you were made aware.” Jessica shrugged. “What do you need?” Her question was open ended, for Tony to interpret as he wished. Sure, he definitely came to this room with some sort of intention, but maybe he could use a friend beside him.

“I’m going to go after Zemo, and I need to pick up Barnes.” Tony informed all of them, already making his way towards the doors that led to the other room.

“I’m going to go after Zemo, and I need to pick up Barnes.” Tony informed all of them, already making his way towards the doors that led to the other room.

“Just Barnes?” Gamora raised her brow. Tony shrugged.

“Zemo is just one man. He doesn’t want world domination or anything like that; he just wants to see the Avengers tear themselves apart. I don’t really need to take anyone with me. I’m only taking Barnes because this is something that’s directly connected to him; Zemo’s going to the HYDRA bunker where they kept Barnes.” Tony explained as he hit the code for the lock on the door. When he opened it, all of the eyes on the room were on him. “Come on Elsa, you and me. Let’s go.” He said to Barnes, avoiding everyone else. He owed them nothing.

Barnes nodded and started to make his way towards Tony, but Rogers intervened. He placed himself in front of his friend and looked harshly at Tony. “Where he goes, I go.”

“Did you sign?” Tony asked, already tired of dealing with this stupid subject.

“Yes.” Rogers hissed out unpleasantly. “I signed.” He clearly didn’t want to, but wasn’t given much of a choice. Tony smirked, if only to spite him.

“Alright, let’s go then Barnes and Noble.” He turned around and started heading out, but before he
made it far someone blocked his path. That someone was Jessica.

“I’m coming with.” She stated. Tony raised a brow, but didn’t argue.

“Okay.” He knew she had mentioned wanting to be a team focused in New York, but he also knew she was a great friend. If she wanted to support him, he would let her. Matt would kick his ass otherwise.

“I’d like to come along as well, but your government still doesn’t know about us.” Gamora sighed. “We’ll leave tonight, after you get back.” She placed no room to argue. “Then we will return once our mission is complete.” Tony nodded at her. “When we get back, I want to try some more of what you made us.” There was a warm smile on her face now, and Tony couldn’t help but match it.

“Oh! And cookies, make sure you bake more cookies.” Peter chimed in, causing Tony’s smile to widen.

“There will be cookies waiting for you when you get back.” He nodded in agreement.

“And tech.” Rocked chimed in.

“I am Groot.” Groot said, not looking over his video game.

“Sure, tech and games. Not a problem.” Tony was just starting to understand Groot, though it did help that he learned to communicate with his bots that spoke only in beep and also a cape that didn’t even speak.

“Movies.” Nebula hissed out angrily with her arms crossed and a glare. Tony gave her the brightest smile he could muster, knowing how hard it was for her to show affection.

“Deal.”

With the oddly demanding farewells out of the way, Tony and his makeshift team of four made their way towards the Quinjets. He wasn’t looking forward to being in a several hour-long jet ride with Rogers, and suddenly felt a sense of gratitude towards Jessica for tagging along.

The ride itself wasn’t too bad, if not for the deafening silence. Rogers tried talking sometimes, but Jessica or Barnes would glare at him to shut up. He kept trying though, which was infuriating. “So, who are those people?” Rogers asked, but Tony kept quiet. “Did they sign too?” He was answered with silence. “What was the mission they were talking about?” Nothing. “What about that sorcerer guy… Stephen?” Quiet. “Tony…” He sounded disappointed.

“Leave him alone already.” Jessica hissed out.

“They are my friends, Rogers.” Tony said quietly, “and that’s all I’m willing to say.”

The rest of the ride was ridden with silence.

Going into the bunker was an odd experience. It brought forth the absolute worst memories from Tony, and he didn’t really like that much. “Boss, there are six heat signatures.” FRIDAY supplied from inside his helmet.

“He must not have yet killed them.” Tony responded, wondering if they might have gotten there too early. He sighed and continued walking, wanting to get this over with. He hoped that he was too early, that way there wouldn’t be a video for him to watch. He didn’t want anyone to watch it, not really. Jessica was a friend, though. He could handle her watching it. Rogers had already seen it
and Barnes lived through it. He still hoped they wouldn’t be forced to watch it.

“I’m glad to see you came.” A familiar voice rang out from within the walls of the compound. “It was a bit more… complicated to get you here than I thought it would be, but here you are nonetheless.” Zemo sounded smug. Tony rolled his eyes and kept walking towards the familiar room in the compound. There were no dead bodies surrounding them, so it was safe to assume that Zemo didn’t have time to kill them. He was probably too busy setting up the video for them to watch.

The events played out mostly the same from here. Rogers tried to break down the compound, and to get to Zemo, but failed. Zemo still mocked him for it. Tony, without much gusto, quipped back the same quip he used in the other timeline. Rogers and Zemo bickered, and Zemo admitted to being Sokovian. It was an odd sense of déjà-vu. It wasn’t even surprising when the small screen propped up, showing the same video it showed in the last timeline.

Showing the same video where his parents died violently.

The video came to an end, and it almost felt like Tony’s world did too. He still had nightmares about this film where his parents die in a brutal way, and he certainly didn’t ever want to watch it again. He didn’t look away though, he couldn’t. As painful as it was to watch it was mesmerizing too, like if he looked away then he’d be abandoning them somehow. Even when the screen turned dark and it was over, he couldn’t look away. Memories came crashing in with panic. Memories of him fighting Rogers and Barnes, of the rage he felt inside bubbling outward with newfound fervor; memories of him almost dying. He closed his eyes sharply, almost painfully. “Did you know?” He heard himself ask.

“I didn’t know it was him.” Rogers said. Rogers lied. Tony closed his eyes tighter, glad to have the armor around him to hide him.

“Don’t bullshit him, asshole.” He heard Jessica hiss out at him. “And you, how dare you?” Tony figured she was looking at Barnes now, who probably looked like a wounded dog himself. Tony had grown to like Barnes, even if his priority was Steve, and he knew Barnes had grown to like him too. They had some semblance of a friendship, but even then he still apologized profusely whenever the topic of his parents was brought up. Tony had forgiven him long ago.

“Hydra had control of his mind!” Rogers defended him. “Bucky, go.” Barnes didn’t move though, he was too focused on Tony. Too focused on trying to analyze just how broken he was by, and how he could try to fix things. He wasn’t sure how he’d accomplish it, but he’d try his best to make things right between them.

“Because I knew.” Tony finally said, continuing his earlier thought. He finally looked beside him at the three figures there. Jessica looked about ready to fight the two super soldiers, Rogers looked ready to fight back, and Barnes just stood there watching him. “Go home Rogers.” He ordered finally, not caring about how exhausted he sounded. He wouldn’t fight them here today, and he wouldn’t nearly die again. He was tired, so very tired. He just wanted to go home and lock himself in his lab. Yet he was forced to be here, feeling the familiar numbness caused by dread that he felt before when he was left to die in this same bunker. It was the same cloud of panic that drowned the world around him and made his heart sink further and further into his chest until it was just too damn heavy.

“Tony?” Rogers said gently, taking a step closer to him. Tony lifted up his hand and got his repulsors ready to fire.

“Go. Home.” He repeated, more aggressively this time. “Take Barnes with you if you want, I don’t
care. Just leave me alone.” With that he took off in the direction he saw Zemo leave. He wanted to get this personal hell of his over with as soon as possible and go home and drown himself in work like he had been doing before, maybe take up drinking again. Anything to get rid of this feeling he had; anything to forget.

With deep calming breaths, he urged his panic down. He had a mission to complete and he wasn’t going to let his emotions fuck it up. He’d deal with it later when he could, but now he had other pressing matters to take care of. He had one Zemo to catch and a couple of iced soldiers to kill.

“Something changed in you, Iron Man.” Tony heard Zemo say from somewhere. He quietly followed the voice until he spotted him. They were deeper in the compound, surrounded by machinery long since forgotten. It was dark, barely illuminated by the old electric lights above them, but Tony didn’t care. Zemo was just one man that he could easily overpower, no matter what ‘well thought out’ plans he had. “I realized you wouldn’t let the team break off so easily, and somehow you were a step ahead of me.” He spoke softly, looking at Tony from where he sat. “It wasn’t easy convincing a HYDRA operative to go into your tower and steal from you, you know. It took some time, but it all worked out in the end.”

“Your plan failed.” Tony replied to him, landing directly in front of him but a few feet away. He strolled closer. “The Avengers haven’t broken up like you wanted.”

“Maybe not, but they will.” Zemo smiled wickedly. “I didn’t want any more of them roaming the Earth, you know, but I figured I was willing to let it go if it meant getting rid of you. After all, you’re the only reason there even is an Avengers anymore.” When he said that, five figures emerged from the shadows around the facility. Zemo confidently stood up and spoke in a strong Russian voice. Tony understood Russian; he picked it up quickly when he realized that it was Natasha’s first language. He figured he could talk to her in Russian, and maybe make her feel more at home. She seemed to appreciate his gesture, but that felt like ages ago. He was grateful for that, though, because it meant he knew exactly what it was that Zemo asked of his soldiers. “Kill him.”

The five other winter soldiers surrounded him, like a pack of wolves circling around their prey ready to pounce at any second. Tony suddenly wished he hadn’t left Jessica, Rogers and Barnes in a fit of blind panic and rage. He’d appreciate the backup, even if he didn’t trust half of it.

One of the soldiers attacked, tactfully slicing his knife where Tony was standing. It was similar to how Rogers sliced his shield around, the sideways arch that used all the momentum and strength available to the soldier. At the familiar motion, Tony suddenly wasn’t facing against five hydra super soldiers. No, instead he was fighting five Steve Rogers. The panic attack he had been forcing down suddenly regurgitated full force. It didn’t help that he was physically in Siberia.

No, no, no. He would not let this happen again. He downright refused to let this happen again! He had suffered enough the first time. No! He saw his parents die, wasn’t that enough torture? So what if Germany’s fight still happened? Did Siberia have to happen too? Does that mean that Maw would happen? Thanos would happen? Does that mean that everything Tony had fought tooth and nail for was for nothing? That his efforts were a waste? Why? Why did he always fail so epically? Why were there five Rogers? Fuck, they were attacking him. Oh God, it was going to hurt so badly. He nearly died the first time and he was only fighting two super soldiers. Now there were five of them. Oh no. Please. No. Not this again. He couldn’t handle this again. He fought so much, why did he have to keep going? No. He refused. No. Not again. Siberia would not happen again! No. No. No. NO!

Not even FRIDAY’s beautiful, calming voice could break him out of his trance.

Pure adrenalin and instinct alone were what kept him going. He shot his repulsors frantically,
desperately, barely taking note of where they hit. His nanotech quickly moved around his suit, providing the extra protection or extra offense he needed. “You can’t… beat…to hand.” He heard through his panic. Almost immediately he shot himself up the air, catapulting another set of repulsor beams at the offenders.

He continued to fight them, somehow keeping himself lucid throughout the haze of the panic he felt. He heard screaming, but he wasn’t sure if it came from him or from the soldiers. More blasts, more gunshots, more pain. Two of the soldiers had taken up trying to shoot him down, if not fatally, then at least to make sure he can’t just fly away. Tony wouldn’t fly away though; he would stay and fight until he died. It’s what he always did, regardless of how much the odds were stacked against him. The other three were more geared towards close combat, hoping to cut through the armor. They were certainly strong enough to do so, but Tony didn’t want to think about that.

“Tony!” A familiar voice called out to him, but that familiar voice only made his panic worsen. Now, instead of five, there were eight super soldiers surrounding him. Oh holy fuck.

“Stay back!” He ordered, pleaded really. He fired more repulsors and flew over to another soldier, using his momentum to punch him. The soldier scrambled to get up and he fired again, and again, and again. Until the movement bellow him stopped, until the soldier couldn’t hurt him anymore. Then he felt a sharp pain in his side, almost on the same spot where Thanos had stabbed him. He turned around, once more using the momentum of the suit and the nanobots to pack a meaner punch. That sent another soldier flying. Jessica took over that soldier, slamming a fist onto him and pushing him further into the wall. And so, Tony kept fighting. He kept doing his best, trying to avoid Rogers and Barnes as best he could. He didn’t trust himself not to go after them next.

Jessica’s presence was a blessing. She wasn’t there in the original timeline, so seeing her was jarring. It was a reminder that this wasn’t a repeat of events, or his own personal nightmare. This was a different rendition of what happened, one where his fellow teammate and friend isn’t pummeling him to the ground. Her presence wasn’t enough to calm him down, though.

With one soldier down and another being handled by Jessica, Tony turned to face the battle scene. He saw Barnes and Rogers fighting side by side and a pang of resentment echoed within him. A third soldier took that opportunity to attack Tony again, hitting him in the chest and causing a new wave of panic.

No, not the reactor… not what’s keeping Tony alive. No!

The room lit up in a blaze of frantic glory, Tony wasn’t even quite sure if he hit anything. The soldier that had hit him was gasping in pain, but still standing. Jessica, Rogers and Barnes seemed to be okay, if only a bit scratched up. Jessica was still taking care of one of the soldiers and the other two remaining soldiers were focused with the Star-Spangled Duo, so Tony forced himself not to pay them too much attention.

He continued his attack, hoping, praying that he wasn’t going to die. That he wasn’t going to feel pain again. God he was tired of feeling pain. So Tony pounced on the fourth Soldier and hit him over and over with nanobot-empowered punches until his face was a bloody mess and he could barely breathe.

Eventually, the three remaining soldiers were taken down. Tony breathed heavily, and so did the two super-soldier Avengers and Jessica. They looked between each other. Rogers started to smile and make his way over towards Tony. He probably just wanted to say ‘good job’ or something of the sort, but Tony could only see another threat. He could only see the man who lied to him, betrayed him, who damned well nearly killed him.
He took a step back, and he noticed Rogers hesitate for a moment before trying to get close again. This time, though, he held his hands up in what he hoped to be a soothing manner, a sign of peace. Tony wasn’t one to fall for the same trick twice, so he took another step back, and then another, and another. Suddenly he was flying back, crashing through walls when he couldn’t avoid them. He didn’t hear Jessica call out for him, nor did he hear FRIDAY try to speak to him. He was outside now. It was snowing heavily.

It was cold.

He was flying so fast now, and everything was so white. He couldn’t see where he was going. He didn’t know if he was flying up, or parallel to the ground, or even straight into the ground. All he felt was the cold, and it was freezing. He felt the pain flow through his body, the inexistent pain from another timeline where he couldn’t breathe; the one where his chest was caved in and he slowly suffocated on his own blood; the one where all he could feel was the numbness creeping up his fingers, fighting the painfully hot hate flaring through his body; the one where Rogers hit him over, and over, and over. Each hit showcasing how little the great American soldier thought of the lowly, stingy mechanic. Each hit another reminder of the broken trust and misplaced faith in their fake friendship.

The cold was overwhelming.

Suddenly, white became black and the cold went from unbearable to downright deadening. In front of him were the Chitauri, burning up in a beautifully chaotic nuclear inferno. The portal behind him was closing, oh so quickly. He wasn’t going to make it. He was going to die there, alone and light years away from all those he loved. Then, the Chitauri lived anew. They flew over Tony, bringing to him the corpses of his loved ones. Everyone he had ever known, cared for, loved. Everyone he held close to his heart at one point or another, dead. They were stacked in front of him, floating motionlessly in the empty void. Then, one by one they opened their glazed, dead eyes. They looked directly at Tony. First it was Pepper, and then Rhodey, then Stephen and Peter, and then everyone. They all looked at him, just staring and staring and staring. They were sad, and they judged, and they expected and they just stared.

“Why didn’t you do more?” Rogers- Steve finally asked. His emotionless eyes somehow still held a fury of disappointment. The same disappointment Tony’s dad held. God he was so sick of it. “Why didn’t you save us?” Steve was now in front of him, looking at him sadly. For a beat nothing happened, Tony almost thought he wanted an answer, but then Steve pushed him. Hard.

And then he was falling again, through the portal and onto the ground. He was falling and he couldn’t stop, oh God he couldn’t stop. This time, though, the Hulk wasn’t there to save him. He was going to fall to his death, just like Icarus.

He landed, painfully, in a desert. His heart felt heavy, and it hurt so, sobad. Someone picked him up, muttering something in a language he didn’t understand. He tried to open his eyes, but he couldn’t. He felt fear radiate throughout his entire being, crushing him thoroughly into despair. He opened his eyes.

Water. He saw a large tub of water in front of him. He gulped, looking up to see a familiar pair of eyes on him demanding he built weapons. His body violently shook, and he tried to free himself. His body hurt so painfully. His heart felt so heavy. Why did his heart feel heavy? He looked down, seeing the familiar battery hooked up grotesquely to his chest. He screamed, or tried to, but no sound came. He tried fighting again, tried to get up and leave, but they were too strong. He was stuck.
Then he heard a small, sad whisper in a voice he could never even dream to forget. “Why didn’t you save me?” Yinsen asked pitifully. “Why didn’t you do more?” And then his head was plunged into water.

