definitions of indefinable things

by w_space

Summary

The war is over. The rogues are back. Steve is definitely not over it. There are lots of secrets about to implode. Tony just really wants his recovered relationship with Stephen to work. And Peter just wants everyone to leave his dads alone.

(With a lot of flashback into the past of how Stephen and Tony met before Iron Man 1, got together, fell apart, only to have all roads lead back to each other again.)

Notes

Getting my frustration from Endgame ending out combined with rewatching all the old Iron Man movies. I have no friends to talk to about this particular pair to so probably venting that stress out too.
Chapter 1

James Rhodes loves Tony. They are brothers in every way but by blood. Yes, he gets exasperated, irritated, and the better half of their years together Tony drove him up the wall... but at the end of it all, he would always care for the brunette like family.

His patience, however, has frequently been tested.

Rhodes honestly wondered during their initial years of friendship where he would draw the line. But as he made sure Tony didn’t drown in his own vomit several nights a week during his party day, picked him up at three in the morning in god knows where, fought alongside him during various life-threatening situations, dealt with his quarter-life crisis, middle-life crisis, every other crisis ever in existence... he was starting to get the impression that maybe... just maybe... there was no limit to the love he felt for his friend. A fact he became quite proud of.

But today, that theory was once again tested in ways he never thought possible.

Well, to be fair, he never thought it was possible for his best friend to have not one, but two exes with superhuman abilities.

“Someone please explain to me what is going on!” he cried out to the scene in front of him.

Some immediately turned towards him with what the Colonel can guess as relief. But most seemed unable to take their eyes off of Captain America and Doctor Strange who both looked about ready to commit murder.

There was debris all along the surrounding area of the common room, furniture broken to pieces, and the floor-to-ceiling glass window behind them was mostly blown out by what the Colonel guessed to be Clint’s arrow. That was most likely the explosion he had heard as he entered the compound and what triggered FRIDAY’s alert to his presence being needed upstairs.

Rhodes chanced a glance towards Scott Lang. One of the few, if he had to take a wild guess from his experiences so far, was probably not part of the instigator for unnecessary violence. But Scott shook his head quickly, eyes wide as if trying to convey he was just as confused.

“Uh…. Colonel Rhodes….?” Was this kid actually raising his hand?
Rhodes gave Peter a look that he hoped obviously conveyed *hurry up kid.*

There was momentary guilt. He was usually friendlier to the teen. He definitely liked this polite boy from Queens that Tony has been so fond of in recent years. It was also worth noting that Peter being around actually helped mitigate the billionaire's reckless behavior, which in turn, certainly made his own life a bit easier. But right now he just wanted answers and quick.

“Uh- well… Mr. Stark dated Doctor Strange a while back before he was… Doctor Strange... but after the car accident he sort of just disappeared on Mr. Stark…”

Oh, he already can see where this might be going. He was one of the few in the room who completely knew about Stephen and Tony’s relationship from the old days. Actually, he had been quite taken aback with the whole Sorcerer Supreme thing upon doctor's return for that reason.

“...Mr. Stark moved on and got together with Captain America as everyone here probably already knows but they broke up when he nearly killed him Siberia-”

There were some side remarks from a handful in the room and even Rhodes frowned a bit at the words. He was, of course, there during the Accords issue for the most part but when he asked Tony what happened during the time he was out of action, Tony had been vague. Said that he had followed Rogers and Barnes to Siberia intending to help after realizing Barnes might be innocent, they fought after finding out about Barnes's past, and he lost. Nearly killed? That part wasn’t exactly mentioned.

“Then Thanos happened. And Doctor Strange came back and they are back together again after the war... but things just got really awkward when old Avengers came back to the compound…” Peter was speaking rather fast now. And Rhodey bit back the urge to ask how Peter knew all this, to begin with.

“…and I just don’t want Mr. America to steal Dad away from my other Dad-”

There was a pause.

“Did you just call Tony ‘Dad’?”
Lieutenant Colonel James Rupert “Rhodey” Rhodes had wondered for decades where he may draw the line with Tony’s crazy life.

And this was it.

“TONYYYYYYYY”

“Okay, so my life is a bit messy right now.”

“Did you know the kid called you ‘Dad’?”

“Really?” Rhodes can see his friend’s eyes light up a little. If this whole situation wasn’t as weird and problematic as it was, he may have thought the little happiness on Tony’s face was rather endearing. “I’m adopting the kid.”

“Tony, the kid already has a guardian.”

“Actually May an I had this talk couple days ago. She may have to move away due to work relocation but she wanted Peter to have a choice to stay here and finish school with his friends. And since she already was thinking it might be great for Pete to have a sort of father figure in his life-“

“Wait, wait, Tony are you serious?” He was very well aware that Tony basically treated the kid as his own son but he had not expected an actual legal adoption to be in the near future. That was a commitment, a big commitment. And no matter how much Tony had changed over the years, Rhodes still remembers how much of a commitment-phobe Tony was by nature. But speaking of commitments... “What does Stephen think about that? Then again the kid just called Stephen ‘other Dad’ so-”

“He did?” came the quick response. There was that look again. “Explains why the wizard wasn’t radiating anger after that with Rogers. I knew he seemed too calm. I didn’t even have to sex him up to get -“

“I DON’T NEED TO HEAR IT!” He exclaimed quickly and abruptly but then something clicked
inside colonel's head. “So… is it serious? Tony, it’s only been what? 6 months tops since Thanos? You guys just decided to officially start seeing each other again. Look, I had my reserves about you two having another go but you know in the end I completely support you two. But still, isn’t this a bit fast?”

He had thought Tony would spin it into another joke or at least some sarcastic comment along the lines of how much his Rhodey Bear cares but none surprisingly came. There was a pause in which the younger was staring at him with a dead-serious look that only happened very few times in the course of their friendship outside the battlefield.

“We all just lost 5 years of our lives, Rhodes. I seriously thought I was a goner during that battle. We saw first hand that life can disappear from us in a snap. Besides, it’s really not like I’m getting any younger. What are we going to do? Dance around each other like we used to and waste time?”

Tony started fidgeting with his tools again, “And before the snap, up in space, you weren’t there. He’s changed a lot. Hell, I’ve changed a lot – or at least I would like to think I have. We were a team. It felt like I got everything good we had before back and more but with all the problems we used to have seems possible for us to fix this time. I’m not saying it’s perfect but we have a good thing going right now and if it continues being good I’m not going to fight it for once. Just because it’s not fitting with the normal timeline of what people believe should be moving on, commitment, etc…. I mean since when have I ever normal? And-“ He waved a wrench at the older with that mischievous grin now forming on his face. “-the sex is great! Seriously almost forgot how kinky that bastard can be. I was actually kind of worried with the whole Sorcerer Supreme serious and prim thing he’s got going on but-“

“I. DON’T. NEED. TO. HEAR. IT. TONES!” He shouted as he quickly started towards the elevator door.

“Love you too, Platypus!”

But just as Rhodes reached the elevator, he paused, pacing. “Hey, Tony… about Cap…” He briefly saw the smirk disappearing from the engineer’s face. The genius was always good at reading people and seems to already know what is to come. “Siberia. Did he…?” Rhodes couldn’t find the words.

He knew.

Of course, he knew the way Tony had been around Steve Rogers before then. What he meant.
How they clashed initially during the Alien invasion in New York. Even after that battle, although they were on relatedly amicable terms, there were still a lot of tensions. It was a long while before the two slowly gained an understanding of each other and started to build a friendship.

The breakthrough was when Cap started to live in the present and more willing to let go of the past. Stopped comparing Tony to his father while finally acknowledged the side of Tony that he hid behind the loud humor and faux arrogance; the side that was caring, passionate, insecure, but fiercely loyal to those he called his.

Tony in return let go of his resentment he held towards Cap for his father’s obsession. To be honest, Rhodey knew Tony couldn’t actually ever hate the Captain. In fact, to some degree, Captain America was Tony’s childhood hero. He was just in a bit of pain from all the times his father seemingly choose Captain America over him, all the times he was told he was not like the great Captain America. When Cap also seemed to be telling him how he wasn’t the “hero” material that probably just struck a nerve. Tony was never good at rejections from people he actually cared about the opinion of, whether he wanted to admit it or not.

Cap threw words around, Tony lashed out, the two fought, and things would escalate very quickly. But at some point, Tony seemed to have let go of his bitterness a bit by bit, telling Rhodey one night over drinks he “finally understands why the world needs Steve Rogers”. And although he was disappointed to see the flaws at first, it is comforting to know even Captain America was human after all.

No, Rhodey saw it from a mile away. In truth, a part of Tony just wanted to be accepted by Captain America he grew up admiring especially now that he was part of this Avengers group he couldn't help but care for.

Everything became easier after the two seemed to have developed some mutual respect for each other. They were officially both leading members of the Avengers and the missions ran relatedly smoothly. Some called them friends or partners though the two superheroes rarely spend much time outside of missions largely due to much of Tony’s personal time still being spent with Stephen Strange, now a well-renowned surgeon.

The team knew of the existence of Tony’s boyfriend since several gossip magazines covered much of their relationship every other week but considering Stephen’s workaholic tendency that rivaled Tony’s and the pair’s scene originally vastly different from the rest of the Avengers, they didn’t have many reasons to cross paths. After all, they didn’t even know Clint even had a family until the situation demanded it. They were all, more or less, respectful of each other’s personal life and privacy. No one officially had met Stephen in person other than Natasha, who only ended up in the same room as Tony’s then very public boyfriend while she was parading as Stark Industry
employee. She had noted in the initial report for Avengers Initiative Stephen Vincent Strange as one of the potential liabilities of Iron Man.

But of course, everything changed the day Stephen crashed his car. Tony was the first one on-site. Abandoning his own post during a mission nearby the minute Pepper had called to inform him of his boyfriend’s accident.

Captain understood when Rhodey later explained the situation but Tony disappearing on them without a warning did cause some complications. It may have been the reason Cap showed up to the hospital later that night only to have any lecture die in his throat the minute he saw the state Tony was in. The great Tony Stark not even being able to string two words together, shaking while trying and failing to keep his emotions in check.

That was the day Cap became Steve Rogers for Rhodes. And just Steve to Tony. When Rhodes and Pepper came back from getting all of them desperately needed coffee around 4 am they saw Tony crying uncontrollably on the Captain’s shoulders.

Stephen breaking things off with Tony was something Rhodey did not anticipate. He had watched the pair at best and worst. The two enabled each other in the best and worst of ways. But it was Stephen had been there for Tony through a series of life-altering events in ways Pepper and Rhodes, despite their best efforts, just could not handle on several occasions. He really had thought that Tony had met his match in the genius surgeon in more ways than one. That after Tony's an endless amount of one night stands and failed attempts at relationships, this was it. So Stephen couldn't go back to being a surgeon, so what? He was, at least alive and if it was the money... well that was definitely not an issue if you were dating Tony Stark. Rhodes felt tremendous relief as soon as he heard Stephen will live. He quickly realized how naive he had been and Tony was right in being nervous all along.

The only warning the Rhodes got was Pepper’s phone call. He didn’t get much detail either other than finding Tony in his half trashed workshop, sitting on the corner with several bottles of scotch. “He left me, Rhodes,” was all he could get out of his best friend.

The media, of course, spun the story into Tony leaving Stephen. About the multi-billionaire not wanting to be held down by the now-crippled surgeon. Tony never made any effort in correcting the story in what Pepper described as some sort of self-punishment. Only the Avengers really saw how wrecked Tony was by the breakup and how desperately he was trying to salvage their relationship.

Steve tried his best to keep Tony company as he increasingly spent more time in the Avengers Compound resenting the world. Cap also seemed to be enjoying the engineer's antics as Tony tried to distract himself by introducing Steve some new technology or pop culture. Rhodes knows first
hand how Tony innately turns up the charm around people he considers a possible friend and how accommodating he can be when he likes you, platonically or romantically. It was a trait that got amplified especially when he felt lonely.

Rhodes knew at some point the way Steve dealt with Tony had changed. It was no longer the careful professionalism or fondness from being a fellow teammate. Rhodes doesn’t make a big deal out of it. If anything, at the time he thought it would be great if Tony can move on with someone like Steve Rogers, America’s golden boy. He saw it that fateful night at the hospital, for once Tony wasn’t carrying all the weight on his shoulders.

Rhodes can clearly recall the day Steve finally asks Tony out on a date. He remembers because he found red roses in Tony’s lab and he proceeded to tease Cap for being old fashioned. Although, even with all his jabs, he was very happy for his friend. Maybe old fashioned is something Tony needs right now. The engineer had doubts and, though he doesn’t outright say, Rhodes can tell even after a year from Stephen’s disappearance he was still a bit hung up over the doctor. He encourages his friend to still give it a shot. Maybe it is time to move on. But whatever doubts Tony had soon disappeared as Steve says all the right things with always that look of unconcealed, open love.

He doesn’t remember exactly when things shifted. Or maybe it was so gradual he just can't pin it. But definitely after Ultron things were different.

“Tony, you said you two had a fight, how bad really was it?” Part of him knew the answer. The Spider-kid had no reason to lie and he wasn’t all too shocked, quite frankly, of how resourceful the kid can be in piecing together all the information. “Tones…”

“Next time,” he can see the smile was now wearing thin, “just not right now, Rhodey.”

“Yea- alright,” he knew better than to push his friend in cases like this. After a bit of awkward silence, he stepped into the elevator. “I’m the one who pushed you to give him a chance. I also pushed you to letting them come back here because I really thought-“

“It’s alright, not your fault,” Tony replied easily.

But it certainly felt like it.
There were a lot of raised voices as he approached upstairs once more. One he can distinctly identify as Pepper, making him nearly run out of the elevator once it reached the floor. He had thought the group dispersed after realizing how upset Peter had been but it seems that there was round two in the works after the teens have left. He wonders if FRIDAY already alerted Tony.

“Look, Miss Potts, all due respect, I don’t understand why he is even here. He refused to be part of the Avengers.”

“Doctor Strange actually had access to all of Tony’s property before any of the Avengers existed.”

“I’m very much aware of Tony’s relationship with Strange in the past. We were there when it ended.”

Rhodes turned the corner just in time to see Stephen glaring daggers at the Captain. He had to admit Stephen did change quite a bit from the handsome pretty boy surgeon Tony had met at a gala one year. It was to the point upon re-meeting him during the war with Thanos, Rhodes hardly recognized the other.

He had first thought it was because Stephen looked significantly more mature now: broader shouldered, the facial hair, more graying hair, and the complete change of clothing choices. But the more he observed it was the change in his demeanor that was throwing him off even more.

“The whole Sorcerer Supreme serious and prim thing” Tony had said and he had to admit his friend had a point. It was oddly fascinating to watch Stephen openly challenge Captain America with clearly no intention of backing down. The ex-surgeon had always been stubborn and hot-headed as Tony, Rhodes knew that first hand, but there was now a complete assurance Stephen had of himself that was underlined everything he says and did. It was quite domineering in fact. He seemed to now have a presence that very easily rivaled Cap’s.

Although currently that just meant this might end in much more of a disaster.

“Do not bother, James,” came the deep voice that was unmistakably the sorcerer’s. He was willing to bet Stephen was purposely trying to sound bored just to tick the Captain off even more, “I already asked FRIDAY to keep Tony out of this. I rather not have him nor our child unnecessarily witnessing something unsavory.”

“Your child?” Steve was starting to sound exasperated.
“Well, he definitely won’t be yours.”

Natasha quickly grabbed a hold Steve’s arm to make sure he didn’t lunge forward at the Doctor.

“Okay look, guys,” Rhodes stepped forward trying to put himself between the Captain and Strange. “I don’t know what even started this conversation or why exactly you both are at each other’s throat today but…” he turned towards Steve, “Captain, Tony made it clear his current status of relationship with Stephen and sure maybe Stephen isn’t an Avengers but he had been in Tony’s life for quite some time and he was a huge help during battle with Thanos… and this is Tony’s building.”

“It’s not-“ Steve looked away taking a deep breath. “Where’s Tony? I need to talk to him-“

“You will do no such thing,” Stephen replied coldly not missing a beat.

“You cannot be serious. You can’t be forcing him to -“

“Oh, I am not. I am not you. I am simply making sure you abide by his wish. He does not want to speak to you. Get a hint.”

Steven came forward pushing past Rhodes, “I refuse to believe that. We just fought side by side against Thanos and he was fine. We never even actually broke up.”

Stephen stood at his full height at the Captain’s approach, no longer leaning against what was left of the kitchen counter. “I believe that was implied when you left him for dead in Siberia to chase after your friend who killed his parents.”

“Like you are the one to talk. You left him, ran away to god knows where, and some of us here had to pick up the pieces. He nearly killed himself when you left, did you even know that?”

There was a pause. Pepper had already pulled Rhodes out of the way and in truth, he was very grateful.
“Unlike you, I’m very aware of my mistakes. I acknowledge it,” He certainly dropped the bored act now. “I had quite mistakenly thought that upon my departure that Tony would find someone better. Thank you for proving me wrong, Rogers. Because of you, I don’t ever have to question my place by his side.”
“So that’s it? Everyone’s pulling the plugs and moving on?”

It has officially been two months since Tony Stark’s disappearance in Afghanistan. There have been a lot of talks circulating as to who will be next to take over the Stark Industries. Stephen was not naïve. Time waited for no man; not even the great Tony Stark.

He had kept his composure till now, as Pepper asked. Not reacting to any of the reporters or even his personal friends that asked for inside news. But when the talk of a funeral came, Stephen finally snapped.

“There’s nothing left we can do. If there was any indication Tony was still alive-” Rhodes looks exhausted and fatigued. Stephen knew in the back of his mind Rhodes is like a brother to Tony. He undoubtedly was worried and has been trying his best to locate the whereabouts of his friend.

But it wasn’t enough.

“Spare me. I read the official e-mail from Pepper. Thought maybe you’d have something different to say.” It wasn’t enough. They need to be doing more.

He started down the hallway in quick strides only to have the colonel closely tail him. “Look, Stephen,” he grabbed the doctor’s shoulder turning him around harshly, “You have some nerve showing up here and making it seem like we are not all doing our best. I knew him for a lot longer than you have. He’s family, you got that? I don’t even know what you are.”
“Then you should know, better than anyone else, if anyone could figure out how to beat the odds, it’s Tony. If it was you over there, he’d be finding a way to get you back, come hell or high water. Or be inventing a new one.”

There was a moment of silence as they just stare at one another.

“…What do you want me to do?” Rhodes asked finally.

“Be better. Be a better friend to him.”

The morning came peacefully, very much disregarding the previous day’s debacle.

Stephen slowly pushed himself up all the while trying to half-heartedly straighten his now messy hair. As he gets a footing off the bed, the blackout tint started dissolving from the window that makes up the majority of a wall, revealing a striking panoramic view of the mountains. Though beautiful, and possibly more his personal taste, Stephen misses the cityscape that could have been seen from Tony’s previous bedrooms. The skyscrapers always reminded him of Tony: bold, fast-paced, a testament of humanity’s intelligence and strength.

“Good morning, Doctor Strange. It’s seven-forty A.M. The weather in Upstate New York is 72 degree with scattered clouds. Boss is downstairs in his lab.”

The doctor pulled on a shirt, processing the information from the AI. He wasn’t blind to how Tony has been spending more and more time in the workshop since the rogues' return. It was one of the few areas they did not have access to. It irritated him, of course. Tony loves his lab but the brunette ultimately did not react well to being cooped up in one area no matter the place or the circumstance. The engineer had mentioned maybe visiting Malibu for old times sake. How Peter would love the sun and the beach. Maybe that was not such a bad idea. He can simply portal to the Sanctum and back when necessary and Tony can get some much needed fresh air and freedom.

“How long has he been there, FRIDAY?” he asked the AI.

“Shall I tell you the answer Boss has instructed me to say?”
He shook his head slightly with a soft smile. The AI was definitely getting smarter than he ever imagined, though in hindsight, unsurprising being a creation of Tony’s. “No that won’t be necessary,” he replied as he heads towards the large bathroom. He wanted to at least quickly wash up before heading downstairs.

Stephen would like to think the AI had taken a liking to him. It did seem to listen to him more so than others in the complex and on a few occasions even over-riding Tony’s order to the creator’s shock.

“Boss has not yet eaten and in process of drinking his fifth cup of coffee.”

The doctor let out of soft chuckle as he towels his face dry. No, the AI definitely likes him because it likes Tony.

“Thank you, FRIDAY.”

“Of course, Doctor Strange.”

“Mr. Stark is requesting your presence downstairs, Doctor Strange.”

“Don’t let him do anything stupid,” Pepper didn’t even look up from the paperwork she was sorting through.

“Thank you, Jarvis,” he replied while smiling softly in the direction of the strawberry blonde. He made his way downstairs quickly, entering the access code once he reaches the glass door.

“How big are your hands?”

“What?” Stephen frowned as he approached Tony shirtless on a chair. He couldn't take his eyes off the glow from his chest.

“Just show me your hands.”
“Tony…” he said warningly.

“Who am I kidding, you’re a surgeon. You’ll do.”

“So that’s the thing that’s keeping you alive.”

“That’s the thing that WAS keeping me alive. It is now an antique. This is what WILL be keeping me alive for the foreseeable future.”

He’s fascinated by the circular object Tony is holding up. “Remarkable,” he whispered under his breath.

“I’m going to swap them out and switch all functions to the new unit.”

Oh no… “This cannot be safe-”

If anything has taught Stephen the past months of being in this friend-ish-with-benefits-kind of thing with Tony Stark, it was that he himself had more self-preservation than Christine had ever given him credit for. His reckless behavior was nowhere near the catastrophic level that was Tony’s.

“It’s completely safe. First I need you to reach in-“

“If it WAS safe you would have called Pepper down here. Basic assumption, women have smaller hands. You just need me to be an accomplice for things Pepper certainly will not let you-“

“-to the socket. Listen, we have to do this in a matter of minutes.”

“Of course you’re not listening-“

“I AM listening. I’m just choosing not to respond because it won’t be what you want to hear. I’m going to lift off the old chest piece and I need you to reach in as far as your hands can fit and gently
move the housing away from my heart.”

“Oh dear god-“

“Don’t be dramatic, Shakespeare... Keep going-“

“I know where the heart is! I’m a surgeon,” Stephen snaps.

“For a surgeon, you’re really not good at being calm-“

“You DO realize there we shouldn’t operate on family members or loved ones-“

“So you DO love me-“

“For someone who is allergic to commitments, you sure are very insistent on romantic declarations-“

“AH-“

“What’s going on-“

“I’m going into cardiac arrest.”

“I know what cardiac arrest is!”

“You asked! Definitely not being calm.”

Okay- okay.... Tony... it’s going to be alright-“ at this point, he was definitely unsure if he was really trying to assure the other or calm himself. Stephen carefully lowered the wires of the new reactor, attaching it quickly to Tony with an odd squish sound he rather never hear again in this lifetime. The beeping stopped.
There’s a moment where they both didn’t move, trying to catch their breath.

“There. Good as new,” the engineer got up, pulling a shirt over himself.

Stephen stood there, still holding the oozing old arc reactor in a sort of a daze. He honestly never, ever, been this frazzled; in fact, he never knew he ever had the capacity to be so panicked. The human body never phased him; the gore, blood, death, it was all almost second nature but- “Do. Not. Make. Me. Do. That. Again.”

There was a look that exchanged between them. The doctor noticed something he can’t quite place in the brunette’s doe eyes.

“I don’t have anyone else.”

There was a long pause in which Tony started pacing nervously. “I-…are you going to say something…?” he asked unable to deal with the silence any longer.

“I’m listening,” Stephan responded dryly. “I’m just choosing not to respond because it won’t be what you want to hear.”

Tony grinned.

The loud music of the shop greeted Stephen as he stepped off the elevator. He glanced up to one of the cameras that connect to FRIDAY and immediately the music turned down just as the sorcerer stopped a few feet away from where Tony was working.

“Leaving me to wake up alone again? How many times is that this week,” he started in a teasing tone.

Tony turned his head with a smirk still fidgeting with his latest creation, “Sorry, hun. Really couldn’t get this out of my head.”
The engineer felt a strong arm wrap around his waist, making him shift around completely, back soon pressing against the worktable behind him. He couldn’t stop the grin forming as Stephen closed the distance between the two, lips meeting his. It started off sweet but it never ends that way for the pair. Long since past the days where they played chaste, trying to tone down their inherent fervent nature.

It wasn’t long before one of the doctor’s long legs shoved its way between shorter male’s and a trembling, but always the confident, hand gripped tightly at Tony’s hip forcing them closer. Tony let out a soft gasp meeting the piercing green-blue eyes.

“Someone’s feisty today,” the brunette’s voice was surprisingly even considering the rapid heartbeat.

Stephen tilts his head, lowering it further to nip at his lover’s neck. “Just making sure I’m the one you can’t get out of that pretty little head of yours.”

He chuckled as he hears Tony groan. The doctor always loved how expressive the other was at times like this. Maybe it was an ego thing. After all, it would be an outright lie for Stephen Strange to claim he wasn’t a prideful man. It was simply that he learned to better control it in recent years.

“Does it actually bother you to wake up alone? You know I can’t really stop my mind when-”

“No, not really,” he lifted his head to meet Tony’s gaze once more. “I just like to complain and see if I’ll get something out of it- ow”

Tony had lightly smacked him with a fond look. “You know full well, cuddle muffin, you can get anything out of me just by fluttering your eyelashes a bit and laying on that accent.”

“I would like you to at least eat something,” Stephen replied while pushing away the coffee cup that sat nearby on the worktable.

“Ugh so boring. I say I can give you whatever you want and you choose having me fed? No dirty sex, bending me over my work table, kinky shit –“
The sorcerer rolled his eyes, “I will tie you to the chair and force feed you if you don’t eat something by noon.”

Tony opened his mouth in hopes of saying another snarky remark but was soon interrupted by FRIDAY.

“Boss, Doctor Strange, Peter is on his way to you.”

The engineer let out a laugh as Stephen made a loud dramatic sigh while resting his forehead onto Tony’s shoulder. “Life of having a kid-“ Tony said fondly patting his lover’s back before lightly pushing them apart, which earned him another groan from Stephen.

“I never wanted kids,” muttered the doctor while straightening up.

“You keep saying but you were over the moon when Pete called you dad yesterday-”

“ARE YOU BOTH DRESSED,” came the loud voice. The two adults looked up to see the elevator door open but Peter completely turned around facing the other direction.

Stephen shook his head with a snort as he makes his way towards the set of couches that became a permanent fixture at the corner of Tony’s workshop.

“It was only one time Pete,” Tony responded with an eye roll. “You teenagers these days are so overly dramatic. You’re definitely getting that from Stephen-“


Tony gave them both a mock hurt expression, putting a hand over his heart with an obvious fake gasp.

“Crashing your own charity gala, that’s new.”
“You’re here?”

Stephen let out a sigh leaning against the bar, “I do get invitations to these sorts of events not just as your plus one, Tony. You do understand, as minor as it may seem to you, I have a reputation of my own.”

“I know you do-“

“I’m the best neurosurgeon in the west coast-“

“I know you are.”

“I may not be the youngest CEO of the fortune 500 company but -“

“So why did you stick around.”

“What?” The doctor turned towards the other in mild confusion.

“I heard from Rhodey how you cornered him into keeping up the search for me. You’re smart, successful, arguably even better looking than me…”

“Arguably?” he snorted as he takes a sip of his drink.

Of course, Tony, as usual, still rambled on. “….incredible in bed. We haven’t known each other for long and it’s clear you’re not even overly attached to me. You could have gone off and found another multi-millionaire to waste your time on with… I don’t know, settle down? House? Have kids?”

“I don’t want kids.”

“Great. Me neither.”
“For god’s sake-“

“What I mean is,” Tony continued on, “You didn’t have to stick around when everyone else basically already put me in a coffin-“

There was a short pause in which Stephen turned his attention to the crowd of the room. “That’s what friends do, Tony.”

“So we’re just friends now?”

“I don’t even know what we are, Anthony,” he lowered his voice. There was a hint of something dangerous Tony undoubtedly will pick up. “Couple of months ago this types of conversation was too advance for you emotionally-“

“Wow not holding back our punches today, are we?”

Perhaps it was the alcohol he drank on an empty stomach or that he just got off from a particularly draining 20-hour shift, Stephen was not exactly in the best of moods. “I recall you went out of your way to tell the press we are ‘friends’, I got the hint.”

“I- You didn’t need to be dealing with my mess right now. As you said, you have a reputation of your own-“

He slammed the drink down on the counter, a little harder than he meant to. “Oh drop the hero act, Anthony. Aren’t you tired yet always being the one to take care of everyone?”

“I’m-“

“Dance with me.”

“Wha-“
He noted it was almost cute seeing the usual pompous playboy confused. There wasn’t a lot that makes the genius become lost for words making it a rare sight.

“Or are you embarrassed to be seen dancing with a man.”

“Oh honey, you’re a hot, successful neurosurgeon, 6 years my junior. What have I got to be embarrassed about?” Tony quickly put down his drink with a smirk.

“Good, because you’re going to let me lead.”

But before Tony can say anything in return there was a voice that that greeted them.

“Mr. Stark!”

They both turned to see a blonde walking towards them.

“I was hoping I could get a reaction from you.”

“How’s panic?” Tony retorted back with the obvious annoyance. Stephen couldn’t help but be pleased that it was he who made the genius fumble for words just moments ago.

“I was referring to your company’s involvement in this latest atrocity.”

Stephen’s eyes narrowed. He could have sworn he saw her before at some point recently.

“Hey, they just put my name on the invitations,” Tony said before a handful of photos were thrust at him.

“Is this what you call accountability?”

He felt the air shift as Tony looks through the photos. “When were these taken?”
Peter smiled, glanced briefly over to where Stephen was now trying to make himself comfortable with an open book, then joined Tony at the work station.

“So,” Tony said, voice lowered. Although, they were pretty sure if Stephen really intended on listening he probably can still hear their every word. “‘Other dad’ huh?”

Peter turned a bit pink around the ears, choosing to look at the blueprints scattered along the work station rather than meeting the other’s eyes. “I- it’s just-“

“You like him?” Tony asked, voice light. He continued his work while stealing quick glances at the teen.

“I- I mean… yeah,” then quickly added, "not like it matters but-“

“Do you like him more than me?” the brunette teased.

Peter’s face snapped up, eyes wide. “NO! …Wait- I mean-“ he urgently looked towards Stephen, who, though not looking directly at them, was smiling behind his book. “This is like being told to choose between mom or dad-“

“I always said mom,” Tony said flatly. “No hesitation.”

“You would,” the doctor called out.

Peter smiled, rocking back and forth on his feet.

“It matters,” the seriousness in Tony’s voice drew the teen’s attention back. This time, their eyes lock. Tony paused for a second trying to get a good read on Peter’s face before continuing. “If this adoption thing goes through, and it will, your opinion matters. A lot.” They stare for a bit longer and the engineer can see the kid’s eyes starting sparkle a bit in the light. “But we can talk for real when the wizard isn’t eavesdropping. Then you can truthfully tell me how lame you really think he
Stephen rolled his eyes and Peter laughed, shaking his head lightly.

Tony turned his attention back to the mechanics and Peter sank his hands into the pockets of his sweats. “I like him a whole lot better than Mr. America,” he muttered, his gaze fixed on the floor.

Tony stopped briefly but did not look up. “Right, about that. You said that in front of the others to give him-,” he pointed the tool in his hand towards Stephen’s direction, “-ammunition.”

“I-“

“Wasn’t a question.”

Peter shut his mouth as if rethinking his next statement. “They were being rude.”

Tony snorted while ruffling the teen's hair, “You sly kid. I knew you were spending way too much time with Nat.”

“Well- Doctor Strange asked me to keep an eye on her.”

That definitely made Tony look up, quickly turning towards his boyfriend. “Please tell me you are not using my kid to spy on the rogues-“

Stephen glanced up from the book, an elegant eyebrow raised. “He volunteered. And he’s not naive, Tony. He knows exactly what he’s doing,” he almost sounds proud. “They do grow up so fast. You are aware he basically have you wrapped around his finger-”

Tony stared at him, arms now crossed. “And you keep saying you don’t want kids.”

“Actually, Mr. Star- Dad?”
Oh, Stephen knew the teen definitely has Tony wrapped around his finger. That look in those chocolate brown eyes as he gazed back at Peter was very telling. He shook his head with another chuckle before turning his attention back to the book.

“There is this party tonight. A small get-together with some friends from school… Ned is going to be there too—"

“Is there alcohol?”

“No!”

“Drugs?”

“No.”

“Sex?”

“NO.”

“Then why are you going?”

“ANTHONY!”

“How ironic, Tony! Trying to rid the world of weapons, you gave it its best one ever!”

“STEPHEN! Time to hit the button!”

“You told me not to!”
“JUST DO IT!”

“YOU’LL DIE!”

“PUSH IT!”

............

“You’ve all received the official statement of what occurred at Stark Industries last night. There have been unconfirmed reports that a robotic prototype malfunctioned and caused damage to the arc reactor. Fortunately, a member of Tony Stark’s personal security staff… Iron Man… That’s kind of catchy.”

Stephen rolled his eyes watching Pepper tries applying makeup to one of Tony’s many bruises. Luckily, only one marked his pretty face making it easy for the secretary to cover it up. God, how he wished to have been the one to have strangled Obadiah Stane to his death.

“It’s got a nice ring to it. I mean it’s not technically accurate. The suit’s a gold-titanium alloy, but it’s kind of evocative,” he glanced at Stephen with a bit of what resembled a puppy seeking acknowledgment.

Stephen laughed under his breath, shaking his head lightly.

“…the imagery, anyways.”

Pepper threw the doctor a glance and they share a knowing look they often did in moments like this.

She picked up Tony’s suit jacket that has been draped on the chair and Stephen quickly walked over. It seemed as though they were the only two who noticed Tony’s adverse to people’s touches since the kidnapping. They had briefly, and discretely tested the theory and it seemed that the only one Tony hadn’t been flinching around, though it was masked very well they had to admit, was Stephen.
“Here...” he said under his breath. He took the fabric from Pepper and she stepped back easily. Tony stood without a second thought, letting the doctor help him slip on the jacket.

“Here’s your alibi,” said the man who Pepper introduced as Coulson. “We have port papers that put you in Avalon all night, and sworn statements from 50 of your guests.”

“See, I was thinking maybe we should say it was just Stephen and me-“

Pepper turned towards Stephen with an exasperated smile. The surgeon tried to give her his best “see what I have to deal with” look.

“alone... on the island.”

“That’s what happened,” Coulson ignored him. “Just read it, word for word. You’ve got 90 seconds.”

As the agent started towards the door, Pepper quickly following. Stephen heard vague words of thank you being said by the secretary.

As the door closes shuts the pair focused on each other.

“Ok- let’s get this show on the road. You know it’s actually not that bad. Even I don’t think I’m Iron Man.”

Stephen crossed his arms leaning back, half sitting on the table behind him. “You’re not.”

“All right, suit yourself.” The brunette took a step forward. “You know, if I were Iron Man, I’d have this boyfriend who knew my true identity. He’d be a wreck, ‘cause he’d always be worrying that I was going to die...”

Stephen raised an eyebrow, a smirk starting to form on his lips.

“...yet so proud of the man I’d become. He’d be wildly conflicted, which would only make him
more…” Tony stepped closer, their lips now almost touching. “…crazy about me.”

“You don’t do boyfriends, Tony.”

“I might if it’s you.”

“Tony…” he began sternly.

“Listen,” of course Tony would always interrupt him. Though Stephen surprisingly found he doesn’t mind too much oddly. “Because of all the changes and Stane being dead and all, we are moving the headquarter to New York. …You were saying how you missed it there and your friend… Christine?”

“Impressive. You were actually listening,“ he replied with much sarcasm.

“-And Metro- General has been scouting you for the past year…”

“Are you really asking me to move with you across the country? Your definitely-not-boyfriend-not-really-friends-one-night-stand?”

“Are you really telling me this isn’t worth seeing what it can be?”

His sighed but the smile never faltered. As outrageous as this conversation was, somehow it felt... natural, almost fun. This was the first time someone had been able to completely keep up with Stephen and he was almost certain the sentiment was the same for Tony.

“Come on,” the shorter brunette said stepping back a little. “I saw the way you looked at me when you thought I was going to die-“

“Which time?” the doctor responded flatly.

“-you love me.”
There was a prolonged silence before Stephen straightened himself up. “It’s going to cost you,” Stephen said finally with a smirk.

Tony stared back almost challengingly.

“A flat with a view. You’re going to pay for it.”

Tony scoffed, ”Really? That’s all? You know I’m Tony Stark right?”

He let out a soft laughter. “Okay then, tell me, Anthony, what is your love worth then?”

The engineer shrugged. “Uh- I don’t know,” he said half-heartedly, “half the universe?”

“Oh, believe me, Tony, if I had half the universe in my hands I wouldn’t be wasting it on you.”

“RUDE.”

Chapter End Notes

* Had to put the party dialogue that I saw from once online and couldn't stop it seeing it as Tony & Pete.

And thank you for all the comments and kudos~ made me so happy that I finished writing out the next chapter a bit earlier than I intended to LOL It probably won’t be updated so frequently in the future but will definitely be trying to post once a week.
Before anyone points it out – I did try my best to stay within the original timelines of MCU but I will conveniently switch Doctor Strange movie event timeline to before Age of Ultron;;; I had this story idea before the Endgame movie came out with the confirmation from Ancient One going “5 year too soon” in regards to Strange and realized my timeline was fucked up. So at this point, I’m just gonna fudge up some details for my convenience lolololol

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“So, you broke up with me, ditched all your family and friends here, bolted straight to LA the minute you got that ridiculously generous compensation package but now you are back because of… a… friend.”

“Yep,” Stephen said curtly, lowering his cup back to its saucer.

Christine continued to stare at him, eyes narrowing. She has yet to touch the latte she ordered. “I’m missing something,” she whispered with a hint of amusement.

Stephen rolled his eyes while letting out a sigh, “let it go, Christine.”

“No. The fact you don’t want me to question, you don’t want to be the center of attention is telling me that whatever you are hiding, Strange, it’s good,” she finally took a sip from her cup. There was a genuine smile playing on her lips, as she didn’t take her eyes off her long-time friend and ex. “Did you follow a girl?”

“No girl, no.”

Her eyes widened briefly, resting her chin on the palm of her hand. “A boy?”

He scowled at her before turning away.
That definitely made Christine laugh, shaking her head in disbelief. “Stephen Strange in love. This IS good.”

“Oh shut up.” And he meant it. He was already feeling stupid enough as it was the more he thought about the whole situation.

But his friend pressed on. “So am I going to get a name?”

He let out a sigh, leaning back in his chair. “Anthony.”

“When do I get to meet him?” she said, unable to hold back the enthusiasm she felt.

Perhaps it was odd she appeared rather happy upon hearing the news that her ex found someone new but when it came down to it, the two were friends before anything more. They had given a relationship a shot confusing the comfort felt for one another as a possibility for something more. But, in the end, Christine definitely knew Stephen was not the type to be satisfied by something just because it was easy and stable. It was in his nature to seek out the type of love that will burn you to the point of consumption. He needed the excitement, the trill… a love that was hard but made you feel very much alive.

The problem was, it was damn near impossible to find someone that will keep Stephen’s interest and affection for extended periods of time. Especially after he decided to nitpick at your life, your personality, life, and issues and deemed you are not worth his time.

“We’re not even in a relationship, Christine. We are just seeing how things go.”

“Okay, you could not have followed him across the country on a chance it might work out. You definitely would not let anyone talk you into that-“

Their eyes met and something in Stephen’s expression made her smile falter.

The war was over. Thanos defeated. Cheering filled the air as many looked to one another with happiness and relief.
…But for some, the relief was very short lived. Because few short seconds later, Iron Man pushed past the crowd to jump into the arms of Doctor Strange.

Many were confused. Most clearly expected the first one Tony seek out from the battlefield to be Captain America, regardless of the fallout events that occurred. And as the Avengers turned questioningly to Steve, they came to the obvious conclusion the Cap… must have also been expecting the same.

And so here they were, once again wondering if they should flee from the scene or try to prevent the inevitable. In the end, they all stayed. They were heroes, after all. But as for trying to prevent the situation, they knew it was a trainwreck.

“We are a team! Whatever problems we have, we will work it out together. And for the last time, it does not concern you, Strange. It’s between Tony and I. Stay. Out.”

It at least started out as a peaceful afternoon. Two weeks since the last standoff between Steve and Stephen, which was quite impressive considering the level of animosity that had escalated in the recent months… although that may have been largely due to the fact Stephen spent much of his time back at the Sanctum, Tony hid in his office or lab, and Steve mostly stayed in the training floors with the several other Avengers, old and new.

But today was the day of Stephen’s return to the compound. And noticing how Tony decided to forgo most meals while he was away, he had taken upon himself to cook in the communal kitchen. He had initially checked with FRIDAY to see if anyone else was already present. Personally, and perhaps selfishly, the sorcerer wanted nothing more than a chance to put some of the rogues in their place but he hadn't planned on going out of his way to cause unnecessary trouble.

However, shortly after he began, Steve, Bucky, Clint, Sam, and Natasha came back from a round of training. A moment’s later, Bruce walked in with the intention of getting a bite to eat closely followed by Rhodes who looked as if he was seriously considering turn right back around and running.

“Steve- don’t…” Barnes stepped closer as if preparing to hold back his friend if necessary.

Stephen had to admit, though his presence had been stressful for Tony initially, James Barnes proved to be much more sensible than Rogers. He at least had the decency to look extremely guilty the few times he and Tony crossed paths. And upon realizing how Tony seems to flinch every time
he laid eyes on the soldier, Barnes took upon himself to try and put as much space possible between them, or just making himself scarce if the situation allowed it. It was an effort that Tony noticed and after several weeks, threw an olive branch by initiating small talks when the engineer was feeling more up to it.

Tony ultimately knew the death of his parents was not Barnes’s fault, he didn’t ask to be taken in by Hydra and be brainwashed. Sure he had lashed out badly initially but if he was being honest, it was Steve's betrayal that affected him more than finding out the truth of his parent's death. At the end of the day, however, the brunette felt he had no real right to judge Barnes when he himself definitely did not have a clean record.

But that was precisely the reason Stephen has so much issue with the Captain. While Tony was not blameless for certain events, he definitely was aware of his faults. It was to the point it ate him alive from within. Rogers, however, seemed to be under the impression he can do no wrong. No, correction: he lacked self-awareness enough to acknowledge the gravity of his mistakes. He seemed to believe the mistakes he committed was somehow necessarily simply because he himself deemed there was no other option. And yet, when another does something similar, he condemned them to no end. It was a clear double standard. On top of that, he seemed to ignore all his personal flaws or downplayed to an extreme extent. Others around him only enabling the behavior by letting things go just simply because he was Captain America.

The social perception was definitely a funny thing: it can condemn or revere a man just on an emotional whim.

Stephen had wondered at some point if Rogers purposely did not discuss the details what happened between Tony and him because he honestly believed in the idea of privacy or was it more out of pure self-preservation, whether the blonde acknowledged it or not. In the back of the good Captain’s mind, did he know…? That once more reasonable people stepped in and looked into what happened as a whole, understood the details and connected the dots, they may not be on his side wholeheartedly as they are now.

After all, the reason why most of the Avengers and SHIELD simply wanted Captain America and Iron Man to just simply “kiss and make up” largely stemmed from the impression they had of Tony. Everyone had a skewed perception that Tony must be more at fault, whatever it was. The Captain was willing to forgive so why not let things go back to the way things were? Back to the good old days. It was Steve Rogers, how bad could things even have been.

That mere thought always made Stephen feel sick.

“How convenient that would be for you,” the doctor replied coldly. He felt his old temper rise the more he thought about the whole situation.
“What are you talking about, Strange?”

“Doctor Strange…” came a voice from the corner. It seemed as though Peter had come back from school. Still wearing his backpack, looking a bit wide-eyed at the scene that was unfolding.

“Peter, go upstairs.” The teen’s appearance seemed to have softened something in the sorcerer, neither his voice nor his gaze holding the bitterness from just seconds ago.

“Is Tony upstairs?” Steve asked though it wasn’t much of a question.

The teen stiffened in response, which only returned the sorcerer’s anger.

“None of your concern, Rogers,” Stephen snapped.

Steve scoffed at the statement. “What are you? His keeper? Tony doesn’t need you to fight his battles for him. Or are you just afraid to let me talk to him because you know that once we work this out, you’ll be out of the picture.”

It was a stretch. They all knew it. Even Steve knew the situation was far from being that simple. And although he did believe things would be worked out between him and Tony, he did not expect Tony to let Stephen go so easily, he hadn’t in the past. But at that moment, Steve’s frustration had gotten the better of him and doctor's continued interference had been getting to him, to say the least.

Stephen lunged forward, raising a hand. Rhodes quickly jumped in to get a grip on his arm and shoulder, pulling back slightly. Considering the many years, Rhodes knew this particular topic was approaching a sore spot. There had always been one specific topic that made Stephen lose his cool and the Captain just stumbled on it.

Unfortunately, the action did not go unnoticed by Steve who narrows his eyes, analyzing the situation. This had, in the several months of the on and off arguments, been the first time he had gotten a real rise out of the sorcerer. No faux boredom, no carefully considered verbal attack, no above-it-all attitude, Stephen nearly gave into his own impulsiveness.
“So, is that what this is? Underneath all the bravado, you are just an insecure, broken man who knows he can’t hold Tony’s attention as soon as something better comes along.”

Rhodes, Barnes, Clint, and Sam all swore under their breath, looking as if they all were reconsidering running from this situation. On the other hand, Natasha stayed carefully silent, Peter and Bruce just looked horrified… and Stephen…

“Watch your tongue, Rogers. You may find that, unlike many here, I do not put you on a pedestal and more than willing to put you in your place should you push me.”

“Captain- Steve… there is no need for this,” Bruce pleaded, looking towards Natasha for backup.

Getting the hint, Natasha took a half step forward trying to get the Captain to look at her. “Steve, stop-”

But Steve quickly ignored his teammates, eyes fixed on Stephen. “Come on, let’s go a few rounds then. I’m not scared of you. You act like you are better than everyone but inside you are just a man too afraid to face the fact you are his second choice, a rebound at best.”

“Who exactly is the rebound I wonder-“ there was definitely something dangerous in Stephen’s tone now.

“Stephen,” Rhodes grip tightened, trying to pull him back further away from the Captain. “Don’t do this, man. You know Tony wouldn’t want-”

“Gosh, I don’t know why I didn’t notice it sooner,” Steve lets out a dry laugh. ”The fact you never take off those gloves and don’t ever shake anyone’s hands should have been a clue. You’re so insecure.”

He took a step forward towards the sorcerer. "You know, I thought it was odd you wouldn't join the Avengers... even for Tony after all your declaration about how you care about him, how you are better than me. But it's because you're a coward. You knew the distance was the only way you can keep up this perfect, tough, infallible impression you gave everyone. Because the more time we spent with you, we would see the cracks in your mask. Does Tony even know? What you are really like? He always liked his men strong and confident. The fact that he's still with you probably means you have him tricked too. You definitely seem the type to be smart enough not to show him. You would have lost your appeal. I mean what else can you be offering him really, Strange? A
cripple who can’t even hold him properly.”

There was a cold silence following the statement.

Rhodes gritted his teeth, looking to the god above. He then took a deep breath, patting Stephen’s shoulder before letting go. “On second thought, Tony will understand.”

“Are you not going home to rest?” She swiftly took away the book that Stephen had been using as a shade from the fluorescent light, tossing it to the nearby table.

He blinked several times adjusting to the light. He must have dozed off at some point. Long shifts through the night were always brutal. “What day is it?”

“Thursday,” Christine replied, setting down a cup next to the other doctor. “Here, coffee.”

“I hate Thursdays.” He straightened up from the lounge chair he had been half-heartedly lying on and groaned as he felt the stiff muscles. Perhaps he really should have gone straight home after the last procedure.

“...Well, there are three new projects the chairman wants to commission.”

“I assume they are counting on the Maria Stark Foundation to underwrite some of that-”

“The Chairman certainly seems to be. But they have funded us for the past six years so-”

The two turned towards the newcomers. One of whom Stephen was starting to get a bit tired of seeing, Dr. Nicodemus “Nick” West. He didn’t particularly have anything against the man but Stephen definitely knew when he was at the end of some petty jealousy. He dealt with that treatment from many others throughout his life. He admitted things always came easily to him. He had the looks, top of his class, great background, never short of admirers... He certainly had an easy life. But that sort of life was a magnet for envy and passive aggressive treatment once in a while.
“Doctor Palmer. Strange.” There was a slight shift in tone as West address from one to the other. Stephen tried not to roll his eyes.

“Doctor West,” he greeted back, making his voice even.

“This is Mr. John Holt, he’s on the board of directors. I believe you have yet to meet our new surgeon, Doctor Stephen Strange.”

Stephen rises from his seat, shaking the man’s hand with a smile.

“Ah, Doctor Strange. You’re quite the talk upstairs, you know. Wilson seemed quite pleased he finally convinced you to join the hospital.”

“I hope to exceed the expectations,” Stephen said politely, noting the slight annoyance that flashed across Nick’s face. Well, he had always been fond of the fact he can get under some people’s skin without really trying.

John returned the smile, and after a nod, turned towards Nick once more. “But as I was saying, Nick, with Tony Stark fully taking over all aspects of Stark Industries, it may be a whole new ball game. Wait… Doctor Strange, you are from LA, are you not? I believe I may have seen a picture or two with you and Mr. Stark…”

Stephen kept his face blank. Should he say they are “friend”? He and Tony didn’t exactly get into the whole labeling what they had, though “dating” may be the most appropriate term by definition. However, they also didn’t exactly talk about boundaries in terms of public viewpoint.

“You know- Anthony Edward Stark? By any chance are you two close? Maria Stark grant has always been quite generous to this hospital and I admit we do rely quite heavily on it. Would be great to have someone close put in a good word.”

“Anthony?” a whisper from Christine that Stephen was pretty sure he only heard. Well, she’s never going to let this go.

“I-” but before he could respond, Nick stepped forward.
“It’s LA, John. Besides, we all know what Tony Stark is like. All charm one moment doesn’t even remember your name the next. No offense, Strange. You have an impressive reputation but it’s THE Tony Stark. Remember how he still didn’t know the chairman’s name last year?”

“Oh, I definitely remember. He sulked about it for weeks…”

If the rumors haven’t spread yet (and it did), everyone was certain something royally combusted the moment they were called in for a mandatory meeting. And (if it was even needed) they got the confirmation when they walked into the large conference room with both Captain America and Doctor Strange at opposite sides. If anyone noticed the terrible bruise forming on Steve’s right eye (they did), no one dared to mention it.

It has been a very complex situation after the war with Thanos. SHIELD wasn’t short of internal problems before then and Accords became disarrayed after the snap. Five years later, everything was in complete chaos. At first, they did not know how to deal with the situation but after some time they were slowly putting back the pieces. It was eventually agreed that Nick Fury be put in charge once more of the new SHIELD that had been rebuilt with Everett Ross’s help. It was definitely not perfect and there were plenty of objections, but in the end, it was the best situation for the time being.

“I only agreed being summoned to mandatory meeting once a month, you better have a damn good reason to-“

Everyone remained silent as Tony Stark entered the room. They can all see the gears turning in the genius’s head as he noticed Stephen there, who hasn’t been present in one of these since the debriefing of the Thanos’s defeat. And as his gaze land on Steve’s new black eye, Tony definitely doesn’t bother finishing his sentence.

“Right…” he cleared his throat, walking to the chair next to Stephen.

Sitting down, Tony couldn’t help but glance over at Stephen, checking to see if he had suffered any injuries. Stephen stared back with an expression that clearly said something along the lines of I’m insulted. The sorcerer was leaning almost comfortably on one arm of his seat, legs crossed, fingers to his temple, looking surprisingly calm compared to the panic Tony felt once realizing someone must have gotten into some sort of brawl with Cap.
But now that he can see his boyfriend seemed relatively ok, he couldn’t help but also note Stephen was in his full sorcerer robe, boots, thick gloves, along with the cape. A look Tony had not seen in quite a while given their slip into the more domestic life. And although he really shouldn’t, given the circumstances, he can’t help but let his mind go… there…

The clothes always gave Stephen an incredible stature. Heightened his broad shoulders and form in ways that did wonders to his physique and presence. Tony had always been hot and bothered by the white coat the doctor used to wear during his surgeon days but he had to admit that was nothing in comparison to this. Probably didn't help he didn't have good sex in days. Quite frankly if this was any other situation he would have had his hands all over his boyfriend and-

Rhodes cleared his throat loudly behind them, making Tony do a complete 180.

“What the-“ Tony snatched off the glasses he had been wearing. “You-“

Rhodes’ lips were split and an ugly bruise on his chin. “I punched first,” the colonel admitted.

The brunette frowned before turning his attention back to his boyfriend with a look that said then why the fuck are you here?

“I had Rogers fall continuously for an hour,” Stephen replied in a bored tone.

There was a loud cough from the opposite end of the table, from Clint. Tony regarded him questioningly but the archer refused to elaborate, his arms crossed.

Rhodes let out a sigh. “Cap punched me back. Stephen threw him into a wormhole. Clint shot an arrow and…” he motioned to the doctor.

Stephen rolled his eyes. “I had Barton fall continuously for an hour… as well.”

“Oh,” that’s all Tony manages before sitting himself straight on his chair. “Oh…”
Stephen took long strides down the hallway, not bothering to care for anyone he had passed. He was unsure why he was here. He never actually came to Tony’s work unannounced. The only other time was when the genius disappeared for months in Afghanistan but that had been an emergency. Maybe he should have at least called Pepper or Happy but he honestly didn’t comprehend where his feet were carrying him to till he ended up at the front steps of Stark Industries Headquarters.

“How may I help you, Mr…?”

“Strange. Doctor Strange,” he replied curtly at the woman.

She was quite attractive; fair skinned, dark, medium-cut, wavy hair, seemingly above average in height, quite lean with a narrow waist that was accentuated by the tight pencil skirt… and light green-blue eyes that were quite striking.

“You are not Pepper,” he couldn’t help but say those words out loud.

The woman smiled and there was something about the look in her eyes, a look of cleverness, that Stephen was unsure he liked.

“Ms. Pepper has her hands full with all the new arrangements. I’m just filling in for her temporarily for secretary works. Is Mr. Stark expecting you? I don’t believe I’ve seen anything in the books.”

“No, I’m just dropping by.”

There was something about this situation that was unnerving the doctor but he could not put a finger on the what just yet.

“Is he in?”

“I’m afraid he’s indisposed at the moment. Do you mind waiting?”
He noticed an accent in her voice, faint but definitely there. It was one he was quite familiar with, having grown up in New York in a British household.

“No, not at all,” the statement came out a bit harsher than he intended.

“I’ll send him a message you are waiting if you would like to take a seat, Doctor Strange.”

Stephen took a seat towards the farther end of the room and couldn’t help but to tap his foot lightly in impatience. His attention strayed to the woman every once in a while. He just realized he never asked for her name given how taken aback he was to find someone on that desk other than Pepper Potts. Perhaps, that’s what was bothering him. Stephen knew how attached Tony was to Pepper and how much he just about fled from every other staff in Stark Industry other than Pepper and Happy. And after the ordeal with the kidnap and Stane, the genius developed a trust issue. No matter how overworked Pepper undoubtedly was Tony would have fought tooth and nail if anyone suggested having even a temporary replacement.

“Mr. Stark’s office, please hold.”

Stephen had to admit, however, that she was quite good at her job. He had been watching for several minutes now of the woman answering non-stop phone calls while typing proficiently with one hand. It was impressive to watch. But no matter how amusing this may be, his impatience got the better of him.

He took out his cell, quickly typing a message. And just seconds after it was sent, the large double door flung open.

“Mr. Stark,” the secretary stood up.

Tony seemed to visibly light up as he sets his eyes on the doctor, crossing the room in quick strides. And Stephen, though he will never admit it out loud, felt better seeing the pure fondness in those whiskey brown eyes. He also may have been a little smug Tony had paid little attention to the woman. “Stephen- sorry didn’t know you were here.”

“No worries. I came unannounced.”

“Yeah I mean- more than happy you are but...” He was already leading the doctor into his office
but paused at the receptionist desk. “Kaitlyn, sweetheart-”

“I apologize, Mr. Stark,” she said smoothly without missing a beat.

“Oh no no, it’s fine. My fault. Didn’t tell you. This is Stephen, a close friend. Just give him the clearance as Rhodey-bear.”

An amused smile formed on Kaitlyn’s lips and in a faux whisper, “I believe you wanted Colonel Rhodes to wait like the others.”

A thought seemed to dawn on Tony. “…Yeah, let him sweat it. You can just let Stephen in anytime.”

“Of course, Mr. Stark.”

“Thanks, honey. And don’t let anyone bother me for the next hour.”

Stephen frowned. He was definitely used to Tony freely giving out endearments but something about this situation was bothering him more than it should.

“So-“ Tony started as he closes the door behind him, the trademark smirk on his face. “Sorry about that. I may have told her to have everyone wait at the door for an hour. You know, for them to re-assess if whatever they were coming to me with really is that important I have to be bothered with.” He walked towards the mini bar at the other end of the room. “Want one? I’m guessing you just got off from a shift.”

Stephen slowly paced around the space, stopping in front of the large window behind the desk. “No, I’m fine.”

“Suit yourself,” Tony responded while taking a large gulp of the amber liquid. “I really didn’t think you would ever just randomly drop by, to be honest with you. I do mean it, incredibly glad you did. So what’s the occasion? Did you miss me?”

“You like her.” It was a simple statement of a fact. Stephen didn’t even bother turning away from the window.
“What?” the engineer sounded a bit taken aback. “Oh, yeah, Kaitlyn is great. She’s good at her job. Can handle me, which automatically means she should be given a medal. Pepper knows how to pick ‘em…”

Stephen tried to keep a straight face but his mind was already repeating the grating “Mr. Stark” in that annoyingly posed voice with that annoyingly fetching smile.

“I didn’t think Pepper would be so easily replaced for another pretty face.”

There was a short but distinct silence in which Stephen mentally berates himself.

“She’s not. But someone capable makes me miss her a bit less while she can’t be here. Still, gotta say, can’t replace the real deal.” They both knew they were no longer really talking about secretaries.

Before the doctor can fully let the words sink in, the other already crossed the room, stopping only a foot away. “You never answered me. Did you miss me? Because I definitely missed you.”

Stephen absentmindedly traces a finger along the brunette’s jawline. From this distance, he can see every one of Tony’s long lashes, the laugh lines that started to form, and the intense dark eyes that always reflected so much fire and intelligence. He doesn’t know when the feeling started but a side of him wanted to keep all of Tony to himself. “Do you really need a second secretary?”