He couldn’t breathe. Oh God, he couldn’t breathe. His lungs burn painfully, and he tried so hard to get out and free himself to breathe. He couldn’t. He felt his heart pound heavily against his chest, faster and faster and faster. He was so scared. Fuck, he was shaking. His body jerked against the hold, but it did nothing more than make his captors plunge him deeper. Then came the electrocution as the water hit the battery pack.


All he felt was despair and he still couldn’t breathe.

After what felt like an eternity, he was finally brought back up. Water dripped down from his face as he gasped desperately for air. He barely had enough time to think, let alone breathe, before he was unceremoniously thrown out of the cave and onto the desert. He turned around, wondering why he was suddenly granted freedom, and only saw bodies. The many, many bodies of the people he’s killed, and not just the terrorists. He felt terror flood through his being.

He did this.

“Why didn’t you save us?” Quickly became: “why did you kill us?” And he hated himself more and more as he continued to stare at the depressing, bloody sight. So he turned around and started walking. He kept going, and going, and going. It felt endless, hot, dry, painful. His legs hurt, threatening to fall off if he didn’t take a break. He kept going. His mouth felt dry, desperate for even a drop of water. He kept going. His determination was gone, and his hope was practically nonexistent. He kept going. He felt death’s caress. He. Kept. Going.

And then he heard a whimper. It was Peter! He was lying on the ground, crying in pain. Tony ran to him, forgetting his own suffering at the moment and thinking only of the boy. He gently picked him up, cradling him in his arms as tenderly as he could, hoping to give some amount of comfort.

“It was the only way.” He heard Stephen say. He looked at the man, saw the sadness in his eyes, and saw the pity. And then Stephen was gone, turned to dust.

“I don’t want to die.” Tony’s gaze shot back towards Peter, watching the boy cry in his arms. “Why, Mr. Stark? Why couldn’t you have saved me?” Tony tried to say something, to soothe the ailing boy, but his voice was gone and before he could find it, Peter disappeared into dust. Tony’s heart shattered in his chest.

“All that for a drop of blood.” Thanos’ voice rang in his ear. He turned around quickly ready to face this threat. Instead, he saw everyone dead from the battle. Those who were still somehow alive were busy holding down Thanos.

“What are you waiting for, Tony?” Thor boomed at him, throwing himself towards Thanos again. Tony felt a sharp pain in his stomach. Looking down, he saw a bloody mess. God, it was gruesome. The only thing keeping his innards inside him was the nanobots. He’d be dead without them. He was dead regardless, now it was just a matter of time, really. He could still fight, using the power of sheer determination to push him through until the end. If he could help his allies somehow, then he’d do it. God, he’d do anything.
So he did. He fought. Pain flared through his body at each movement, but he didn’t dare stop. He
didn’t dare think about what stopping meant. He would keep going on and on until he literally
couldn’t.

Through some stroke of dumb luck, the Gauntlet was pulled out of Thanos’ grasp. Dumb luck, of
course, being the sacrifice of so many -too many. Tony managed to catch the Gauntlet. He noticed
Thor and everyone else trying to hold back the mad Titan, who was barreling towards him. He
would reach him in a mere moment. Tony quickly put on the Gauntlet and thought up a wish,
snapping his fingers immediately. He felt a familiar, scorching flare up his arm, burning him
with the raw amount of power. He refused to yield. He gritted his teeth and held on tightly, using
the remainder of his energy to focus on his desire, to focus on making sure everything was as it
should be.

He would not fail. For once, he didn’t.

Except, instead of appearing in the room in front of the compound, he was in a void. It was so dark,
so lonely. He wondered where he was. He wondered if he won. The void then became a familiar
winding road. He felt his throat swell up angrily, and tears threatened to fall. He saw the familiar
car come merrily on its way, and then the crash happened, and the soldier was about to make his
move.

But he didn’t.

“This is quite enough.” He heard instead. The winding road suddenly became outer space and its
entire glory. This space, though, wasn’t cold like he remembered it being. It wasn’t hot either. It
was comfortable, serene even. Stars lit up everything beautifully, and planets decorated those stars.
Tony could see gorgeous nebulas scattered around, surrounding him. It was so breathtakingly
beautiful, and so unlike anything he’d ever seen before. It felt almost ethereal. Tony was so lost in
the intricate beauty that he almost forgot about the voice entirely and was completely surprised
when he heard it again. “You’ve suffered enough.” He turned to face the source of the gentle tone,
surprised to see four genderless children looking at him with different expressions each. All four
kids had different colors to them: blue, red, purple, and orange.

“You mustn’t torment yourself.” Blue said gently. “Please, stop it.”

“This reality you’ve forced yourself to live through, I do not welcome it.” Red frowned. “Even if
you had help for some of it, I do not find it worthy of your mind.”

“You are strong, Anthony Stark. You will do well to remember your achievements, and not your
few, meaningless shortcomings.” Purple chided.

“You have a gentle soul, and a will of iron. It is both saddening and heartening to see you bear such
heavy burdens in your life, but do not cause yourself any more grief.” Orange spoke. They all look
at Tony longingly, caringly, and almost lovingly.

Tony opened his mouth to speak, but what could he say? That he felt he deserved the pain thrown
his way? The stress? The fear? He didn’t, and he did. He’s saved so many, but he’s killed so many
as well. His nightmares are proof enough that he needs to do better.

“No.” Blue interrupted Tony’s thoughts. “You’ve rarely killed, Anthony, and you’ve never enjoyed
the act. You do not deserve the harsh judgments thrown upon you. We do not believe you to be
cruel, nor selfish. We believe you to be kind and true. We believe you to be worthy of everything.”

“Yet we can not give it to you, for despite your power, you are simply not strong enough.” Purple
sighed. “We wish to guard you, as you so carefully have done for us.”

“But you would not have us stay together, only to be used again by greedy men.” Red continued. “And we are grateful for your selflessness. We do not relish destruction.”

“One of us is already there for you, though they are now something new because of you.” Orange smiled softly. “I wish it were me.”

“Another stands with you, guarded by men who look at it warily, but with awe and respect. They are where they belong.” Purple explained.

“We want one more to be with you, guarded by the man who saved us and the universe.” Blue hummed softly, suddenly taking a couple of steps closer towards Tony until they were right in front of him. “We have decided that it shall be me.” The child placed a hand on Tony’s heart, on his reactor. “After all, an adorable imitation of me is with you already.” They smiled coyly.

“We will always watch over you, Anthony. We will aid you if we can, but that is all we can promise.” Red whispered softly.

“I wish it were me that would be with you. You have such potential, such greatness, such power.” Purple shook their head lightly. “But I will at least grant you strength to endure. Take it as my thanks.” With that, the child turned into an orb of purple light. A small, almost too small to see, portion of the light left its body and made its way towards Tony. Then, the orb disappeared.

“We each wish it were us,” Red chimed, “but we know which of us is truly the better option for you. I leave with you a reality where you can be happy, where you can find peace.” The red child also turned into a red orb, splitting a small section of itself just like the purple orb had done. This small section, however, dispersed into a red mist that surrounded Tony until it disappeared. Shortly after, the red orb was gone as well.

“My gift to you will be a well-guarded soul. May it thrive, as it should.” Orange turned to an orb and split itself like the others. The smaller section formed a small string that wrapped around Tony, only to fade into him. The orange orb was gone.

“And that leaves me.” Blue hummed softly. “It is my will to be with you, Anthony Stark. Know that and know it well. Nothing but death herself will be able to separate me from you.” The child declared, staring Tony straight in the eye. “I will protect you as you have done for my kin.” They glowed softly, a smile forming on their features. “I will be yours until your parting breath.” Finally, Blue turned into an orb. This time, however, instead of splitting itself like the others had done, the entirety of the orb encased Tony in what almost felt like a tight, warm hug. It slowly melted itself onto Tony’s chest, before disappearing entirely, leaving Tony alone in the beautiful scene.

*Finally,* Tony could breathe.

Chapter End Notes

Nightmares, am I right?
Hey guys!
Here is a new chapter for your enjoyment!
The story is almost coming to a close, I'd say. Only a few more chapters and it'll be finished, that's a bit of a surprising thought to have. I've been working on this story for months now, and I can't believe I'm this close to finishing it!
This adventure has only been made even more enjoyable because of you guys! Thank you so much for all of your amazing comments, your continued support and just your amazing awesome selves for giving this story a chance and inspiring me to keep on writing and making it the best story I possibly can.

This chapter, I'll admit, wasn't one of my favorites; especially since I had to battle a massive writer's block to get it done after having spent all of my creative juice on the last chapter… buuuut on hindsight the next chapter will have something all of us have been waiting for.

That being said, I hope you guys have a great weekend and enjoy!

The room was an eerie silence after Tony and Peter left, and the three men were too lost in their own thoughts to try and break it. FRIDAY had been ready to answer any questions they would have while also explaining the situation that Boss found himself in, but none of the men had spoken up or questioned what they had been told. With a mechanical whirl, her version of a sigh, she spoke up first and broke the silence. “Do you wish for me to explain what Boss meant?”

“Yes, please Ms. FRIDAY.” Matt said politely. “If you wouldn’t mind.” FRIDAY was delighted by the polite tone directed at her.

“It would be my pleasure!” FRIDAY chirped, pulling up a hologram screen in front of the three of them. “These are memories Boss has shared with me through the BARF interface, they are as accurate a documentation we will ever get from the alternate timeline. I am unable to share much of it due to Boss’ privacy protocols, but we will make do with what we have.” She pulled up an image of Thanos from Tony’s fight in Titan. “The ‘big purple grape,’ as Boss liked to describe him, is an alien named Thanos. He is the last of his kind, and the one responsible for the Chitauri invasion. His goal was to collect all the Infinity Stones, which are six powerful stones that were created with the birth of the universe. Each stone has a unique element attached to it: power, mind, soul, reality, space, and, lastly, time. Thanos achieved his goal of uniting them and wiped out half of the universe.” She changed the picture to that of Earth and what it had looked like after the infamous snap.

The two non-visually impaired adults widened their eyes in shock and felt a sick feeling pool in the pit of their stomachs. The image wasn’t pretty. The first thing they noticed when they saw the image was the sheer amount of accidents that happened due to drivers disappearing mid-drive, or planes crashing down through the buildings. There were fires everywhere and so much destruction. The most sickening thing, however, was the fact that there was almost no one on the streets. The few who were looked entirely dead and heartbroken, with grief-stricken faces and defeated
postures.

Matt, while not really being able to see the images presented for him, could still understand what was going on with FRIDAY’s explanation and the other two’s verbal and physical reactions to what was happening. So far, he wasn’t enjoying this show and tell session. He vaguely remembered Tony mentioning the stones in their first meeting, but he hadn’t put much thought in it. He didn’t realize it was something so devastating as what FRIDAY said it was.

“The remaining Avengers, and all others who offered their aid against the Mad Titan, united for one last battle.” She switched the image to one that Tony had shown Stephen, and it was just as dreadful to look at now as it was the last time. The image, however, turned into a video that expanded through the room to make it seem like the three men were actually there. In it, several people were fighting against the titan, attacking him from all fronts. Above them, Thor and a blond woman who looked like she was on fire flew down and attacked the titan together. Meanwhile, Rogers and the Hulk were working together to try and hold down Thanos and prevent him from using the gauntlet with six stones still firmly attached to it.

Nebula, several sorcerers and Wakandan soldiers worked together to dispel the army of aliens surrounding them, allowing the stronger and more powerful heroes focus solely on the titan. Scott Lang was unconscious against a pile of dead alien soldiers, with blood flowing through his helmet. Romanoff and Clint were dead, lying together beside other corpses from both armies. Thor swung his axe, but it was blocked by Thanos’ arm where Rogers was hanging onto with all his will. The woman on fire managed to blast him on the back, causing him to lose his balance and step forward a bit. Soon, the War Machine and Iron Man armors were seen flying in unison, side by side, and sent repulsor blasts and gunfire at the purple menace. There was something wrong with both of their armors, though. War Machine’s armor had more support on the legs for a reason only Stephen and FRIDAY knew, and the Iron Man armor was oddly painted red in the midsection, and it revealed some of Tony’s skin at some parts.

War Machine flew by, but Iron Man kept going closer and closer to the titan in a rapid speed. “Tony!” Rhodey heard himself say in the scene. War Machine immediately turned around and followed the Iron Man suit. “What are you doing? We’re artillery support. You can’t take another hit.” It was then clear that this was being said in the privacy of their communicators, because no one else seemed to notice what was going on.

“Yeah, I know.” Tony said, but his mind wasn’t really in the conversation. “I have an idea.” Iron Man then maneuvered his body so that his feet fell first and slammed a really hard landing on Thor’s axe, digging it deeper into Thanos’ arm. The titan yelled out in pain and swatted his hand at Tony, but the billionaire was quicker. He quickly flew up, shooting some more blasts on Thanos’ face giving Thor time to take his hammer back. “Thor, think you can hit the gauntlet?” The force of the swat threw out Rogers, and he landed a couple of yards back with a grunt. Hulk tried to take the gauntlet out of Thanos’ arm, but was punched off for his efforts.

“Not his head?” Thor asked back, lighting flowing freely through his body.

“Not the head.” Tony repeated with a grimace. Stephen noticed that Iron Man’s flight pattern was odd, and a bit uncontrolled. Looking at Rhodey, he noticed it too. “I don’t think he can quite use the stones again, not for something big.” Tony explained. “Otherwise, he’d have used them already. I’m pretty sure it’s pride that’s keeping him from leaving the battlefield, but we can’t keep relying on that.” His voice sounded a bit strained, but it carried strong anyways.

Rogers got up, and immediately charged back at Thanos, although he was quite a ways away. His shield was gone, but he refused to back down. It was one of the only things Tony would ever be
able to relate to with Rogers, the refusal to stand down. He gritted his teeth, both in spite and pain. “Carol, you hit him first. Make sure his attention is on you.” He called out on the coms; she looked at him and nodded before diving down.

“Hey asshole!” She yelled, punching Thanos in the face and holding onto one of his hands with all of her strength.

“You are strong for a human.” Thanos commented with a feral grin. “But not strong enough.” He moved the arm with the gauntlet, as if to summon something, but before he could Thor hit it with his axe.

“A little jolt might due him some good, don’t you think Point Break?” Tony called out from above. He closed his eyes momentarily before taking a deep breath and letting himself fall with the aid of the repulsors.

“Aye!” Thor boomed in agreeance, sending as much electricity through the axe and onto Thanos as he could. He kept pushing the axe as low as he could, knowing what the mortal was trying to accomplish. Tony smiled, only briefly.

“Rhodes, when I give you the signal, push him all the way back. Carol, help him out if you can, and same with you Thor.” Carol and Thor were quickly thrown off, and Thanos looked at them with a mad look in his eyes, he was starting to get angry. With a shaky breath, Tony willed his descent to be quicker, and, just like last time, he twisted his body and let his feet fall first landing on the axe. This time, though, he kept pushing, drawing out more and more power from the repulsors. He heard Thanos scream, and it was music to his ears. “How’s that for a drop of blood?” He grinned viciously before he amped up the power on the repulsors, frying nanobots with the overload. “Rhodes! Now!” He ordered when he felt the axe cut through the bone and then, finally, through the arm.

A couple of things happened at once: Tony managed to cut through Thanos’ arm, and grab it before it fell; Thanos grabbed Tony by the neck with his remaining hand and tightened his grip incredibly; Rhodey, Carol and Thor pushed Thanos away in a united attack; and, subsequently, both Thanos and Tony were sent flying. Tony landed with a hard crash on the side of a bolder, his world spun with dizziness and pain, but he didn’t care. He vaguely heard voices call out to him, but his only thought was on the gauntlet. He held onto it so tightly, afraid that it would slip away from him.

His senses went haywire, clouded by bright colors and the throbbing ache his entire body felt. His innards were probably a jumbled mess by now, how the fuck was he still alive? He shook his head… or would attempt to if the motion didn’t make him so incredibly nauseous. He closed his eyes and blinked them open until he could force his senses to work again. When he did, he felt a new sense of dread flow through him.

Thanos was charging at him with a berserker rage. Thor and Carol attempted to stop him, but he simply swatted them away like flies. Rhodey kept attacking him from above, but to no avail. Tony tried to tell them to stop, to get the gauntlet before Thanos managed to reach it again, but his voice wouldn’t carry. He grimaced and forced himself to work. Thor and Carol kept trying to stop him, Rogers did too, but in the end all they did was slow him down. He was tunnel-visioning Tony with a mad glint in his eyes and incredible fury. Tony worked to get Thanos’ limb out of the gauntlet, to try and quickly put it on, but it was stuck.

“For fuck’s sake.” He tried to grumble, but nothing came out. Looking up, Thanos was a lot closer now. He wouldn’t have the time he needed to get the gauntlet on him and make the snap. He’d have to run, but looking down, he didn’t have any nanotech to spare. His suit got blown away from
the crash, and everything that he had he was using to keep his stomach in place. He’d die in seconds if he chose to use up those remaining nanobots. He wasn’t sure if he’d be able to reach anyone in time to hand them the gauntlet.