The engineer rolled his eyes. “Seriously, Doc? Are you actually jealous of a secretary? You never minded Pepper.”

That makes him snap. By now, he figured out exactly what was wrong about this picture. “For god’s sake, Tony. Do I have to spell it out for you? Tall, dark hair, light eyes, the accent- She doesn’t remind you of anyone?”

Tony was taken aback by the sudden outburst, blinking several times trying to process the information. “Oh…”

The doctor let out a snort of disbelief.
“Okay, …I-I didn’t think that-“

“Who really assigned her to your desk? You or Pepper?”

“Pepper! And I didn’t have much of a say-“

“Get rid of her.”

“Jesus Stephen, you’re always saying how Pepper is overworked! We’re trying to re-launch Stark Expo and with the move to New York there is too much going on.”

“Then get another typist. The world is full of them,” there was an edge to his voice that makes Tony flinch back slightly. “And preferably one that doesn’t look like they can pass as an opposite-sex version of me should you wake up one day and decide you rather be back sleeping with women.”

“Okay, first of all, Sunshine, you know as well as I do that it is very hard to replace what we have in the bedroom department and second of all, I need help. Also, do you know how hard it is to find someone I can tolerate while being stuck in this miserable office AND who meets Pepper’s expectations?”

"Oh, I’m sure you more than simply tolerate her presence, Anthony."

Tony set the glass down on his desk while taking a deep breath. “Okay.... Stephen, honey... it's... it's just one more week. It’s definitely not permanent. Then she’ll be back to whatever department Pepper found her in.” He tried to smile, searching for some reasonability in the doctor’s expression.

Stephen looked away. This was ridiculous. He was starting to feel incredibly stupid and he HATED feeling stupid. Since when did become the type to lash out like this or let the emotions get the better of him when it was so utterly unnecessary.

He was well aware he had the traits of a person that can potentially become possessive. He was obsessive, stubborn, arrogant, and definitely prideful, a cocktail recipe for jealousy and
possessiveness. But luckily, it had never been an issue in the past. Everyone he’s ever been with always had been more invested in him than he was with them. Add the side of him that was cocky enough to believe they will not find someone better than he, he never cared enough to get jealous.

But Tony... Tony was different. As many kept pointing it out to him, he was THE Tony Stark, the self-proclaimed "genius, billionaire, playboy philanthropist" who definitely lived up to the name. In comparison, for the first time, Stephen was no longer clearly the smarter, more successful, better-looking one. Despite all the snarky remarks, he was pretty certain Tony can outdo him in every department. In truth, Tony didn’t really need him. Not really. If the engineer applied himself, he undoubtedly can get another doctor to play the boyfriend role should he become bored or annoyed of Stephen. He even wondered quite often if all this was just simply that... Tony's new amusement, a result of temporary boredom... one that eventually had an end once he found something new and shiny to focus on.

“Alright,” he said finally, resigned. What else was he supposed to say? Tony was making sense (for once) and he certainly didn’t feel like parading his issues any longer nor go further into it.

“You know,” Tony started after a pause. The playfulness was back in his tone. “If you are that worried you can just stay here all the time. I won’t mind.”

“I’m sure you wouldn’t, Anthony,” he scoffed, “but I have better things to do with my day than be your typist.”

Tony let out a soft laughter while idly playing with the collar of the expensive black button up the doctor chose to wear. “Oh honey, if you were my secretary I wouldn’t be able to leave you alone,” he said with a smirk before closing the distance, planting a firm kiss on the other’s lips.

They spent a couple of seconds just kissing, soon becoming feverish as if both parties were trying and failing to release some of the tension that had built up.

It wasn’t enough.

Stephen lets his own hand travel upward along the other’s spine, soon grabbing a fistful of the chocolate colored hair giving it a hash tug backward. He savors the flash of surprise on Tony’s face as their eyes lock.

“You would like that, wouldn’t you... Mr. Stark,” he drags out the other’s name, lowering his own
voice down an octave. Oh, Stephen knew very well what that tone usually did to the other.

Tony doesn’t make his retort, face suddenly flushed and pupils blown wide. Interesting. He can work with this.

Wasting no time, he forces Tony’s tie loose, popping off the top 2 buttons swiftly with his left hand. “Having me at your back and call…” The right tugged a little harder on the locks, forcing the brunette to expose his throat completely. Stephen licks a dirty strip from the collarbone all the way up to the jawline just below the ear. “Indulging your every whim…” There was a precision in which the doctor undoes the other’s belt, rough but efficient. “Meeting all your desperate needs…” He slipped the wondering hand down below the belt line, earning a sharp gasp from his lover. “Oh and you know I always meet your needs... Don’t I, Mr. Stark?”

But really it was Stephen who needed this. A little more control of the situation. A confirmation that he can have Tony’s undivided attention. It was a fix… a temporary fix but a fix to get the edge off nonetheless.

Tony cursed under his breath feeling his knees buckle. He doesn’t dare try to meet those icy blue eyes unless he wants to cum right then and there. “Babe- o-okay... this is fun but anyone can come in-“

Stephen kissed him hard on the lips stopping the words. The long fingers finally letting go of the now messy locks and traveling down, quickly tightening along the jawline. He hears Tony moan, desperate and needy.

“I saw how you locked the doors. You were hoping for this,” he whispers with a sly smile. His fingers wrapped firmly around Tony’s cock which was more than half interested now. He gave a couple lazy but deliberate strokes, watching the other squirm in his hold. “The sudden modesty doesn’t suit you...”

Despite the small protests, Tony’s fingers had been locked onto the other’s shirt drawing them closer. It was likely going to leave wrinkles. Well, there went the chance of maybe walking out of here later decently and unnoticed. Though the petty side of Stephen wants Kailyn to see, to notice, to understand.

He retreated his hand from Tony’s well-tailored trousers earning a near soft whine from those lovely lips. Tony tried to buckle forward involuntarily, searching for some type of friction, but Stephen soon held his hipbone in a tight grasp not letting him have an inch.
“So...” Stephen smirked. “how do you want me, Sir?”

There was a pause in which he can visibly see the gears turning in Tony’s head.

“The desk,” his voice sounded wrecked already. “I want you to bend me over and fuck me hard enough I don’t give a shit who walks in.”

He gives his best fake polite tune he often used at the hospital, “That can certainly be arranged, Mr. Stark.”

“I’m just saying Tony, you didn’t even notice I got hurt. Too busy checking up on your boyfriend.”

“Oh come on, Platypus, I said I was sorry. You know I love you. I’ve been working non-stop for all the upgrades you wanted.”

“Whatever Tony. Just admit it. Stephen is around and you really don’t see any of us little people-“

The meeting had been rough, to say the least. But luckily, no matter how much resentment each of them may have been bottling up, none seemed all too keen to voice their full thoughts in front of SHIELD agents for one reason or another.

It had come up (again) from the rogues, however, that some of these issues may resolve quicker if Tony just stopped avoiding them. To their frustration, like he often did during these meetings nowadays, Tony barely spoke and didn’t even bother with a reply. He knew it often bothered Rhodes and Stephen how rarely he spoke up in the recent months, but Tony knew, from hard experience, this was the quickest way to have things go away. Quite frankly, he did not have enough energy for these types of fights anymore.

Even then, it was a miracle there wasn’t more of an uproar. But that may have largely been due to the fact both Stephen and Rhodes, following Tony’s lead, did not engage the rogues... Excluding the incident where Levi, (as Tony grew accustomed to calling it) Stephen’s cloak, launched full force at Clint for making a threatening comment at Tony. Stephen had insisted that the Cloak of Levitation has a mind of its own, it wasn’t his doing, and he couldn’t possibly do anything to stop
it... which Tony was quite certain was a lie.

By the end of it, Fury looked like he was ready to chuck all of them out the window. A sentiment that, as Rhodes pointed out, should be considered favoritism since there were clear advantages for some in the room at survival over others.

The director also especially seemed to have resentment towards a certain non-Avenger who had been center of many disturbance as of late. However, a case could be said that he was bitter the moment Stephen insisted he would not be joining Avengers. After all, since the battle with Thanos, Blank Panther and Dr. Strange had been top of the ideal recruitment list due to their skillsets and understanding of politics. But, of course, there was only so much Fury can do to the sorcerer who wasn't necessarily under his jurisdiction and the director at least had more self-preservation than the Captain. And considering how Clint rushed out to throw up several times during the meeting, Fury seemed not all too keen on finding out for himself what it was like to perpetually fall for an hour.

Tony had been the first to stand up to leave after the meeting was adjourned. Steve calling out his name only making him walk faster.

“You do realize, Tones, that I am human, like you. With no real superpowers up against super soldiers and gods. Your boyfriend, on the other hand, is a sorcerer with actual magic who probably won’t break a sweat going toe-to-toe with the crazies. And you still don’t think to check on me? Do you not care whether I die?” Despite the very evident exasperation in the colonel’s voice, there was no real bite to his words. They both knew this game.

Tony rolled his eyes. “Well, I didn’t think you were stupid enough to actually have a go at them without the suit. What exactly made you snap anyways?”

Rhodes took a sideward glance at Stephen, who had been unnervingly silent since they had left the conference room. “…You know how they are. They were just being assholes.”

The elevator opened as they reach the ground floor and the colonel stepped out looking back at the two. “I should get going. I have a lot to do anyway. When are you two heading to Wakanda then?”

And the real reason the meeting was called.

As it turned out, it was not actually the fight that broke out at the compound that had caused the
all-hands meeting. It just happened to have been the final push and a convenient excuse.

They had all been notified a week prior about a formal celebration in Wakanda hosted by the King T’Challa himself. All Avengers were invited, of course, and Ross had been very insistent that they all attend to show good faith. There were also talks about Black Panther formally joining the Avengers and SHIELD seemed keen on not letting anything get in the way.

“Since they were all here anyways” as Ross put it, he just wanted to remind all of them how important it was for all to make an appearance “no matter the internal differences that exist”. They all had to admit, the reminder was a necessary one. Not that any of them had been averse to going to Wakanda (some were far more than ecstatic with the opportunity) but due to the ever-busy life of playing hero, for many, thing like a party simply slipped their minds.

Tony chanced a glance at Stephen who was still soundlessly leaning against the farther wall, crossed arms. He practically can see the black clouds that loomed over the doctor. He turned back to his friend, the trademark smile plastered on his face. “I’ll call. Probably tomorrow early afternoon.”

Rhodes gave a nod before starting out of the complex. “Be careful you two. And call if you need anything.”

“Thanks, Rhodey-bear.”

Tony watched as his friend disappear and the elevator soon conveniently closed leaving the two to their privacy. “FRIDAY, my room.”

“Of course, Boss.”

“So… are we-“

Before he can finish the sentence, Tony found himself harshly shoved to the opposite wall, the sorcerer’s full body flushed against his. The kiss felt almost desperate, all tongue and teeth, and although the brunette often enjoys Stephen losing control and being rough, the nagging voice in the back of his head telling him this wasn’t the time.

He turned his head slightly to the left breaking the lip lock. “I was going to say talk by the way,”
Tony said with as much sarcasm as he can muster. He wanted to keep the mood as light as possible.

Stephen watched at him for a moment, hands clawing at the formerly pristine dress shirt the engineer had changed into for the meeting. “Either we argue or we fuck. I rather choose the latter.”

These are the moment that makes Tony think. Think and look really hard at this relationship between them. He wonders how many times he must have missed the signs years ago. The signs of Stephen spiraling and using the momentary gratification to somehow convince himself everything was fine. And how many times he, Tony, had must have let him - too distracted by the wicked smile and clever hands. To be fair, the engineer had a similar way back then. He too was a pro at avoiding the real problem, deflecting things that were hard, a master at deluding he and the rest of the world that everything was fine and dandy.

Tony thinks he must have not seen the signs …or perhaps he just did not fully understand at the time… or worse, maybe Tony knew but didn’t know how to deal with it so he jumped at any indication Stephen showed that things might be okay.

But things were different. It had to be different. There was just too much to lose. Tony couldn’t lose this, not a second time. He doesn’t know if he will survive that heartbreak.

“…You just assume I’ll agree with you,” he frowned, eyes hard. “That I’d rather just have you fuck me into some bliss than actually make sure you are okay. Okay. …just…off. Get off.” Tony firmly shoves at Stephen’s chest making the other take a step back with a blank look on his face.

He took a deep breath, hands falling onto his hips. For a moment he paces trying to discern the unsettling feeling in his chest. “Shit-… shit- SHIT!” He slammed his hand hard on the emergency button making the elevator come to a halt.

“Anthony…”

“What did he say to you?”

Stephen holds his gaze in silence.

“What. Did. He. Say.”
He waits. But the doctor makes no effort in saying another word.

“Stephen. I swear to god say something before I go back there and punch the shit out Rogers till he repeats exactly what he said to-“

“Enough.”

“Wh-“

“I SAID ENOUGH.”

The sheer intensity in Stephen’s voice made Tony involuntarily step back. He stared at the sorcerer a bit longer then shook his head looking away. He felt his eyes starting to sting. God, he cannot be crying right now.

“Then tell me what I need to say to you,” he tries to make his voice even as possible. “Tell me what I can possibly say to assure you that whatever the hell Steve fucking Rogers said doesn’t matter.”

He started to pace again, running a hand through his hair nervously before turning around to fully face the sorcerer once more. “I love you?” he shrugged, letting his hands fall to the side. “Because I do love you, Stephen Strange. I don’t… I don’t want anyone else. I don’t have anyone else. I’m goddamn unsure about so many things in my life and half the time I wonder if my whole existence is a mistake but one thing I am damn sure about is that I. Love. You.”

"Is that not enough?" Tony took a step closer. “Because I can’t lose you, not even to yourself. I don’t think I’ll survive that another time.” He paused before going on. “You… never actually tell me what’s really bothering you. Okay, yeah, you show the surface level things, you make your snarky remarks, throw a tantrum, you brood but you don’t ever show me any vulnerability, things that actually get to under your skin. When something is really wrong, when you are actually hurt, you never say a thing. I don’t find out till you are gone. Is it… is it me? I-I know I have given you too many reasons to doubt me, maybe that’s why you feel you can't trust me-”

“I do trust you, Tony.” Stephen’s arms were crossed, once again leaning against a corner.
“Really? Do you even believe that? One moment you seem like you are completely in this, the next you seem to like you are ready to run. I know you are the type to have one foot in the door and building an exit plan at the same time. I get it, I really do. And honestly, if I was dating me I would do the same.”

“Tony… “

“But it just hurts!”

He felt himself tearing up and promptly looked away, embarrassment threatening to eat him up alive. “Because I… I don’t know what else to do or say to prove to you that I love you.” He takes a deep breath, trying to calm himself down. “…I was just playing dumb. I knew how much you doubted me since day one and I knew you were just protecting yourself… so I tried SO hard… so hard to prove to you that, even if you aren’t yet, I’m completely in this. Hell, I tried to in ways I never thought I had in me. I opened myself up to you in ways I never thought I could for anyone. I just wanted you to see you may be unsure about us but I’ve never been more sure about anything else in my life.” When Tony turned back around, he can see Stephen trying hard to keep his expression blank.

“You’re spiraling. I can see that now. But I fucking don’t know what else to do to help because you still refuse to tell me anything… not when it counts. And I know that may be my fault but I don’t know what else I can do…” Tony reached forward, hands on either side of Stephen’s face, trying to get the other to meet his eyes. “Please… just trust me. Tell me what’s bothering you, Stephen… just tell me so we can fix this together…”

"...Nothing. Nothing's wrong, Tony."

Chapter End Notes

Oh man... I had to split this chapter into two because it was getting way too long (like this was not even the halfway point to what I originally outlined for the chapter? I mean damn imagine how ridiculously long it would have been if I kept stuck to my original plan?).

Luckily that means the next chapter has already been started. Which is great since if not, I may have not been able to post next week since I'll be up in Fanime (an event) for most of the week.

Sorry for mild cliff hanger though LOL
& remember comments makes the world go around *cough* aka please help fuel my momentum for writing //cries I need it- been so tired lately
“STEPHEN! You need to come NOW!”

Stephen narrowed his eyes at Christine who had just flung open the door to the break room. “Palmer... calm down-“

“Iron M- Tony Stark. He just arrived in an ambulance. OR 3.”

That was all he needed. Stephen ran out the door in a full sprint, Christine closely following.

As they approach the operating room, however, they were greeted by an unusually large amount of security. “Sir you do not have the clearance-“

The doctor tried to peer over their shoulder, panic at his throat.

“Stephen!” A familiar face hurried towards them.

“Rhodes! Tony- he...”

“Let him through! Let him through!” Rhodes ordered, pulling Stephen in past the guards. The men all scrambled to obey.

The group was crowded outside the operating room in the halls. Tony, in his full Iron Man suit minus the helmet, was lying on a stretcher while nurses and paramedics clamored around.

As Dr. West saw them approaching, he turns to Rhodes. “We need to get the armor off him-“
“Shit,” Rhodes, “Jarvis?”

“Access code is required to disable the armor,” they heard the AI say.

“For heaven’s sake-“

Nick took a breath, “We need to figure out a way to break it then-“

At that, the shouting started. Tony seemed to have regained some consciousness and began flailing about. “DON’T- TOUCH…”

He soon fell down from the stretcher, knocking out several personnel out of the way in the process. Securities hurried forward trying to pin him down but were no match for the Iron Man suit. They were quickly thrown aside, one hitting the opposite wall and another skidding across the floor. A nurse screamed in fright.

“MR. STARK YOU NEED TO REMAIN CALM!”

“TONY! YOU’RE INJURED! STOP-“

“GET THE SEDATIVE!” But those words only made Tony lash out even more.

“DON’T TOUCH HIM!”

They all froze. There was so much venom to Stephen’s sudden outburst both Nick and Rhodes jumped back in shock.

Stephen rushed forward, roughly pushing the others out of the way. Tony’s was now half sitting up, back to the wall, eyes wide and unfocused. He was only taking short gasps of breath and visibly shaking. A hand never left his arc reactor, shielding it from everyone.

That… made Stephen’s protective instincts flare up. One he didn’t even know he had. He was half-heartedly thankful no one tried to walk closer. The doctor felt he might just end up snapping their
wrist if anyone stupidly tried to touch Tony right now.

“Tony…” Stephen lowered his voice, slowly kneeling on the floor in front of him. “Tony... hey... look at me…”

He cautiously stretched out a hand towards the other's cheek. Close enough for Tony to feel the body heat but not enough to touch. Stephen quickly scanned over the armor-clad body, noting all the dent, scratch, blood. They needed to get him inside fast; there must be a puncture wound somewhere – the way Tony was shifting most likely the lower abdomen.

Tony’s gaze darted about the room before falling on Stephen. “S-Steph-“ he managed to gasp out.

“Yeah, It’s me. I’m here,” he tried to smile, feeling the other lean into his hand. “Tony, remember... 5 things you can see, 4 things you can touch, 3 things you can hear... breath Tony... there is nothing to be afraid of...”

“...y-you,” Tony’s voice was breaking and it squeezed at the doctor’s heart in ways he never quite felt before. “I... only see you.”

Stephen swallows thickly, “Okay... that’s great. Keep your eyes on me and try to take deep breaths. It’ll be over soon. This is only temporary.”

Tick-tock, tick-tock. The faint ticking from Nick’s watch was all that could be heard as everyone watched with bated breath. After some time, Tony's breathing slowly leveled out, the panic attack seeming to near its end. Although, the sudden lack of adrenaline seemed to be making the brunette slip in and out of consciousness.

“Tony, you need to be treated. You got hurt. We need to get the armor off you,” Stephen said as gently as he could.

“Y-you.”

“No. You know I can’t do the surgery. Not on you,” he threaded his finger through the other’s chocolate locks.
Tony started shaking his head furiously.

“Tony,” he said firmly, making the other still his movement and lock eyes with the doctor once more. “You’ll be in very capable hands. I’ll be in the room if you’d like, alright?”

After a long pause, Tony nodded.

He peered about the armor. “Jarvis, I need you to disable the armor,” he stated clearly.

“Of course, Doctor Strange, please state your full name and access code.”

He paused, holding Tony’s unfocused gaze, searching.

I don’t have anyone else.

“Stephen Vincent Strange. 05232009.”

The armor unlocked, parts retreating then falling off Tony’s body hitting the floor. Stephen reached for Tony’s hand, holding it for couple more seconds while the brunette completely calmed down. Somewhere behind him, he hears Rhodes sighing in relief.

“Prep the OR. Move him in. Doctor Palmer,” he turned towards Christine. She would hear it, the quiet pleading in his voice. “I need you to do the surgery.”

Christine nodded, understanding what’s behind those words. She gave him a small, assuring smile before walking off quickly to the scrub area. The paramedics were helping Tony back onto the stretcher. Stephen was mindful to be within the engineer’s eyesight.

“Rhodes,” he called, gesturing toward his left. “-the viewing room.”

The Colonel hesitated briefly. “Stephen,” he grabs hold of Stephen's arm, squeezing it for a second. “Just make sure he’s ok. Alright?” He seemed shaken but admittedly holding together far better than many other friends and families of patients they’ve seen. “He’s- he put up a fight. We
kept saying he needed to go to the hospital and he just kept repeating Metro-General so I made the paramedics... We lost time- I...screwed up...” his voice trails off.

Stephen nodded and Rhodes stepped away.

The doctor definitely doesn’t miss the baffled expression on Doctor West’s face.

It happened in a matter of seconds.

Sam didn’t have time to activate his wings before being knocked off his feet, slamming headfirst to the far wall. Natasha quickly dropped the floor, easily dodging the first attack only to be grabbed by the ankle and thrown ten feet into the air before landing harshly.

Knowing he didn’t have time to draw an arrow, Clint swung his bow only to have it stopped mid-air. There was a moment of confusion as he became face to face with the Iron Man suit. “Tony-?” But that was all he could manage before he felt the bow snap under the crushing grip of the gauntlet. Of course Tony would know where the weak point of the bow was. The archer only had a moment to mutter a curse before being flung aside as well.

Bucky was quicker. Threw his body furthest away possible at the first sign of danger. He aimed a punch but was blocked, his metal fist landing on red armor with a loud clunk. For a split second, they both held their stance, neither strength giving in. Then there was a harsh shove that threw the Winter Soldier back. Just a couple of inches, but that was enough. The armored hand opened, the repulsor blast hitting Barnes squarely in the chest landing him near Sam with a groan.

Steve reached for his shield but soon felt Iron Man’s full weight as he was knocked backward by good several yards. There was a loud thud as the foot of the armor landed very close to his left ear, cracking the cement below. He was flat on his back, the red and gold armor looming over him.

“Tony- what is this-“

“What did you say to him?” there was so much hate in the voice Steve quickly closed his mouth, frowning.
The helmet retracts, revealing Tony who looked just about ready to commit murder. His right hand, repulsor at the ready, was locked onto the Captain’s face. His left, in Barnes’s direction.

As the rest of them try to regain their footing they came to a realization a micro-missile was aimed at each of them, making all of them stop dead in their tracks.

“Stark, what the hell!” shouted Clint, left hand gripping tight at his right shoulder. He exchanged a quick glance with Natasha who shook her head briefly. Well, that quickly confirmed his suspicion.

Tony was not messing around. This was a cold-calculated attack at each of them utilizing years of knowledge the genius knew about each them. And if the way he had just landed, putting his dominant arm out of commission, was any indication Tony didn’t plan on dragging this out.

“Tony…” Natasha took a half step forward, her voice stern and composed still. “What are you doing? That’s Steve you are aiming at-“

“What THE HELL DID YOU SAY!” Tony’s voice rang around the hallway cutting Natasha dead in her tracks.

A silence followed.

“What. Did. You. Say. Rogers.” He repeated, his tone dangerously low. The nanotech, as if following its owner’s mood, was radiating a faint heat. Almost vibrating with anger.

Steve was at a lost for words. This was the first time in weeks he was so close to Tony. Those whiskey brown eyes finally meeting his. But this was far from the relief he had been expecting himself to feel. He, of course, considered the possibility that Tony may be cold to him in the beginning… but Steve definitely didn’t prepare himself for this.

This… whatever this was, it was entirely different from anything he could have ever imagined. It made Steve think back. Think back to all the times they engaged one another, during their initial confrontations, the time in the Helicarrier manipulated by the scepter, the fight at Siberia… had he ever been truly at the end of Tony’s hate till now? Every fight, every argument, every conflict, it felt like child play compared to the now.

He tries not to think about how much that hurts. How much it hurts to hear the other not even call
him by his first name.

“Tony…” Steve said gently. “I know you’re upset but let me up. We can talk about this…”

Tony doesn’t move. His eyes still fixed on the Captain. Nobody dares to do much else. Not even Clint makes his usual ill-timed outburst.

Steve takes that moment to look the other over, noting the red-rim around the eyes. “Was it Strange? What did he do-“

That snaps the brunette out of the trance. “You wanted to talk?” Tony started slowly, his voice harsh. “Let’s talk. I don’t care what you say to me. I don’t care what you say about me to all your worshipers here. I let you go about playing the bigger man, the perfect golden boy because the world needs the great Captain America and I honestly don’t care anymore. I’ll be a good soldier for the benefit of this team and the universe. I will let you be the leader and I will follow the orders, play nice, be the good team player out in the field even if it kills me. I don’t care what you do to ME.”

He leans in a little, the repulsors charging threateningly. “But you say anything to HIM. You so much as fucking touch him, so help me god I will wipe the floors with your blood, Rogers.”

“…What did he do, Tony-“

He fires. The blast landing just at the right of Steve’s head. Steve instinctively turned his head to the other side, the flare barely missing his temple by an inch. There were shouts of curses from the others but Tony ignores them.

“You said something to him dammit! I don’t fucking know what it is but this is your fault!”

“Tony, you’re better than this. You’re better than him-”

“SHUT UP!”

“Is he really worth all this?” Steve raised his voice slightly though making sure his tone remained
even. The Captain stayed surprisingly calm. “A man who hides because he is ashamed of himself… who refused to join the Avengers you dedicated your life to. He chose not to have your back out there in the field, decided not to stand by you and be a team…”

“Is that what you said to him?” Tony lets out a dry laugh. “You think you’re better than him, Cap? You left me to die in a Hydra bunker, my armor destroyed, no way to contact for backup in the middle of nowhere in minus fifty-degree weather! I’m not even going to throw in there I was your boyfriend.” Something softens in him for a split second. “…A team? I was in love with you.”

After a pause, Steve spoke. “I’m sorry about that… I’m really am, Tony,” he glanced at Bucky who seemed to be trying to make himself invisible. “I wish I can go back-“

“And you would do it again,” Tony cuts him off. “I actually admired that part of you. Wanting to protect your friend that at least I can sympathize.”

“We were okay,” Steve tried to reason. “You- I thought we were moving past it. During the battle with Thanos-“

“We were at a war! Did you expect me to be holding onto some personal drama when the world needed us to fight together?!” He glanced around to everyone else in the room, to mainly Natasha and Clint. “You all constantly gave me crap about how I need to stop being the narcissistic maniac and the minute I do you wonder what the fuck is going on!?”

“Tony…”

“Did it ever occur to you what I lost up in space? Maybe not back then but how did you not put it all together now? I lost my kid and the love of my life!”

Steve tried not to wince at the term, what Tony was implying. He was just angry, that was it.

“You approached me with an IDEA, a hope that I just might get them back,” he motioned to Clint. “You at least should understand what that must have felt like.”

“I had five fucking years to reevaluate my life. You think I wouldn’t have put aside my personal feelings towards you, no matter how awful it was, if it meant I could get them back? You are the great Captain America. I get it. You make the world go around, the hope for mankind. But you…
“you were not worth *them*. Not to me. Not anymore.”

“Tony you are just upset. When you calm down-“

“You had your chance to apologize! Maybe- just maybe, we could have been friends. The fact is you didn’t. You whine constantly about how I don’t talk to you now and how you want to talk this out but where was the apology when I WAS speaking to you? The five years? When we were collecting the stones? The month we spent building back the Avengers, SHIELD, moving everyone back into the compound? You had plenty of chances then but you thought you didn’t have to so you didn’t. Because everyone always forgives you, right? They always give you the benefit of the doubt? Does it feel good? I honestly don’t know what that feels like.”

“Tony… I-“

“You know what’s the funny thing, Rogers? I did get an apology. Just not from you.” With a shove, Tony pulled away. As he straightened up, he briefly turned towards Barnes who finally looked up at his last statement. Their eyes meet and Tony gives him a small nod before walking away from the group, the artilleries falling back into his armor.

“…You’re just upset because he left.”

That stops Tony’s tracks. He doesn’t look back, however.

“He left, didn’t he?” Steve rose to his feet, eyes still fixed on the brunette.

His voice was still soft, almost compassionate. Tony knew if he turned around now he would be met with those puppy dog, blue eyes he was once fond of. But Tony wishes Steve sounded smug, taunting… just so it’ll give him a reason to hit him.

“Just like last time.” Another step. “Tony… I was there for you before-“

“Don’t,” Tony spins around, pointing a repulsor at the Captain. A warning. “Just. Don’t.”
There was a soft knock before the door before it was pushed open. Tony turned just in time to see a woman walk in. Average height, chestnut hair pulled into a loose bun, kind eyes. She is in what Tony can recognize as the surgeon’s scrub, which helps him identify her.

“How are you feeling, Mr. Stark?”

“Good. Perfectly good. You did wonders by the way,” he gave his best charming smile. “So when can I go home?”

“You’re still recovering, Mr. Stark. You have to remain here at least for a couple of days-”

“Doctor Christine Palmer, right?” He interrupted.

Christine smiled. Tony notes she started fidgeting with her hands, subtle but noticeable enough. “I-... did Stephen-?”

“Yeah, he mentioned you couple times.” He can see why Stephen likes her. She’s sincere to the bone. But not in an annoying or overbearing way like most, it is just pleasant enough to make you feel at ease.

Christine stepped forward, soon standing right next to the bed. She held out her hand for him to shake. Tony hesitated for a moment but then offered his. The doctor looked as if she was having a hard time keeping eye contact with him.

“It’s an honor. I heard a lot about you. Well, not from Stephen because I think he’s trying to keep things quiet for you. But I mean... who doesn’t know you. The Da Vinci of our time.” He watched her hastily tuck a loose strand of hair away from her face, pursing her lips for a brief moment. It seemed like she was trying to prevent herself from grinning too widely. “I’m a... fan.”

“Well I’m a fan of anyone who can get Stephen to call them a friend,” Tony replied. She really was hard not to like.

“Oh,” she suddenly exclaimed as she dropped his hand, pulling away sharply. “Sorry I- I heard you... don’t like people touching you-“
Tony gave a half-hearted shrug as he tried to sit up a little higher on the bed. “It’s alright, Honey. You already fondled around my insides so what’s there to be shy about now.”

Christine let out an exasperated laugh. “Don’t let him hear you call me that.”

“Oh- right. Jealousy? Ha- I’ve seen that already.”

The doctor frowns for a moment then coming to a realization. “Oh no I didn’t mean- He never was jealous over me.”

Tony gives her a look. “You don’t have to lie. We’re all adults- He seems the type to be possessive over all his past ex too, to be honest… The other day he tried to throw out my secretary.”

“Uh… no. That’s the thing. Stephen doesn’t do jealousy.” She pauses as if debating briefly how much she should be saying. “When we were dating, I had this reunion to go to. My first boyfriend was there. And this was when Stephen seemed more into our relationship and I thought oh hey this is going to be trouble. I assumed, given his personality, he would lash out, become competitive… something. It was fine. He actually charmed every one of my friends including my ex. I asked why wasn't he jealous, most people would be. He said to me and I quote, ‘why bother getting jealous of someone inferior to you’

There was a silence in which they both just stared at one another, but then they both broke into laughter.

“Oh god- that’s pretty good. Wow and here I thought I was the egotistical one.”

Christine pulls up a seat next to the bed. “The fact he even got jealous of a secretary… I mean… that’s a lot for him.”

“So basically what you are telling me is that he’s so self-absorbed he doesn’t feel any jealousy, competitiveness, anger, fear… God, I’m going to tell him you said that-“ he said smirking.

“But it’s different with you.”
Tony’s smile falters a bit.

“I think he’s basically experiencing these intense emotions for the first time in his life… around you, because of you. And I think he just… doesn’t know how to handle that.” She let out an exasperated laugh. “For the first time, he’s not good at something. And he’s definitely doesn’t know how to handle not being good at something.”

“Are you sure you two don’t want to have another go? You’d be good for him.” His tone was playful but as soon as the words left his mouth he felt his heart plummet.

But Christine gives him a knowing look. “No. Don’t worry.”

He let out a faux huff of exasperation and the doctor lets out a soft laughter.

“No really. I always knew Stephen was probably one of those types who either care too little or cares too much. I was the former. No hard feelings, we make great friends. But I can tell… you are the latter.” She paused for a brief moment. “Besides, it’ll break your heart.”

Tony doesn’t answer, the corner of his lips twitching up in a small smile.

Christine soon stands, checking on something on the monitors then at his wounds. “Everything looks good. You’ll probably be able to go home maybe in a day or two.”

“Great,” Tony replies. “By the way, what’s the deal with that other Doctor? One with the weird name.”

“Oh. Doctor Nicodemus. We call him ‘Nick’. He’s… well… got a competitive thing with Stephen.”

Tony looks at her questioningly.
“Ms. Romanoff? I thought we were going to go train…”

Natasha looked up to see Peter in his full Spider-Man suit, the mask in his hand. He was staring at her, noticing she was in a pair of jeans and a black top. She seemed as though she had been there for a while now, sitting on one of the high chairs at the kitchen counter with a cup of coffee half empty.

This was odd. Usually, by the time he showed up, she was in her suit ready to go.

She smiled at the teen that now was walking hesitantly towards her. She rarely showed emotions and was mostly indifferent to kids but even she could not help but be nice to Peter. It wasn’t hard to see how or why Tony became so fond of the kid.

“I was thinking, maybe you should go spend some time with your father.”

Peter looked at her questioningly, dread starting to form. “Did something happen? Was that why the meeting was called? Doctor Strange told me to stay in school-“

She shook her head lightly, stopping the teen’s rambling. “Something did happen but don’t worry Tony isn’t hurt.” She didn’t have the heart to elaborate in saying he wasn’t hurt physically. “But I think he may appreciate not being alone right now.”

Peter slowly nodded, “Okay… yeah… yeah, I’ll go find him…” He tried to head towards the elevator once more but found himself pacing at the entrance. “Ms. Romanoff?”

There was a pause in which the redhead silently watched the teen seeming to formulate his thoughts.

“You… you didn’t want to check on him?”

Natasha tried to smile, “I don’t think I’m the person he wants to see right now.”

“…You guys were friends right?”
“I would like to think we were.”

There was a further pause in which Peter gazes at the window. “But you were better friends with Captain America-”

She slowly steps off from the chair, walking closer to where the teen stood. “It wasn’t that simple.”

“I know he isn’t perfect… but… you were there. At the airport…when we-”

“We were holding back,” she finished for him. “He was holding back. I know.”

Peter fidgets with the mask still in his hand. “You let Captain America go… If we… you don’t think we could have figured out eventually Mr. Barnes was innocent? …He nearly died-“

“Hey-“ Natasha put a hand on his shoulder, forcing him to meet her eyes. There was a brief moment she let out a soft sigh noticing the tears starting to form in Peter’s eyes. “He survived. Doesn’t make what happened okay but he survived. We can contemplate on the ‘what ifs’ forever but even if we had made another choice it may not have necessarily lead to the outcome we want. It’s never that simple.”

“You always take his side. Just because he’s the Captain America-“

“There are no sides,” her voice was still even. She looked just as calm as if they were here talking about the weather. There were no signs of anger or defensiveness as Peter had been expecting when he started this conversation. “This is far more complex than taking someone’s side. I know it may not seem like it but most of us know it’s not our place to get involved in what’s going on between Steve and Tony. I’m just around Steve because he needs me and Tony needs space. Your father… Tony… I’m sure he understands that too. He is not childish enough to not understand that-“ There was just a hint of laughter, a ghost of a smile. “…At least not anymore.”

Peter stared at for couple more seconds before nodding hesitantly. “…What was he like back then?” he asked, curiosity getting the better of him.
“Arrogant, stubborn, narcissistic… frustratingly brilliant,” Natasha smiled, one of the more genuine smiles the teen had seen on her. “But it’s still there. Underneath all the…” Her voice trails off.

Peter continued to watch her questioningly.

“The war wore him down. Life wore him down. He’s seen too much and lost even more.” She gives him another squeeze on the shoulder before turning around walking back towards the table. “But he is definitely more… happy… around you.”

She walks her cup to the sink, rinsing it while giving Peter another glance. “You know, I did his initial evaluation for SHIELD. He always wanted a kid, even if he didn’t know it yet.”

Peter couldn’t help but grin as Natasha put a to her lip briefly in a mock shush.

.......... 

“Mr. Stark…?” Peter called out as he entered the surprisingly quiet lab.

“You know, you might officially have to stop calling me that.”

Peter spotted Tony who was currently leaning back on his work chair, holding up a folder.

“Adoption paperwork. I had people help speed things up a bit,” Tony stood up from the chair, slowly walking towards the teen who seemed frozen in place. “I just signed.”

There was a smile on the adult’s face and Peter couldn’t stop staring.

“You’re going to cry- Don’t cry. You know I’m not good at that-“ but before he can finish his sentence the teen threw his whole body weight at him in a forceful hug.

“I-I’m not crying-“ he was definitely crying.
Tony let out a fake huff of annoyance while patting the kid’s back. “Sure-sure…”

They stood there for another moment, Peter refusing to let go. At some point, Tony, perhaps awkwardly, wraps his arms around the teen. A small smile forming on his lips.

“Hey… Pete… aren’t you supposed to be training with Nat?” Tony said after a while.

“Oh… yeah… She said she’s busy today.” He pulls back slightly. “I thought maybe I could kill time here. I won’t bother you too much.”

The engineer smiled walking towards the workstations, “Want to work on your suit updates?” He was already pulling up the files on the Spider-Man suit.

Peter followed, staring at the blueprints trying to read as much as he could.

“Who told you?”

The teen stiffened. He let out an involuntary cough. “…to be honest I heard you guys arguing a lot recently…” Peter was speaking fast-paced, a habit he quite often did when he was nervous. “Did he leave?”

“Yep,” he replied without taking his eyes off the screens and keyboard.

“He’ll be back.”

There was a pause in Tony’s typing. “Just because mommy and daddy are fighting, doesn’t mean we love you less,” the sarcasm dripping in his voice.

There was a short silence in which the genius looked the teen over, analyzing his expression and body language. “Are you worried?” he finally said, almost uncharacteristically serious. “It’s… going to be okay. Whatever happens, it’s going to be alright.”
“I know,” Peter muttered, crossing his arms. “MJ said parents fight. It’s normal. Two people fight because they care… when they are indifferent, that’s when you should worry.”

Tony let out a soft, exasperated laugh, ruffling the kid’s hair. Peter huffed in mild annoyance.

The engineer tried to shake off the apology that had started to form at the tip of his tongue. Peter had already started to get used to the idea of Stephen being around. “Parents” the teen had said. Tony can see now that he had perhaps been selfish and irresponsible in jumping the gun with his relationship with the sorcerer. What had he been thinking familiarizing Peter so quickly with the idea that… there was some sort of version of them as a family… Peter did not need another heartbeat of losing another “family”.

Eventually, the teen chanced a glance up, quickly noting that the smile on the engineer's expression as very much forced. He definitely knew when Tony’s smile was forced. When it didn’t quite reach those large eyes that often showed too much emotion than less.

“He’ll- he’ll come back. I’m sure he’ll come back. But… if he doesn’t… just you know, really one in million chance he doesn’t… I’ll still be here. I’m not going anywhere.” He nervously waved a hand towards the direction of the folder. “You’re sort of stuck with me.”

A moment… and Tony laughed, this time genuine. “Yeah… yeah, you’re right, Pete. And you’re stuck with me.”

There had been a lot of whispers of what had happened during the night the Iron Man had been admitted to Metro-General. By morning there was already speculation as to the nature of Stephen Strange and Tony Stark’s relationship, stemmed from a nurse’s comment describing the two’s encounter in front of the OR to be rather “intimate”. Even newspapers and gossip magazines have picked up the story quoting anonymous sources but they all mainly focused on if the famous playboy had suddenly shifted his taste away from women.

It has already been a week since Tony’s release from the hospital and yet no one seemed inclined to move onto a new topic.

“They are such good-looking couple.”
“Are they a couple?”

“I mean what else could they be?”

“But it’s Tony Stark! The biggest playboy in-“

“But it’s Doctor Strange… he basically is the most eligible bachelor here- and here I was wondering who would be good enough to turn his head. Have you heard about when Janet tried to ask him out?“

“Well, he was pretty much a playboy himself. Heard he was pretty popular back in LA… got around-“

“With that look, I’ll be shocked if he didn’t-“

“I really thought he was dating Doctor Palmer. “

There was a loud thud as Christine slammed a bunch of files onto the nurse’s station. Many who had been crowded around the computer jumped in fright. It was a slow day and they had been so engrossed in their conversation they hardly saw the doctor coming.

“Lighten up, Palmer. Let them talk.”

Christine sighed, watching as Nick handed one of the nurses his files.

“Doctor West, I heard you were there-“ a nurse started.

Christine rolled her eyes.

“Are they really dating? Do you know?” another asked.
"Doctor Palmer, you must know-"

Nick cleared his throat making all of them turn to him. "Okay but… that can’t be true, right Palmer? Dating? Tony Stark? Probably something casual at best. I was talking to Jim about this just this morning. Did not expect that though. I thought Strange’s pride would not allow himself to be at someone’s beck and call."

Christine opened her mouth to say something but another beat her to it.

"Hey, Doc. I can use a little help here."

They all turned around. Some very much freezing where they stood.

"Mr. Stark," Christine greeted watching Tony stride towards them from the elevator. He definitely didn’t look like someone who had just been bedridden the other week. Dressed to the nines in a designer suit and gaze sharp. She noticed everyone around them were starting to stare now, both patient and staff. Some bluntly pulling out their phones and snapping a photo.

"Hey, sweetheart, long time no see," Tony gave her a quick smile. "I’m just lost."

"Mr. Stark, it’s great to see you again," Nick stepped forward briskly.

"I’m sure," the brunette said with a smirk. "Who are you?"

But before Nick can even say another word another voice joined in.

"Mr. Stark! I didn’t know you would be dropping by today," as the chairman hurried towards them the other staff quickly made room. "I was just informed you were in the building. You seemed to be recovering well I’m told."

"Chairman," Tony greeted back. "Yes, I’m doing- BABE-"

In unison, all their heads once again turned as Tony basically shoved past the Chairman. Stephen,
who had clearly had been in his own world, looked up from his chart, frowning as he quickly
walked over.

“Tony. Why the hell you here.”

Tony gave a faux hurt expression. “Well, that didn’t sound like a question. I missed you and you
weren’t answerin-“

“I just dropped you off at your work. I saw you an hour ago,” Stephen hissed under his breath.
Though considering how close in proximity most of them were and how engrossed they all were at
two, most clearly heard every word.

“Longest hour of my life,” replied the engineer without missing a beat.

“What are you? A dog?”

Christine tries hard not to laugh, though everyone else seemed mortified. The look on the
Chairman and Nick’s face was one of pure horror.

Though Stephen evidently was not paying attention to the rest of them. “You do realize you’re not
the only one in trouble with Pepper if you go disappearing during work hours and you can’t be
showing up to my work unannounced.”

“I can’t stay? It’ll be like… just 30 minutes-“

But before the doctor could form his reply the chairman stepped forward. “You can stay as long as
you like, Mr. Stark. If you would like a tour of the facility-“

That makes Tony break into a grin. “Stephen, sweetheart, show me around-“

Stephen glares, “No.”

“Yes,” replied the Chairman making Stephen look at him with exasperation.
“I have paperwork to finish.”

“I’m sure Dr. West is more than willing to help pick up the slack,” Tony replied smoothly now typing something on his phone. Christine chances a glance at Nick who looked somewhere between irritated and confused. It probably did not go amiss that Tony, in fact, remembered his name even if he acted as if he hadn’t just seconds ago.

She bites back a smile, now getting the game. Oh, they were perfect for each other. She can certainly see now Tony can be just as petty as Stephen, if not more.

“He will,” stated the Chairman without hesitation. Which shut Nick up from saying another word.

“See,” Tony said brightly. “I love your coworkers, babe. They are so nice. Now, which one do you not like?”

That made Nick pale.

“Because you have money,” stated Stephen making both the Chairman and some of the staff flinch and cough nervously.

“And you don’t? You told me to buy you that loft-“

Some of the nurses were now whispering to one another.

“I was kidding!”

“Oh... well, there’s a predicament.”

Stephen’s eyes widened a little. “What? Undo it!”

Tony turned casually towards Christine. “Christine, do you want a-“
Stephen hit him hard on the shoulder with the charts.

“OW! ABUSE ABUSE THIS IS DOMESTIC ABUSE”

“SHUT UP.”

Christine put a hand to her mouth, covering up the distinct smile. On the other side, one of the board members, whom she recognized from the other day when Nick introduced them, seemed as though he was trying to get the billionaire’s attention.

“Excuse me, Mr. Stark, I assume Doctor Strange invited you already to our Annual Gala?”

Tony looked at Stephen. “Are we going?”

“I’m going. You’re not,” the doctor replied flatly.

“But I’ll be good. I definitely make a great arm candy. Have you seen me in an Armani? And I can make it worth your while later-“

“Oh FOR GOD’S SAKE-“ Stephen quickly grabbed Tony’s arm harshly pulling the shorter man far away from the rest of them.

They all watched the two go in silence.

Finally, the nurses broke the stillness.

“I didn’t know Doctor Strange could lose his cool-“

“Well, it is THE Tony Stark.”
“Well, THE Tony Stark is definitely smitten.”

The Chairman turned to the rest of them with a sigh. They all could feel the change in his demeanor. “Why didn’t anyone tell me Doctor Strange is actually dating Tony Stark? Especially with this year’s Maria Stark Foundation grants in the works?”

Nick hesitated. “Well… Strange didn’t mention-“

The Chairman turned towards Christine instead. “Doctor Palmer? You’re his friend you must know something. How seriously are they?”

She gave Nick a look before casually replying, “Enough that he seems to have full access at Stark Industries?”

She will never forget the look on Nick’s face.

“So you’re really not going?”

Stephen doesn’t answer, eyes fixed on the book in his hand.

“Just going to stay here and sulk?” Wong persisted as he straightens his robes. It was dressier than normal, still the color combination of muted concord and wine but with much more embroidery. “Sometimes I don’t know why he puts up with you.”

That made Stephen look up with a glare.

Wong doesn’t even flinch. “He’s trying. Even I can see that. He’s a pain in the ass but honestly, it’s nothing compared to you.”

“Well that’s new,” Stephen scoffed. “Usually people say that to him.”
“Then they don’t know you all too well then. Don’t know what a stubborn asshole you are-“

Stephen raised an eyebrow, letting the book finally close. “Well don’t hold anything back now,” he said sarcastically.

“I never do. The only way I can put up with you.”

Stephen rolled in eyes as the other continues.

“You put on a good show. You act like the perfect boyfriend but in the end, he chucks aside all pride when it comes to you and you still hold on to it like your life depends on it. And god forbid anyone calls you out on how you might not be perfect - you sulk about it for weeks. I don’t know what it is about this time but I’m sure he apologized. Because he always does. Goes out of his way to apologize, to chase you, to coax you from whatever shit storm you are brewing under while you just run away in some self-pitying mood because it’s comfortable for you-“

“Enough,” he said firmly. “Just be on your way to Wakanda. You’re extremely chatty today and it’s unbearable.”

Wong lets out an exasperated huff. “He needs you. He probably didn’t force you to go because he cares more about your comfort than about his… mental state… You know he’s going to lose it tonight right? With all the rogues there? The Captain America?”

He created a portal for himself but doesn’t step in yet. “Remember when you decided to go back to him? You brooded about it here for days. But what you finally said was that at least you’d be better for him than the Captain America. You’re not a better person-”

Stephen shot him another glare. “You agreed with me,” he said offended.

“Better person? No. You’re not. Let’s face it, you’re not.” He replied without so much as a flinch. “Steve Rogers is not a saint but you’re definitely not one either. Quite frankly even with all the problems that Cap has, I think you can give a run for his money. I said you are better for him because you’ll be there for Tony. Get your head out of your own ass and be there for him when it counts. …Or at least I thought you would.”

Wong doesn’t wait for a reaction. Just simply stepped in with the portal closing behind him.
Stephen stared at the spot, letting his thoughts fully fester now that he was completely alone.

He didn’t want to go to Wakanda. He made that clear since the beginning. He didn’t want to deal with the rest of the Avengers anymore than he had to. Sure he liked some but it had been quite tiring to deal with others, mainly the rogues. Tony had expressed he would like for Stephen to join him considering for Tony, the invitation was quite mandatory. But once Stephen pointed out he was not part of the Avengers and had no interest in being one, along with the fact he wanted to avoid this type of events that reminded him of his former lifestyle, all the bad habits, the other dropped the subject to never speak of it again. Besides, Tony would have his Rhodey, Pepper, and Peter.

_I don’t have anyone else._

A thought had manifested in the Sorcerer’s mind. Was he really better than how he used to be or was it all just a huge charade? Was he just as insecure the day he started this relationship with Tony but just better at hiding it as the Captain had insinuated? A fake who just now knew how to mask the worst sides of himself well enough. Did that make him similar to Rogers? Can’t face his own weakness, insecurities, faults, and mistakes…

Did he really have a good reason for skipping out tonight or was he simply being selfish? Justifying, so he did not have to forfeit his comfort. …Just as he refused to join the Avengers. Just as... he refused to tell Tony what had been bothering him.

Well, Wong was right about some things. He was being selfish. Stephen was certain in the beginning that he was undoubtedly a better choice for Tony. That he can at least be better than the shit Steve Rogers pulled. But at times like this, he wonders if there is even a difference. After all, it was true. Tony always accommodated for ones he loved and he was taking advantage of it just as the Captain once did. The thought left a bitter taste in his mouth.

A migraine was starting to form and he pinched the bridge of his nose with a groan. Somehow… he was making the same mistake as that night all those years ago, if not worse.

He let out a sigh as his cloak dropped a phone onto his lap. The sorcerer stared at the fluttering fabric that seemed to be tilting its head at him though not having an actual head.

He dialed a number.
“Pepper… I need a favor.”

“So why are you really here, Tony?”

They had ended up in the supply closet. Considering how much attention Tony was getting, there were not many options for having a private conversation.

“I just wanted to see you.”

Stephen gave him a look.

Tony rolled his eyes. “Christine and I had a talk about some of your co-workers.”

The doctor let out a huff of exasperation. “I don’t need you fighting my battles for me, Tony.”

“You’re not even fighting at all apparently!”

Stephen just stares at him, eyes narrowing. Tony, steps closer, placing his hand on the other’s arms squeezing it momentarily.

“Stephen, honey, you were just letting them say whatever they want. It’s insulting what they are saying about us. About you. Do I not mean anything to you? I thought after last week-”

The doctor sighed, “Of course you do, Tony. You mean a lot.”

“Then tell them that.”

“I don’t think how I feel is what is being questioned.”
There was a pause in which Tony holds his gaze. “Well, that’s why I’m here.” He reaches forward, pulling the doctor down by the collar to have their lips meet. “To leave no room for doubt. And... I know a thing or two about being knocked down one too many times. To wonder if it’s worth fighting anymore because you’re just so tired. I'm not questioning whether you can fight for yourself. But... on a few occasions, you are just too tired, I will fight for you. I always will.”

There was a moment of silence before Stephen let out a soft sigh, closing his eyes as he pressed his forehead against the brunette’s. He made no attempts to respond to those words. But they both clearly understood.

"...So that access code-"

A grin formed on Tony's lips. "I knew you'd figure it out when it came down to it."

Stephen leaned back a little, looking into the other's eyes. A soft smile played on his lips. "I don't have anyone else."

Chapter End Notes

Sorry this took longer to make "live" than I thought. I had a VERY rough copy fully written last week but just didn't have the time to edit it till now.

The next chapter will be the final conclusion to this little section then we move on to bigger plotline/issue I have mapped out LOLOLOL

Just on side note: please respect my creative decisions with this story. I completely understand everyone probably has their own opinion about each character and how they want things to play out but please try to respect the direction I take with this story as well / give the ideas a chance for the duration of the story (so to say) - Thank youuuu :')

& Really appreciate the continued support many shown so far ;^; def means a lot and what keeps me going ❤️
Okay so after some thought, I decided to change two things from the original movieverse. I’m completely going to forget Natasha/Bruce was ever a thing (personally, it just... didn't connect well for me) & Bruce and Hulk are still two entity. That... is because of laziness;; I admit that I don’t have much knowledge in “Professor Hulk” that the Endgame explored and it is just… easier… for me to go off of how Bruce was before OTL.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Cap, we’re ready for takeoff.”

There was no response. Steve still had his eyes fixed on the compound. Clint nudges at Natasha.

“Steve?” Natasha called over her shoulder.

“Did Tony leave for Wakanda already?” the Captain asked.

Sam sighed rolling his eyes.

“He took off last night,” replied Natasha calmly. “He crossed paths with the King of Wakanda before Avengers so they may be catching up.”

Steve turned towards her questioningly.

“The United States doesn’t have royalty,” she went on with a small smirk. “Stark family was and is as close as it will get.”

The blonde nodded a bit hesitantly before walking towards his seat. “Did he take the suit? It’s a long flight-“
“He said he could use it. He hasn’t been out in the field much these days. Probably wanted a breather.”

Tony half wonders why he thought this was a good idea. He definitely had thought it was initially. Initially (possibly for the first hour or so) it was quite nice. Flying far above civilization, feeling the wind, enjoying the speed. After all, he had recently found a new appreciation for the time he had to himself.

But, about two hours in, however, he was starting to get a bit tired. Maybe he really should have gone on his plane with Pepper and the rest.

“We’re approaching Wakanda border, Boss.”

That made him search around but he saw nothing but hills, mountain, and dense forest. “Some kind of sheath tech. FRI, contact the number we were given and request access.”

“Of course, Boss.”

There was a brief pause before he noticed a section of the woods seeming to dissolve revealing a hint of a city surrounded by valleys and what appeared to be beautiful farmlands.

“Access granted, His Highness is requesting you land in the main courtyard. He provided coordinates.”

“That’s my girl,” he muttered as he flies towards the buildings far ahead.

He couldn’t help to admire the land as he soared over. First the farm, the green fields, then what looked like a metropolitan city. The architecture seemed like something straight out of Sci-Fi movies he enjoyed as a kid.

People stared up at him as he flew, some waving, welcoming. He supposed the bright red and gold armor was easy to spot in the sky. Few kids on horses had even chased after him for a good couple minutes out in the field. He smiled at them, eventually waving before zooming by.
As he landed on a large quad, he sees a couple of people standing, protected by several lines of guards. One person he distinctly recognizes. Tony let the armor retract as he walked closer in long strides, a smile on his face.

“So what else have you been hiding from me?” he said in a good-natured tone as he approached T’Challa.

The King laughs as he greeted with open arms. “I would have shown you sooner but well, the universe needed saving.”

Tony gave a half-hearted shrug patting the other on the back. A smirk now formed on his lips. “I still can’t believe you didn’t tell me you wear spandex- especially after I announced to the world I was Iron Man. I thought we had a pack-”

“Oh that pack was long broken the day you betrayed me-" 

Tony snorted, “I was babysitting you and you were being very difficult. Your father was a King, of course I was going to rat you out.”

“You only had to watch me for 30 minutes,” The King replied in indignation. “You’ve managed to gain my trust and betray me in less than an hour.”

“A five-year-old prince is very overwhelming for an eighteen-year-old to handle. Besides I was never good with kids-”

T’Challa laughs, “Surely that’s not true. You’re adopting.”

“Oh… well…” Tony looked around. “So…Where’s the pretty one?”

“Nakia is on her way back from a mission. She’ll be joining us later for the celebration,” he replied back smoothly. Too used to Tony’s usual antics.
“Where's the scary one?”

“Here, Stark.”

“Jesus-” Tony jumps as Okoye’s voice came right behind him. The warrior has a smirk on her face as Tony stares at her with faux irritation. "Fucking cats I swear-"

The King chuckles as he led the other towards the other two that were nearby. “I believe you two may have already met. My mother, Ramonda, Queen Mother…”

Tony smiled, kissing an offered hand. “It has definitely been a while but you haven’t aged a day.”

Ramonda smiled back. “Still very good with flatteries I see.”

T’Challa then motioned to a young teen. “My sister, Princess Shuri…”

“You have finally made an armor with fewer overlapping plates. Though it seemed to have compromised the inertia dampe-“

“SHURI.” There was an outcry from both her brother and mother.

The girl took a sideward glance at her two guardians then at Okoye before clearing her throat. There was a moment of silence as Tony just stared.

“It’s alright,” he says easily, taking off his glasses.

At that Shuri looked up meeting his eyes. There were no traces of embarrassment or shame. A part of him felt like he can understand that… the fire, the passion, the never-ending curiosity, the non-compromising boldness… intelligence.

A smile plays on the engineer’s lips, “So… you got all the brain in the family.” He teasingly glances at T’Challa who rolled his eyes, arms crossed. “What other advice you got for me, princess?”
The teen breaks into a grin.

Wakanda was certainly an enchanting nation. For the first time in a long while, Tony had been absolutely fascinated. Everywhere he turned there was something new, something for him to learn and explore.

Ever since the nation-state opened its doors to the rest of the world there had been much publishing of its beautiful art, rich heritage, and unimaginable technology but Tony can see now that none had done justice to the real deal.

He spent the afternoon with Shuri in her lab. She had been very enthusiastic in explaining the extent of Wakanda’s technical advances and her latest creations. Tony had listened to it all asking questions here and there. When she finished her round, the princess had looked at him almost expectantly. Though he was unsure what exactly she had been hoping from him. But in the end, the genius had done something he had never had to before in his life… asked for a repeat, slower.

Tony smiled to himself remembering the look on her face. She seemed both amused and all too happy to explain everything over and over again as many times as he needed. Perhaps the old age was really getting to him. He doesn’t remember being so fond of kids when he was younger. He had been right there with Stephen saying he never wanted kids…

*Stephen*…

“My friend, will you not join the rest of the party?”

Tony turned to see T'Challa approaching, dressed in highly decorated robes of royal purple and midnight blue. The jewels and embroidery that adorned most of the panels glistened as if it were stars in the night sky. He, himself, had chosen to wear a traditional, clean-cut tux for the occasion.