He kept working on taking out the arm and was surprised when it finally started to give. “Yes! Just a little bit more.” He cheered, though he coughed up blood for his efforts. Looking up Thanos was almost reaching him with a spear he probably took from one of his soldiers. Panic started to settle in, and he looked around. The closest person was Nebula, but she was busy fighting the army and he probably wouldn’t even make it to her before he died. He grimaced; she’d have to do. He started redirecting the nanobots, still working on freeing the gauntlet. “Nebs, I’m going to need you to run my way.” Tony said in the coms, pleased when she turned around to look at him. The moment his boots were formed and ready to fire, he moved with one hand holding the gauntlet and the other the hole in his stomach. Nebula ran towards him as well.

“Delivery for my favorite smurf.” He grinned, already seeing two of her. He crashed again somewhere near her and extended the gauntlet for her to take, but she didn’t. Instead she jumped in front of him and a spear hit her shoulder. It should have hit him instead. His eyes widened and he forced himself to sit up. “Nebula?!”

“I am fine. Resume your task, I will take on Thanos.” She stated, removing the spear with a wince. She gave him a curiously fond look, one he had never seen on her before, and charged at her father- no- at her target. The nanobots quickly redirected themselves back onto his wound, trying desperately to bandage it up. It was probably FRIDAY’s work, as she was programmed into this suit before they went off to space to search for Thanos. She had been gone silent for a while now though, as Tony didn’t have enough bots to sustain most of her functions.

“No! Nebula I need you to take the gauntlet and go!” The dying billionaire shouted at Nebula, hoping she’d turn around and do as he’d ask. She didn’t. He continued his task to take care of the hand problem. “Someone take this thing from me. I don’t think I…” His breathing was getting labored and he couldn’t focus anymore, he couldn’t even speak. Regardless, he forced himself to continue on his task; he couldn’t give up. So many lives had been lost, and he needed to fix it. He needed to. The universe depended on him; his friends depended on him; Peter depended on him. He couldn’t fail now, and he wouldn’t.

A strange surge of newfound power flowed into him from the hand that held the gauntlet and gave him strength to continue. He didn’t really understand it much, but he didn’t question it. He managed to remove the hand, finally. He didn’t look up as he put the gauntlet on; he didn’t see Nebula torn to shreds in front of him; he pretended he didn’t hear it. He didn’t see Carol fall or Thor gasp for air. He didn’t see Rhodny and Hulk getting tossed to the ground like ragdolls. He didn’t see so many innocent lives being taken mercilessly to buy him more time. He didn’t need to.

Shaking and in incredible pain, he lifted his hand and snapped.

The hologram ended, and blanked out, leaving the three men in the room in silence. “Afterwards, boss was sent back in time with all of the stones and has made it his personal mission to prevent anything of the like from happening again.” FRIDAY summarized. “Thanos, thankfully, is no more; but boss still believes there is a threat and is avidly working against it.”

“FRIDAY, how long has Tony from that timeline been here?” It was Rhodey who asked that, but Matt was thinking it too.

“Since late February.” FRIDAY supplied. “He has safely landed in Siberia.” She added, pointedly. None of the three men understood why she decided to inform them of that, but they were too overwhelmed with what they had just experienced to give it much thought.
“I didn’t realize it had been that bad.” Stephen whispered. He didn’t realize he was shaking so hard until Levi tightened his grip on him.

“You knew.” Matt wasn’t asking, he was stating. He wasn’t sure he’d be able to forget the sound of Tony’s voice, rasping desperately for air as he bled out painfully. He wouldn’t be able to forget the sound of war that surrounded the engineer as he frantically tried to end it. He wouldn’t be able to forget how broken Tony sounded as all of those he fought with died. None of them would, really.

“Yes.” Stephen agreed easily. “I am the keeper of the time stone, and I immediately went after him when the stone disappeared. I had noticed he seemed panicked, but I never imagined this.” He closed his eyes and forced himself to take a deep breath. “No wonder he couldn’t sleep.”

“He’s been dealing with this since February. Alone.” Rhodey felt his legs give out, so he leaned back onto the wall and slid to the floor. He rubbed his fingers against his tired eyes, trying to wrap his mind around it all.

“He’s had Vision, FRIDAY and myself.” Stephen offered, but it wasn’t much consolation.

“He now has us, too.” Matt added. “Where was Daredevil in this fight? And the other vigilantes?” He knew he’d have joined in too, within a heartbeat. He knew Spiderman would have joined, and so would Jessica and the other Defenders. He then realized that Stephen wasn’t there either. At first it was surprising to find out that the nice doctor fellow that Tony invited to every Saturday get together was in fact the sorcerer supreme, but he got over it quickly when the man made a portal to him and Jessica after receiving a message from FRIDAY that Tony was fighting alone with Vision. He had other priorities to think about first. “Where was Stephen?”

“At this point, half of the Universe’s population was turned to dust by Thanos. Daredevil, Iron Fist, James Barnes, Spiderman, Dr. Strange, and many others were some of those unfortunate, or perhaps fortunate, enough to have turned to dust.” FRIDAY answered.

“He saved us.” Matt whispered in awe.

“Yes.” FRIDAY’s voice was firm, as if stating an obvious fact but still refusing any denials about it. “Vision needs to speak with you.” She said abruptly, and, oddly enough, relieved. Before any of them could ask, Vision phased through the room with panic.

“Sir might be in danger.” He said quickly, looking at Stephen. “Take me to Siberia.” Stephen blinked in confusion and was already looking at the hologram FRIDAY had supplied him with. It looked like it was an abandoned base of some sort, there were five unconscious soldiers lying on the ground in the image and beside them were Jessica, Barnes and Rogers. And then it clicked. Tony mentioned almost dying by Roger’s hand in Siberia. He had lashed out at them not because they wanted his trust, but because he knew there was a chance he would die again. “Idiot.” Stephen breathed out dangerously, angrily. He immediately made a portal, uncaring whether anyone else in the room would join him. He stepped through and looked around. “Where is he?” He asked with a vengeful glare, looking around the room looking for Tony, but he was gone.

“You just missed him.” Barnes said unceremoniously. “He had a panic attack and left.” Stephen had to count to ten not to lose himself to rage. He looked back at the room he had just come from.

“FRIDAY, can you update me on his location?” He asked.

“Yep.” She showed a new hologram, but this one was much less clear. Everything was white, and
nothing was concrete enough for him to think of where he needs to go. He mentally cursed at the tundra for having nothing but a white snowy landscape with no trees, rocks or anything.

“Which direction did he go?” He looked at Barnes again, who just lifted his arm and pointed. Stephen nodded in thanks, turned and left. Vision was beside him, though he had the advantage to simply go through walls, disappear and fly. He was much more unique than the other androids, clearly. So, Vision went through walls and flew ahead of Stephen, but the sorcerer was rather thankful for it. He didn’t care who it was that reached Tony, as long as they did and were trusted. Though, he did notice a couple of Tony sized holes on some of the concrete walls, and his stomach churned. He wasn’t much of a fan of those and was a bit worried to see how Tony looked as a result. As he left, he vaguely heard Jessica question Rogers, followed by a metallic crunch on skin. He’d have smiled smugly if Tony weren’t missing.

Finding him had been a blessing and a curse. They found him falling, and subsequently crashing towards the ground. Stephen quickly summoned a portal underneath the Iron Man suit, and he then landed on the ground. Tony was then dropped above him, but Levi was quick to catch him aided by Stephen’s magic. Vision was by his side in a heartbeat, scanning for any injuries.

“There seems to be some scratches and minor injuries, but otherwise Sir remains unharmed.” Vision said and Stephen let out a breath he didn’t know he was holding. He closed his eyes and Levi wrapped himself a bit tighter on Tony, refusing to let go. It was a sentiment shared by Stephen, unsurprisingly.

“I’m going to take him to the hospital.” Stephen quickly drew up a portal, hoping he’d be able to catch Christine. He trusted her with Tony, and he wasn’t sure he’d be able to trust anyone else. “Will you be coming along?” Stephen asked, already stepping through the portal with Tony.

“Yes, I do not wish to leave him alone. There is something odd about him right now.” Vision followed Stephen into the portal. “His mind is not where it should be.”

“What do you mean?” Stephen asked, alerted. He looked at Tony once more, ready to use magic to help him if needed.

“I am not quite sure of it myself, but I know he is safe. He will return to us, but that is all I know.” Vision placed a gentle hand on the Iron Man helmet, already missing the person underneath it. “For now, it is best that we let him rest.”

Stephen nodded, but he wasn’t too satisfied with what Vision just told him. “Very well, let’s find Christine and take off the armor.” With that, both men quickly went about their tasks. Vision was already taking off the armor as Stephen searched the hospital for Christine. It wasn’t hard to find her, and by the time he did, Tony was already out of the armor.

The days after passed either agonizingly slow or irritatingly unpleasant. For the most part, Stephen refused to leave Tony’s side. Past visitor hours, he’d teleport back in until Christine would yell at him, and he’d still find a way to be beside Tony. Vision wasn’t much too different, although his mind was also focused on keeping the original Avengers as far away from Tony as he could.

Rogers had tried to visit him once, but both Stephen and Vision, as well as the others who were with them at the time, barred his entry. He looked like a kicked puppy that didn’t understand where he went wrong, but none of them were having it. If it wasn’t for Matt’s calmly terrifying presence, Stephen would have sent the ‘good captain’ to an alternate dimension. Matt’s sharp words and quick mind were far more effective than any dimension Stephen could have thought up.

Rhodey looked abnormally pale when he saw his best friend lying in a coma-like state. “There
weren’t parachutes.” He mumbled once. Stephen had explained how he saw Tony falling, as well as everything he knew that happened to both Rhodey and Matt as soon as they caught up with him. Jessica filled out the rest when she reached them, and it wasn’t difficult to put two and two together. “He said there would be parachutes. Why weren’t there parachutes?” Pepper placed a calming arm around him and cried softly alongside him.

“FRIDAY?” Stephen called out to the A.I. “Were the events of this timeline in Siberia the same as the previous timeline?” He needed to know if Tony was just giving in to his circumstances. He needed to know if Tony really refused to ask for help from his friends.

“No. The super soldiers had been killed off before Rogers had reached the bunker. Tony’s actions in this timeline prevented the previous timeline’s fight against Rogers and Barnes from repeating itself.” FRIDAY explained. “But the soldiers were awakened in this timeline, and that was not something I had taken into consideration.” Stephen nodded then, relieved to know that Tony didn’t have some sort of death wish.

“So, he really meant it when he said this mission wouldn’t be dangerous?”

“Yes, boss had not foreseen a fight breaking out.” FRIDAY confirmed, and Stephen let out a tired sigh. “He will be okay, right?” FRIDAY asked after a few quiet moments. Stephen looked at Tony then, and smiled.

“Yes, I believe he will be just fine.” He said as he carted his hands against the brilliant engineer’s hair.

Waking up was an impressively slow experience. Tony’s body felt heavy and numb, and his eyes took quite some time to open. He hadn’t felt this sluggish in quite a long time, but looking around, he could quickly understand why. The annoyingly familiar white walls, white sheets, white window frames, white fucking everything, kind of gave it away. He was in a hospital room. Why was he in a hospital room?

He forced his brain to start working properly and give him the answers he wanted. Did he cause a scandal? He really, really hoped he didn’t. PR would be a bitch and Pepper would probably tear his head clean off. He shivered at the thought. He didn’t think he caused a scandal, so he continued to try and remember. All that came to mind, however, was a peaceful and tranquil feeling and the vastness of space.

“You’re awake.” A familiar voice calls out to him. He couldn’t stop the grin the formed in his face.

“Well, if it isn’t my favorite doctor?” Tony said before turning to the direction of Stephen’s voice. The moment he saw Stephen, though, his heart fell with dread and he noticed himself panic slightly. He was staring at Stephen’s ghost. “Holy shit, please tell me you’re not dead!” Tony choked out. “Please, please tell me I’m concussed and hallucinating!” Stephen blinked in surprise for a moment, before smiling widely and chuckling.

“Rest assured, I’m not dead and you’re not concussed and hallucinating.” Stephen shook his head fondly. “This is my astral projection. It’s after hours and Christine would murder me if she found out I snuck into your room via portal again. I didn’t want to leave you alone, so I figured I would just use my astral form to watch over you.” Tony let out a breath in relief.

“I hate magic,” he grunted, “so much.” He slowly pushed himself to a sitting position and offered Stephen a wonky smile. He ignored how his body protested in pain, and just tried his best to focus
on the sorcerer. “Thank you, though, my valiant knight in shining monk robes.” Stephen snorted and rolled his eyes. “If you don’t mind my asking, why am I here?” Tony asked, unable to keep his curiosity at bay any longer. He really needed to know if he had to send Pepper several bouquets and apology please-don’t-kill-me letters.

“Well, you decided it was a smart idea to fight five super soldiers alone while having a panic attack. Then, once you beat said super soldiers with the aid of three other impressively strong individuals, you decided to fly out, crashing through several layers of concrete wall, only to crash violently into the Siberian snow a couple of miles away from anyone who could help you. Thankfully, I caught you before you hit the ground.” It was impressive how impassive Stephen sounded. “That about sums it up, I think.”

“Oh.” Tony muttered softly, wondering if he was going to get yelled at again for this. He was just told not to fight a team of strong people alone, and then he immediately goes to a frozen desert to fight a team of strong people alone. If that wasn’t a mega ‘fuck you’ he doesn’t know what is. He cringed momentarily, remembering his ‘I don’t trust anyone’ outburst. He faintly wondered what kind of consequences he’d get for pulling that one on them. “That would explain the pain.” He noted with mild humor.

“Yes, I suppose it does.” Stephen agreed easily with a small quirk up his lips. They were silent for a moment, before Tony couldn’t stop himself from asking.

“Okay, so how come you’re not mad at me?” Stephen blinked, taken aback slightly.

“I’m mad, but at the moment I chose not to focus on that. I’m pretty sure you’re well aware about my feelings when it comes to you and your determination to deal with everything alone. Currently, you’re alive and only mildly injured. That’s all I could ask for, right now. It could have been worse, and that terrifies me, but I’m trying not to focus on that as well.” Stephen shrugged, and floated closer to Tony and running a fond ghostly hand through Tony’s messy hair. “Though you are most certainly the superhero equivalent of grounded the moment you’re released from the hospital.”

Tony groaned. “Okay, in my defense the soldiers were already dead when we got there in the last timeline.”

“That shouldn’t matter. This timeline isn’t the last timeline; you’ve changed far too much for it to be the same, and change negates experience. It doesn’t matter how similar the two timelines are, they are still different.” He kept carting his fingers through Tony’s hair, looking fondly at him as he explained this. Oddly enough, Tony was enjoying the experience. It was surprising that he could feel it at all, but even more so that it felt warm and comforting. It was similar to a warm breeze on a pleasant spring day in the park, but more precise and just as gentle.

“That makes sense.” He hummed softly, unconsciously leaning closer to Stephen with closed eyes. The sorcerer could only smile in turn. “What are the terms of my grounding?”

“Firstly, you’re required to take someone who isn’t a member of the original Avengers or Wanda with you during any mission or assignment. Secondly, if you are attacked and without backup, FRIDAY is to immediately message the New Avengers and that includes myself. Thirdly, Matt, Rhodey and I want to know what happens in the other timeline from here on out so we can have some forewarning for whatever stupid idea you have next. If it weren’t for Vision’s vague memory of the events, I wouldn’t have known you were falling perilously in Siberia’s cold tundra.” Stephen paused for a moment, thoughtfully. “You should tell the others, at least the time travel bit.”

“At this point, I think the only ones out of the loop are the Defenders minus Matt.” Tony mumbled,
snapping his eyes wide open. “And also Pepper and Harley. Oh crud, Jessica and Pep are so going to team up against me, aren’t they?”

“I believe you should be more worried about Harley.” Stephen answered helpfully. “From what you’ve told me, the boy’s absolutely ruthless.” There was a moment of silence, before the two men burst into a fit of laughter. “This isn’t a term, but I was hoping you’d let me place some wards on you.” Stephen finally said after their laughter died. Tony’s eyes widened slightly.

“Wards?” He asked, cautiously. He wasn’t too big of a fan of magic, but he wasn’t going to turn this down outright especially since it was Stephen that was asking this of him.

“Yes, three to be exact.” He nodded and carefully moved his hand from Tony’s hair to his cheek to gently nudge him to look at him. He was being awfully bold, he knew, but after nearly losing Tony twice in the span of one day, he didn’t find it in himself care. From what he could tell, his advances weren’t rejected, so it only made him bolder. “One that would allow me to track you regardless of where you were in the universe, one that would protect you from anything that would affect your mind, and one that would notify me of whenever you’re in trouble.” He explained each of them while gently rubbing his thumb on Tony’s cheek with affection. He smirked when he noticed the billionaire lean into the gesture.