The engineer peered about gazing at the ever-growing crowd inside. He recognizes most of them though it was somewhat strange seeing many of them out of superhero suits and in elaborate evening wears.
It seemed that, as Ross wanted, most had shown up. Tony mainly had been with Pepper and Rhodes earlier in the evening but eventually met Hope that Scott had never shut up about and even briefly ran into Wong at some point. He did note Wong had been the only one present from the magic world but that wasn’t surprising considering this probably was not their usual scene.

The party did get much more lively once the Guardians and Ravagers arrived. Nebula seemed all too keen to finally introduce Tony to her sister, Gamora and the engineer understood a bit why Quill was so smitten. Thor wasn’t present from what Tony had seen but eventually overheard someone mentioning to Bruce and Carol about Thor having been away on separate business. A formidable woman, who Bruce referred to as Valkyrie, seemed to have come with a couple of other Asgardians as representatives. There were also words flying around that Thor decided to relinquish his birthright as Asgardian King, naming Valkyrie as the next ruler but he wasn’t sure on the details.

*Good for him,* Tony had thought, honestly happy for the god.

Though it had been very nice seeing these familiar faces outside mortal danger, Tony soon spotted the rogues mingling within the crowd. Considering the mixture of all the heroes, SHIELD agents, people of Wakanda, and some Asgardians, it was quite a turnout and definitely not impossible to hide away from selected few, however…

“Yeah I’m trying out the stereotypical hide-out-in-the-balcony to see if it’ll land me attention from someone worthwhile,” he replied with a smirk. “Apparently, it actually works because I got myself a King-“

T’Challa gives him an exasperated laugh shaking his head slightly. “Come, I believe your boy had been looking for you. I may need help getting them away from the dessert table.“

Tony smiled softly, “Just a sec. I kind of like the cold air right now.”

The King gave him a polite nod before walking inside once more.

As soon as he was left alone, Tony’s smile faltered, a deep groan of annoyance as he covers his face with his hands. Can he be any more of a cliché? Was he seriously here pining for the wizard who basically left him once again to do god knows what. Tony had contemplated chasing after Wong earlier to demanding to know where Stephen was but he managed to stop himself just in time.
He should go find Pepper. Pepper would know what to do or at the very least keep him from doing anything stupid. But now that he thought about it, he hadn’t seen his favorite strawberry blonde for a good two hours or so. Suddenly getting a bit concerned, he strode back in. The pleasant music and laughter filling his ears the minute he came through the double doors.

“Man of Iron!”

Tony turned just in time to be pulled into a crushing hug. There was a genuine smile that had formed on Tony as he pulled nearly lifted off his feet. The Asgardian soon let go, stepping back a bit with a huge grin on his face. The brunette couldn’t help but note that Thor was back to his old self. He definitely looked cleaner cut, shorter hair but still a bit messily kept, less of the darkness around the eyes, definitely leaner but still all broad muscles… The Asgardian seemed happier, energetic, full of life.

“Hey there, Point Break. Didn’t know if you would be joining or not.”

“Wouldn’t miss it for the world! Seeing you lot again. Good to be back amongst my SHIELD brothers.”

That made Tony peer around the tall blonde. He hadn’t notice before that behind Thor was the old team plus Barnes and Sam. The engineer tried not to show on his face the displeasure he suddenly felt, though Bruce and Thor being there certainly helped.

“So that’s what it takes for the great Tony Stark to grace us with his presence without bolting the other direction… a god:“

Tony glared at Clint. He knew the archer was trying to be playful. He knew that tone. Before all of this Clint and he had a good bantering thing going with them having a similar dry sense of humor. But at the moment, after all that had happened, Tony just didn’t feel like it. It irked him for reasons he couldn’t quite explain.

Thor gives Hawkeye a confused look but then catches the expression on Bruce and something seem to dawn on his face. The Asgardian never quite heard the full story as to what transpired while he was away. He certainly remembers the tension after Ultron fiasco but he had thought it was nothing too serious. The blonde may have also just assumed everything had blown over considering how well they had fought together against Thanos.
“Come now,” being good-natured as always, Thor regarded back and forth at all of them with a grin plastered on his face. “After all that we’ve been through together, why not put everything behind us and celebrate the future.”

At that, Steve stepped forward, “Join us for a bit, Tony. Please. For old times’ sake… We can take things slow-“

In the back of his mind, Tony knew Steve meant well. He can see it in those clear puppy dog blue eyes. Having been around so much politics, corruption, business… all of it… all his life, he knew the tells of someone lying to him… those who were trying to hide their real intentions. Cap really was honestly trying. He really was simply hoping to make some type of progress on their strained relationship. He may not always be going about it the right way at times but, at the end of the day, he was trying. Tony can see that. Knew that when it came down to it, they all made several mistakes getting here. That life, people, situations were much more complex than who's right and who's wrong.

There was a soft smile on the Captain expression as he took another step towards the brunette. The sincerity, hope, optimism clearly visible as he gazed at Tony. Steve put a hand to the other’s arm, a friendly gesture that was once so common between them at a point in time.

And Tony involuntarily flinched.

There was half a second where the two’s eyes locked. Tony’s eyes widened, a bit taken aback by his own unconscious reaction. Steve seemed startled as well, confused or even hurt but took a half-step back none-the-less.

A slight frown soon appears on the blonde’s expression, “I’m sorry-”

“For fuck’s sake, Stark. Stop acting so precious,” Clint burst out.

Sam let out a sigh. “You attacked us when we had our backs turned yesterday. Come on, Stark, we all need to make an effort to try and get past things-“

Thor frowns a bit as he turned towards Tony. “You attacked them…?”

He wasn’t sure if that was judgment he senses from Thor or just plain confusion but he just wanted
to run. He didn’t want to know. Didn’t want to be disappointed anymore.

Bruce quickly approached him. “Tony,” he called out gently as he put a hand on his shoulder. That made the brunette fix his eyes on his friend, his breathing leveling out slightly.

“Anthony, a word?”

They all turned towards the newcomer.

“Your Highness,” Bruce quickly greets, as if glad for some sort of interruption.

T’Challa has a polite smile on his face as he joins them. “My apologies, but I was hoping to steal Tony for a bit.” He turned towards the engineer. “Turns out I am in need of the final words on the blueprints you and my sister had been working on in the afternoon.”

“Yeah… Yeah of course,” Tony doesn’t hesitate as the T’Challa led them away from the group to the other end of the large ballroom. After they were well out of earshot he looked towards the other. “What blueprints?”

T’Challa clears his throat, a playful smile forming on his lips. “No idea. Couldn’t think of anything on the spot. I’ve never been the best liar…”

Tony laughed, “Well you should work harder at it now being King and all.”

“I was just told I should go rescue you.”

“From who?”

“My sister and your son,” he nodded towards the Shuri and Peter, who were couple yards away at a table. They had a mass amount of colorful desserts in front of them that had Tony frowning slightly.

“I had tried to stop them,” T’Challa quickly said.
“Why? Let them just throw up later and maybe they’ll learn their lesson.”

T’Challa lets out a huff of exasperation. “Great parenting, Tony,” he said teasingly.

Tony shrugged, his eyes still fixed on Peter who was laughing now at something Shuri had just said.

“So your sister… she’s pretty smart.”

The King follows his gaze towards the two teens who seemed to be showing something on their phones to each other, talking animatedly. “Yes. Surpassed our best scientists and engineers by the age of twelve.” He turned back towards the brunette. “She meant no disrespect earlier-“

“Oh, no it’s fine,” he brushed off. “I know what that’s like. Too much thoughts and your mouth get ahead of you…”

“She admires you.”

That made Tony snap up. “Why? I’m practically a fossil here. You must have been laughing your heads off when we were boasting about all the Stark tech breakthroughs-”

T’Challa let out an easy laugh. “No no… we admired you more than you think. We had an endless supply of vibranium to rely on. You came up with the Iron Man suit in a cave. My sister is brilliant but she had access to the best tutors, unlimited resources, backings of generations of technological advances other countries cannot even dream of. Imagine what you could have accomplished had you had access to our equipment… the vibraniums…”

“Probably something terrible,” Tony replied without hesitation.

There was short silence that followed.

“Why not extend your stay here, Tony,” T’Challa began with a smile. “Shuri would love for Peter
to stay longer and I’m sure you would be fascinated by the knowledge we have to offer. Of course, your doctor can join you here if he likes. I don’t believe I saw him here tonight.”

Tony studied him for a moment. “How did you know? How much do you know…?”

The smile fades for a brief second. “Well… words get around. Everyone had been talking about the tension at the Avengers compound. …But I mainly heard from my sister… who heard from Peter.”

Tony grimace but before he can speak the other continued.

“Shuri seemed to have become quite close friends with your boy and they kept in contact. Do not be angry, Peter just seemed… worried… needed someone to talk to. He had only confided in Shuri and my sister only told me. Quite frankly, Shuri had been quite mad on your behalf-”

“I thought she was friends with Barnes.”

“They are. But I don’t believe what happened in Siberia was the only thing that was being questioned.” T’Challa turned to fully face the other. “I apologize, for how it may have seemed to you by letting them stay here. I did not realize the extent-”

“No,” Tony said quickly. “You were doing the right thing.”

“Was I?”

“Barnes needed help. I know… I knew he was brainwashed. It was the right thing to do.”

“God damn-“ Tony exclaimed after a pause. “Is Peter okay? …Fuck, I should have known he was upset…”

“Tony, he cares for you. Of course, it’s natural to worry…”

“Well, he’s a kid! He should be worrying about whether he ate too much ice cream or some crush he has at school. I’m supposed to be giving him that kind of life, the experience of being a kid…”
He’s Spider-Man. He already has too much on his shoulders he shouldn’t have to… He shouldn’t have to have added stress from my overly complicated, messed up life. I shouldn’t have—... God, I fucked up. I should have been more careful about introducing Stephen into his life…”

“Doctor Strange, he—“

“Yeah he fucking left—“

“No, Tony… I mean…”

T’Challa lightly grabbed a hold of the other’s shoulder, nudging him to turn around. As Tony stared questioningly to the same direction the other had been watching he noticed the main entrance was open.

His heart skips a beat.

Stephen had just stepped into the room, Pepper standing next to him, smiling. The doctor had offered her his arm like a perfect gentleman helping her over the complex steps that were at the outer edges of the room. Once more inside, Pepper seemed to whisper a word of thanks, giving a light squeeze before letting go. Rhodey hurried to joins them, laughing as he pats the sorcerer on the back.

Soon the three approaches to where Wong stood talking to Thor and Bruce. And it became very evident what had caught Tony off guard. Standing next to Wong, Stephen was a startling contrast. The Sorcerer was not wearing a decorative robe like Wong but a high-end tux. And Tony knew high-end tux when he saw one. It was a classic cut with a modern flair. Completely black, though it had a gunmetal sheen under the light. It fit Stephen in all the right ways, accentuating the broad shoulders, the V down to his slim waist, the mile-long legs. Clearly a custom fit perfect to the very last stitch.

Tony found himself walking closer, his legs unconsciously carrying him. But at the corner of his eyes, he sees Steve approaching as well, followed closely by Natasha, Barnes, Sam, and Clint. Nick Fury, along with Everett Ross and Maria Hill, now had their eyes on the situation, the Director striding towards them at a quick pace.

“Stephen!” Tony called out before the rogues had the chance to speak to the sorcerer.
Stephen doesn’t hesitate. As his gaze fell on Tony, his expression visibly softening, an earnest smile spreading across his lips. He lifts a gloved hand, reaching for the brunette’s forearm as he approaches.

Tony couldn’t speak. Couldn’t find the words.

The doctor’s hand strays down to the other’s waist, quickly giving it a light pressure. “Just one moment, Tony…” he said gently. He waited for Tony to nod, though the brunette had done so with a bit of hesitation. Then the sorcerer lets go, turns to face the others, expression hardening.

“Strange.”

“Rogers.” It definitely did not go unnoticed he referred to the Captain simply by his last name.

But the sorcerer didn’t bother to linger on Cap, instead stood in front of Director Fury. Soon reaching to the inside pocket withdrawing an envelope.

“The contract for the new Avengers Initiative. Signed,” Stephen stated holding it up. “You’ve been quite crossed with me due to this. I believe now the qualms you have should be well taken care of?”

Fury’s expression remained blank, arms crossed. “You suddenly changed your mind? You don’t seem the type.”

“Funny how couple years can change someone’s perception.” It was barely above a whisper. As if it was merely a thought that was absentmindedly voiced aloud.

Something flashed across the Director’s eyes. “What is it that you want?”

Stephen straightened up, a small smile playing on his lips. The easy assurance, willful arrogance, and wicked intelligence… it was all tightly wrapped up in a single smile. “I want a chair in decision-making.”

“What?!” exclaimed Steve in pure anger. There were many others equally taken aback.
The doctor ignored them, effortlessly carrying on with his words. “I believe that won’t be a problem considering the current team lack expertise in the realm of magic which is why you were so keen on recruiting me. It would be a logical, efficient decision to solve a quite pressing concern.”

The Director took a quick glance at the Captain. Everyone knew Fury had always given preference to what Captain America wanted in the past. But he cleared his throat, for once ignoring the exasperated look on Steve’s face. “Anything else?”

“The division leader spot Iron Man had chosen to relinquish after the war with Thanos. Equal status to Captain Marvel and Captain America… and most likely, I assume, Black Panther if he chooses to join.”

There were mutterings now from several.

Steve stepped forward. “Who would follow you? You have no right-“

“I will.”

Silence fell as all heads turned towards the King.

“A good leader can also follow when needed. I have no problems working under Doctor Strange’s leadership when the situation requires it just as I’m sure he has no problems working under mine.” T’Challa took a couple of long strides towards the group, stopping next to the sorcerer.

Stephen gave him a small nod and the King smiled pleasantly.

“I can potentially have my papers signed by sunrise,” T’Challa said now facing the Director.

They can see the gears turning in Fury’s head as he was sizing the two. Ross was now looking at T’Challa questioningly.
But Stephen doesn’t wait. “Iron Man will be under my main jurisdiction and completely be removed from any and all authorities of Captain America.” Stephen continued sternly.

At this, both Sam and Steve cried an outburst. Thor looked like he was going to say something as well but they were all quickly stopped by Fury who raised a hand to silence them.

“Doctor Strange, be reasonable. We cannot limit Stark to only be working under your team.”

“No, I did not say only me. But he will be under my main jurisdiction. In the same way you currently, and in the past, viewed Rogers as his main leader. Captain America will no longer have any power over Iron Man sanctioned by SHIELD. If needed, I have no doubt Tony can work under Captain Marvel or Black Panther. Contrary to what was continuously insinuated in the past, he never had issues working in a team or under a leadership… just bad ones.”

“Strange, you have some nerve—” the Captain lunged forward, only to be held back by Thor. “What the hell is this? Another show to just prove yourself?”

“Oh no, it is far from it,” he replied, finally turning to face Steve. Stephen strode nearer pausing only feet away. “This isn’t a show. We’ve passed the stage of empty threats. I warned you, you son of a bitch. Do. Not. Push. Me. Or I will put you in your place.”

Some looked a bit taken aback by the change in the doctor’s demeanor. Tony supposed most of them never seen how Stephen used to be, hot-headed and foul-mouthed. From what everyone had seen so far, the sorcerer probably gave them a straight-laced impression.

“Agreed.”

That made a chilling silence wash over them.

Fury let out a sigh as he snatched the envelope from Stephen’s hand. “I said, agreed.” he sounded almost resigned, “We’ll finalize rest of the details when we get back but Hills will note the terms you just stated to start.”

The Director opens the envelope, looking it over. “So… this is your idea, Doctor Strange?”
“Some. Mostly Tony’s.”

He doesn’t reply to that statement, just folds back the contract before putting it into his inner pocket. Fury gave one last warning look towards Steve before motioning to Maria Hills. Along with Ross, the three walked away from the small crowd that had now formed.

Cap looked as if he wanted to go after them but also seemed too keen on finishing the standoff with the sorcerer.

Stephen didn’t bother watching the SHIELD agents leave. Instead, he casually lifted his hands to about waist level, pinching the fingertips of his gloves before giving them a swift pull. All the while, those piercing eyes does not leave the Captain’s, the two’s gaze locked in a heated glare. He lets the gloves carelessly fall to his feet, one after the other, soon revealing the once elegant hands that were now covered in dreadful scars.

Some stared at the trembling hands. A frown appeared on those who were more or less not aware of the infamous accident. Barnes and Sam, who undoubtedly were at least aware of the story from rest of the rogues, glanced but looked away just as quickly.

There was complete silence as the sorcerer regarded each of them with a sharp gaze, as if daring any of them to speak. The proud arrogance openly on display.

When no words came, he turned towards Steve once more, a slight smirk forming on his lips. A moment, then the sorcerer let out of light, dismissive scoff before brazenly turning his back towards the soldier – a last egotistic act, a challenge.

The Captain seemed too bewildered to do anything.

“Stephen,“ Tony’s voice was barely above a whisper. As the doctor faced him, Tony almost immediately reached for the other’s hands, shielding it with own. It was an instinctive reaction. An unconscious reflex the engineer had developed in response to other’s discomfort.

Stephen took a step forward, smiling softly at the act. For someone who had a photographic memory, who always saw too much details, analyzed every act to the roots... how could he have missed the obvious? Been so blind? He never really had anything to worry about. Tony always was his to the core.
The usual icy green-blue eyes showed such open adoration that much too rare in public. It made Tony frown, uncertain. But before the genius can formulate a response, Stephen extended a hand to the other’s cheek, thumb gently stroking the jawline. The faint tremor and ugly scars on open display for anyone around to see. … and Tony, understood.

“I believe you owe me a dance,” the sorcerer said, his voice low and warm. “And you’re going to let me lead.”

Tony let out an easy laugh, taking the other’s hand and letting himself be led away to the floor.

“What was that?” Scott murmured as he watched the two leave. He, Hope, and several others eventually had walked over trying to figure out what was happening.

“Strange one-upped Rogers,” Carol replied too loudly, a smirk in place. She didn’t even bat an eye as some glared at her.

Rhodes glanced towards Steve, who looked furious, to say the least, ears turning red, jaws set, fist clenched… then at the rest of the rogues who had all sorts of mixed expressions.

“Stephen, you bastard,” he said under his breath, grinning fondly.

.......... 

Stephen effortlessly leads them to the middle of the dance floor as he had done numerous times back in the days where Tony was mainly known to the world as the billionaire CEO with a hero complex and him as just Stephen Strange, the surgeon.

It feels like another lifetime. It was another lifetime. All the problems they faced back then seem so small now in comparison… even if then, it all seemed like the end of the world. Well now, he supposed, the literal end of the world was quite a realistic possibility.

And Tony had changed as well. Stephen was very aware. It was apparent in the simple things.

Tony used to drive head first into a fight or didn’t hesitate to face an oncoming obstacle. Used to be
so stubborn and hotheaded… determined, passionate… carried himself with unyielding resolve. It was infuriating. But the doctor had fallen in love with that side in the genius quite possibly from the moment they met. For the first time in his life, someone can measure up to his own headstrong personality. To argue with him, push him, to challenge him. Stephen didn’t have to carry all the weight for once. He didn’t always have to be the smarter one, the one who had all the solution, the one everyone looked to. In fact, Tony had proven over and over again to be the stronger one of the two when the doctor was just so… tired.

Stephen gave a quick spun before sharply pulling the other close in a firm hold. It was a touch dramatic but he was in a mood to show off. After the stunt he just pulled with the Director they were definitely the center of the attention anyway. Tony let out a soft, exasperated laugh, a smirk forming on his lips.

Yes, it was in the small things. The way the other rarely laughed loudly, openly, as he once did. The way Tony no longer stood tall, proud, strode into every room as if he owned the place but rather, stayed off to the side as if he was tired of the attention. The way he didn’t bother to argue, the way he avoided confrontation, the way he just let the rogues win because he just wanted things to be over.

They swayed to the music, spinning, circling to the waltz. Stephen led a quick pace and Tony followed him easily. Once upon a time, Tony showed defiance, brief moments of involuntarily trying to lead himself, a reflection of the engineer’s assertive and commanding nature. They would laugh at the awkwardness. Stephen faking annoyance and Tony making some snarky comment about how the doctor should lead better then.

Stephen misses that. He understood why the brunette had changed. Why he acted this way now. It had been a gradual shift that started long before the doctor had left. The most definite turning point being after the New York invasion. But sometimes Stephen wonders…

“Are you happy?”

Tony snaps his head up to stare at the taller male, giving a questioning look. “Why wouldn’t I be? You finally took my advice. Although, I mentioned about you taking my place in Avengers months ago. And you were pretty hot back there, wizard, commanding attention-” There was a usual smirk now forming in place. “…So what’s with the suit? Not that I’m complaining you look great in it. Always looked great in it.”

“Pepper helped,” he let out a soft laugh. “Apparently had it prepared last week.”
"I thought you didn’t want things that reminded you of your old life… the partying, drinking, fast cars and equally faster spending habits-" There was teasing in his voice.

“It’s about time I stopped running away,” the sorcerer replied with a hint of a smirk. “Perhaps I should take something out of your book and accept my past. Fix the problem itself rather than trying to avoid the triggers. Own up to my faults and failures… wear the scars proudly-” he nodded towards Tony’s chest. “Besides, you are from my old life I don’t want to leave behind…”

“You sure about that?” There was something odd in the engineer's voice.

Stephen smiled, “There was once a time where you wouldn’t have even dreamt about stepping out of the leadership role. Especially something as important to you as the Avengers.”

The corner of the brunette’s lips twitched up, a hint of a smile that did not reach his eyes. “People change. I’m getting old.”

“You gave up,” he said calmly.

There was something that flashed in those whiskey eyes. Tony opened his mouth as if to make an annoyed remark.

“And it’s okay,” the sorcerer went on. He paused for a moment, waiting for Tony’s defensiveness but the engineer simply looked away. “I understand. Considering everything, it's more than reasonable. I used to think-” He let out a sigh. “That you perhaps didn’t fight back against Rogers because you still had feelings for him…”

Tony snapped his gaze up, “Stephen, it’s not-”

“I know… I know,” he replied quietly.

“Just the other day I lashed out at them-”

“For me. Not for yourself. You let things go if it’s you that got hurt. It’s… you’re tired. I can see that now. And I’m so sorry I did not realize sooner. I was so absorbed in my own problems I
Couldn't... God, and I have so many problems-

That made Tony smirk, “You're human. You're complicated. It would be boring otherwise.”

“But it hurts you. My pride, insecurity, the anger... they all end up hurting you. And I’m... usually better. I always had been so good at keeping myself under control. It’s infuriating that one person I want to be ‘good’ around is... I don’t know what it is about you but... the moment you entered my life I felt like I didn’t know anything anymore. I always thought of myself better than anyone, suddenly felt like I couldn’t ever measure up to you... for you.”

It was easier to talk once he started. “Then the ego of becoming Sorcerer Supreme… that certainly helped. Or I thought it had. After getting out of my head, I was better than all of them. I had thought I was getting better. Felt more ‘myself’, the arrogant, self-important, confident self. But once you came back into the picture, everything derailed again. You’re always the only thing that prevents me from being composed...”

“Stephen,” Tony said quickly. His eyes fell onto Peter in the crowd. He was next to Shuri, both of them smiling as they watched him and Stephen, whispering to one another... clearly happy for them.

“I’m... if you walk out on me again... I can’t- I can’t do this again. You know-... You know I will break my heart over and over again if it meant saving even a part of you. But I can’t... anymore.” His voice breaks despite himself. “It’s not just about me anymore... I have a fucking kid now.”

“Tony-“ Stephen stops suddenly, letting go to place both his hands on either side of brunette’s face. “No, no... Tony, I’m not leaving. Not again. Leaving you was the greatest mistake of my life and one I don’t intend on repeating.”

“It’s always been you. The source of my greatest strength and greatest weakness. I’ll learn. I’ll work on my faults, issues, problems, whatever they are... I’ll work harder at actually fixing them instead of simply hiding them. Because even if I am ‘better’ when you are not around, even if it is easier... it means absolutely nothing without you. I will fight for you, Anthony. Just as you have always fought for me. It’s my turn. You’ve always protected me-”

“I- I didn’t... I couldn’t back then-“ A sudden sadness appears in Tony’s expression. Guilt that lingers every time anyone mentions the doctor’s accident.
“No, you have. You always have. You can rest now. Do what you want and what makes you happy. If that means taking your place back as co-leader of Avengers someday, I’ll keep it safe for you till when or if you are ever ready. Or being in your lab more, spending all your time with Peter in the quiet, building a family… If you don’t want to fight, don’t. If you want to push back, I’ll be by your side. Be selfish. It’s my turn to protect you. To support whatever is best for you. Whatever you need-”

“This is starting to sound awfully like a proposal, Doc,” Tony said teasing. He couldn’t help it.

Stephen didn’t even hesitate, “Would you like it to be? I can-” he made a motion as if to kneel.

Tony quickly grabs him, pulling him back up, making the other straighten up once more. It was all but a split second but the act does not go unnoticed by most of the room who had been watching. There was a lot of mutterings, some "aw" of disappointment. Stephen was laughing, clearly amused by the startled expression on the brunette's face.

"Jesus-" The engineer let out a huff of laughter, “We’ve been only back at this for six months-“

Stephen was smirking, “Tony, I followed you across the country after a one night stand. Don’t tempt me.”

They giggled, ending with brunette eventually wrapping his arms around the other’s neck. There was a moment of silence before they lean in for a kiss, a kiss that was perhaps a bit too scandalous in such public eye but neither cared. Tony smiles onto the other’s lips, trying not to laugh as he heard cheering and clapping. He can distinctly make out the extreme rowdiness of Peter and Shuri.

*Kids*… he thought fondly.

And for the first time in a long while, he doesn’t mind the attention.

“What happened between Man of Iron and the good Captain?”

“Honestly I’m still piecing it together myself,” replied Rhodes as he stood by Bruce and Thor. The
others all started dispersing to smaller groups. He kept his eyes on Steve though, who still seemed to not have calmed down. Barnes was with him and talking profusely but they were too far to hear the actual conversation.

“So Anthony and the sorcerer…?”

“Yeah, they sort of picked things up again. Oh, wait… Stephen is the same Stephen Tony was dating years back. You know, when you met first Tony in New York? During the whole your insane brother attacking humanity thing? The same doctor Tony was seeing back then-” Damn they really needed to make a chart of who knew what, Rhodes thinks. He was definitely losing track.

“Ah, the medicine man,” something seemed to dawn on Thor’s face. “So then…”

“They broke up after Stephen’s accident. You saw the scars on his hands. He couldn’t practice medicine anymore. He disappeared… at some point, I’m guessing he became a sorcerer… and Tony started seeing Cap, which you sort of knew about I think- Yeah by the time you came back to earth they were together. How far do you guys know about the Sokovia Accords incident?”

“I’ve mostly caught up since coming back. I’ve had FRIDAY show me recordings and documents,” replied Bruce as he took off his glasses to polish it. “I was explaining it to Thor earlier. I suppose we should have seen in coming… after Ultron.”

“Yeah well, then Sargent Barnes got added to the mix and things sort of exploded.”

“The airport incident,” Bruce said simply.

“I was out of commission after that so not really sure what happened other than what Tony told me. He, Barnes, and Cap seemed to have had quite a fight in Siberia. Turns out, during the time Barnes was brainwashed by Hydra he killed Tony’s parents. And Cap knew about it-”

“His parents?” there was a frown that appeared at Thor’s face. The Asgardian always put such importance in family and they knew.

“Yeah but like I said, he was brainwashed. Tony knew that but still… snapped. Can’t blame him-“
“So Man of Iron has not forgiven the Captain…”

“Somewhat. Or the rest of them. Many sided with the Captain during that fight… But honestly, I think it’s more that he just doesn’t want to deal with them anymore.” Then a thought dawned on the Colonel. “Why the sudden interest in Tony?”

“Just curious I suppose,” Thor replied after a short hesitation.

Bruce turned towards the Asgardian as well. “Wait… now I think about it, you knew they had a fallout before I told you. How did you know?”

Rhodes frowned at that, especially when he sees Bruce giving the Thor an odd look. But before he could question the two Valkyrie rushed to them, quick greeting before pulling both Thor and Bruce away. Something about a bet with the Guardians.

“I just haven’t slept well- I’ll just go splash some water on my face and I’ll be ok.”

Stephen looks at him with guilt, almost reluctant to let go of the other’s hand. “Do you want me to come with you?”

Tony let out a faux huff of exasperation, smiling fondly. It was odd but endearing seeing Stephen so openly attached. “I’ll be fine.”

They had already stepped off the dance floor, standing off to the side in a corner. Everyone had more or less gone back to their own chattering, mingling, and dancing. There was a lot more energy in the room now than before.

Stephen clicked his tongue before pursing his lips, a habit when he didn’t quite get his way. “Alright… I’ll… get some air then.”

Tony smirked, “You’re cute when you’re all worried-“
“Oh shut up.”

Tony lets out a chuckle before turning around, walking towards the door. He feels Stephen’s gaze lingering on him and smiles to himself. Despite his recent years of avoiding the public’s eyes he never stopped loving Stephen’s attention. He relished every spec of it given to him. And tonight, he was over the moon.

There was a bit of bounce in his steps as he trotted along despite himself. Though, once outside in the halls, he slows his pace, enjoying the silence and the unfamiliar architecture. But he managed only halfway down the hall before he heard voices.

“TONY!”

fuck. He had half a mind to just run for it but his pride held him back.

The engineer turned around slowly, taking a deep sigh. “I have nothing I want to say to you, Rogers,” he replied as he saw the blonde hurrying towards him closely followed by Barnes who seemed very much exasperated.

“Stevey- stop-” Barnes tries to get a hold of Steve’s arm but Cap quickly shook him off.

Tony sometimes admires Barnes for his persistence. He reminds him of his Rhodey, never failing to run after his troublesome friend. It must be an exhausting job now he thought about it. Maybe he should send something nice to Rhodey Bear.

“Tony, just hear me out. Please, we should talk-” There was something in Cap’s voice that was new. He seemed almost begging, desperate.

“Rogers, I swear to god- just leave me alone. I’m actually in a really good mood right now so if you dare ruin it-”

Tony shoves open a nearby door, quickly walking through without much thought. He doesn’t even know where or what this room is but he just wanted to get away. However, before he can shut the door Steve shoves in.
“Look, I get that you’re angry. I get it—”

“Do you?” he retorted harshly, “Because the rest of them leaves me alone. Even Clint for all his stubbornness backs off when I insist enough- For fuck’s sake look at your best friend!” he waves his hand towards Barnes. “He apparently knows me better than you! Follow his example and LEAVE ME ALONE!”

“I’m—… Tony, we were so much more than—“

“I’m done with this,” he said briskly, cutting the other off. The engineer tried to push past the other, making quick strides till…

Tony felt a strong hand on his upper arm. The next second he was forcibly tugged, his back hitting hard against the wall. Steve was looming over him, pinning him. From this distance, the difference in their size and strength becoming so much more apparent. It felt as though all the air around them was suddenly gone.

“STEVE!”

“did you know?”

“I didn’t know it was him-”

Tony struggled, but he couldn’t move. He couldn’t feel his limbs. He took a sharp intake of breath but felt like it was not enough, not even close. Why wasn’t his suit activating?

“Don’t bullshit me, Steve! Did you know!?”

He looked up and saw those clear blue eyes. Saw the shield coming down, hard.

Barnes jumped in, quickly pulling his best friend back away from the brunette. This, this he recognized.
Steve struggled. “Bucky- what-?”

“GET BACK, STEVE!” he yelled at the blonde. Cap frowned but took a further step back. Bucky rarely used that tone with him or anyone for that matter.

Tony’s knees buckled, his weight dropping. Steve reaches out but Barnes was closer, quickly caught him, lowering the engineer to the floor with his back against the wall.

“That was quite something.”

“Romanoff,” He greeted, slowly turning to face the woman.

“It was impressive.”

The sorcerer scoffed. “Shocked? Did you think me incapable?”

“No. I knew what you were capable of. Or you wouldn’t have been such liability otherwise.” Natasha took a couple of steps forward, leaning on the rail next to Stephen. “Why are you having me watched?”

“I don’t trust you.”

“Using Peter… That was clever.” Her expression remained blank, her tone even.
“Don’t bore me,” he snapped, unable to control the annoyance that seeped into his tone. “Get to the point.”

“You did once. Trust me, I mean.”

He let a silence fall between them for a second. “I had thought you cared about him.”

Natasha chose to still stare out into the open. “Someone had to do it.”

“Is that what you believe? That it was necessary?”

“We’re not children, Stephen, and this isn’t some fairy tale. You and I think alike. The world is not black and white, the good doesn’t always win, what is right is relative, and many things are bigger than us.”

“Oh, I do know. We are alike,” he stepped closer to her. “That’s why I recognize it.”

She turned towards him, “Recognize what?”

“Guilt. You look at him with the same guilt I do at times. Why would you feel guilt when you believe it was necessary?”

“STRANGE!”

They both quickly turned just in time to see Captain America running towards them.

“What do you want?” snapped the sorcerer.

“It’s Tony-“

There was an abrupt change in Stephen’s demeanor. “Where?”
“What do you say to your other nickname: The Merchant of Death?”

“When I ordered the hit on you, I was worried that I was killing the golden goose. But, you see, it was just fate that you survived it, leaving one last golden egg to give. You really think that just because you have an idea, it belongs to you?”

“You want it? Take it!”

“Put your hand down!”

“You think you got what it takes to wear that suit?”

“We don’t have to do this, Tony.”

“You wanna be the War Machine, take your shot!”

“Iron Man Yes, Tony Stark... Not recommended...”

“Big man in a suit of armor. Take that off and what are you?”

“You’re not the guy to make the sacrifice play. To lay down on a wire and let the other guy crawl over you.”

“Come on ... use... your words buddy.”

“I have more than enough to describe you, Stark.”

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

“And I’m the man who killed the Avengers. I saw it. I didn’t tell the team, how could I? I saw them all dead. Nick. I felt it. The whole world, too. It’s because of me. I wasn’t ready. I didn’t do all I could. ...I watched my friends die. You think that’d be as bad as it gets, right? Nope. Wasn’t the worst part.”

“The worst part is that you didn’t.”
“I can’t do this anymore, Tony! You said you were done with this!”

“Pepper! Pepper wait! Just please try to understand—”

“His name was Charlie Spencer. You murdered him. In Sokovia. Not that it matters in the least to you. You think you fight for us. You just fight for yourself. Who’s going to avenge my son, Stark? He’s dead. And I blame you.”

“Oh God, Tony! Every time. Every time I think you see things the right way…”

“Give me a break! I’m doing what has to be done… to starve off something worse!”

“You keep telling yourself that.”

“Steve… Steve! I’m sorry. I’m just don’t leave “

“The futurist, gentlemen! The futurist is here! He sees all! He knows what’s best for you, whether you like it or not!”

“You got to watch your back with this guy. There’s a chance he’s gonna break it.”

“I’m sorry Tony… I wouldn’t do this if I had any other choice… But he’s my friend.”

“Wasn’t I more—”

“I said we’d lose. You said, ‘We’ll do that together too.’ Well guess what, Cap? We lost, and you weren’t there.”

“He needs to be taken down a peg.”

stop…

“You screwed this up, Stark and you know it!”

just stop…
“This is on you, Tony. You should have known better than this!”

please…

“DON’T TOUCH HIM!”

Stephen…

“Tony… Tony… hey… look at me…”

Steph-

“You… I only see you.

“It’s over, Tony.”

…Stephen?

“Don’t come back here-“

“Stephen, babe…you… I… I know it must be really hard right now but don’t– don’t do this…”

“I don’t want to be with you.”

“Please… we… we can get through this– just… just give me a chance…”
“God, why must you be so stupid. What part of this do you not understand? I. Don’t. Want. You.”

“That’s… that’s not…”

“I haven’t been happy for a while. I’m tired of all the dramatics and your need to play the hero… It’s not fun anymore, Tony.”

“What’s going on Stephen… I… this isn’t you. Look, I can get to the hospital in 15. Just give me 10 minutes and we’ll talk.”

“I’M TIRED OF IT, TONY! I’m tired of all of it! I’m tired of you.”

“Stark!… S-Tony… Tony!”

Tony gasped for breath he didn’t know he desperately needed.

Barnes hurriedly withdrew his hand. That same look of shame playing on his face again. He seemed to not know what exactly to do with himself next. “Sorry… you- I had to. You stopped breathing. Steve went to get Strange.” There was a pause. “I’ll… I’ll go look for them… or Rhodes-”

The soldier tried to stand but a hand stopped him.

“Don’t.”

Barnes looked down, searching in the other’s eyes for any indication of doubt. “…Did you want me to get someone else…?”

“No,” he replied flatly after clearing his throat.

Tony tried to lift himself off the floor but soon felt very light-headed, wobbling before quickly
losing balance. Barnes hastily grabbed him by the shoulder, helping him lean against the nearest wall.

“I’m feeling better. There is no need.”

Barnes swallowed hard as he took a step back, looking around. “I can… wait outside. Make sure people don’t come in if you want to be alone for a while…”

“…Yes. Thank you.” Tony stared at him for a moment as the other walked towards the door. There was clear stiffness in his posture. “Why are you… What’s wrong with your arm?”

The soldier turned back around, glancing briefly at his metal arm. “I don’t know… It acts up at times,” he replied with a half shrug.

There was an awkward pause before the engineer stretched out a hand. “Come here- I’ll take a look.”

Barnes hesitated, “You really don’t have to. Shuri said she can look at it tomorrow maybe… or I’ll ask a SHIELD agent when we-“

“SHIELD agents are a bunch of idiots. Don’t insult me, Barnes.”

He stood in place, still uncertain.

Tony let out a sigh, “It… it makes me feel better. Building things, fixing things… It helps when I’m…” not ok, but he doesn’t finish his words.

Barnes stared at him for a moment, unable to stop himself from thinking over that statement. Slowly, the Winter Soldier walked back towards the brunette.

They both stayed quiet as Tony withdrew a small flat tool from his wallet easily opening up a section in the metal arm. Barnes tried to look at the far wall as the other worked but after a quick glance, found he couldn’t stop staring. It was fascinating the way the engineer started unscrewing and playing with the cords as if he already knew his way around the device as if it was his own
After some time, he cleared his throat. “When did you start? Building things, I mean…”

Tony didn’t look up. “Four.”

_He gasped as he made his way towards the chair at the center of the room. There were a loud noise and crashes of items hitting the floor as he knocked over desks, materials, anything that was in his path._

_Once collapsing onto a chair, he reached for the arc reactor, pulling it out to examine it. There was odd smoke emitting from the core. The engineer stared for a couple more seconds before popping it back into place on his chest._

_“Jarvis!”_

_“Yes, Sir.”_

_“Scan… me.”_

_“Of course, Sir. …There seems to be a high level of toxicity in your blood, Sir. Most likely caused by the arc reactor.”_

_“…Run diagnostics. Anything and everything related to the arc reactor.”_

_“Of course, Sir. Shall I contact Doctor Strange?”_

_Tony licked his lips, pausing as his eyes landed on a medical text at the far corner of the worktable. Stephen had left it there during just the night prior._
“…No.”

Chapter End Notes

(I always wondered, do people even read these things? LMAO)

I'm sure you can sort of guess what the flashbacks in the next chapter are going to be about. And I know I just left you guys with a bit of a cliff hanger but I am thinking of taking a bit of a hiatus from writing for the time being. It's sort of still a bit up in the air and I may write one more chapter before going on a break but I'll definitely keep everyone updated on what happens.

I do have the whole fic mapped out but I wish there was some way to write as fast as your thoughts :) I'm still pretty invested in finishing this out however I do have a lot of other hobbies to work on right now and writing does take a lot out of you;;

But thank you so much for everyone who had kept up reading this story so far!! I really did not expect so much kudos, comments, bookmarks, etc. when I first started this. It's definitely a nice surprise since I never thought myself as a good writer so gave up writing fanfic years ago.
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

So I got sick this weekend and got super bored bedridden...
Ended up writing an overly indulgent flashback chapter because I originally didn't like Iron Man 2 so changed it to fit more my taste LOL.
kudos if you can identify all the deleted scenes/details I utilized.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

[Earth, December 2010]

Stephen let out a sigh as he looked around at the loud club, soon spotting Tony at the bar. At the very least the VIP space had considerably less number of people although it was just as disorienting with the flashing lights and high beats of the music.

“Tony Stark, how are you?” He was a well-dressed man, quite possibly someone from entertainment industry if the loudness of his clothing choice was any indication. “Sorry I still have your plane-“

“No no- and I got your Bentley, so bring it back full of gas and -” Tony replied easily. “Hi. And they are…?” He motioned to two identical ladies that stood next to the other.

“Oh, they are for you-“

Stephen approached them just in time to see the twins getting a bit handsy. Although, if the genius’s expression was any indication, it did not seem entirely unwelcomed. Tony soon had an arm wrapped around each of their waists looking them over. That pushed at Stephen’s buttons.

“I’m thinking of a number between one and… five,” said the genius in a low tone.
“Three,” the twin replied in unison.

“Wow-“

Stephen had enough. He had a firm hold of Tony’s upper arm practically dragging him away. He kicked the door to one of the private room where a handful of partiers stared at the two in shock.

“OUT!” he shouted.

A quick glance at him then recognizing Tony Stark everyone jumped to comply, hurrying out. Once the last straggler went through the door, Stephen promptly locked it. All the while, the harsh grip on the brunette only tightened.

The doctor tried to take a deep breath but found himself unable to, his temper only rising. He slammed Tony to the nearby wall with very little restraint. The brunette had the wind knocked out of him but didn’t say a word, staring back at the other with a small smirk.

“I’ve had enough of this,” Stephen started in a low baritone voice. “I don’t know what the hell is wrong with you. One week you dedicate yourself to me, the next…” He couldn’t say it. Couldn’t admit to himself what he had just witnessed.

The whole evening Stephen watched as his so-called boyfriend flirted with half the crowd. In their relatively new relationship it was a common occurrence for the pair to run into many of Tony’s one-night stands just about everywhere they went. Though they had gone public about their affair shortly after the hospital incident and were featured as favorite topic of several magazine and newspapers for weeks, that certainly did not stop many people’s advances for the billionaire.

Stephen can guess why, of course. It was somewhere between everyone assuming the doctor was a bi-curious phase and considering Tony’s infamous past, “relationship” or not, Tony Stark surely couldn’t ever be off the market. The doctor resented the notion and alone in private, it ate away at his sanity every time he heard some ridiculous rumors of a sidepiece the playboy might be seeing.

But at the end of the day, even he had to admit Tony had been a model example of a dedicated boyfriend for months now. The brunette refused all advances, never ceased to correct the public that “yes they were officially in an exclusive relationship”, getting stern when necessary, never strayed too far when they were together in public, frequently apologized to Stephen every time someone went over the line… constantly checked on his well being.
…Until tonight.

He gave another harsh shove before letting go. “You want out? Do it. Say it to my face. AT LEAST HAVE THE GUTS TO TELL IT TO MY FACE!”

Stephen knows what this is. The tightening in his chest, the feeling of desperation, the agony… he wondered if this was karma. Must have been how Christine felt the day she learned he cheated on her.

And she had forgiven him back then. Back then, the doctor thought of her as… pitiful. But he had never dreamed he would be here.

How did it come to this? They were happy. Or at least Stephen thought they were happy. They went to a nice evening out just last week, spent the night at the doctor’s loft. Tony complained about the lack of AI and personal chef when morning came but seemed all too thrilled when Stephen cooked them breakfast.

They spent the weekend at Tony’s penthouse. Chose to stay in. They watched movies and Tony worked in his lab for a couple of hours with Stephen reading nearby. Tony had started to talk of having a couch set up down there for the other. Stephen originally had work that on Sunday but the brunette seemed so…sad with the idea of him leaving the doctor called in sick. The first time he called out of work in five years.

They went to the Metro General’s Charity Gala. Tony, true to his word, was the perfect date for the evening. Charmed everyone just the right way, somehow directed the attention to Stephen every chance he got… boasting fondly, supported him.

There was a lot of laughter, talks of future plans- both the next week and far ahead. If Tony had shown any signs that he was bored with their relationship, Stephen had missed it. How had he missed it? He saw everything. Noticed every god damn detail there was to notice.

The only missing day was yesterday. He had a long shift and Tony mentioned he was staying in. He texted to check in during the evening but Tony never replied. But the engineer quite often forgot to reply when he was working in his lab, it was nothing alarming.

If Tony just… if he JUST…
“I’m sorry.”

... he would forgive him.

There was silence between them. After a minute the brunette reaches out, grabbing a hold of the doctor’s blazer as if his life depended on it, pulling them close. Instinctively, Stephen puts an arm around the shorter man’s waist.

“I... I just- I’m so sorry- I’m being selfish-…”

“Yes... yes, you are,” Stephen replies half-heartedly. “The next time you do this... I walk.” He wondered if he himself means it. Or was it just another empty threat.

“No... I’m... being selfish by keeping you-“

“...what...?”

“...But I don’t know how... to... let you go-“

“...Tony... what is going on... did you... take something? How much did you drink?”

That changes something in the engineer. He seemed more lucid, a bit sharper in his gaze, but it’s a stare Stephen doesn’t quite understand. But before the doctor can say another word, Tony already sank to his knees, hands undoing the other’s belt.

“Tony what-“ he exclaimed hastily grabbing the other’s wrist, stopping him. “We’re not doing this right now. How much did you have to drink?”

“Fuck me.”

He admits there was a pause. Shamefully admits he may have hesitated while staring at those doe
eyes that now held so much heated emotions. “…No.”

“Suddenly being altruistic, doc? Come on… you knew exactly what you wanted when you dragged me in here.” Tony tilts his head back a little, peering at the doctor from behind the long lashes, a smirk playing on his lips. “Want to fuck me against the wall? Or keep me on my knees?”

His wrist still tied up in the doctor’s hands, the brunette leans his face forward, mouthing right next to the bulge of the other’s pants. He made a show of arching his back in a way he knew would exaggerate the curve of his broad back to the narrow waist to the round ass. If Stephen’s darkened gaze was any indication, Tony knew he already won. “Put me in my place, babe- …I need it. I need to feel alive-“

There was a short silence before Tony found a strong grip on his jaw. Another painful shove and he was pressed up against the wall with the other’s body heat all over him.

Tony couldn’t help but let out a soft laughter. Sounded odd, distant, and not quite like him.

_________

“Ugh- ughhhhh.”

Pepper opened the door to the aircraft lavatory finding Tony, in his full Iron Man suit, just about with his head in the toilet.

“UGH- I’m serious… oh- give me a little space-“ Tony muttered as he waved a hand dismissively at his assistant.

Pepper gave him a half exasperated, half disgusted look. “Get up,” she said bitterly.

“Oh god- I can’t go through… I’ll tell you-“

“STEPHEN!” she yelled over her shoulder, then quickly turned back to her boss. “We don’t have time for this! We have to go! Now!”
Stephen walks towards them, first passing by Rhodes with a questioning look.

“Tony’s being an over-dramatic little bitch,” the Colonel replied with a small smirk, leaning against the wall.

The doctor stepped past him to where Pepper had been standing. Narrowing his eyes as he peered about to his boyfriend who was now doubled over.

“Oh god, you don’t want to see that-“ the brunette said as he closes the lid to the toilet, flushing.

“Tony what…?” There was a feeling at the pit of his stomach. Something felt wrong. Yes, this can easily be another one of Tony’s antics as Pepper and Rhodes clearly seemed to be thinking but…

But Stephen doesn’t have a chance to finish his thoughts as Tony stood hastily, the Iron Man armor making him at equal height as the doctor for once.

“Where am I? …Do I look weird?”

“You look like how you look every day. You look like you have a hangover,” Pepper replies without missing a beat.

Stephen scowled. “How much did you drink?” he asked angrily. The past month he had been trying to mitigate Tony’s dangerous drinking habit. Recently, it had increased at an alarming rate. The genius, in turn, went on to picking at Stephen’s frequent smoking habits and they were at a standstill in the argument, neither budging as usual.

Tony doesn’t reply. Doesn’t meet Stephen’s eyes. He walked away swiftly from the two though Pepper was hot at his tail. She hastily tosses the Iron Man helmet she had been carrying to Stephen, which he caught easily.

“Just give me some toast… some crackers… ginger ale…. and some Advil-“ whined the billionaire.

“I don’t have Advil, I got Motrin,” replied Pepper.
“Motrin?” Tony sounded offended. “I’m telling you there is something seriously wrong—“

“I’m telling you there is something seriously wrong with you!”

The two were yelling over each other now.

“-with a grown ass man taking Motrin! I’M NOT ON MY CYCLE!”

“IT’S IBUPROFEN!”

Stephen put a hand over his face with a sigh. He didn’t bother trying to stop these two when they got like this, which has been rather frequent as of late.

“ABORT MISSIONNNNN!” Tony was shouting on top of his lungs now fidgeting with the oxygen mask.

“WE’RE NOT-“

“WE ARE DROPPING THIS MISSION!”

“WE’RE NOT ABORTING THE MISSION!” Pepper was soon yelling right at Tony’s face. “DO YOU KNOW HOW MUCH COORDINATION IT TOOK FOR D.O.D. TO APPROVE THIS?!“

Stephen glanced at Rhodes who was giving him an amused, resigned look, then out at a nearby window. The doctor walked over, putting a hand to Pepper’s shoulder having her step aside. She did so without hesitation, giving Stephen almost a pleading stare.

“TONY!” he yelled, sternness very evident in his tone now.

The engineer turns, eyes finally meeting the other's.
“We’re over the drop zone,” he said simply.

“What.” The brunette’s tone was suddenly even.

Stephen had a hand on the back of the other’s neck, stilling him. “You idiotically decided to be Iron Man despite breaking my fucking heart. I begged you not to put yourself in danger but YOU wanted to go play a goddamn hero. So right now, when Pepper needs you, you’re damn well going to do it!”

There was a pause, as Tony’s gaze finally seemed to focus. “Let’s do this, baby.”

Stephen sighed, as he followed Tony making his way to the edge of the plane, the chilling breeze and wind tunnel hitting them as they stood. Tony quickly put an arm around the doctor’s waist.

“I can be selfish sometimes… and I know I don’t say it enough—“

Stephen raises an eyebrow.

“…how is my hair?”

“…You said that before,” Stephen replied, deadpan.

“I know but this time I mean— is it piecey enough? Do I need more product?

“You look good, Tony,” he replied flatly.

“That windblown look?”

Stephen doesn’t even bother with a response.
“Okay, give me a smooch for good luck. I might not make it back- this is heavy stuff.”

They stood there for a minute, eyes locked. Then Stephen brings up the Iron Man helmet to his lips, giving it a mock kiss before tossing it out to the open air with a smirk.

“Go get ‘em, Iron Man.”

Tony grins widely before jumping off the edge, “You complete me!”

Stephen leans over, looking down at the bright lights emitting from the newly re-launched Stark Expo. There soon was a flash of red and gold that zoomed by. Rhodes finally strode over to next to him, patting the other on the shoulder with an exasperated huff. Even from this distance, they now heard the muffled roar of an enormous crowd.

“Perfect landing,” Pepper told them, a hand to an earpiece.

“Pepper, was he drinking when he was with you today?” Stephen finally asked turning away.

The strawberry blonde considered at him with an odd look. “No, why?”

“Because I made sure he couldn’t drink yesterday when he was with me.”

Rhodes frowns. “So… maybe he just had a bit of stage fright-“

“Tony? … no-… he loves the attention. The trill of jumping off a plane at 15,000 feet in his beloved armor is just fuel to a fire.” Stephen started pacing a bit. Couldn’t help but to keep glancing back at where Tony had just been. “It definitely seemed like some type of poisoning…”

“Food poisoning…?” The Colonel suggested, now becoming more attentive at Stephen’s seriousness.

No… something was odd. Tony was starting to act incredibly erratic as of late. The genius always had a spontaneous side that kept Stephen on his toes but never to the point he thought the other
might be unstable. Most of the time the doctor was able to keep up and to a degree estimate the
other’s movements and thoughts. But these days, Tony’s moods and actions were becoming near
unpredictable, inconsistent.

“Pepper, how long till we land?”

“The point is… you’re welcome, I guess.”

“For what?”

“Because I’m your nuclear deterrent. It’s working. We’re safe. America is secure. You want my
property? You can’t have it. But I did you a big favor- I’ve successfully privatized world peace.
What more do you want?! For now! I tried to play ball with these ass-clowns-“

“[beep] you, Mr. Stark. [beep] you, buddy-“

“My bond is with the people. And I will serve this great nation at the pleasure… of myself. If
there’s one thing I’ve proven, it’s that you can count on me to pleasure myself-“

............

“Wake up, Daddy’s home.”

“Welcome home, sir. Congratulations on the opening ceremonies. They were such a success, as
was your Senate hearing. And may I say how refreshing it is to finally see you in a video with your
clothing on, sir.”

“How many ounces a day of this gobbledygook am I supposed to drink?”

“We’re are up to 80 ounces a day to counteract the symptoms, sir.”
“Check palladium levels.”

“Blood toxicity, 24%. It appears that the continued use of the Iron Man suit is accelerating your conditions. Another core has been depleted.”

Tony took out the arc reactor from his chest. The core popped up, rusted and smoking. “God… they are running out quick.”

“I have run simulations on every known element, and none can serve as a viable replacement for the palladium core.”

He inputted a new piece. Silver in contrast to the blackened metal he had just took out.

“You are running out of both time and options. Unfortunately, the device that’s keeping you alive is also killing you.”

Killing him. He was dying.

Tony knew for about a month now. The day he found out he spent the next 24 hours trying to solve his way out of it. He had cheated death several times in the past. What was one more? Just please… one more miracle.

But once he ran out of options, when the sun rose and set again, all he could think about was one thing.

He finally had a functional relationship. Someone he was crazy about, someone who loved him, someone that lightened up this dreadful life. It was good… so very good. But it was coming to an end, be taken from him like every other good thing that happens to glimpse his life.

That wasn’t okay. It was not fair. It wasn’t enough. It had been far too short.

Short… then it had occurred to Tony how short of a time he had spent with Stephen. They knew each other for less than a year, a good portion of it he had spent being kidnapped, and even shorter time they had spent in an actual relationship. Sure they claimed to love each other. Crazy enough to
start absentmindedly planning their whole future together. But when reality hit, how fair was it for Stephen to suffer with him on this?

So Tony had made up his mind. The evening at which they originally planned to meet up to try a new exclusive club, the engineer made a decision to break things off. A thought occurred to him that all jokes aside, he was really in love with the doctor. This was possibly the single most selfless decision he had made in his life.

…but in the end, he couldn’t do it. In the end, he had been selfish. In the end, didn’t have to guts to break things off to the doctor’s face, had chosen the coward’s way out by going back to his old ways to see if Stephen will just leave him.

As if reading his mind, the AI spoke. “…Miss Potts is approaching. I recommend you inform her and Doctor Str-“

“Mute.”

“…”The notary’s here! Can you please come sign the transfer paperwork?”

“I’m on happy time.” With that, Tony elbowed Happy in the face.

“What the hell was that?”

“It’s called mixed martial arts. It’s been around for… three weeks-“

“It’s called dirty boxing, there’s nothing new about it!”

Not bothering with the two’s antics Pepper took the pen from the redhead and started signing. “I promise this is the only time I will ask you to sign over your company-“

Tony couldn’t help but follow the new redhead with his eyes. She was striking. Something about her was odd but definitely intriguing.
Happy took the opportunity to lightly punch the brunette in the back of the head. “Lesson one. Never take your eye off-“

Tony kicks him, then goes on to crashing his bodyguard into a corner.

“That’s it. I’m done,” he said stepping off the ring. “What’s your name lady?”

“Rushman. Natalie Rushman.”

“Front and center. Come into the church.”

Pepper looked exasperated. “No. You’re seriously not going to ask…”

Stephen entered the room, quickly looking around before his attention landing on the unfamiliar face. He was unsure what was happening but strode over to Pepper, giving her a light hug and a peck on the cheek. Seeing him, she smiled.

“Congratulations, Pepper.”

Pepper let out a huff. “If he ever signs-“

“If it pleases the court, which it does,” they hear Tony say. Pepper crossed her arms while shaking her head.


“It’s no problem at all,” Natasha replied and to Stephen’s surprise, the redhead started walking towards the ring.

“I’m sorry. He’s very… eccentric,” Pepper said, clearly given up.
Stephen let out a sigh, his displeasure clearly showing now.

The engineer’s gaze falls on him immediately at that. Then after a split second, started stepping off from the platform. “Can you give her a lesson,” he calls out to Happy.

“No problem.”

Tony hastily came to his boyfriend’s side, pulling off his boxing gloves. Once close, he easily wrapped an arm around the doctor’s shoulder, pulling him in for a quick kiss. When Tony took a half step back, Stephen realized the redhead’s piercing eyes were fixed on them still.

As Stephen sizes the women, Tony turned towards Pepper. “Who is she?”

“She’s from legal. And is potentially a very expensive sexual harassment lawsuit if you keep this up-“

That made Stephen turn his attention back on the two.

“I need a new assistant, boss,” Tony said, almost playfully.

“Yes, and I’ve got three excellent potential candidates. They’re lined up and ready to meet you.”

“I don’t have time to meet. I need someone now. I feel like it’s her.”

“No, it’s not.”

“How do I spell your name, Natalie?” Tony calls out.

Pepper rolled her eyes. “What? Are you going to google her now?” She glanced up at Stephen with a brief apologetic look before glaring at her soon-to-be not boss.

“She’s fluent in French, Italian, Russian, Latin. Did you model in Tokyo? ‘Cause she modeled in Tokyo-“

Stephen stared at the scatter of photos that were pulled up on the projection. Cannot help but to notice the woman was mostly in lingerie in the photos. He opens his mouth to say something but Pepper beats him to it.

“You’re unbelievable-“

“I need her,” Tony went on. “She’s got everything that I need.”

“You’re doing this in front of Stephen?” Pepper hissed out. “OH MY GOD! HAPPY-“

They all turned just in time to see Happy land painfully hard as Natasha flipped him over, legs strangling him.

“That’s what I’m talking about!” Tony shouted, approaching the ring.

“I just slipped,” said Happy as he slowly got up.

“Looks like a TKO to me.”

The redhead focused on Tony but Stephen could have sworn her attention on the billionaire never left in the first place. “I need your impression.”

“You have a quiet reserve. I don’t know, you have an old soul-“

“I meant your fingerprint.”
“Right.”

Pepper quickly walked to Tony’s side. “So, how are we doing?” She said with a fake pleasant smile.

“Great. Just wrapping up here,” with that, the final signature. “Hey. You’re the boss.”