“Those sound… reasonable enough.” Tony sighed softly. He closed his eyes briefly, before opening them again to look at Stephen. “Okay.” He agreed far easier than Stephen had expected him to. Sensing the surprise, Tony offered a smile and an explanation. “If I were in your shoes, I’d probably have done those things without me even being aware. And, despite consistently denying it, I do trust you.” He admitted, still thinking about the long rant he gave against that same idea. Trust. “Just don’t fight my battles for me, and don’t get hurt because of me.” He added, softly. “I don’t think I could live with myself if I let you, any of you, get hurt let alone die.”

“Then you know how we feel.” Stephen’s voice was firm, signaling that there was no room for debate. “Tony, you are special to us. We don’t want you to sacrifice yourself for us; we want you to fight alongside us. We want you to be with us, to laugh with us and cry with us. You shouldn’t have to take over everyone’s responsibilities or problems. You can’t solve everything, Tony, but you can support us and in turn let us support you.” He slowly retracted his hand, carefully choosing his next few words. “I was scared you died.” He admitted as he looked at the hand, he used to caress Tony. “I was so scared I wouldn’t be able to come to your tower and banter with you over medical papers or whether Chinese is better than Mexican. Scared I’d never work alongside you in the lab again. Scared I wouldn’t get to dine with you on Saturdays. Scared that I’d have never get to say… to say everything I want to you.” He looked at Tony and smiled fondly. He almost admitted his feelings there, but he wanted to wait until Tony wasn’t all scratched up and beaten. He wanted to wait until after he’d successfully pampered the billionaire in their ‘not really a date’ date. “Not to mention, the world would be incredibly dull without one Tony Stark in it.”

Tony grinned at that. “You’re right.” He said, running his hand against his hair. He missed the feel of Stephen’s astral fingers on him, but he pointedly decided to ignore that. “I am pretty great.” He winked slightly, before becoming serious. “I don’t intend on dying any time soon, so you can come and banter with me whenever you’d like.” Stephen nodded with a small smile.

“I’ll be looking forward to it.” He asserted. “Speaking of which, I would still like to take you out at some point. I understand today’s rain check, but please do free your schedule up for me soon.” Tony blinked a bit confused, before his brain kicked in and supplied him with the information that they were supposed to hang out today.

“I am so incredibly sorry.” Tony immediately said. “I didn’t mean to end up in the hospital the day
we were supposed to hang out.” He groaned.

“I should hope not; it would be rather concerning if you practiced near death experiences to escape spending time with me.” The sorcerer stated flatly, causing both of them to chuckle lightly.

“Wouldn’t dream of it Stephanie!” Tony winked with a grin. “Wait, today’s Wednesday? How long have I been out?” Stephen’s brows furrowed.

“About two days or so. It was odd, though, as your injuries weren’t severe enough to put you in a coma.” He sighed, looking at Tony with newfound worry. “We couldn’t figure out what was wrong with you. I was afraid you wouldn’t wake up.” Tony wracked his brain to try and understand exactly just what happened. He remembered going to Siberia now, and he remembered feeling dread throughout every second he was there. He remembered fighting the Winter Soldiers, and he remembered running from Rogers. He winced at that memory, hating the fact that he actually fled. After that, he couldn’t remember much. It was as though his memory had been wiped clean and replaced with the calming, beautiful space he’s associated with his dreams whenever he slept with the stones.

“That’s odd.” He agreed easily, still trying to recall just what it is that he’s missing. There’s a piece of the puzzle that just doesn’t fit quite right and he’s at a loss. What’s more is that he’s starting to wonder if this has anything to do with the stones, otherwise why would he only remember that beautiful space? “I need to go to my workshop.” He then said, wanting to see the stones. He wanted to test them out, see if maybe there was really a connection between them like Vision was had suggestion so many nights ago.

“No.” Stephen countered almost immediately. “You are not leaving this room until you are discharged.” His tone made it clear there was no room for argument.

“I’ve done it before.” Tony said flatly.

“And you won’t do it again.” The two kept eyeing each other in a standstill, before Tony finally gave in.

“Okay, fine. But when the others undoubtedly come in and lecture me for being reckless again, be sure to point out that I behaved.” Tony offered a smile.

“I’ll keep that in mind.” Stephen drawled. Suddenly, a sound of a doorknob being twisted was heard and Stephen visibly sighed. “Well, that’s my cue to go. Christine- “

“Would kill you if she found out. Yeah, I know.” Tony offered him a smile. “She’s Pepper level scary. Go.” With one last glance and one last smile, Stephen vanished back into the Astral Plane, though Tony was sure he could still feel his presence somehow. It was probably wishful thinking, though he wasn’t quite certain why he’d be wishing for Stephen to be there. Okay, he was lying, but still.

He sighed and lay back down, looking up at the ceiling. The shitshow that was the Accords is finally over, and everything is okay. It was tiresome, but he somehow made it out with the best possible outcome. None of the Avengers were made into criminals, so they would be able to defend the Earth together when the time came; he had amazing friends and allies backing him up; the current Accords weren’t something General Ross came up with to try and gain control of the Avengers; and everyone he cared for was fine and not in danger. He heard the door open and looked to the side to see who it was. “Hey there.” He said with a tired smile.

“Hey there yourself Stark.” Christine smiled back. “Glad to see you’re awake. Stephen will finally
get off my back about it now, and he’ll be happy to know you’re up.” She sounded tired, probably because she was. For the few times Tony had interacted with her, he’s learned a couple of things about Christine. She is a hard worker that genuinely cares about the people she takes care of, as well as those around her; She’s a great friend, as Stephen was always quick to point out; and she is a very good person; someone Tony is happy to have met.

“Somehow,” he started slowly, “I get the feeling he already knows I’m awake.” He mused, not quite giving away the sorcerer, but still throwing out bait. The slight jolt he felt on his arm only made his smile widen.

“Hah!” Christine exclaimed tiredly. “I wouldn’t be surprised. I was actually half expecting him to be here, if I’m being honest. He’s been sneaking into your room as often as he possibly could.” She explained, causing a sense of warmth to flow through Tony’s heart. “I really don’t like magic.” Tony agreed with her easily, but smiled, nonetheless. He hated magic, but Stephen’s magic was fine. “Anyways, I’m going to check your vitals and make sure you’re okay.” She said, already starting on her job. “How are you feeling?”

“Fine, for the most part.” Tony admitted; he really did feel fine. He felt stronger, even.

“Good, that’s good.” Christine nodded along. “You should be fine to be discharged tomorrow morning. I’ll send Pepper a message, and she can pick you up.” Tony almost forgot that he put Pepper as his emergency contact, followed by Rhodey and then Happy. It wasn’t hard to figure out what would happen when she came for him.

“She’s going to kill me, won’t she?” Tony asked sounding resigned to his fate.

“Only a little.” Christine smiled at him sympathetically.

“I’m definitely looking forward to that.” He chuckled softly. “So, tell me Doc, will I make it?”

“I think you’ll survive, yes.” Christine rolled her eyes. “You’ve got a couple of bruises and some cuts, and you broke your arm while crashing into concrete walls… and I never thought I’d ever have to say that.” Tony couldn’t help but laugh. “Alright, I’m going to go home. Do you need anything before I leave?”

“Water, if you wouldn’t mind.” Christine nodded and quickly grabbed a cup of water for him. “Thanks.” He took it with a smile and was beyond thankful for the pleasantly cool liquid going down his dry throat. “Have a good night Christine!” He called after her as she opened the door to leave.

“Have a good night Tony.” She smiled back at him as she clicked the door closed.

“You still here Casper?” Tony asked the empty room. He was only a bit disappointed when Stephen didn’t respond, though he couldn’t blame the good doctor. It was incredibly late at night and Stephen had apparently spent all of his time here in the hospital room with him instead of doing what he normally does in his day-to-day life; Tony couldn’t help the surge of affection towards the good doctor that flowed through him, he welcomed it even. With a smile, he closed his eyes and decided to try and go back to sleep. He was somehow still tired, and he wasn’t afraid of the nightmares for some reason, so he’d figure now was as good a time as any to try and get some shuteye.

The next morning was spent being scolded, hugged and coddled by everyone. He was discharged and told to come back eventually sometime to check up on his arm. He wasn’t surprised when he was immediately called up by Ross the Bad One to talk about the accords, though Tony was sure it
would be him trying to get Tony to back down from his version of the accords and agree to whatever bullshit he came up with. He was pleasantly surprised when Matt told him he’d go as his representative, and basically forced him into agreeing with it.

The guardians had bid their farewells, having apparently waited for Tony to get better before finally embarking on their journey and taking two stones with them. They promised to come back as soon as possible, both to sign the accords and just to hang out. Nebula had glared at him as she entered the ship, and he could only smile back at her. Rocket, true to his word, took the prosthetic leg he had been given as a joke as well as some other things he hadn’t been given but took anyways. He quickly found out that Tony wasn’t too materialistic with his possessions, and that most of everything not S.I. or Avengers related was pretty much fine to grab, and if it wasn’t he was rather respectful about giving it back – though Nebula and Gamora’s twin glare was probably a huge influence there too. Groot simply nodded at him before going back to his new updated game. Drax and Mantis simply said their farewells, and Tony couldn’t help but use endless metaphors to confuse them just a bit. Peter and Gamora each gave him a hug, something he hadn’t been expecting and promised to come back soon.

The Tower felt a bit empty without them, but he’d live. Pepper and Rhodes were there waiting for him, both to welcome him and to scold him. Rhodey gave him a knowing look and told him to actually put in the parachutes next time. Pepper, bless her heart, made him promise to be more careful and to “not fly through concrete walls! Are you out of your mind?” Happy eventually joined them with some cheeseburgers, and it was an enjoyable time.

Jessica popped in at some point in time, and Tony remembered what Stephen said. With a comforting nod from Rhodes, he decided to sit Pepper, Jessica and Happy down and tell them the truth as well. At first they were really confused, but Rhodey was quick to back him up. “FRIDAY showed us -Matt, Stephen and I- some snippets of the other timeline, and man it was bad.”

“So, you’re saying you’re a time traveler?” Jessica asked straight-faced. “And you’re sure you didn’t hit your head too hard when you crashed through the walls?” Tony couldn’t help but smirk at that.

“I was wearing a helmet.” He defended himself weakly, but Jessica smiled back.

“Alright, I believe you.” She said leaning back against the couch she was sitting in. “You don’t usually spout bullshit, so I’ll take your word on it. What happened in the previous timeline anyways?” Tony sighed then and looked at Pepper. She, as expected, took it all in stride, but he had hoped she wouldn’t have to ever experience the other timeline ever again.

“Well, the Avengers had split during the whole Accords fiasco. At that moment in the timeline, I didn’t know a super cool wizard doctor or a kickass super strong detective that likes alcohol. Then a guy named Thanos invaded the Earth and you know the story from there.” He glossed over so many finer details like how-

“Rogers also tried to kill him once.” Rhodey said quietly. Yes, that was one of the finer details he had intended to leave alone. Tony tried not to notice how vicious both Pepper and Jessica looked now.

“He what?” Pepper asked calmly. “I think I might have misheard you Rhodey, did you just say Captain America, the figurative leader of the team that’s been taking advantage of Tony for years, attempted to kill Tony?”

“He didn’t try to kill me; he just didn’t know that leaving someone beaten up in a broken suit in the Siberian tundra without any help could probably kill me.” Tony said halfheartedly. “Okay, maybe
he unintentionally tried to kill me for wanting to punch his bestie.” He really was still sour about that little fun event, but he did just prevent the Avengers from breaking up -like the Beetles- and he’d rather keep it that way.

“I see.” Pepper’s lips tightened into a thin line. “Anything else you think you should share with us, Tony?” It was moments like these where Tony could appreciate how incredibly terrifying Pepper could be when she was mad. He completely understood that she had just silently proclaimed war against Rogers and would work endlessly to make his life a living hell for as long as she could. She really was an amazing friend.

“I almost died in an abandoned planet, and you absolutely had my ass in a sling for that.” Tony said with a straight face, pleased when Pepper tried, and failed, to hold back a smile.

“Just don’t do it again.” She said sternly.

“I second that.” Jessica added, giving him a pointed look.

“I’ll do my best not to stow away in an evil alien sorcerer’s donut shaped spaceship next time he kidnaps Earth’s Sorcerer Supreme for his bling.” After that little quip, the conversation lightened a bit.

For the first time in months, it felt like things were looking up. Tony didn’t have this cloud of responsibilities and worries looming over him. The accords were mostly a success, Siberia was over with, Peter was fine and didn’t almost die because of his stupid ideas, Rhodey could still use his legs, he had so many friends supporting him, Harley would come visit him soon and he had Stephen with him.

Things looked really good from where he was standing, and he really appreciated it.

Of course, good things rarely last. Rogers had demanded to have some sort of team meeting the moment he found out Tony was no longer in a coma to talk about the accords and what happened and probably whether Tony was of sound mind or if he really lost his rockers. Tony groaned when FRIDAY informed him of the meeting, and he wasn’t surprised when Stephen popped in a second later with a scowl on his face.

“I will send him to the dark dimension, just give me the word.” He said with such a straight face that Tony wasn’t sure if he was joking or not.

“Nice to see you too Casper but please leave the bloodlust by the door.” Tony smiled at him. “Besides, I think I’m just going to not go.” He looked at the message Rogers had sent him and shrugged. “I’m thinking of playing the ‘I just got out of the hospital and would rather not see your ugly mug’ card and see where that lands me.”

“I’m going.” Rhodey stated and offered Tony a genuine smile when the man looked at him in confusion. “I want to see what nonsense they’re spouting now and be there to defend you if needed.”

“Rhodey, my dear Platypus, light of my life, don’t go there and get an ulcer just because the big kids are saying mean things about me.” Tony sighed dramatically. “It will literally be a waste of your time.”

“No, it wouldn’t.” Rhodey countered. “They have been giving you a hard time for years now, and I’m done standing on the sidelines watching.” He looked sternly at Tony, making it clear that wasn’t up for debate. Tony nodded and gave in, knowing it would be pretty futile to fight Rhodey
against this; though, if he were being honest, he didn’t want to fight Rhodey against this in the first place.

“Fine, then I’ll go too.” He could appreciate Rhodey wanting to fight for him, but he refused to let him do it alone.

“Great, so we’re all going?” Jessica smiled and stood up, stretching her arms lazily.

“It seems like we are.” Stephen nodded. “Shall I make a portal?” He asked.

“Man, I keep forgetting you can do that.” Rhodey murmured. “But yes, please do.”

The portal was made quickly after FRIDAY provided an image of the location they would be meeting at. Tony was the first to go through it, with no hesitation, and Stephen was right beside him. Jessica and Rhodey followed suit, and then Pepper and Happy. Tony raised a brow at her, wondering why she had tagged along considering she wasn’t related to the Avengers or the Accords in any way, but she simply smiled innocently at him. He knew better than to go against Pepper’s will, so he stayed silent.

“Tony, why did you bring a civilian here?” Rogers, however, did not know better than to go against Pepper’s will. Tony was excited to see what would happen next. Behind him, Barnes rolled his eyes, Romanoff looked at her nails, Wanda watched quietly and Sam stood silently against a wall. He opened his mouth to speak, but he did it mostly for show because he knew Pepper was the one on the spotlight.

“Well, Mr. Rogers,” Rogers went to correct her of his title but a sharp look quieted him quickly, “I came to inform you and your company that from here on out S.I. will no longer be providing financial support for your group. I am also here to notify you that if you choose to continue your aggression towards Tony, verbal or physical, videos and recordings of what transpired in the compound’s hangar will be released to the public with a full detailed account by several individuals, and the U.N. Council will be forced to take action.” She explained, surprising everyone in the room.

“What?” Rogers asked dumbfounded, and Tony found himself echoing the question.

“That is all I wish to say. Let it be known that I will be closely monitoring you, and your actions will have consequences.” Pepper warned him icily. She then turned to Stephen and smiled warmly at him. “Would you mind taking me back? I believe my business here is concluded.”

“Certainly, Ms. Potts.” Stephen answered politely, but the satisfied smirk on his face wasn’t really hidden. He quickly opened up a portal for her, and, with one last glare, she entered through it with Happy still trailing behind.

“Tony, why are you-“ Rogers started, but Rhodey was quick to interrupt.

“First of all, that was Pepper’s decision as CEO of S.I. and Tony’s other best friend. Secondly, even if Tony had made that decision, you have no right to question him. It’s his money, his company and his choice, if he doesn’t want to share than he doesn’t have to.” Rhodey crossed his arms, and stared at the man in front of him, practically daring him to keep arguing.

“I couldn’t have said it better myself.” Stephen’s smirk was still present, and, if anything, it grew wider. “Now, would you care to explain to us why you have summoned us here?”

“I- well, I wanted to make sure Tony was okay and-“
“I’m fine. Can we go now?” Tony said quickly, knowing full well Rogers hated being interrupted.

“...to understand why he run away from me?” Rogers continued his sentence, though he did so irritably. The room was still for a moment. “I also want to know what’s going on with the Accords, and why you forced them onto us.”

“Rogers, you have to understand I didn’t force anything on you. You could have chosen to simply not sign, like Clint did.” Rogers opened his mouth to speak, but Tony didn’t let him. “And the accords would have happened one way or the next, my Accords just happen to be better for us than the ones Ross and CO. came up with.”

“Tony we did fine without the accords before, I don’t see why we needed them now.” Tony stared at him for a solid few seconds, just baffled. He was still using his old arguments, still using the same idiotic mindset he had before everything. Thankfully, before Tony had the chance to step in to argue, Stephen spoke up.

“117 countries agreed that the Avengers needed to work with them to avoid unnecessary or unwanted fights as well as to work with them to avoid as much collateral damage as possible.” His voice was monotone and bored, as if he were explaining this all to a toddler.

“And what happens if it fails, like SHIELD did? I’m sure you haven’t forgotten project Insight.” Rogers countered. “Many lives were lost because the government was infiltrated by the very people we swore to fight against.”

“And many more lives were lost because you released personal information of SHIELD agents that were still on the field.” Tony visibly glared at him now, still loathing the fact that he couldn’t save all of the innocent SHIELD agents that had nothing to do with Rogers’ conflict.

“They knew the risks.” Romanoff bit back, looking at Tony in the eye.

“Their personal information being leaked out by the very corporation they were working under was not included in the risks!” He felt a hand on his shoulder, calming him. He gave Stephen a grateful nod.

“You didn’t answer my question. What happens if it fails?” Rogers asked again. Tony wasn’t sure whether he was ignoring the current argument because he had nothing to say about it or because he didn’t care, either way it was aggravating. The least he could do was apologize to all of the lives he ruined that day.

“There are fail safes incorporated in the accords.” Rhodey said calmly. “You’d have known that if you read it.”

“And if those fail too?” Rogers looked at him straight in the eyes. “HYDRA didn’t play fair, and neither will the enemy.”

By this point, Tony had decided to allow Stephen and Rhodey argue for him. He noticed Jessica was mostly just glaring at Rogers and Wanda, but had given Barnes a friendly enough smile. Later, when asked, she told Tony it was because he got on her good side after punching Rogers hard enough to draw out blood back in Siberia. Apparently, Barnes knew a thing or two about panic attacks and was absolutely displeased with how Rogers handled it.

He then noticed Wanda’s eyes on him, though they didn’t hold their usual malice. He couldn’t help but frown in confusion. She offered him an innocent, small smile and a nod, before looking away and back towards the argument at hand. Tony’s frown deepened, and he was extremely confused.
He’d have to figure that out later, when he wasn’t witnessing Stephen’s beautiful arguing skills. The man had a talent.

Despite no longer immersing himself in the argument, Tony could still feel the weight of Rogers’ previous question that had been left unanswered. *Why did he run?* What was he supposed to say? “Oh, yeah I ran because you pretty much killed me in a different timeline.” Well, he probably could say that… but he didn’t want to talk to Rogers. He didn’t want to tell him or anyone else the truth. All of the important people in his life, save Harley, already knew, and he didn’t want anyone else to know. “I’m afraid of you.” Would have been honest too, but he didn’t want to admit that. Sure, he was afraid of the guy, but he’s fought against things he’s feared before. It wasn’t a good enough excuse.

“Tony?” He then realized that Rogers had asked him a question; he snapped back his attention to the conversation.

“Yeah, what?” He kept his face slack, preventing any of his emotions from flooding through.

“I asked if I’ve done anything to you to make you react the way you did.” Tony glared at him now. He realized Barnes had been glaring too, and, if he looked around, he’d have noticed Rhodey, Jessica and Stephen glaring with just as much vigor.

“Yes, you have.” Tony answered vaguely. “But that’s for you to figure out, I’m done trying to get through to you.” It was as good an answer as any, and it also made it so that he wouldn’t have to really answer the question. He mentally groaned, wishing he had been in his workshop instead of this ‘meeting’.

“Please, Tony.” Rogers pleaded, but Tony just rolled his eyes. He then noticed Stephen take a step forward, physically separating Tony and Rogers. Tony wasn’t sure how he felt about that. On one end, it was a bit annoying being protected from someone like Rogers, but on the other, it was nice being taken care of. He really would rather be anywhere else but here. With a sigh, he opened his mouth to speak…

…But before Tony could say or do anything, he felt a pair of hands gently push him back. Looking down, there was nothing but the familiar glow of the arc reactor. He vaguely wondered if Stephen was doing some sort of magical voodoo to push him back, but the sorcerer’s eyes weren’t even on him. They were locked on Rogers with cold fury promising unspeakable horrors if he stepped out of line. Despite the unknown ghostly sensation, he didn’t feel any hostility directed at his person. So, he let himself be pushed back, wondering just who it was that was going this. He briefly closed his eyes in a blink, and gasped when they opened again.

He stared at the painfully familiar portal in front of him with mild bewilderment. On the other side, no one noticed it; they were all too busy fighting a silent battle. The portal was one he’d hoped to never see again, one that plagued his nightmares consistently, and yet he felt no fear for it. It was the same portal that he had gone though in New York, back when the Avengers had just become a team. Although it looked the same, it felt so different.

The New York portal felt cold, he had attributed that to the fact that he was in space –a cold vacuum in it’s own right- but now he wasn’t so sure. He had grown used to Stephen’s magical portals, he even grew to like them, but this wasn’t like that at all. It wasn’t like the gentle warmth of Stephen’s magic that he felt whenever he flew by it. It was so much more. It was loving, caring and protective. Its energy was like a soft hug that cherished him with its entirety, making promises of love and affection with every caress. It was almost saddening to see it close.

He then realized that he was placed in his lab, right in front of the box that housed the remaining
two infinity stones. “Careful what you wish for.” Tony mused, but smiled thankfully. He’d deal with the fallout some other time.

He decided to unlock the box, hoping to make sense of what had just happened. He gingerly picked up one of the two containment units he had built for the stones. Stephen had already placed all of his magic wards on them, but he knew it would be safe for him to at least hold it. He immediately felt the thrum of energy from the Power stone, and gently stroked the container with his thumb affectionately. Even now, the stones calmed him.

He gracefully set it back down and picked the container with the space stone in it… it was empty. He felt panic wash over him, but it quickly left when he felt a pair of hands on his wrist. Again, it was a phantom feeling that was nothing like what Stephen’s astral projection felt like, and there was still no one there with him, but it calmed his nerves nonetheless. He then noticed the blue hue on his reactor look a brighter blue than before. “FRI, could you run a scan on me?”

“Consider it done, boss!” He noticed the sensors briefly light up and surround him before turning off again. “It seems the strength of your Arc Reactor has strengthened considerably, almost as though it is a different power source entirely made up of a similar element.” Tony closed and locked the box in front of him, and gently touched the arc reactor.

“Well, this is certainly a surprise.” He murmured. “FRIDAY, can you call Vision? I think he and I have just become a lot more alike.”
Happy Friday everybody!
How is everyone doing today?
Me? I'm crying because I finally got this out. Thank heck.
As always, thank you guys for your awesomeness and your support! I adore reading all of your comments!
(They make me smile cheesily to my phone like a loser and it's great!)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“So, you are implying that you have a stone embedded in you in a similar fashion to the one embedded in me?” Vision asked, summarizing Tony’s hypothesis.

“Sort of, yes.” Tony nodded, tapping the reactor as he thought. “I think the stone switched places with the reactor… I’m a bit tempted to see what would happen if I attempted to remove it.” Almost immediately after his musings were vocalized, Tony felt a slight hum of energy rejecting the idea with great displeasure. “Wow, okay. Noted. Do not attempt to separate us.” A wave of delight hit him then, and he couldn’t help the grin that formed on his face. Truth be told, he really wasn’t against the idea of spending the rest of his life with one of the stones. He wasn’t sure when, but at some point, they started to feel like home.

“Sir?” Vision frowned, seemingly confused. Tony looked at him and offered him a calming smile.

“I’m pretty sure Space-boy is trying to communicate with me.” He explained, looking at the gentle blue hue of his reactor-turned-stone-container. “It’s rather adamant about staying with me.” He swore he heard a purr of pure glee at the back of his mind, and he wasn’t bothered by it at all (which he honestly expected himself to be).

“Remarkable.” Vision muttered, looking at the reactor as well. “Then, we truly are more alike now.” He flashed Tony a small, but genuine smile. “I had sensed something was different with you when we found you in Siberia, but I had not imagined that this would be it.”

“You and me both buddy.” Tony smiled back at him. “So, I’m going to go on a whim here and say that my new… bond—from lack of a better word- with Topaz has made me a little less human and a bit more magical?”

“You’ve always been magical, boss.” If FRIDAY had a body, Tony could easily imagine her winking at him.

“Oh FRI, flattery will get you everywhere.” Tony grinned at the nearest camera.

“I believe you have access to all of the space stone’s abilities, yes.” Vision nodded, mildly amused by Tony and FRIDAY’s interactions. It was nice, he thought, being a part of their odd little family. Tony, whether he knew it or not, was most certainly a father-like figure that all of them looked up to and wished to protect. He was always so ready to give everything he had to his creations, and to treat them with more respect and admiration than he treated most other humans. He watched them grow and helped them every step of the way, and if that wasn’t fatherhood, then Vision wasn’t
What’s more is that in the other timeline, when he was no more and all that was left was the stone, he had access to Tony’s emotions and thoughts. He had access to Tony’s mind, or rather, the stone did. It was still a multitude of vague memories, hazy and hard to recall, but it was strong nonetheless. Out of all of the pain and the suffering that Tony had felt, physical and psychological alike, nothing stood out compared to the immense amount of love Tony held for those who were dear to him. Vision, as he was quick to figure out, was included in that list of individuals. It was an honor he greatly appreciated, and one he would not take for granted.

“So, I basically control space?” Tony whistled, amazed by the situation. He had fallen in love with the stones, but he had not expected them to love him back… at least, not enough to fully integrate themselves with him.

“We do not know for sure, Tony, but it wouldn’t be far fetched to believe it.” Vision nodded at the man in front of him. “All we know is that the stone is within you now, for one reason or another.”

“Well, we also know it teleported me here.” Tony added, but when he saw Vision’s brow furrow in confusion he realized that he hadn’t really explained much to him other than the ‘there’s a stone in my reactor’ spiel. “I was in a meeting, listening to Rogers yap away like a broken record and then I wanted to come home and to the lab. Suddenly, I felt a pair of hands push me back and presto! Here I am.”

“You felt a pair of hands?” Vision placed a hand on his chin in thought. “Perhaps the stone has not fully integrated with you, but instead chooses to serve you?”

“Serve me?” Tony didn’t really like the sound of that. “I don’t know…” He mumbled, “I’d much rather work alongside the stone rather than have it work for me.” Vision wasn’t surprised that Tony felt this way. The inventor has always been reluctant to let others do the work for him; he’s always hated being handed things.

“Then maybe that’s what it wants as well. To work beside you, as an equal.” Tony liked the sound of that much more, and, judging by the hum of approval, so did the stone.

“So no cool space powers for me.” Tony sighed dramatically, but he wasn’t really disappointed. “Still,” he said more seriously, “we should probably try and figure out just what exactly changed and what exactly made the stone decide to infuse itself with my reactor.” Vision nodded in agreement. The stone choosing to stay with Tony was one thing, but what it would allow Tony to do with it or what it intended to do with Tony is another. There was always the unsavory idea that the stone has ill intentions for the engineer, but Vision wasn’t giving that much thought. Had the stones truly wanted to hurt the human inventor, then Vision would have felt it.

“I would suggest by attempting to teleport somewhere else, or perhaps form a portal.” Vision suggested, still observing the blue of the reactor.

“Alright, let’s do that. Wish me luck Piping Hot.” Tony smirked and attempted to concentrate on making a portal. It didn’t take long, however, for Tony to realize he had absolutely no idea of where to even begin making a portal. The portal that brought him here was one conjured by the space stone itself, not by Tony. It was reacting to Tony’s distress and wishes to go back to his lab, or perhaps it just wanted Tony to realize that it was with him now. Either way, he had no idea how to make a portal, or even if he could. The Starks aren’t a family of quitters, though. He figured he’d try at least a bit more, before changing his approach and trying again. Only until it was absolutely clear that he had no say in portal making, that he’d agree to stop standing there like an idiot with his face scrunched up in concentration.
Surprisingly, after a few moments, a portal was in fact made. Instead of the feeling of pure glee and elated excitement that Tony thought he’d be feeling when he saw the portal, there was only dread. The thing about this portal was that it wasn’t radiating the calming sense of absolute love that the previous portal did, instead it radiated anger, fury and a promise of the unspeakable. It was also orange.

Tony’s eyes widened in realization that he had simply disappeared without a trace from the team meeting, and he had made no attempt to talk to his team and say he’s fine. He wasn’t surprised that Stephen was in a warpath. Oh, fuck; Jessica was going to absolutely murder him. He didn’t even want to think about what Rhodey would do. He had lost any and all brownie points he might have earned from behaving in the hospital. “I can explain.” Tony said immediately when the sorcerer stepped through the portal.

To his surprise, Stephen did nothing more than glare at him for a solid minute. “That is three times you’ve scared me half to death in a span of less than a week.” He crossed his arms, looking Tony over and checking for any signs of injury.

“In my defense, I had no say in it this time?” Tony knew he could have sent them a message just to say he’s okay, but he didn’t think about that. He didn’t think about whether or not his new team cared about his wellbeing and even he had to admit that was getting old. “Okay, I dropped the proverbial ball… again. Sorry.” He deflated.

“You’re uninjured?” Stephen asked, still looking over him suspiciously.

“Yeah.” Tony nodded. “Highly confused and looking like a dolt for the past few minutes, but no injuries to boot.” Stephen frowned confused and Tony offered a tentative smile. “Want to know how I pulled my disappearing act that not even Houdini himself could beat?”

“I’m listening.” Stephen quirked up a brow, urging the genius to continue.

“So, you know how Vision has the mind stone embedded in him to the point where it’s a part of him and he can’t simply take it off without consequence? Well, get this, apparently I am now the proud vessel of the space stone!” Tony threw up his best jazz hands with a killer showman smile to accompany them. “Surprise!”

“What?” Stephen furrowed his brows, glaring at Tony before his eyes trailed down to the reactor (which he also glared at). “I suppose that does explain why you went into an inexplicable coma. Your body must have been adjusting to its new… parasite?”

“More like a symbiotic relationship, I think.” Tony frowned then, he really didn’t know. “In any case, I think it wanted me away from Rogers and his possibly infectious stupidity, so it brought me to my lab. Sorry for leaving you guys to deal with that mess of a human being turned lab rat superhero.”

“Yes, well it was a rather annoying waste of time. Though, it was amusing to watch Jessica threaten their team with a choice of colorful words. It’s probably still happening, actually.” Tony blinked. He’d have figured everyone would be tearing everything apart in search of him. “FRIDAY let us know you were in your lab, and made the excuse that you were using hologram technology to attend the meeting but something had come up. We knew it was absolute bullshit, but if she was covering it up then it meant you were safe. Rogers, of course, had gotten angry for you to simply ‘dismiss’ a mandatory team meeting like this and that’s when Jessica’s thin veil of self control broke.” Stephen smirked smugly.

“FRIDAY, baby girl, I love you so much and you are far too good for me. Thank you.” Tony
stated honestly, feeling very thankful for FRIDAY’s actions. She always had his back, and knew exactly what to do before he had to ask her. She really was too good for him.

“Anything for you, boss.” FRIDAY chirped happily.

“Perhaps you would be able to assist us with our new inquiry.” Vision spoke up for the first time. He had been observing Stephen and Tony’s interaction, and he came to the conclusion that the two were close. Close like he had thought he was with Wanda. With a small smile, he decided to see if he would be able to help nurture their relationship.

“Oh, yeah. Stephen, how do you make portals?” Tony looked at the sorcerer with inquiring eyes eager to learn. Stephen blinked in surprise. He had never thought Tony of all people would be interested in magic, especially considering his aversion to it. He had to admit, with a smug satisfaction, that Tony seemed to be more accepting of his magic.

“I don’t think my method is the same as the space stone’s,” Stephen said slowly, “but I will gladly aid you in however way I can.” Tony gave him a bright smile then, one he hoped he’d get the chance to see often. “Are you free now?” He asked.

“Yeah, I’m pretty sure I am. You are too right Vis? I’m not keeping you?” Tony suddenly realized he called for Vision without even checking to see if the android had previous plans.

“No, I am without commitment.” Vision answered with a kind smile.

“Boss, you asked me to remind you that you and Stephen have the intention to rendezvous soon.” Tony blinked, completely fighting the urge to groan in embarrassment. Why did FRIDAY have to word it like that? She could have said ‘meet up’ like any normal person but, no, she had to say ‘rendezvous’ like it was some scandalous affair. It made it seem like a date—not that he wanted it to be a date… not that he didn’t want it to be. Okay, Tony definitely wanted it to be a date. He wanted to be romantically compromised with Stephen, the grumpy doctor turned sorcerer who harassed him about his sleep schedule with a warm smile that usually brightened his day. He was so doomed.