Natasha closed the folder. “Will that be all, Mr. Stark?”

“No.”

“Yes,” Stephen said coldly, making all three of them stare at him.

Tony doesn’t say another word. Natasha glances at the engineer before turning her attention back to the doctor. Stephen couldn’t tell what she was thinking but there was a faint smile before the redhead walked away.

That evening the pair had gotten into a fight. Waited at least till Pepper left before shouting at each other’s face and throwing things. In the end, Stephen left the penthouse without so much as a backward glance and Tony wondered if this was it.

He doesn’t admit to himself he doesn’t know what he is doing anymore. Not even sure what came over him really to be doing all these things that will undoubtedly piss his boyfriend off. Perhaps a part of him still believes it would be better at the end of it all if they split now. Less of a heartbreak for Stephen on Tony’s deathbed if he hated the billionaire’s guts.

Yes, Tony definitely wondered if this was it. Convinced himself this was better for Stephen… and yet, couldn’t help the endless tears that fell and the painful feeling of his heart squeezing the life out of him.

And he definitely couldn’t help but be selfishly relieved when he and Pepper arrive at the airport three days later to see Stephen already there, waiting for them.

Stephen remained cold and distance during the flight to Monaco, taking every opportunity to be at
the other end of the private plane. But Tony doesn’t miss the fact that during the short turbulence in which the billionaire spectacularly fell, the doctor still rushed over to check on him… and didn’t leave his side since.

“...您知道，這是歐洲。無論接下來的20分鐘發生什麼，宝贝，就順其自然—“

Oh, he really does not like that tone in the other’s voice. Stephen frowned. “Go with what?”

“Mr. Stark?”

Both Pepper and Stephen turned around sharply to see a certain redhead coming towards them. Stephen distinctly hears the new CEO mutter, “Oh, you got to be kidding me—“ and he shares the sentiment.

“Hey,” Tony greeted easily but doesn’t leave Stephen’s side. The doctor purses his lips, jaws locked as he puts a hand on Tony’s lower back.

“Right this way,” Natasha smiled pleasantly before walking them into the viewing room.

Stephen definitely noticed the tight red dress and gold belt ensemble she was wearing. Very subtle, he thought bitterly rolling his eyes.

“You look fantastic,” Tony said to his new assistant.

That comment only made Stephen pull the brunette closer to him, grip unconsciously tightening in a way that displayed a degree of his recently discovered possessiveness.

“Why, thank you very much.”

“But that’s unprofessional. What’s on the docket?”
“You have a 9:30 dinner.”

“Perfect. I’ll be there at 11:00.”

“Absolutely.”

“9:30 Tony,” Stephen said firmly, interrupting the two.

Tony doesn’t hesitate. “9:30 then.”

“Of course,” Natasha nodded but stole a quick glance at the doctor, their eyes meeting.

The smile on her lips and that sly look in her eyes, Stephen knew this woman was well aware of what was going on. That the doctor and this new assistant were at a subtle game since the moment the redhead appeared in the workout room.

It was a power play. A display of Stephen subtly exhibiting how much control he, contrary to the public’s assumptions, had in he and Tony’s relationship. Proving just how much he had Tony’s ears, how much the billionaire’s actions depended on Stephen’s emotions and mood. A warning.

“Is this us?” Tony said pointing at a corner table. Of course, he would choose the best table in the house.

Natasha quickly stepped forward. “It can be.”

“Great. Make it us.”

Natasha smiled as she turned to one of the staff, speaking quickly in well-versed French.

Pepper chose that moment to swoop in grabbing a hold of Tony’s arm and dragging him away, though not too far. She gave an apologetic smile to the doctor but Stephen just nodded in understanding.
“Have you lost your mind?” she hissed out.

“What-“

“Are you serious right now? Did you already forget what happened with Kaitlyn?”

“Okay, that was on you-,” Tony replied flatly.

“You threw a tantrum at the idea of someone covering my spot for two weeks. Just two weeks, Tony. Which turned into one when you two got into a fight. When I had to deal with EVERYTHING that dealt with the move, the new headquarter, the expo-” the frustration was very clear in her voice.

“You could have warned me-“

“I gave you over twenty candidates. You hated all of them!”

“They were inadequate-“

“No, they were not, Tony. It was a glorified babysitting duty and half of them had a business degree from Ivy leagues- Then I ran into Kaitlyn down at legal. I had this brilliant idea that maybe if I give you something that reminded you of your boyfriend you constantly pine after while at work-“

“I do not pine-“

Pepper doesn’t even dignify that with an answer. “And you took the bait. You were happy and it worked. Then I find out that Stephen had a problem with her which you failed to mention-“

“Well I didn-“
“And I had to hear you two whine about it for four days straight! I had to relocate the poor girl entirely, had to make her sign a confidentiality form because you two weren’t even sure you wanted to make the relationship public but had sex with her just outside the door, quite loudly from what I was told—”

“I’m always loud—”

Stephen tries to ignore the fact he can hear them. Although, this finally explains what happened with that incident. But he wasn’t the only one that seemed to be listening in on the conversation.

The new redheaded assistant finished acquiring the table and couple staffs were cleaning and setting it up now. She turned towards him with an amused smile, though her attention still seemed to be on Pepper and Tony’s argument.

“Would you like to sit first, Doctor Strange?” she asked him in the same charming tone.

But he didn’t respond, giving her a crossed look that doesn’t go unnoticed.

“Is something the matter? If you have any additional request I can—”

“Most people are at least exasperated by his antics,” Stephen said coldly. “You’re the first person I’ve seen who seem to enjoy being accosted by him, odd… especially in a work setting. I don’t know what your agenda is but stay away from what’s mine, you bitch.”

He doesn’t quite understand what is about this woman that was setting him off so much but this was a whole new level from petty jealousy. He feels some need to get her far away from Tony as possible. He doesn’t exactly have solid reasoning but some part of his brain kept telling him this woman wants Tony. Perhaps not romantically from what Stephen saw so far… no this was different… something far… worse.

However, despite his outburst, Natasha seemed unfazed, the polite smile didn’t even falter one bit.

But there were new voices now. Stephen turned to see Justin Hammer with a familiar blonde reporter. He almost had to wonder for a moment who out of these three he hated more.
He swiftly turned towards Natasha. “Make an excuse. Go get them before things get out of hand-“

Natasha nodded before hurrying over.

“Got any other bad ideas?”

“Tony and I… Tony… I love Tony Stark. Tony loves me. We’re not competitors. Him being out of the picture created tremendous opportunities for Hammer Industry, you know? Everything that Tony and I do…”

“Well, what’s the use of having…”

“…is a healthy…”

“and owning a race car if you don’t drive it?”

“competition… is he driving??”

Everyone’s eyes were fixed on the large screens where Tony Stark was seen in a blue racing suit. The reporters all had their recording device out or on their phone. Some were cheering.

“Natalie… Natalie!”

“Yes, Ms. Potts?”

“What do you know about this?”
“This is the first that I’ve known of it.”

“This… this cannot happen.”

“Absolutely. I understand. How can I help you?”

“Where’s Stephen?”

“Pepper!” the doctor quickly walked towards them. “What’s going on? Why is he racing?”

Pepper turns to Natasha, “Where’s Happy?”

“He’s waiting outside.”

“Okay, get him. I need Happy.”

Stephen’s eyed the screen, his heart going a mile a minute. He makes a split second decision, dashing towards the door. Though he soon collides right into Justin Hammer almost knocking the other man over. The reporter was gone now.

Justin smirks. “Oh, it’s you. Going to go get your boyfriend?” there was an oddness to his tone that Stephen distinctly identifies as jealousy. Tony clearly, once again, commanded the attention of the whole room, away from other. “Show him his place?”

That snaps the doctor’s attention.

“You know that club isn’t the most discrete of places. Have to hand it to you, doctor… didn’t know you would be the one wearing the pants in the relationship. He was always such a proud asshole I never even imagined. But he doesn’t seem… you know… all that now having seen him be such a whore-“

There were screams. Hammer was on the floor, hands to his broken nose. Stephen notices the pain in his knuckles but ignores it still glaring at the other man. Few securities were approaching them
but Pepper reached them first, motioning them away. Identifying her as the new CEO of Stark Industries they seemed to be giving leeway.

“Don’t you dare say another word you son of a-“

“Stephen, stop! The racing is about to start- Tony…”

That brings him back to his senses. He takes a deep breath. “Pepper, go get Happy-“

“Where are you going?!?” she called out to him.

“Stopping him from killing himself!”

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No one else bothers to stop the doctor as he steps into the racetracks. Everything appeared to have fallen into a bit of disarray once Tony made the announcement of throwing his name into the ring.

“What the-“ Tony stared at Stephen in utter shock as the other steps into the car to the seat next to his. “You can’t be here-“

“You want to be an adrenaline junkie? Fine. But if you fucking even dare for a second think about throwing your life away in this race, know that you’ll be throwing mine as well!”

“You don’t even have the racing suit on-“ Tony regarded him in a mixture of awe and fear.

Stephen glared at him. “So I suggest you be careful, Anthony Stark.”

*Engines ready, set, go!*
“It’s just unbelievable. It proves that the genie is out of the bottle and this man has no idea what he’s doing. He thinks of the Iron Man weapon as a toy. I was at a hearing where Mr. Stark, in fact, was adamant that these suits can’t exist anywhere else, don’t exist anywhere else, never will exist anywhere else, at least for five to ten years, and here we are in Monaco realizing, these suits exist now!”

“Mute. He should be giving me a medal. That’s the truth.”

Stephen doesn’t look at him, choosing to rather stare out at the window.

Tony’s eyes linger on the gash that adorned the doctor’s handsome face. He had rushed in to get the Iron Man suitcase from Pepper once Ivan fixated on attacking Tony and both Happy and Pepper were near panic-stricken to properly move. An act that Tony did not expect… an act, he admits, sent him on a near heart attack.

It was all fun and games till you realize you betted something you were not willing to risk losing.

He put the tray down on the small table before choosing to half-sit on the arm of Stephen’s seat. The brunette grabbed a hold of the surgeon’s right hand, putting a pack of ice on it. That made the other turn to face him finally.

“I heard you threw a pretty mean punch at Hammer. Should have just let me do it, doc. Your hands are far more valuable,” Tony said trying to smile.

Stephen let out a sigh. “If he has some type of film-“

“Do you care?”

“No, but you-“

“So what? So what if the world knows I am a bit of a slut for you… you know… pushing me around a bit. Not that bad compared to all the other shit about me on the Internet. I can just say… whatever you think we did, we did, and more-“
Stephen let out an exasperated huff, a small smile playing on his lips. He motioned to the tray. “What is that?”

“Your in-flight meal,” he replied with a smirk.

The doctor narrowed his eyes. “Did you just make that?”

“Where do you think I’ve been for the past three hours?” Tony’s voice was light, the usual playfulness back in his tone. But it didn’t reach his eyes.

“Tony,” Stephen reaches to put an arm on the other’s waist. “What are you not telling me? Are you… getting tired of this? Us?”

The thought did cross the doctor’s mind. If perhaps he was the cause of Tony’s changeable behavior as of late. Did the genius somehow felt so trapped in their relationship that he was letting out the pent up stress in other ways? Dangerous and reckless ways, he might add. That certainly would explain the random flirting with strangers and the new redhead assistant he hired. Both behaviors that were surprisingly non-existent earlier on in their dating.

“I don’t want to go home,” Tony replied in a soft tone. The brunette swings around a leg on either side of the doctor, saddling him. “At all. Let’s cancel my birthday party and… We’re in Europe. Let’s go to Venice, Cipriani…” He soon sinks into Stephen’s lap, his head falling onto the doctor’s shoulder.

Then there were moments like this where it convinces Stephen that maybe that’s not it. There were so many hints Tony displayed that showed he was still fond of him. Committed to him. Or was that his own wishful thinking?

“…it’s a great place to be healthy…”

“Tony, I don’t think this is the right time…”

“Yea, but maybe that’s why it’s the best time. Cause then we can-“
“Hey… Anthony… look at me. What are you doing? What are you running away from?”

Tony leaned back a bit; there was something there that had the doctor confused. “You don’t run away. You ran right to me, babe… you always do.”

Stephen held the other’s gaze. Tried to figure out why he felt as though he should panic. Tony was so close to him, in his arms, but it felt as though the brunette might slip away the moment he blinks. “I’m not going anywhere, Tony.”

“Yeah…” Tony smiled. Leaning in once again into the other’s embrace. “Yeah, of course.”

They stay still for a couple of minutes, Stephen absentmindedly running his fingers through Tony’s hair. At some point, he feels the brunette shift, a slight circling of his hips.

Getting the cue, Stephen slowly snaked a hand between them, unbuttoning the other’s pants before reaching in. “Want me to get you off, love?” he whispered in a low tone.

His other hand, still tangled in the brown-locks, gave a tug. Tony obliged, turning his head to one side and the doctor started tracing wet kisses on the exposed neck.

Tony let out a lewd moan before buckling his hips, rutting into the other’s hand quite blatantly now. Something about this makes him feel a bit cheap but he doesn’t care as long as Stephen continues to view him with that dark look.

Stephen extends his knees apart, which in turn, makes the Tony spread his legs further. He completely stills his hand for a second. Simply watching as Tony gasped at the loss of balance and leverage at the new position, the unconscious embarrassment soon setting in. The doctor definitely doesn’t miss the pretty tint that appeared on his lover’s cheeks.

“Stephen… I need-“

Tony’s eyes dart away but the hand removes itself from his pants, traveling, then fixing firmly on his jaw.
“Eyes on me.” The command in that baritone tone had Tony instantly buckling, though in vain. The doctor chuckled but allowed the brunette to lower himself further, arch his back so their hips can meet, to get some friction.

“God, you’re so pretty like this, Tony. When you’re so needy and desperate... Maybe I should have you cum just from my fingers—”

He moans loudly at the praise, begging, but before he can say anything else Stephen’s hand secures itself over his mouth. Breathing sharply, Tony can smell his own musk, which sets him off more on the edge than it should.

The doctor was leaning in now, his lips near his ears. “shh… be quiet now. I’m just not in the mood to let other people hear you. Don’t worry. I’ll still give you what you need.”

Tony tried to let out of a disgruntled huff, then darted his tongue out licking suggestively at the palm covering his lips.

Stephen smirked, “Brat.”

“Do you know which watch you’d like to wear tonight, Mr. Stark?”

“I’ll give them a look,” Tony replied, quickly buttoning his shirt. “…Should… cancel the party.”

“Probably,” Natasha strides over to where he stood, a drink in hand.

“Yea. ‘Cause it’s…”

“Ill-timed?”

“Right. Sends the wrong message.”
“Inappropriate-“

Tony took the drink, taking a sip. Their gaze remained locked.

“Is that dirty enough for you?”

He stuttered. “…Gold face, brown hand. The Jaeger. I’ll give that a look. Bring them over. Why don’t you-“

Natasha handed him the display box, then casually sits on the arm of the couch, quite close to him.

Tony stared at her for a moment. “I gotta say. It’s hard to get a read on you. Where are you from?”

“Legal,” she answers smoothly.

Tony let out a snort. “What’s with all my assistants coming from legal,” he said while putting the box aside. “Can I ask you a question, hypothetically? Bit odd. If this was your last birthday party you were ever going to have, how would you celebrate it?”

“I’d do whatever I wanted to do with whoever I wanted to do it with.”

“Doctor Strange?”

Stephen turned around to see a familiar brunette. “Kaitlyn, was it?”

Right. Pepper had mentioned she was transferred out of the New York headquarters. He supposed it made sense for her to be here in the West Coast office. There was slight guilt playing in his conscience.
The woman approaches gracefully, a smile on her face. “Ms. Potts asked me to grab couple files,” she said, answering his unspoken question. “I assumed you would already be with Mr. Stark for his birthday party.”

“I’m just grabbing a few things for Tony,” he lied. He had snuck into Tony’s office to check if there was any hidden alcohol or substance or anything that may explain the brunette’s recent behaviors. Stephen already had checked Tony’s main office in New York but found nothing and he just had to be sure.

“I work downstairs by the way. Rarely at this floor.” there was a small smirk playing on Kaitlyn’s lips.

Stephen cleared his throat awkwardly. “I apologize-“

“Oh no no. It’s fine-“ a short pause. “I understand. And I quite like it here actually. Although I did find it quite surprising to hear Natalie took over Ms. Pott’s old position-”

“You know her?”

“Natalie Rushman? Yes, we worked in the same department before my transfer. Talk about lucky. But I suppose things just happen for some people-“

He stared at her questioningly.

“Oh,” she said as she started collecting the files she needed. “The notary duty. I heard through the grapevine Samantha Carlisle went through a lot of trouble to be selected for delivering that document. She was trying to get higher in the company by crossing paths with the right people. Not surprising. But…” She straightened up, putting the items into her bag. “Apparently she got sick on the day of. Sudden vomiting that landed her in the infirmary. Natalie was the last minute replacement. And well… she got Ms. Pott’s old job from it which we all know is… quite a big deal.”

“Anyways…” Kaitlyn let out a small sigh as she turned towards him once more. “Have a good evening, Doctor Strange,” she said pleasantly before turning to leave. “You two are quite cute together by the way.” There was a hint of fondness in her tone.
Stephen watched her go thinking over the new information. His brain suddenly re-playing over everything he had encountered with Tony’s new redhead assistant.


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Chapter End Notes

So decided maybe not to put a specific hiatus timeframe but just write the next chapter slowly/ whenever I want till it gets done. In the end, I think right now the most fun I have is writing (I have a fixation problem) so I keep finding myself going back to it ...and I stress myself out more when I keep going "don't write for a while."

I also may eventually write a couple one-shots related to some of the ideas played in this story but didn't get far into or excerpts quickly touched upon here.

Anyways, shamelessly asking for kudos and comments~
Because it genuinely makes me happy and I really like knowing that people actually read things I put so much time into //cries
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

Did you figure it out yet?
Trust me, even if you think you did... there will be a twist.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

[18:51]

“Can I ask you a question, hypothetically? Bit odd. If this was your last birthday party you were ever going to have, how would you celebrate it?”

“I’d do whatever I wanted to do with whoever I wanted to do it with.”

“...What if I can’t?”

[21:01]

“Pepper, what’s going on?” Rhodes puts a hand on her shoulder. Pepper shook her head while pacing, obviously distraught.

“I-I don’t know what to do-“

Rhodes takes the chance to better look around at the chaos in the room. “You got to be kidding me. He’s out of control-“

“No no no. Don’t call anyone-“
“Pepper. This is ridiculous. What the hell is wrong with him? I just stuck my neck out for him—“

“I know, I know. I get it. I’m going to handle it—“

[22:17]

“This is a bad idea.”

“Let’s do it. Right now,” Tony replied in a whisper. She was close to him, sharing one breath, matching one heartbeat. “You know you want to.”

“What about those people around?”

“That’s why we’re doing it. It’s for them.” He shrugged. “It’s my party. It’s my friends. They like this sort of garbage—” He let out a snort of laughter and a smile appears on the redhead’s lips. “Come on—“

“Hike it up,” He put a hand on her forearm, helping her lift the gauntlet hand, the other reaches around her waist in a firm hold. “In three. Fire in the hole. One. Nail it!”

There was a loud bang as the blast hits the ice sculpture, shattering it into pieces. A unison gasp could be heard from most of the guests while the two instigators share a laugh.

Tony still had a hold on her wrist, easily spinning his red-haired assistant to face him as she steadied herself. Natasha’s hand soon fell easily onto his chest.

“Packs a big punch, doesn’t it?” she said, the easy laughter still prominent. Their face was close now, lips almost touching.

Tony smiled at her for a moment but then felt a stare. He looked up, eyes meeting...
Stephen doesn’t wait, quickly turned around leaving the scene.

[23:42]

“Tony- I’m going to say this once. Shut it down!”

“Put that thing back where you found it, Platypus. Before someone gets hurt. Sorry, pal, Iron Man doesn’t have a sidekick.”

“Sidekick this!”

[23:54]

“Natalie!”

“Yes, Doctor Strange?”

“Don’t you ‘Doctor Strange’ me! I’m on to you, you lying bitch.” There was venom in his voice as he approached her. “Who the hell are you? What do you want with Tony?”

“Doctor Strange-“

“I know you poisoned Samantha Carlisle!” he hissed out. “Must have slipped her something so you can get close to Tony. I don’t know what the fuck you want with him but I will not sit here-”

There was a pause in which their eyes locked. The next second, however, it felt as though he was staring at someone completely else. The doctor seriously had to debate whether to just strangle her right then and there. Do no harm, my ass-
The next time she spoke, her tone had drastically changed. To one that was much more stoic and unyielding. “Doctor Strange, I’m a SHIELD shadow agent tasked to keep an eye on both of you. Tony Stark is dying from palladium poisoning but he is not the only one in danger-“

“What-?”

There was a loud bang. To everyone’s shock, Tony and Rhodes, both in full armor, comes crashing through the ceiling. There were screams and shouts. Out of reflex, he tried to shield the redhead from the glass, reaching out to grab her arm, to get her away from the scene... Shocked... to find she had done the same.

[23:57]

“Put your hand down!”

“You think you got what it takes to wear that suit?!“

“We don’t have to do this, Tony.”

“You want to be the War Machine, take your shot!”

“Put it down!”

“You going to take a shot?”

“PUT IT DOWN!”

“NO!”

“DROP IT TONY!”
“Tony! Can you hear me?”

“Stephen…”

“Is it true? Are you dying?”

“I-“

“Don’t you dare lie to me-“

[00:00]

“I’m sorry.”

[23:59]

“Did you hear me? You are on the radar of quite dangerous people. You two’s involvement only attracted more attention-“

“I don’t fucking care-“ Stephen snapped at her, only quickening his steps. Considering his foul mood, he was only marginally smug the redhead nearly had to sprint to keep up with his long strides.

“Where are you going?” Natasha’s expression still remained carefully blank but she sounded near exasperated.
“Dealing with a more pressing problem—“

“Which is?”

“Oh fuck off!”

It has been two weeks since they arrived back to the compound from Wakanda. T’Challa had offered for them to stay a while longer but given Tony’s sudden panic attack episode, Stephen thought it may be best to get his boyfriend back to familiarity. Somewhere he felt safe with all his security protocols, his trusted AI, all his robots and suits at his beck-and-call.

Oddly enough, however, Tony acted completely normal since the event. There was no flinching, no usual paranoia that associated with one of these incidents. In fact, he seemed to be doing rather well. Apart from, Stephen noted, spacing out on frequent occasion.

The first couple of days, Stephen had made every excuse in the book to follow Tony around. Wong didn’t even bother to question his absence from the Sanctum, undoubtedly knowing what was the cause. By the fifth day, the sorcerer relaxed a bit. Perhaps, Tony was actually doing okay.

But why was there a feeling of foreboding following him around?

At the end of the week, he let his guard down. Maybe he was the one being paranoid and it would do no good for either of them if he kept seeing a problem when there was none.

“Tony… Are you really alright?”

Tony lowered his mug, staring at the sorcerer. “Of course I am,” he replied with a bright smile.

Stephen mirrored it unconsiously.
“Sir, I’m gonna have to ask you to exit the donut.”

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“I told you. I don’t want to join your super secret boy band. I have bigger problems to deal with—”

“Getting your suit back from the government?”

“No, trying to figure out how to get my boyfriend back,” Tony snapped irritably. He pulled down his sunglasses slightly to peer at the SHIELD Director. “It’s... It’s... I’m sorry. I don’t want to get off on the wrong foot. Do I look at the patch or the eye? Honestly, I’m a bit hung over. I’m not sure if you’re real or if I’m having...”

“I am very real.” Fury’s expression remained carefully blank. The one eye remained fixed on the troublesome billionaire across the seat from him. “I’m the realest person you’re ever gonna meet.”

Tony let out a huff, looking around at the donut shop. “Just my luck. Where’s the staff here?”

“That’s not looking so good,” said the Director as he pointed to the isometric pattern on the genius’s neck.

“I’ve been worse.”

Then there was a new voice. “We’ve secured the perimeter but I don’t think we should hold it for too much longer.”

Tony turned to look automatically. The voice was familiar. “You’re... fired.”
“That’s not up to you,” replied his red-haired assistant.

Natasha quickly took the seat next to a very smug Fury.

“Tony, I want you to meet Agent Romanoff.”

“Hi.”

Tony fixed her with a glare but she seemed to not mind.

“I’m a SHIELD shadow. Once we knew you were ill, I was tasked to you by Director Fury.”

The gears were turning in his head. “Should have fucking listened to Stephen-“

“You’ve been very busy,” said Fury loudly, speaking over the last comment. “You made your assistant your CEO, you’re giving away all your stuff, you let your friend fly away with your suit, destroyed your relationship with the doctor... Now, if I didn’t know better...”

“You don’t know better. I didn’t give it to him. He took it.”

“Woah woah woah- He took it? You’re Iron Man and he just took it? The little brother walked in there, kicked your ass and took your suit?”

“And don’t you fucking talk about my boyfriend. I didn’t destroy my relationship-“

“You did, Stark. Actually, he lasted longer than I thought-”

That made Tony snap. It scratched at the terribly ill feeling in his stomach. “What do you want from me?”

“What do we want from you?” Fury still carried on with his gratingly amused tone. “Nuh-uh.
What do you want from me?"

“I don’t want anything from you. Not your advice. Not your judgment-”

The smile faded quickly from the director’s expression. “No, you just want your precious doctor. Whining about it like a child-“

“Because he is the ONLY thing that matters to me right now!” He snatched off his sunglasses and threw it aside on the table. “I don’t care about the government. I don’t care about the suit. I don’t care about your stupid secret agent problem. All I CARE about is him.”

“See that’s the problem, Stark. You have become a problem, a problem I have to deal with. Hit him.”

“OW!” There was a sudden sharpness in his neck. Tony watched as Natasha stepped back once more but there was a needle in her hand. “Oh, god! Are you going to steal my kidney and sell it? Could you please not do anything awful for five seconds? What did she just do to me?

“What did we just do FOR you. That’s lithium dioxide. It’s gonna take the edge off. We’re trying to get you back to work.”

The engineer let out a disgruntled huff. Although, he was starting to feel a bit better. The symptoms of the palladium poisoning seeming to recede at a rapid rate. “Give me couple boxes of that. I’ll be right as rain.”

“It’s not a cure, it just abates the symptoms.” Fury leaned back on the seat once more. “Doesn’t look like it’s gonna be an easy fix.”

“Trust me, I know. I’m good at this stuff. I’ve been looking for a suitable replacement for palladium. I’ve tried every combination, every permutation of every known element.”

“Well, I’m here to tell you, you haven’t tried them all.”

Tony rolled his eyes.
“You’re distracted,” the Director went on. “Very distracted. So I’m going to tell you something that will help you focus since I can’t depend on your self-preservation or your altruistic morality about protecting the world.”

There was a pause in which Tony stared at the spy with a fixed look.

“We have reasons to believe that Stephen Vincent Strange has already attracted attention from the wrong type of people.”

That made him straighten up a little in his seat, eyes focusing. “What?”

“He’s brilliant. You know how to pick ’em I’ll give you that, Stark,” the Director said sarcastically. “His recent research on the formation of new nerve cells has shown up during another of our operation when we infiltrated an enemy base.”

“Who. Who are they?” His jaws were set, hands balling into fists despite himself under the table.

Fury definitely noticed the sudden change in attitude.

“It’s being taken care of,” he said sternly. “For now. But I’m sure this won’t be the last. Someone like Strange has a tendency to end up in danger. So, the question is, can you accept death now, Stark, knowing you're leaving him in a world where Iron Man won’t be there to protect him?”

“Stephen, you need to come. Now.”

The pair turned to see Wong stepping through a portal he had just conjured, a look of concern clearly tied to his usual stern expression.

Stephen slowly got up from the couch, glancing at Tony briefly before facing the other sorcerer once more. “What happened?”
“There is something unusual in the Dark Dimension. Some large amounts of energy.”

The Sorcerer Supreme gave a quick nod. “I’ll be right there.”

Wong didn’t linger, going back through the same portal. They were all too used to this system none of them bothered with the unnecessary.

“I-“

“It’s alright. I’ll be fine,” came Tony’s voice quickly.

Stephen walked over to the engineer who was slightly spinning himself from side to side on his usual chair in the lab. He gave a soft smile leaning down to capture the other’s lips. “I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

Tony grinned, lightly stroking the side of the doctor’s face. “Hey, duty calls.”

And soon the sorcerer created his own portal, stepping through easily.

But as soon as the last golden flair flickered, the smile disappeared from Tony’s lips.

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“What do you remember about your dad?”

“He was cold, he was calculating. He never told me he loved me. He never even told me he liked me. So it’s a little tough for me to digest when you’re telling me he said the whole future was riding on me and he’s passing it down. I don’t GET THAT. You’re talking about a guy who’s happiest day was when he shipped me off to boarding school.”

“That’s not true.”
“Well, then, clearly you knew my dad better than I did.”

“As a matter of fact, I did.” With that, Fury stood up, motioning to the other agents around them. They quickly darted around at the silent order. “He was one of the founding members of SHIELD.”

Tony stood up as well. “What?”

Fury ignored him. “I got a two o’clock.”

A large black case was being carried over by two agents. Tony eyed it suspiciously as it was placed with a thud next to him. “Wait wait wait – what is this?”

“Okay, you’re good, right?”

“No, I’m not good.”

“You got this? Right? Right?”