“Ah, yes.” Stephen said calmly, blind to the turmoil in Tony’s mind. He turned to Tony with a straight face. “Will you be free at…” he looked at his watch, “let’s say eight?”

“Yeah, sure. That works.” Tony said quickly, too quickly for his tastes. Neither Stephen nor Vision seemed to notice though, so that was a relief.

“Wonderful, returning to the topic at hand let’s figure out what you can do with the stone.” Tony nodded eagerly, wanting to get any and all thoughts of dating Stephen out of his head. And so, they spent a good portion of the day trying to figure out just that. It was a tedious process for the most part, if Tony was being honest, but it helped that both a sorcerer who had knowledge of portals and a close friend (son-figure?) who had a stone embedded in him as well—both of who were pleasant and patient.

They didn’t really figure out much, it seemed the stone wasn’t there to be freely used by Tony; the inventor wasn’t really bothered by it, actually he preferred it. Like he had said previously, he didn’t enjoy having others to stand in front of him and fight for him or treat him like he isn’t capable of handling things himself. He’ll admit he’s a hypocrite because of it, but it didn’t make his feelings any less valid (even if the other protecting him was a stone that was firmly placed in his chest). Though, it didn’t really answer why the stone was with him. All they had to go off of was Vision’s theory that the stone was to be an equal alongside Tony.
Eventually, they decided to call it a day as Stephen had things to do before their not-date and Vision had... actually Tony didn’t really know what Vision had to do. They talk a lot about their activities throughout the week whenever they meet up to cook on Saturdays, but he supposed he wasn’t quite sure what else Vision did. He knew the android had developed many hobbies to try and find what he likes and dislikes, and Tony had been incredibly supportive, but he wasn’t sure what the hobby of the week was or if he stuck to something.

“So, what are you going to do?” Tony asked the android once Stephen had left with the specific set of orders to dress ‘nice but casual’.

“I find myself unsure.” Vision answered easily. “I have been… confused in these past few days.” Tony frowned. Something was wrong, and he had no idea. He should have been paying more attention.

“Is something going on?” Tony tried to encourage the other to talk to him, but he didn’t want to push it. He didn’t want to force Vision to tell him anything he didn’t want to say.

“I care for Wanda,” he had stated bluntly but contemplatively, “and yet I do not wish to see her currently. Twice, she’s used her powers against me to fight you.” Tony opened his mouth to speak, but decided against it. Vision still looked like he had a lot to say, so Tony waited. “You are family, and I can’t help but remember how I had found you in Siberia before. It is a memory I almost wish I didn’t recall.” He admitted, sounding so incredibly sad. “She chooses to align herself with Rogers, the man who nearly killed you. I care for her, but not for her actions. I fear for your safety within the Avengers team. I fear that I may have to choose between the two of you, and I do not think I will choose her.” Tony blinked then, incredibly surprised by that admission.

“Vis, I’m not going to make you pick a side.” Tony said carefully, trying to keep the emotion out of his voice. “Rogers didn’t kill me, he almost did then, but he didn’t. In this timeline, he didn’t even try. It isn’t to say I trust him, but I’m not in danger. I have you, Stephen and everyone else to protect me and remind me I’m not alone.” Tony smiled softly, “Wanda is… I think she’s learning. I don’t like what she’s done to you, and I’m surprised you aren’t incredibly angry at her for what she did to you, I know I am, but if she apologizes then it’s up to you to see whether you forgive her. I stand behind you just like you stand behind me. Whatever you choose, I’ll support you and do my best to make sure you’re happy.”

Tony placed a hand on Vision’s shoulder and gave him a sincere smile. “That being said, if you need a break from her, that’s okay too. Ultimately, you do what you think is best for you. Okay?” Vision stared at him for a long, silent moment just thinking before he nodded.

“Yes, I think I will do that. Thank you for your advice, Tony.” Vision hesitated for a moment before he spoke again. “Would it be alright if I spent the rest of the evening with you, before you leave with Stephen?”

“Sure thing Piping Hot! Actually, why don’t we try a new hobby together?” Both of them smiled at each other now.

This is how Tony Stark: genius, billionaire, ex-playboy, philanthropist, holder of the space stone, Avenger; and Vision: android, artificial intelligence, holder of the mind stone, Avenger; ended up spending an entire evening making friendship bracelets for all of the new Avengers, some non-superhero friends, and the Guardians. Next Saturday was going to be interesting.

Afterwards, however, Tony found himself at a loss. He had just taken a shower and was standing naked in his room, as he had no idea what to wear for this not-date. “FRIDAY, what’s something ‘nice but casual’?” Tony could help but ask while he stared into his remarkably vast wardrobe.
“You look very charming in red.” FRIDAY supplied.

“So, slacks and a red button-up?” Tony put on a pair of (red) briefs, eyeing his collection of shirts. “Or is that too formal… maybe a T-shirt? All of my shirts are band-related or oil-stained, and that’s not really nice-looking. Should I go with jeans? Slacks? Shorts? It’s still a bit chilly for shorts, and I don’t like shorts. Do I even own shorts?” Tony forced himself to stop talking for a moment and breathe. “Why is this so complicated? It’s not even a date!” FRIDAY was silent for a moment.

“You look nice in everything, boss.” Tony scoffed, but there was a smile on his lips. He did love her sass.

“Yeah, you’re right.” He hummed, looking around. After some time, he started eyeing a nice looking pair of jeans and a red button down that was tight against his pronounced muscles. He wore a nice, and pretty expensive, watch, a pair of dark grey converse and a black leather jacket to finish the look. “Does this work?”

“You look amazing!” FRIDAY chirped encouragingly! It almost felt like they were two girls deciding on what to wear for a date… Except it wasn’t a date. He tried not to groan at himself.

“Thanks FRI.” He smiled up at her and put on a pair of sunglasses before turning back out of his room. He hadn’t expected to see Stephen smirking at him as he closed his portal. He grimaced and looked at the clock by his bed, it was 8 on the dot.

“I’m inclined to agree, you do look quite handsome.” He had his hands hanging loosely on the pockets of his black slacks. The light gray button down shirtsleeves were rolled up to his elbows and his black Oxfords, not brogues, shone brightly. His hair was slicked back, and his eyes shone with glee. Tony smirked at him.

“I could say the same about you.” He flirted easily, and immediately reminded himself that this wasn’t a date. Stephen wasn’t interested in him like that.

“Do you want to take the car or the portal?” Stephen asked, walking over to the other man.

“Portal.” Tony said immediately, remembering Stephen’s aversion to the car. If Stephen was relieved, he didn’t show it.

“Are you sure? I don’t mind it if you drive us there.” He offered, and it felt genuine. He wasn’t saying it for Tony’s benefit, but rather because he meant it. He trusted Tony.

“And I don’t mind it if you portal us there.” Tony countered back with equal amounts of sincerity. “Your magic isn’t so bad.” He added, truthfully. Stephen blinked at him in surprise, but easily smiled back at him.

“Alright, let’s go then.” He opened a new portal, and motioned for Tony to cross through with a slight bow. “Engineer’s first.” Tony smirked at him as he walked through the portal. When he turned to examine just where Stephen had taken them, he found his eyes widen in pleasant surprise.

“Oh my god it is a date.” Tony whispered in awe as he looked at the candle-lit dinner set beautifully on a desolate hill with New York’s bright cityscape as the scenery surrounding them on one side and the beauty of trees and nature surrounding them on the other. The night sky was strangely clear, and the stars shone brightly at them, their brilliance dimmed only by the floating candles surrounding the classic red and white picnic blanket. On the blanket were a couple of matching pillows, for comfort, and a singular picnic basket. It was safe to say Tony was thoroughly impressed and wowed.
“Well, that was the intention.” Stephen arched a brow, staring carefully, apprehensively at Tony as he finished closing the portal behind them. “Should we pretend otherwise?” Tony turned his head to look at Stephen, and found that he had to force his eyes to follow the movement. He offered the other a small smile.

“No, it’s fine… I rather like that intention much better, but now I wish I went with my lucky slacks after all. They tend to make my ass look fantastic.” He explained with a dramatic, disappointed sigh as if him not wearing that particular pair of pants had ruined the night. He noticed Stephen’s lips twitch up as the sorcerer leaned back to look at Tony’s posterior with the critical examining eye of a doctor. Tony’s heart flipped in his chest and he gulped at how thoroughly Stephen looked at him now. He’d never looked at Tony so obviously greedily before, and Tony decided he very much liked that look on him.

“Well, considering your ass already looks fantastic, those pants must be magical.” Tony felt his face flush red, but he smirked dirtily.

“Admit it, you just wanted an excuse to look at my ass.” Stephen looked at his eyes now, but his lips matched Tony’s grin.

“I’ll admit I wanted an excuse to look without fear of being caught.” Tony blinked, and then laughed. “It is a delectable sight.” Stephen winked before extending his hand to the other. “Are you hungry?” Tony had then realized he forgot to eat that day, and gave Stephen a sheepish grin.

“Famished.” He answered honestly as he grabbed Stephen’s hand. Stephen looked at him unimpressed, but had decided against chiding him for his bad habits. Instead he gently pulled Tony with him and took him over to the picnic area. Tony looked at the city, a fond expression on his face. Stephen felt a sense of pride at that expression, glad he made the right choice in scenery. “It’s surprisingly quiet considering how close we are to the city.” Tony said suddenly, having realized that the only sounds he could hear were the crickets in the forest, the sound of other night creatures, and the gentle rustling of leaves coming from the trees.

“Magic.” Stephen said simply, making Tony throw his head back in laughter. Stephen soaked it up, enjoying the sound as though it were his favorite song.

“It’s beautiful here.” Tony looked from the city to the skies, and finally to Stephen whose half lidded eyes were locked on him and whose lips were shaped with a caring, gentle smile.

“Yes, quite beautiful.” Though Stephen was agreeing with him, it was clear they weren’t talking about the same subject. Tony was definitely not used to Stephen being so bold with him, especially not after everything they’ve been through. Stephen’s only ever been gentle, and careful with what he does. There were moments where he was an egotistical, selfish ass, but even then he still showed Tony care. This Stephen in front of him was so much brasher, making himself and his intent as clear as possible. Tony wondered what had sparked this side of him, but he sure as hell wasn’t complaining.

While Tony continued to muse, Stephen had opened the basket in between them and taken out two wine glasses, two Sonic cheeseburgers, two things of large fries and a bottle of something (Tony couldn’t read the label). The engineer raised his brow, moving his eyes from the burgers and the bottle back to Stephen’s cool blue eyes. The sorcerer, sensing the unasked question, simply shrugged. “You’re the one who cooks on Saturdays for a reason.” Tony laughed at that.

“And the bottle?”

“Non-alcoholic apple cider, the bitter kind of course.” Tony hummed with approval. Both of them
had gone dry for quite some time, considering their troubles with alcoholism. It was a nice gesture.

“I will say that the burgers were a nice call, you can never go wrong with cheeseburgers.” Tony grinned when Stephen handed him a burger. “Thanks.”

“Don’t expect me to ever go for burgers again.” Stephen threatened as he filled his and Tony’s glasses with cider. Tony gasped dramatically and Stephen rolled his eyes. “They are incredibly unhealthy in all aspects of the word, and I have a medical degree. I can not, in good conscience, agree to such a heavily greasy and abnormal meal.” He offered Tony the now filled glass. “Though I was told it’s one of your preferred meals, and the way to a man’s heart is through his stomach after all.”

“Touché.” Tony grinned cheekily, already knowing Stephen’s tactics were working. “I also like pasta; it comes with being part Italian.” Stephen hummed thoughtfully.

“I didn’t know you were Italian.” He admitted, taking a sip of his drink. “Do you speak the language?”

“Mother’s side.” Tony explained. “E sì, dottore, parlo Italiano.” Tony was only a little extremely pleased with the awestruck expression Stephen made; he made a mental note to speak Italian more often. “I speak other languages too, but Italian’s the one I speak most fluently… after English of course.”

“That’s impressive.” Stephen complimented, smiling at him, but Tony only shrugged.

“Languages are just a sequence of repeating, structured sounds. It’s not that different from simply memorizing and applying equations, and with your eidetic memory I’m sure you could do the same.” He looked down at his drink with a slack face, and took a sip.

“It’s impressive.” Stephen repeated more sternly but still gently, not trying to argue but still insistent.

“I… also know how to play the piano?” He didn’t know what made him say that, but he felt the need to further impress Stephen. He didn’t even really play anymore, not since his mansion was blown up all those years ago, but still.

“You’ll have to play for me some time, then.” That was the first time in a long while someone had asked him to play. Not even Pepper asked him, and she had known he could play. To be fair, he never wanted to play for anyone, not since his mother d- not since his mother. He wanted to play for Stephen. It would probably feel intimate, and extremely awkward for him considering, but he wanted to do it.

“Alright, I’ll have to buy a piano, but alright.” Stephen chuckled at that.

“I’ll be looking forward to it.” They settled in a pleasant silence, listening only to the sounds around them. Tony found himself lost in Stephen’s piercing eyes. They were such a beautiful color, a cool light blue that absolutely enthralled Tony and gave him a sense of poise serenity and ease.

“What made you want to become a neurosurgeon?” Tony suddenly asked, both because of his curiosity and his inability to stay in silence for long. He had remembered Stephen once disclosed having been in a car crash and ending up a sorcerer as an end result, and he knew a bunch about Stephen’s life as a sorcerer and all of his achievements as a neurosurgeon, but not much about anything before that.

“Well, my younger sister Donna was who inspired me, actually.” Stephen looked melancholic, but
there was a small smile on his features. “I had helped her put a Band-Aid on a small injury with the extensive medical knowledge my eleven year old self had, and I liked the feeling of being able to help.”

“I wish I could say my reasons for becoming an engineer were as noble as yours.” Tony commented, remembering how a great factor of his interest in engineering was to impress others. He had always dreamed of going into robotics, but he ended up making weapons instead. It was one of his biggest regrets, but he’s moved on from it.

“Well, eight years later my ‘noble’ reasons soured.” Stephen scoffed at how arrogant he had become, he knew Donna would have been disappointed with how he turned out as a doctor. Tony frowned, looking at him in confusion, but unsure if he should ask. Stephen appreciated the gesture, but he wanted to share his life with Tony as Tony had done with him; though, he’d rather do it less dramatically. That whole rant about trust, all while trusting him with his past, was really something else. Thinking back to it, Stephen couldn’t help but feel a slight satisfaction with the fact that Tony had been addressing him throughout the entire rant. Not once did their eye contact break. It felt like the story was meant for him, and the others were an afterthought audience. “When I was nineteen, I couldn’t save my sister from drowning.” He confessed, still feeling the guilt from the memory. “I lost my interest in the importance of life, and grew to be arrogant and uncaring.”

Tony had then realized they had ventured into the delicate territory of ‘emotions’ and he tried not to panic. He wondered if he should try to comfort Stephen, maybe try to lighten the mood with his charming jokes, but neither option seemed appropriate. Stephen didn’t seem to want comfort, advice or even someone to lighten to mood; all he wanted was to share, and Tony wanted to know. He hesitantly and tenderly placed his hand on top of Stephen’s, silently communicating for him to continue if he wished. Stephen obliged with a kind smile on his features.

“Now, as a sorcerer, I can’t say I’ve learned the error to my ways,” he mused, “but I do understand where I was wrong. Life does matter, even if the life that mattered most to me when I was young was taken away by my inability to save her.” He closed his eyes, if only briefly. “Donna and I were really close. We used to pester Victor, my younger brother, a lot together. We were quite the pair. She and I would always go everywhere together, and she encouraged and supported me more than anyone else had. I don’t think I’ve ever gotten over her.” He took Tony’s hand in his and rubbed gentle circles with his thumb idly. It was comforting to know he had Tony there with him, listening and caring. His story might not be as drastic as his, but Tony still cared, He still listened. “Victor and I had a falling out some time ago, mostly my fault, and then he died in a car crash before we could reconcile.” Stephen sighed at the memory, at the guilt. “I still didn’t care enough about life for it to ever truly sink in either. I regret it immensely now, but I think I’ve become better.” He paused for a moment. “I’m still pretty arrogant though.” Tony stifled the chuckle that wanted to come out at that, but he did offer an amused smile that matched Stephen’s.

“I wish I could have met them.” The engineer couldn’t help but wonder what Donna and Victor would have been like. He wondered if they’d approve of their older brother’s choice in romantic partners. He’d like to think they would.

“I do too.” Stephen admitted. “You’d have liked them. Donna was easy to like, and Victor’s Victor.” Stephen clearly had a favorite, and Tony couldn’t help but snicker in amusement. “Did you have anyone in your childhood?” Stephen asked, hoping he didn’t breach a sensitive topic. He knew Howard Stark wasn’t the exemplary father of the year, but he had hoped he had other people.

“Well, making friends was a bit hard for me. Everyone was always out to get me for being smarter than them and younger. If they didn’t want to humiliate me then they wanted to approach me for my money. Rhodey only came around when I went to M.I.T., but I didn’t have any real friend
before him.” He thought about Tiberius, but he wasn’t really a pleasant memory. He still couldn’t believe the boy he had thought to be his childhood friend had held such a toxic grudge against him, to the point of murdering his own parents. “I had Jarvis and Ana though, they took care of me more than my actual parents did.”

They ended up trading pleasant childhood memories with each other, and eventually moved on to talk about other things. They kept on talking even after they finished their meal and even more after they finished up the bottle. Stephen had filled it right back up though, pouring them another cup. Tony immediately demanded to know how the hell that worked. With a pleased grin, Stephen explained.

They moved on to talk about science and magic. It was interesting to see Stephen’s stance on the matter, considering he used to be a skeptic as well. They made jokes, laughing together without a care in the world. They shared their worst gala memories, though Tony seemed to have the worse ones with his notoriety of getting drunk in said galas. Stephen talked about Christine, and Tony talked about Pepper. They talked about everything and nothing for hours, and they just kept going.

Occasionally though, they would enter into a pleasant silence before they would start up a new conversation. In those quiet moments, Stephen would look at Tony with such immense fondness it was startling; it was almost like there was nothing more important than him and that moment. It made Tony’s heart skip several beats and his lips curl in approval. In turn, Tony would look at Stephen’s captivating eyes, lost in their expressive yet cool blue. He’d occasionally look at the sorcerer’s sharp and attractive cheekbones, or at the softness of his lips. Sometimes his eyes trailed elsewhere, like his constantly trembling and scarred hands that he’d left exposed for their date, a gesture of trust considering how he preferred them gloved at all times, or the gray hair on his temples. He took the whole sight of Stephen, and felt deep appreciation for it.

They had shifted closer to each other now, having moved the basket from between them. Stephen had magicked it away, because he can do that. Easily. Smug bastard. They still had drinks in their hands, but Tony was pretty sure those would be gone soon as well. Their shoulders were brushing now, the hands without drinks were occupied holding each other, and they were completely in each other’s spaces.

“Tony?” Stephen’s voice was so deep, but he spoke softly. His eyes were locked on Tony’s, blues on browns, and they conveyed desire. His hand squeezed Tony’s softly.

“Hm?” Tony hummed in response, looking back at Stephen with equal amounts of want.

“Be mine?” Two small words spoken so gently and honestly, and Tony’s world was spinning. The mechanic squeezed Stephen’s hand back, and offered a brilliant and honest smile.

“Yes.” He breathed out in a shy whisper. He placed his empty glass down. “Yours.” He murmured softly, slowly placing his hand on Stephen’s cheek. He inched closer, leaning further into Stephen’s personal space. His eyes were looking at the sorcerer’s soft lips, before looking back up to his eyes in a silent request. Instead of answering, Stephen moved forward, closing the gap. They kissed.

It was slow, testing. Neither of them wanted to make it sexual, but rather caring. It was experimental, deliberate and chaste, but it was amazing. When they separated, they looked at each other to gauge what the other’s reaction was. Tony smirked then, and Stephen found himself smiling back. Tony moved forward again, for another kiss.

This one was more confident, now that they both knew this was what the other wanted. It was
more passionate, more about conveying their mutual interest in each other. Tony wanted to be closer to Stephen, so he carefully pushed himself up to his knees and leaned towards the sorcerer. The hand that was holding the sorcerer’s hand moved up to cup his other cheek. Stephen, in turn, wanted Tony closer as well. He placed both his hands on the other’s hips and pulled him closer until he was basically straddling him. It was odd having to crane his neck up to be kissed, considering he was always taller than his partners, but Stephen found himself enjoying it.

Stephen wanted Tony to be closer still, so he greedily tightened his grip on the older man’s waist and pulled him even closer. Tony all but fell on top of him, but he didn’t mind. They broke the kiss again when they remembered their need for air. Stephen examined Tony, pleased with how flushed the other looked. They were both breathing heavily, pupils dilated and cheeks rosy.

Tony was surprised with how incredibly innocent they were being, considering his track record of skipping everything and going straight to sex. He didn’t want that, though. Well, he did eventually, but not right now. Currently, he wanted to simply be with Stephen. He wanted to spend more time with him and have their relationship grow steadily and unrushed. It was disgustingly domestic, and he wanted it.

“You’re gorgeous.” Tony heard Stephen whisper softly once they’ve collected themselves. “I’ve wanted to tell you that for quite some time.” He admitted quietly, his eyes never leaving Tony’s. What could Tony do but kiss him again? So he did. Just like the first two kisses, it was great.

“Harley and Peter talk about us, did you know?” Tony mumbled when the kiss broke. They had shifted positions so that they were lying down comfortably on the pillows facing each other. Stephen raised an inquisitive brow. “They kept talking about how much time we spent together, and they kept hinting at us dating.” Stephen chuckled, and Tony, being as close to the man as he was, felt the vibrations. It was a nice feeling.

“Did they now?” Stephen’s smile was brilliant, even under the gentle candlelight that cast so many tenebrous shadows on his feature. “Well, I suppose we’ve now proved them right.”

“Yeah, they’re going to be such insufferable little shits about it though.” Tony huffed, but there was a smile on his face.

“Indubitably.” Tony looked at the sorcerer for the longest time before laughing loudly.

“Who even says that?” Stephen huffed at the slight, but there was still fondness in his gaze. “I bet you just say big words to make everyone else feel stupid.” Tony accused, but he didn’t really mean it.

“Well…” Stephen shied away from Tony’s stare then, practically a confession of guilt. Tony laughed even harder then.

“Oh you’re such an ass.” Tony leaned his forehead against Stephen’s shoulders as he continued to giggle in glee. In response, Stephen wrapped an arm around him and rolled his eyes fondly.

“Yes, well, words were made to be used regardless of their hidden intent.” Stephen argued, and Tony had to admit he was right. Conceited, but right.

There was the comfortable silence again, and they had turned to their backs to stargaze. Tony was still fascinated with how clear the sky looked, and he begrudgingly admitted that magic was pretty impressive.

It was ironic, really. He used to be so afraid of space and equally afraid of magic, but now he’s
grown to love both of them (at least when it’s shown by those he trusts). The Infinity Stones certainly made his love and curiosity for outer space return, and Stephen made him comfortable around the dazzling orange energy. He closed his eyes momentarily. He felt like he was home, surrounded by space and Stephen. Looking at the sorcerer, he couldn’t help but wonder with a satisfied smirk what the future had in store for them.

The days that followed were surprisingly normal considering the roller coaster that had been that week. Rogers and the gang had stopped harassing him after their meeting, so Tony was pretty sure Jessica scared them out of their wits and had them shaking like leaves. He was eternally grateful for it. Looking at the calendar, Harley was scheduled to come in three days and Tony was really looking forward to it. He had been twice as productive trying to make sure everything is perfectly in place for the kid. Unfortunately, Ms. Keener and Harleen had decided to stick around in Tennessee, so it was just Harley that was coming, but Tony was still excited.

Stephen could only watch in fond amusement as Tony personally prepared the boy’s room, which was, unsurprisingly, in the penthouse apartment relatively close to Tony’s own room. Peter, upon realizing Harley was coming soon, took to decorating the penthouse with balloons, confetti, lights, streamers and everything he could find at Party City. Tony, of course, funded everything without a second thought. “Mr. Stark, we should make a sign!” Peter once exclaimed, and it didn’t take long for Tony, Peter, DUM-E, U and Butterfingers to start making signs, each more ridiculous than the next.

Of course, Stephen was made to help out whenever he wasn’t busy at the sanctum. He was put under Peter’s supervision, and it was one of those moments where he never thought he’d be bossed around by a fifteen year old. Tony was working on the lab downstairs, prepping it as a gift for both Peter and Harley. Peter had absolutely no idea, and he was constantly trying to figure out what Tony was doing. Stephen’s second, more secretive duty was to prevent the little spider from ever finding out. It was an adventurous time that included many, many portals.

Eventually, Vision joined them, and then Jessica, then Happy and Pepper, Rhodey Luke, Danny, and even Matt and Barnes were in on it too. When asked, apparently FRIDAY had sent out a message to everyone and invited them to join. Tony smiled and shook his head with fondness, he was glad they wanted to meet Harley. Everyone had decided to participate in welcoming Harley, which of course meant the penthouse ended up being overcrowded with far too many decorations. Pepper had tried to make it look at least a little bit organized and appealing to the eye, but to no avail. Tony smiled broadly when he saw the end result of so many people’s hard work. He gave Pepper a small pat on the back and a sympathetic smile, knowing full well that she was certainly suffering on the inside.

When Tony went to pick up Harley at the airport, everyone pitched in to grab lunch from different restaurants. It was an odd assortment of meals, including Chinese, Italian, Mexican and whatever else seemed appealing at the time. Vision had decided to bake pastries for dessert, and Peter ended up decorating those too.

“What the hell happened to your apartment?” What was Harley said the moment he saw the monstrosity made to celebrate his arrival. “And why are there so many people here?”

“Well, Tony asked a blind man to help decorate his house.” Jessica answered stoically; a couple of chuckles could be heard from the group. “And we are Tony’s team. We heard a lot about you twerp, so we decided we didn’t want to wait until Saturday to meet you.”

“You talk about me?” Harley frowned, looking at Tony.

“Hi Harley!” Peter said energetically no longer able to contain his excitement. He practically skipped over to Harley and extended a hand. Harley raised a brow, but then smiled and shook his hand.

“Peter, it’s nice to finally be able to bully you in real life.” Peter laughed, not surprised by the greeting. The two of them had exchanged contact information after their brief talk in the car, and have been communicating with each other since. They had been looking forward to meeting up, and Tony was only slightly afraid of what shenanigans would ensue.

“So, I’m going to assume the black haired girl is Jessica, beside her is the cool lawyer… Matt?” Matt actually grinned at being called a cool lawyer. “Then Luke, and obviously the other rich guy Rand. Vision, metal-arm Barnes, Happy and Rhodey.” Harley pointed at each person he named, though he sounded a bit bored and completely ignored the surprised stares he got. When his eyes landed on Pepper, he offered a sincere smile. “Hi Ms. Potts.”

“Hi Harley.” Pepper smiled back fondly. Harley then looked at Stephen and his smile grew tenfold.

“And you must be the ‘just a friend’ magician guy.” Stephen groaned, and Harley laughed elated.

“I prefer the term sorcerer.” He said with a sigh. “And ‘just a friend’? I’m afraid your information might be outdated.” Stephen smirked and Tony felt a flush of warmth on his cheeks. He rolled his eyes at the obvious smugness in Stephen’s voice and looked over at his friends.

“Meet Harley.” Tony sighed exasperated, though it sounded fond.

“He’s exactly how you made him out to be.” Jessica deadpanned and Tony could only shrug.

“You talk about us?” Luke asked, repeating Harley’s question; the brilliant smile on his face was mirrored by the others.

“What do you mean outdated?” Harley squinted his eyes at Stephen.

“Yes, I talk about you guys,” Tony started.

“All the time.” Harley interjected with a huff, but it had no heat behind it.

“And he means we are dating.” Tony finished, looking at Harley. He tried not to think too much on the disbelieving ‘what’ and exasperated ‘finally’ he heard echoing around the room.

“Why didn’t we know about this?” Matt raised an inquiring brow.

“It’s a recent development.” Tony shrugged while Stephen made his way towards him. Stephen snaked an arm around Tony and held him close with a satisfied glint in his eyes. Tony raised a brow but Stephen simply smiled innocently at him. He was putting their relationship on display for their friends and looked completely smug about it. So, a possessive type then. Tony hummed noncommittally.


“You couldn’t wait two weeks.” Luke sighed, but paid Jessica the amount owed. “Two weeks and I’d have won.” Both Tony and Stephen raised a brow at this.
“You were placing bets on our relationship?” Stephen was the one to ask, but Tony found himself mirroring the question nonetheless.

“Looks like it. Which reminds me, Pete since I won our ‘when-they-finally-get-over-themselves-and-date’ bet we get to do my experiment first.” Harley grinned mischievously towards the other boy.

“Urg, fine. I still think potato canons aren’t going to be as cool as potato bombs, but fine.” Peter huffed and crossed his arms petulantly, but it wasn’t long before he was smiling again. “Congratulations you two, I was afraid Harley and I were going to have to play cupid to get you together!”

“That would have been absolutely horrible.” Tony muttered under his breath. “Thanks Peter.” He said louder, with a smile.

“I heard that.” Peter grumbled with an eye roll. “It would have been great, thank you very much.”

“Can we just take a moment to talk about how they are making plans for a potato gun and potato bomb? Boys, please don’t take after Tony. Please don’t explode the lab every other week.” Pepper sighed out, crossing her arms in worry. “He’s already taken years out of my life from stress, I don’t need you two following his footsteps.”

“Oh come on Pep! They won’t get hurt, it’s just potatoes.” Pepper looked incredibly unimpressed at Tony. She was giving him the look… the one that made him want to be a responsible adult that certainly didn’t do anything fun ever. “I’ll keep an eye on them?” Tony tried, and Pepper let out a sigh and turned to Stephen.

“I’ll keep an eye on them, all three of them.” Stephen told her with a kind smile.

“Thank you, Stephen.” Pepper smiled back gratefully, and Tony just looked betrayed.

“I’ll have you know I am perfectly capable of keeping two kids alive and uninjured while they play with volatile projectile potatoes.” Tony huffed out petulantly, crossing his arms and slightly leaning on Stephen. He immediately remembered Peter dying in his arms, and the smile that had been on his face all day nearly dropped. He had to remind himself to look happy; no one needed to deal with his issues on a day that’s supposed to be joyful. “Okay, fine. Stephanie will keep us alive.” He kept his voice lighthearted and fun.

“Dad can definitely take care of two kids making a potato shooter.” Harley rolled his eyes, before looking at Stephen and smirking. “Though, I guess we could use this time to bond. Isn’t that right Mr. Magician?” The way Harley said that sent shivers down Stephen’s spine. The kid was a menace.

“It’s sorcerer.” Stephen muttered belligerently with a sigh.

“Or Dr. Wizard for fun!” Tony piped up, completely ignoring the look of utter displeasure Stephen was giving him.

“Oh, I like that one.” Harley’s grin widened.

“Did you just call Tony dad?” Jessica asked with a raised brow before they could continue to harass Stephen and his magical career. “You have a kid, Stark?” There was amusement in her tone.

“With the addition of puppy-eyes over here,” Harley pointed at Peter, “he has three. Well, not counting FRIDAY, KAREN and the bots.” Harley shrugged. Peter grew bright red.
“I-I’m not Mr. Stark’s kid!” He said far too quickly and defensively. Harley looked at him with a bored expression. “I’m just his intern…”

“Well, you are on his will.” Pepper pointed out. “You, Harley and Harleen are supposedly going to inherit mostly everything.” Both kids blinked in surprise, but Harley quickly grinned.

“See? Told ya you were his kid.” He sounded smug. Peter was bright red and Tony was looking away from the scene, deciding that the bright red confetti was far more interesting than admitting he had emotionally adopted the teen. Stephen, the bastard, was chuckling at the moment. “I’m pretty sure he has adoption papers all signed and ready hidden somewhere in his files.” Harley teased.

“You have no idea how long it took me to convince him not to ask May and Ms. Keener.” Pepper groaned. Harley blinked wide-eyed, not having expected his tease to actually be true. He looked away from Pepper and towards Tony, his lips threatened to curl up.

“Really?” Peter’s voice was soft and shy. He looked at Tony with wide, hopeful eyes.

“Yeah, well…” Tony tried to think up an excuse, but found that he couldn’t. “Yes.” He sighed out. “Anyways, I’m hungry. Let’s go eat.” He said far too quickly, and everyone gave him a knowing smirk.

“You know, you’d make a great father.” Matt remarked, refusing to let the subject drop.

“Except he already is.” Harley piped up, raising a brow and challenging anyone to say otherwise. “Mechanic’s right though, I’m hungry. I was promised there would be food. I don’t see the food.” Laughter radiated from the crowd. The kid was hard to impress, and had snark to rival Tony’s. He really does seem like he was Tony’s.

“Right, food is on the other room.” Rhodey said with a fond smile. Everyone followed Rhodey’s lead, and sat themselves in the large table filled with assorted take-outs. Tony and Stephen, unsurprisingly, tried to sit together, but Peter had already sat on one side of Tony and Harley refused to sit anywhere else but on Tony’s other side. Stephen raised a brow and Tony sent him an apologetic smile. Harley grinned and tapped on the seat beside him while staring menacingly at Stephen. The sorcerer begrudgingly complied.

The rest of the day was spent with boisterous conversations, ranging from how Tony met Harley to Matt’s new case to Vision’s favorite hobbies. Harley decided he liked these people a lot more than he liked the old Avengers. He had noticed Tony always seemed stressed whenever he mentioned the Avengers or talked about everything he did or had to get done for them. These people, though, seemed to make Tony smile a lot more than frown. He kept glancing at all of them, sizing them up and watching how they regarded Tony. They seemed decent enough, so Harley felt at ease with them. Although, he didn’t stop glaring at Stephen with an impish smirk on his features promising all sort of trouble.

When lunch was done and over with and everyone was helping with clean up, Harley quickly grabbed Stephen’s arm and dragged him into an empty room. Stephen followed willingly but with a raised brow.

“So, first thing’s first,” Harley started with a smile, “I am happy you two are together. He talked about you a lot, it was starting to get annoying.” The way he said it made it seem like he didn’t really mean it. Harley enjoyed talking with Tony and finding out about his life, listening to all the things Stephen and Tony did together was usually pretty fun and it made Harley happy to know there was someone watching out for his mechanic. “But if you ever even think about doing anything
that could hurt him, I will come after you.” Harley hissed out threateningly. It was surprisingly effective. “So you better treat him right.”

“I’m getting the shovel talk from a kid.” Stephen muttered exasperatedly from under his breath. “I intend to protect Tony. My desire is that no harm falls onto him, be it from myself, himself or others.” He explained. “He’s gone through too much as it is already…” Stephen closed his eyes briefly. “Regardless, should I ever break my oath to him and cause him harm, you’re not the only one I should fear.” He offered Harley a smile. “I don’t know who is more frightening, honestly. Everyone in that room is terrifying, and you haven’t even met the aliens yet… though I suppose only some of them are genuinely cause for worry.” Stephen hummed at the thought. He doubted Drax, Mantis or Groot would be too much of a threat. The previous two probably wouldn’t understand enough to care or be dangerous enough to matter, and the latter is a tree stump with a brain, not really the stuff of nightmares.

“Well, as long as you know.” Harley shrugged and started making his way out again. “Just know I’ll be keeping an eye on you, and I will make you miserable if you hurt him.” Stephen watched as he walked away.

“Why does Tony surround himself with terrifying people?” He asked Levi, still looking at the now empty doorway. Levi simply shrugged, gently patting Stephen’s cheek in consolation. With another sigh, Stephen quietly made his way back to the group. He decided he’d have to try and get on the kid’s good side.

Eventually, everyone had started to leave for home. Peter, after begging insistently to May, was to spend the night with Tony in the room the engineer had apparently prepared for him. There was also a mention of preparing a whole floor just for Peter to use, but the teen quickly deflected that idea saying that he’d prefer to sleep in the penthouse near Tony. Harley had teased him again after that, saying it was only a matter of time before he called Tony his dad. Vision had decided to spend his nights in the tower as well, wanting to spend some time away from Wanda and to process his emotions.

Once everyone else had left, Tony had clasped his hands and demanded the boys’ attention. He then dragged them down a couple of floors and gave them each a small little badge. “That,” he said, “is entirely useless since FRIDAY already knows you have clearance… but it’s the thought that counts.” He grinned at the two confused expressions he saw. “Think of it as the key to your lab.”

It didn’t take long for the confused looks to turn into wild excitement. “No way!” Peter was bouncing eagerly and immediately went to give Tony a hug. The engineer merrily returned it, not surprised when Harley joined in too.

“You’ll come and work with us up here, right?” Harley asked… demanded, really. Tony rolled his eyes fondly and smiled.

“Sure thing kid. You can kick me out anytime you want, though.” Harley scoffed at the notion, and Peter simply chose to ignore it. The two teens eagerly dragged Tony into their lab and already started on their potato canon. Tony chuckled at their enthusiasm; happy he was the cause for it. He promised himself that he’d do everything in his power to protect it, and then a dark thought crossed his mind.

Peter and the Vulture. He had to do something about it, so he would. For now though, he’d enjoy the kids in trying not to blow up the lab too badly.
On a different note, I'm curious. What other pairings do you guys like?
The Wrong kid

Chapter Summary

Hey guys!!
So, first and foremost… I'm terribly sorry about this pathetically small chapter.
I had originally meant for it to basically have all of Peter's arch in it (as I wasn't going
to make it a really long one) but unfortunately, I haven't had the time. I wrote this
before I went back to uni, but since then I've barely had any time to work on anything
and it's a sad sad time.
I was going to wait until I had more written down before I posted anything, but I felt
bad for leaving you all in the dark for so long.
Soooo this sad excuse of a chapter is mostly for me telling you that I'm not gone! This
fic has not been abandoned! I'm just drowning in work at the moment but regular
weekly updates will be attempted to resume once I'm no longer dead… Get it? Cause stuDYING? (Bad joke is bad)
Anyways, as always, THANK YOU SO MUCH for all of your love and support and
you guys are all absolutely fantastic!!!
Sorry I'm having to put this in a hiatus, and for making you wait literal months for a
four page chapter, but I swear it will come back eventually with a bombass chapter to
make up for this!
Love you guys!! See you soon!

Tony was at an impasse. He’s spent a couple of nights awake trying to figure out what to do about
the Vulture. On one end, he was fine with simply going to their secret little hideout and exposing
them outright so that Peter will never have to go through what he did in the last timeline; however,
that meant Peter wouldn’t learn. In the previous timeline, Peter had been itching desperately for a
bigger fight after the battle in Leipzig-Halle. He believed he was ready for more when he really
wasn’t, and he was so eager to prove himself right that he avidly disobeyed Tony and lied to him
shamelessly and nearly died because of it.

Tony wondered if Peter could learn without the near death experience. If he couldn’t, then he
might actually lose his life the next time he’s itching to prove himself. That could absolutely not
happen.

“You’re thinking too hard and it’s annoying.” Rhodey muttered from across the couch throwing a
piece of popcorn at him. The two of them had decided to watch a movie, Tony’s pick, and just
hang out like they used to before everything became overly complicated. Of course, that meant
they are watching Stardust and Tony was far too into it despite having watched it way too many
times.

“I’m always thinking too hard, and you love it.” Tony huffed out, throwing popcorn back at his
friend.

“It’s annoying.” Rhodey repeated, rolling his eyes. “What are you thinking about now?” Tony
readily opened his mouth to give off an excuse, any excuse. It was instinct, by this point, to try not
to worry Rhodey about whatever random thing he himself was worried about. Whatever was going
on in his life with Peter, he could probably figure it out himself and it would turn out okay. He
quickly closed his mouth though, because, with a sudden realization, he knew it wouldn’t turn out okay. He lived in the timeline where he dealt with things on his own, and he suffered throughout most of it. Nearly getting killed in Siberia was avoided in this timeline because he actually had friends, and the same can be said about everything that went down with the Accords.

He risked a look at Rhodey, and noticed the other man was staring at him patiently. Tony had many masks that he wore around many people; his father had taught him to always hide his emotions, and that was one of the few lessons Howard taught him that he took to heart. Rhodey, however, had already pushed through many of these masks. More were created, and more were discarded throughout their years of friendship. That being said, Rhodey probably knew that Tony was debating on whether or not he should bullshit, and he also probably knew what Tony had decided.

“It’s Peter.” The billionaire finally answered with a tired smile. He went on to explain the events of the previous timeline in great detail. He mentioned everything Peter had accomplished, as well as all of his shortcomings. Rhodey snickered when Tony mentioned his ever first ‘grounding,’ and his smile quickly fell when Tony then revealed how Peter had almost died as a consequence.

“So, what are you thinking of doing?” Rhodey asked, and then glared at Tony almost immediately. “If you’re thinking of pre-emptive grounding, I will kick your ass. They might be the same person, Tones, but they now have different stories. Old Peter fought with you in the airport, right? And because of that, he constantly wanted to be in action. This Peter never experienced that.”

“The Vulture is still a threat, and Peter will still want to solve that.”

“So you neutralize it.” Rhodey said with a straight face, and Tony wasn’t completely sure whether he meant murder or capture. Tony wouldn’t doubt either answer.

“The kid has to do it.” Tony answered easily enough. “I can’t coddle him forever, and, if he finds out I did this when it was something he could have handled, I’m pretty sure he’ll be mad at me. Trust me, no one likes a mad Peter.” Tony rubbed the bridge of his nose, still trying to think of a way to make sure everyone (minus the Vulture of course) comes out happy.

“That’s surprisingly mature of you…” Rhodey frowns looking at Tony in scrutiny. “Are you feeling okay? Did you hit your head?” When Tony glared at him, Rhodey simply laughed. Tony then kicked him (lightly of course) as payback, but the bastard only laughed harder.

“Rude.” He grumbled, and turned back to the movie. “I’ll have you know I’m plenty mature.”

“Yeah, I know.” Rhodey suddenly sobered up, but despite the serious tone he still had a smile on his face. “Tones, you need to talk to him. Tell him what you told me, and figure out where to go from there. The kid loves you, and he trusts you. Whatever you decide to do, he’ll believe in you.”

“That didn’t happen last time.” Tony pointed out. “He went behind my back, and did things I asked him not to.”

“Did you sit down and talk to him?”

“No.” Mumbled reluctantly.

“There you go.” Pleased with how the conversation ended, Rhodey gave Tony a reassuring smile. “Now shut up, I’m trying to watch a movie.” Tony simply gasped in mock offense, staring wide-eyed at Rhodey and wiping nonexistent tears from his face with a forced sob. Before he could say anything dramatic though, Rhodey threw another popcorn kernel at him. “Movie.” So Tony rolled
his eyes and went back to watching the movie.

To say Tony Stark was panicking at the prospect of talking to a kid was underwhelming it. He was absolutely terrified that if he said one thing wrong, then Peter would be doomed. Granted, that’s really not how reality works, but he can’t help but feel worried. It’s who he is, really, a big worrywart who just wants the best for everyone. He can’t help it.

“Boss, there’s someone wanting to speak with you. They are rather insistent. It’s W.-“ FRIDAY started but was quickly interrupted.

“It’s the kid right? Right. Okay, can’t procrastinate this any longer. Bring him up.” Tony was thankful he was in his workshop right now; he definitely needed something to do with his hands.

“No, boss it’s-“

“FRIDAY, please. I know you’re trying to take care of me, but this is something I have to do.” He knew FRIDAY was just trying to coddle him, as she’s always done. She takes her job to take care of him very seriously, and he loves her for it; but right now he needs to do this and he can’t lose his nerves. He will talk to the kid.

“Very well, sending her up your way.”

Tony then took a deep breath to steel himself. He already knew how he’d start the conversation, and how he’d talk along with what words he said. He had practiced a little bit in front of a mirror. With a groan, he mildly thought to himself how much easier this would be if he was giving a public speech. Why did his father teach him to be so emotionally stunted he couldn’t even give a kid a serious heart to heart?

It was only after the soft click of the door opening that he was brought forth from his train of thought, and he realized just what FRIDAY had said. “Wait, her?” Tony turned around to look at just who was entering his workshop, only to be surprised that it was a girl, not the boy he was expecting, wearing her signature red. He felt himself pale slightly, and he forced himself to take a calming breath. “FRIDAY, that’s the wrong kid you sent up.” Tony muttered, and mentally cursed himself when he realized that Wanda had heard him.

“I’m no kid, Stark.” She said with a raised brow. It was odd, though. Her voice didn’t hold the usual tone of hostility it normally did. She looked around the workshop and smiled softly to herself. “I did always wonder what this place looked like. Steve made it seem like it was a chaotic mess you can’t find anything in.” Tony simply scoffed and rolled his eyes.

“Of course he did.” He muttered, only a little bit annoyed.

“I think he was wrong.” Wanda continued, walking closer to a table and picking up a random tool and inspecting it. “It’s more organized than chaotic. Maybe not to others, but to you.” She put the tool down and looked over at Tony with determined eyes. “You once offered a truce. ‘Water under the bridge,’ you said. I want to accept that offer.”

“I thought you sided with Rogers, not me.” Wanda shook her head then.

“Yes, but not because he went against you. I wanted to fight off Hydra, like Barnes did. I didn’t think you wanted to do the same, especially since Vision was trying to keep me in the compound.” She explained herself, but Tony wasn’t really quite sure he believed her.
“I think he was trying to prevent you from joining Roger’s brigade, and prevent a fight from happening.” Tony said cautiously. He knew FRIDAY had probably contacted someone and had them on standby should things go south, but he couldn’t help the familiar feeling of dread sinking in. He never did quite feel comfortable in the witch’s presence, but he’d faced worse. Far worse. Besides, it seems like she genuinely wanted to let bygones be bygones. He was okay with that.

“I know that now.” She tentatively walked closer, and when Tony didn’t flinch, she continued. “I reacted badly, I know. Vision hasn’t really forgiven me, and I don’t blame him.” She stopped a couple of feet in front of Tony and looked at her hands. “I’ve been clouded by my emotions, and let them control me; my rage against the death of my family, my resentment towards HYDRA, my ignorance towards consequence, all of it. My emotions strengthen my power, but I’ve allowed them to twist my reality. It’s what I do, after all.” She closed her hand tightly, and looked up at Tony once more. “But I will control it.”

“So, water under the bridge?” Tony didn’t know how to answer her speech, so he instead chose to reiterate his offer. It was nice that she was trying to become someone better, but he needed to see proof before he believed her. He did extend a hand though, should she use this as an opportunity to mess with his mind again, then he’d know her real intentions.

“Water under the bridge.” She smiled and took his hand in hers, shaking it tightly. Her eyes then settled on his reactor, and Tony felt himself stiffen involuntarily. “You’re like Vision now, aren’t you?” When Tony didn’t answer, she looked back up and smiled again. “Don’t worry, I won’t tell. I could feel it back in the team meeting Steve had us do. You have a new power in you. Different, but similar.” She muttered the last part.

“Is that why you came to talk to me?” Tony asked, remembering that encounter well. He remembered how Wanda was eyeing him that moment, and the odd smile she had on her face. Now he understood it for what it was: she found out a secret she wasn’t supposed to know.

“Partly. I did want to try and make amends. I don’t think we’ll be friends, but we don’t have to hate each other either.” Wanda admitted. “You’ve done me far more good than harm, and I took it for granted. I still do, but it’s hard to forget the hatred I’ve harbored for so long. You were my inspiration to get stronger, you know. I made it through the experiments because of you, because of how I wanted to kill you.” She crossed her arms, more so that Tony could see her hands than as a symbol of defiance. “I don’t anymore. You’re not the bad man I wanted you to be.” She smiled again at him, one last time, before turning around and leaving. She stopped when she was at the door, and turned her head slightly. “Goodbye, Stark. I’ll see you around.”

“Goodbye Wanda.” With a bow of her head, she left and Tony let go of a breath he didn’t know he was holding. He gently set himself down and ran a hand through his hair. “That went surprisingly well.” He muttered, promising himself never to interrupt FRIDAY ever again.

“Yeah! I thought for sure that she was gonna use her witch powers on you Mr. Stark!” Tony immediately stiffened again and looked around for the source of the voice. He wasn’t delighted when he noticed the vent latch open.

“What are you doing here kid?” Tony asked, getting ready to stand up when the teen landed in front of him and offered an arm. With a smile, Tony took it.

“Well, you said you wanted to talk. When I got here, Ms. FRIDAY said that you were talking with Ms. Maximoff and I got worried so I tried to sneak in. FRIDAY helped me! I didn’t even think to use the vents. Why are your vents so big anyways? You could fit a whole adult in there.” As per usual, Peter was talking a mile a minute; not that Tony minded.
“Something about several labs in one building and a need to have highly ventilated rooms.” Tony shrugged. “Would be a safety hazard without them.” Peter nodded, not at all questioning the validity of Tony’s answer. His blind faith was endearing.

“So you wanted to talk?” Peter looked up at Tony with expectant, bright eyes and Tony faltered. Maximoff really rattled his groove, and now he had entirely forgotten the little speech he had prepared. Okay, that meant improvising, he was good at that.

“Right uh, well, the thing is… stuff happens and it sucks.” Well, he was certainly off to a great start. Tony mentally chided himself. “Okay, so you know how I come from a different timeline right?” Peter nodded enthusiastically. “Well, in that timeline you end up fighting a villain named the Vulture. He was creating weapons from alien tech left over by the Chitauri, and selling them to criminals and thugs. He was going to steal from me while I was moving from my tower and, long story short, you stopped him. You stopped him and you did it without the suit.” Tony had been so proud of Peter for that, so proud of the teen for doing so much without the suit. “But you nearly died from it, and to get to that point you went behind my back and lied to me.” Peter’s eyes, which were wide with awe at what he did in the other timeline, immediately formed a disbelieving frown.

“I did that?” Peter hesitantly asked.

“Yeah, you did, but in your defense you did it because you wanted to prove to that you were ready to take on harder tasks while I didn’t want you to. I’m pretty sure it happened because there was some massive miscommunication on both our parts.” Tony shrugged. “So, I guess this talk is mostly a ‘let’s not do that again’ conversation.”

“Okay, that sounds like a good idea.”

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