“Got what? I don’t even know what I’m supposed to get-“

“Natasha will remain a floater at Stark with her cover intact. You remember Agent Coulson?”

Tony watched as a familiar suited figure steps forwards. He sighed. “…yep.”

“And Tony, remember, I got my eye on you.”

The engineer silently watched the director leave. Then turned towards the other agent once more.

“We’ve disabled all communications,” said Coulson. ”No contact with the outside world-“
That made him panic, “Oh no no no- I need a phone -“

To Tony’s further annoyance, Natasha smirked. He glared at her.

“You two are very much alike-“ she said in an amused tone.

“What are you talking about?” he said with exasperation. Then it clicked to him. “Do you know where he is?”

“Doctor Strange is fine,” Coulson said firmly. “We are tailing him as well. Our people will watch over him and keep him safe till you are back on your feet.”

“I swear to god if something happens to him-"

Natasha strode over to him, stopping only a yard away. “Fury was wrong about one thing. Your relationship isn’t destroyed. Probably far from it. He’s more stubborn than you.” There was something similar to fondness in her tone.

Tony stared at her for a minute longer, debating… then. “Please,” he surprised himself at the sincerity in his voice. “Keep him safe.”

When Stephen returns to the compound, he teleports himself to Tony’s bedroom. It was undoubtedly very late into the night and he had hoped that Tony at least taking a break, even if it was fidgeting with his tablet on the bed.

He himself was feeling very worn out. The sorcerer had near drained his powers dealing with an issue in the Dark Dimensions and all he wanted was wash up and get some rest next to his lover.

But the first thing he notices was an empty, made bed. That triggered something in him. Tony never was this tidy and he had long stopped the maids from entering his bedroom since he and Stephen had started to share a bed once more. It looked as though it hadn’t been touched in days.
Actually, the whole room looked like it hasn’t been used since he had last been here… three days ago.

"JAMES!"

The Colonel’s head snaps up to see the infuriated doctor walking towards them at a swift pace. Major Allen who had been standing by his side took a step back.

“Stephen? What…?” He didn’t know where to start. Rhodes definitely was not expecting to see Tony’s boyfriend in an Air Force Base. “How are you here?”

The doctor stops next to the table, eyes on the silver suit. “I save the General’s daughter’s life couple weeks back. I cashed in a favor.”

He looked around hastily, spotting a muslin bag nearby. He grabbed it then reached for the arc reactor on the chest plate of the armor. A hand stopped him.

“Stephen, what the hell are you doing?” Rhodes asked in a whisper, his grip on Stephen’s wrist loosening a bit as their eyes met.

The surgeon turned to face the Colonel fully, giving a sideward glance at the Major. Rhodes cleared his throat and getting the hint, Major Allen hurried away to give them privacy.

Stephen waited a couple more seconds just to be safe.

“No, what the hell were YOU thinking, James,” there was an obvious bite in his tone. “Bringing this here to a U.S. Army base. Contrary to what we all want to believe the government is not all righteous and moral-“

Rhodes let out a sigh. “He was getting out of hand. You saw it! This armor, it’s a weapon-”

“HE IS DYING.”
Something changes in the Colonel’s expression, a flash of panic in his eyes. “What?”

“You want to sell out the Iron Man suit to the government? Fine. But that reactor is his heart. If someone gets their hands on that and figures out a way to use it against him…” He was speaking fast now. They didn’t have much time. “I will not allow that, James.”

They froze in place, gaze locked. But soon, there was a distant sound of footsteps.

In an instant, they both moved at once, together. Rhodes quickly grabbing reactor from the suit and shoving it into the bag Stephen was holding up.

“Oh, yes! Oh, yes, yes, yes! Is it my birthday? You got it! What did you do? What did you do- Is this what I think it is?”

‘Oh, you got to be kidding me.’ Stephen thought bitterly as he subtly hid the bag behind him.

“Yes, it is, Hammer.” Rhodes took a quick glance at Stephen before turning towards Justin Hammer. “I want to know what you’re going to do for us.”

Justin’s attention finally landed on the doctor but didn’t make a comment, his lips pursing and definitely standing a bit further away than necessary. Stephen smirked as his eyes fell on the bandage still on the other’s nose.

The doctor narrowed his eyes for a moment, calculating. He took a step forward, smirk widening as Justin flinched, jumping back a little. Next to him, Rhodes hid his laugh in a cough.

Stephen leaned towards Rhodes, “Bleed him dry,” he said in a whisper before heading towards the door, the bag still in his hand.

The sorcerer finds Tony in his lab. Sitting on his chair in the middle of the room, papers scattered everywhere... clippings of articles, reports, maps. Several screens were pulled up all filled with
photos of an accident… one particular accident.

There was an ominous silence. One that Stephen came to believe was outlawed in this particular space.

The doctor took hesitant steps forward, “Tony…?”

The other didn’t turn around. A foot still tapping lightly on the concrete floor.

Stephen tried not to be alarmed, shoving down the dreaded sensation that was slowly rising to his throat.

He notes that Tony was still in his black band shirt and jeans. One that he was wearing when Stephen left the compound days ago. Had he not left the lab since then? Had he not slept or ate or drank anything? How had FRIDAY not alerted Pepper or Rhodes?

“FRIDAY,” he called out, evenly, loud enough.

But there was silence.

“I turned her off.”

His stomach drops. Despite himself, a sense of fear spreads throughout his whole body. “Tony… what’s going on?”

“Rebooting complete. Congratulations, Mr. Stark, you got your best friend back.”

“Thank you very much, Agent Romanoff.”

“Well done on the new chest piece. I am reading significant higher output and your vitals all look
promising."

“Yes, for the moment, I’m not dying. Thank you.”

“What do you mean you’re not dying? Did you just say you’re dying?” came the distinct exasperated voice.

Both Natasha and Tony’s smile faded as they looked at the third screen displaying Pepper Potts.

“Uh- Pep. Is that you? No, I’m not. Not anymore.”

“What’s going on?!”

Then came another new voice. “Pepper, we’ll explain later-“

Natasha almost rolled her eyes at how Tony seems to perk up at the voice. “Stephen? Babe, I-“

“Did you know too?!” they heard Pepper shouting. “Oh, you both are so dead!”

“I believe that’s a bit counterproductive given the situation-“ they heard Stephen mutter.

“Stephen, I thought you…” They all froze at the unfamiliar hesitance in Tony’s voice. “I thought you were gone for good.”

“What?” Stephen said to the screen.

“You… you left.”

"Oh please," A frown came upon the doctor’s face, he sounded mildly offended. “I went to go retrieve your arc reactor prototype, douchebag. Your idiot best friend was going to turn it over to Hammer-“
“I SAID I WAS SORRY!” came Rhodes’ voice.

“He, hey, save it.” Natasha was typing rapidly on the keyboard once more. “You got incoming, Tony. Looks like the fight’s coming to you.”

“What made you leave?”

“Tony,” he spoke slowly, calmly. “I told you there was a problem in the Dark Dimension—“

“Not today. Back then. That day.”

“Today?” Stephen repeated. He can feel the panic rising from within him. He looked around hastily trying to gather some information as to how bad this situation was. “Tony, I’ve been gone for three days.”

“Why did you leave?”

“You haven’t slept.” He notices there was not even coffee mug in sight. He’s almost scared to ask. “Did you… when was the last time you ate or drank something?”

“We never fully talked about it. You see, doc, I’ve been spinning this in my head over and over again. I gave you hell. When I thought I was dying in 2010. You never left… But you did. So quickly… After your accident.”

That made the sorcerer’s head spin. His mouth felt dry. “I was in pain. I wasn’t thinking straight—“

“No!” Tony suddenly got up, the chair thrown aside in a loud crash. “Don’t fucking dare lie to me. Was it HYDRA? Fury said you were being watched. Did someone take you from me?”

“Tony—“
“JUST ANSWER ME DAMMIT!”

There was a loud clang as Tony threw a keyboard towards his direction, though obviously intending to miss. He overshot by good several yards, the object landing loudly against the wall behind the doctor. Stephen doesn’t even flinch. He couldn’t stop staring at the brunette.

“…Or did you really mean what you said?” Something flashes in those doe eyes. Grief? Disbelief? Heartbreak? Or perhaps all of them. “You didn’t want me anymore… just got tired of me? Didn’t love me enough to put up with all my shit anymore? Because I played, over and over in my head, what you said that day for years, Stephen. Years.”

The Sorcerer tried to walk closer but Tony automatically stepped back, away from him. He doesn’t remember when was the last time Tony had rejected his presence. “…I’m sorry for what I said…”

“I don’t want an apology Stephen I want answers. You stood by my side through hell and back. You always… You never left me even at my worst. Then suddenly…” His voice breaks. He let out a short, cruel laugh. “Did you not trust me? Did you not think I couldn’t handle your injury? Did you lack faith in us?”

“I trust you… completely-“

“Were. You. Coerced. Did someone make you leave me?”

“Tony you are obsessing…”

“Of course I’m obsessing-“

“Why do you suddenly want to talk about the past when-”

“Why don’t you?”

Stephen freezes, letting silence fall between them for a moment.
“…I…I’m sorry that I hurt you,” he tried to soften his voice, tried to make it as sincere as possible. Tried to have it carry even a spec of what he felt. “To the point of this… I will apologize to you over and over again for the rest of my life. I will try to make up for it every day… I’m not asking you to forgive me. I know I don’t deserve it… But Tony please, I’m asking you to… this isn’t healthy for you-“

“Give me my answer and I will,” he snaps.

“I already did, love.” The doctor tried to smile. “I don’t know what else I can say other than that I was being an utter jerk. I’m so sorry. I really am. I shouldn’t have done… I shouldn’t have said what I said. Why… Tony, why are you fixated on this…”

“Don’t.” Tony was backing up further now, walking quickly to the opposite side of the worktable. “Don’t you dare make it sound like I’m being crazy-“

Stephen frowned. “I’m not saying you are-“

“I swear if you act like him… I…”

“Who are you talking about? Who’s him?”

“Steve fucking Rogers-”

There was a flash of anger. “Did he say something?”

“No,” came the cold reply. “But he used that same tone with me when we argued. Like how you are doing right now. As if I’m being overdramatic. As if I’m being unreasonable, difficult, crazy-“

Tony was speaking very fast now, as if his mind was getting ahead of him and he was trying desperately to catch up. “You called. You couldn’t move your hands. How did you even call me? Christine didn’t know about it so can’t be her-“

“I asked one of the nurses.”
“That’s bullshit.”

“Tony-“

“DID I FAIL?!” He screamed at the top of his lungs.

Stephen didn’t move, didn’t even wince, but closed his mouth immediately.

“Did… I… fail… in protecting you. I was… supposed to protect you. I can’t… I can’t even do a damn thing right…”

He couldn’t stop himself anymore. Stephen took quick strides, rushing to close the distance between them. He caught Tony’s shoulder before he had a chance to escape. He tried not to let it bother him that the brunette recoiled at his touch.

“Tony… Tony look at me. I made a mistake. I made the mistake, okay? I failed. I failed us. I should have been stronger. I should have known better. But it was my fault. For that, I apologize. But you didn’t do anything wrong—

“Don’t you dare lie to me.”

“Tony-“

“Get out.”

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Everything happened in a flash. Or at least it felt like that for Tony. One moment, he felt so alive fighting to the death side-by-side with his best friend; it was definitely a kick to his adrenaline like none other before. It felt so… right.

But next, he was staring at Stephen with one of Vanko’s whip around his neck in a threatening hold. He, Stephen, and Rhodey had worked seamlessly together in getting out of that situation but the scene played in his head over and over again.
Tony let out a sigh as he got up from the chair, pacing once more. The look that Stephen had when their eyes met... it was not fear for his own life... it was fear for his. After all that happened in the past couple months, after all the hell Tony had put the doctor through, how could he even look at him like that?

He wanted to leave. Get back to Stephen whom he left at his penthouse. Where was Fury? He was definitely late now.

But speaking of the Director... Tony’s eyes landed on the file that was on the desk in front of him.

Avengers Initiative Preliminary Report

But just as he picked up the folder, the Director walked in.

“I don’t think I want you looking at that. I’m not sure it pertains to you anymore. Now this, on the other hand, is Agent Romanoff’s assessment of you. Read it.” He threw the file he had brought onto the desk.

Tony sat back on his seat, carelessly opening the file. “Personality overview. Mr. Stark displays compulsive behavior. In my own defense, that was last week. Prone to self-destructive tendencies... I was dying. I mean, please. Aren’t we all? Textbook narcissism? ...Eh...agreed. Okay, here it is. Recruitment assessment for Avengers Initiative: Iron man? Yes. I gotta think about it.”

“Read on.”

“Tony Stark not... not recommended? That doesn’t make any sense. How can you approve me but not approve me? I got a new ticker. I’m trying to do right by Stephen. I’m in a stable-ish relationship-“

“Which leads us to believe at this juncture, we’d only like to use you as a consultant.”

He peered at the director, assessing the situation. “…Because of my relationship with Stephen?”
Fury was silent, his expression unchanging.

“Seriously? What is this thing you have against him? If anything he’s way too good for me. Everyone says so and here you are criticizing—”

The Director leaned back on his chair, sighing. “I’m not criticizing him. In fact, I think Dr. Strange will do great things for the world. I think, you think, he’s too good for you. I think you have him on a pedestal. I think when it comes to saving the world or your boy toy, you will choose the later. Love makes us do stupid things, Stark. I think you’re compromised. In fact, I know you are.”

There was a brief silence, then Tony stood up. “Well… you can’t afford me anyways.” He headed towards the door then stopped to look back. “And you’re right. If you ask me to choose between this or Stephen… I’ll always choose him. No questions.”

Out of habit, she stared out at the window as she dried her hair with a towel. There wasn’t much to see tonight, fog and droplets of rain obstructing the view. It was coming down hard since an hour or two ago. The beatings of water hitting the roof of the compound getting louder, faster consistently.

Natasha and the rest of the crew made the mistake of trusting Clint as he insisted it would just be overcast. They all ended up getting soaked on their way back from the town. Sam had been the most vocal amongst them and he and Clint did not stop arguing till the moment they all separated to their reciprocating rooms to shower.

The redhead checked the clock; near midnight. She reached over to the nightstand towards the glass of water. But in an instant, grabbed the handgun, spinning around.

“Strange?”

There was an eerily silence as he steps off the elevator. Stephen took couple careful steps forward; surveying the empty hospital floor that usually was packed with people.
He turned quickly towards the voice. His gaze landing on a man in complete black and eye patch sitting on a bench to his left.

“Director Asshole, I assume.”

Fury stood to his feet, taking a few steps forward. “Is that what Stark calls me?”

“Amongst other things,” Stephen smirked, putting the chart in his hand to a counter. “How can I help you? You went through all this trouble.” He motioned sarcastically at the empty surroundings.

“I came to talk. You’ve become very famous very quickly.”

“Because of Tony.” His voice was flat, even. Yet, harshness was there, slowly seeping into each word.

“Amongst other things,” Fury said, repeating the other’s earlier words.

Stephen paused as he turned to face the other man, hands falling into the pockets of his uniform. “I heard he has been rejected for your pet project.”

“Technically, doctor, he shouldn’t have even told you that,” an amusement was in the Director’s voice.

Stephen ignores the comment. “Surely, it’s not for the lack of aptitude.”

“Is it not?”

“So it’s because of me… or our relationship to be precise.”
Fury paced a bit, half-heartedly surveying the medical texts that were laying around on the lounge. “You’re perceptive.”

Stephen let out a huff of laughter. “Is this where you tell me to leave him? So your precious SHIELD can have him? For the greater good of the world or the like? Sorry to break it to you but I’m quite selfish.”

“The thought crossed my mind. But if we did that Stark would never stop till he has our heads rolling.” The Director said with a smirk. “Seem a bit shortsighted, don’t you think? So no. That’s not what I’m here for.”

“Then why are you here?”

“As Agent Romanoff mentioned to you, you alone already had attracted the attention of some really bad people. SHIELD has every intention of watching out for both you and Stark as we have in the past. But we would like it if you will cooperate. Help us out a bit.”

“How?”

“For you to check in with one of our agents every now and then. Every other week maybe. Let us know any changes, anything unusual, nothing you feel uncomfortable sharing.”

“And why would I do that?”

“Because unlike Stark, you are vulnerable. And if you are vulnerable, he is vulnerable. I’m sure you understand what I’m getting at.”

Stephen didn’t say anything.

“Stark had told me the other day he will choose you over saving the world. Can you imagine what he would do to keep you alive? Knowing that suicidal motherfucker, he easily will-“

“Alright,” he cuts him off. Stephen didn’t want to hear it. Didn’t want to hear the exact thought that has been haunting him the past couple days. Since Tony disarmed the Iron Man suit to heed to
Vanko’s demand… just for his life. “But I have a say in who.”

Fury raises an eyebrow. “I didn’t expect you to know much of my men.”

“Woman,” the doctor corrects immediately. “I want Agent Romanoff.”

Fury glanced towards the red-haired agent who had been quietly lurking in a corner. She looked collected as always, her expression not changing, though he could tell she was just as curious as he was.

“No problem. Agreed.” The Director was heading towards the elevator. “I knew you would at least listen to reason. Agent Romanoff will check in with you every two weeks.” With that, he was gone.

“Should I be flattered, doc? I thought you hated my guts,” said Natasha teasingly as she stepped out from the shadow.

He glanced her over. “I think you’ll do what needs to be done.”

“Meaning?”

“Where were you when we were all caught up with Vanko at the end?”

She said nothing.

“Sorry more specifically, who did you have the gun aiming at?”

She blinked, but overall her face was completely wiped blank.

“I saw you at a distance. Pointing a sniper.” He took a step closer to her, lowering his voice a notch. “But it wasn’t at Vanko, was it? You were there just in case things got out of hand. Your mission was to protect Tony. The gun… was aimed at me.”
There was a tight smile playing on her lips as she stared up at him. “Did it hurt your feelings, doc?”

“No. No… I agree with you,” Stephen replied simply. He turned around and back to his chart, half-heartedly flipping through before flinging it aside. “No matter what I accomplish in this field, I’m just a doctor. The world is full of doctors. The world needs Iron Man. And there will never be another Iron Man… SHIELD needs Iron Man so I trust that you’ll protect him. I trust that… if it comes down to it, if that time ever comes where it’s between his life or mine, you’ll pull the trigger on my head. …Because he certainly won’t.”

There was a stretch of silence. Then a small nod from the agent. “…Okay.”

The doctor stepped back, a soft sigh. A small smile. “Okay.”

Natasha lowered her gun slowly, giving the other a brief quizzical stare while she looked him over. Stephen didn’t move, just took a deep breath as his gaze fell to the window then back towards her.

After another minute, she gave a soft smile then picked up the towel that she had dropped, throwing it into the laundry basket in the corner of the room. “You can take the floor.”

Stephen let out a sigh as he waved a hand, his clothing magically changing into a normal shirt and pants. The cloak, however, flew towards the door, motioning to him. As if telling him it wanted to be back at the floor above… with Tony. The sorcerer ignores it.

Natasha doesn’t ask the obvious, she can already guess that part. “Why didn’t you go back to the Sanctum?”

“I rather be here, just in case.”

“You think he’s unstable?”
“He’s quite upset.”

There was a pause.

“Do you want to talk about it?” she asked evenly.

There was once a time where that would not have been uncommon: Stephen sharing with her of concerns or issues in regards to Tony. It had taken over a year from their initial meeting for the two to get to that point. Mostly due to Stephen being too cautious and protective of whom he shares any information in regards to Tony or Iron Man.

But in time, it became obvious if the doctor was going to talk to someone Natasha was clearly the best choice. He didn't want to say it but the reality was that Christine was out of her depth unless it strictly retained to matters of his relationship with Tony. Natasha, on the other hand, understood that world, she was part of it. Many times, back during those days, she gave Stephen much-needed perspective and was definitely not afraid to be forthright about it. And, especially after the Avengers had formed, he trusted that she was not a threat, she would have Tony’s back.

Of course, a lot has changed since those days.

She disregarded the no answer. She didn’t expect him to even answer the first question.

“You should get some sleep,” she said calmly as she started unpacking extra comforters and sheets for him to use.

She wasn’t blind as to why he was here in her room instead of one of the many guest rooms. Her room was just below Tony’s. Regardless of the thick flooring, if something major happened, they would hear and would be within close distance.

Sure, they shared a history of friendship once upon a time (and perhaps that still played a part; he knew she would not say no even now) but the sorcerer made it clear, for the most bit, he no longer trusted her.

“He’s asking questions about my departure.”
Natasha stilled for a brief moment, then continued to arrange the sheets onto the floor. “Did you tell him?”

“I told him I was being an idiot.” His voice was leveled but as she turned to look at him there was clear stiffness to his posture. His trembling hands fidgeting, balling into fists then letting go.

“Stephen-”

“He’s been through enough.” It was firm, unyielding.

Natasha let out a soft sigh, climbing to her bed and laying down. She didn’t look at him choosing to fix her gaze to the ceiling instead. After a moment she heard the rustling of fabric as the sorcerer got under the covers on the floor.

“You love him,” she said softly. “Love him enough to let him hate you.”

“I love him.” His voice was quiet, barely above a whisper. “But he loves the Avengers. It’s part of him. Regardless of what he says… it would kill a part of him to lose any of you. He always loved a bit too much for his own good. Even if it was not deserved.”

There was a moment of pause. “…And in the end, it was still my choice. I made the decision to walk away.”

Natasha turned to her side, towards the voice, resting her head on her arm. Although the high rise of the bed prevented her from even seeing the doctor’s form on the floor. If she leaned forward, she knew she would find him lying on his side, facing the other direction. He always did.

“The first time Tony was approached, he turned down the Avengers Initiative… for you. When given the choice between you or the Avengers, he always chose you. Always will.”

A silence stretched between them.

“Tell him.”
There was a moment where neither moved nor spoke. Then, sound of heavy fabrics being
displaced. Stephen pushed himself up to a sitting position, staring at the redhead. There was a
slight frown on his face and a glimmer of what seemed like a concern in those glacial eyes, “And
you? What will you do?”

She let out a huff of laughter. “Suddenly concerned about me, doc?”

“He... will not take this well.”

“No, he will not.” There was a soft smile playing on her lips. “But I expected you to tell him the
moment you came back.”

Stephen fixed her with a look. “He’s been hurt enough, Natalia. I wasn’t going to open a new
wound.” But his tone softened a bit before his next words. “…I had hoped, he would forgive me
without an explanation.”

The corner of her lips twitched upwards a bit more at her real name. There were few people who
still called her that, who had called her that. She looked away, lying fully on her back once more
staring at the ceiling. “I’m sorry.”

Stephen let out a huff. “Did I hear that correctly?” he said sarcastically.

“Don’t gloat,” she shot back. She flung her arm to his direction intending to hit him but the sorcerer
darted back with a light laugh.

He paused before going on. “What happened to it being necessary?”

Natasha didn’t answer for a time. “I thought it was. At the time, I really thought it was necessary.
Then I realized… we all might be sacrificing too much for this greater good that might not even
exist.”

“What changed your mind?”
“…I went to look for you.”

“Did you?” he sounded amused. “When?”

She sighed. “Maybe four-five months after? You just landed in Nepal. I lost you just outside of the city border of Kathmandu.”

Stephen snorted. “Five months, huh?”

The agent gave him an offended glare before looking away. “We were busy. …After all the classified information of SHIELD we leaked to the public…” her voice trails off.

He smiled then lay back down. “We should sleep.”

There were sounds of shuffling as both of them settled. Soon there was complete silence except the ticking of a clock on the bedside table. The rain seemed to have stopped, the remaining droplets of water racing down the window.

She slept soundlessly. He stayed awake.

Chapter End Notes

If you are still reading this, please give me a shoutout :’)
(also because I'm at a debate if I want to continue to add to this series or just wrap it up after this fic is over)

Find me on tumblr :D
wspaceblog.tumblr.com
If you have any questions, new one-shot prompt, would like extensions of some of the scenes from this series, etc. feel free to reach out!
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

Quick thanks to everyone who showed me so much support in the last chapter ♡♡♡

Got so many wonderful comments that kept me going through the past couple weeks of trying to still write while life happened.

Special thanks to @CelestialNymph for that amazing comment that I read over and over again and @i-love-you-3247, @ironstrangehaven, @ironstrange-is-the-endgame for reblogging so many of my writings on tumblr ♡ greatly appreciate it :')

See the end of the chapter for more [notes]

“Twelve percent?? Twelve percent for my baby?!”

“Well, I did do all the heavy lifting. Literally, I lifted the heavy things. And sorry but the security snafu? That was on you.”

“Ohhhh nonono- That was on YOU. If you just didn’t press the panic button just so you and Stephen can have a make-out session-“

Stephen chuckled as Tony hurried towards him. Though the billionaire tried to play it off, his pace was a lot quicker than usual. Tony soon had both arms around the doctor, giving a quick kiss before darting behind the taller man at the sight of angry Pepper closing in.

“Don’t you dare hide behind Stephen!” Pepper called out with exasperation.

“Tony, apologize. Pepper really had a heavy hand in this,” he began. Although, the doctor still had a hand out in front of the brunette, shielding him out of reflex. Tony soon flushed himself against Stephen’s back, peering over his boyfriend’s shoulder at the fuming strawberry blonde with large doe eyes.

Stephen admitted he was weak to Tony acting fragile, seeking his help… though he was fully aware it was generally out of some joke. But even if it was all pretenses, it did something to warm his heart. The doctor was convinced, however, the genius knew that and was exploiting it thoroughly
at occasions like this.

“Why are you taking her side?! You are supposed to be my boyfriend!”

Stephen rolled his eyes right before turning around, hands tight on the nape of Tony’s neck as he leaned down capturing the other’s full lips. It was short but very thorough.

“Because,” he said as he pulled back a little, “it is due to her hard work I get to enjoy my time with you. Great length of time.”

Tony stares back at him, the open adoration on full display as usual. “Towers all you, Pep. I don’t need the tower. Who needs a tower when I have the hot doctor-“

Pepper let out a loud sigh, rolling her eyes at the pair. Though Stephen doesn’t miss the subtle smile dancing on her lips.

“Sir, Agent Romanoff is requesting access to the floor.”

Tony groaned dramatically as he buried his forehead in Stephen’s shoulders. “Tell her to go away. My time.” The doctor tried hard not to laugh at the childishness the billionaire’s voice. “You can do your whole briefing thingy later-“

Ever since he had agreed to check in with the SHIELD agent every so often after the Vanko incident, Tony had started to display jealous outbursts that rivaled his own. Though, perhaps Tony handled his issues better than he in some ways by masking them in humor rather than anger.

“Actually, sir. She is requesting to speak with you, not Doctor Strange.”

That certainly had all of them confused. Though in a matter of seconds, the elevator opened revealing the familiar redhead with a file in her hand.

“Why do you even bother to knock when you were going to throw open the door anyway? What if we were naked?” said Tony sarcastically as he approached the agent.

Stephen followed closely behind, hands casually falling into the pockets of the dark slacks. “Natalia.”

She gives him her usual tight smile. “Stephen.”

“Natalia? Uh- her first name is Agent. ...And seriously?! How many fucking names do you have? Is this one even real?”

The doctor chuckled softly. “Come in, we’re celebrating,” the doctor said calmly towards the redhead.

“Which is why she can’t stay.”

“This is urgent, Tony.” They don’t miss the sudden seriousness in her voice.

Although Natasha was known for her often stoic exterior they found, during the past year together, that she could be quite sarcastic when she wanted to be. The SHIELD agent was definitely bold and quick-witted. Once her Stark Industry persona was thrown aside, she whole-heartedly joined in on Stephen and Tony’s bantering when the situation allowed it.

Something was different today. Something was wrong.

Stephen stopped smiling almost instantly as his eyes landed on the digital file in her outstretched hand. He walked over, taking it and handing it to Tony.

There were words being exchanged. Tony making light of the situation as usual. Something about consultation hours and Avengers Initiative being scrapped. About how he “didn’t play well with others”. But it all fell deaf in Stephen’s ears. A million thoughts were crossing his mind. Something told him of what might be next. An answer that he had been dreading... one he wasn’t sure he was prepared to accept just yet.
Stephen had a cold look as he watched Tony expand his arms, the holographic videos projecting from the file. Pepper looked a bit stunned but chose to remain quiet. The CEO turned towards him as if waiting for his reaction. Often, at times like this, she seemed to expect Stephen to know what to do in regards to Tony. But he was sure grabbing the file from the brunette and chucking it aside was certainly not the best course of action… because that’s what his instinct was telling him.

“I’ll look after him.”

He turned towards the quiet voice. Natasha now stood next to him, giving him a knowing look. The doctor gave a small nod.

Helplessness… that’s what he felt. Utter helplessness.

There was a loud crash as cups landed on the tiles, shattering into million pieces.

“SHIT-“

Stephen sharply turned the corner. Tony was in the kitchen, flinching away from something he had tried to pick up. He rushed to grab a hold of the other’s wrist, pulling him upright and away from the broken glass. There was now a small cut on the engineer’s fingers.

“Allow me,” he said calmly before waving a hand, using magic to clean the mess, the broken cups, and healing the cut.

When he next looked at Tony, the engineer seemed to have his gaze fixed on the far corners of the wall. Stephen had been expecting more anger from the other but that was not what he found.

Tony undoubtedly was edgy. And judging by the redness around the rims of his eyes he didn’t sleep much yesterday either. But it wasn’t rage that radiated from the shorter male. No, it was fear. Fear of what?

The sorcerer took a half step forwards cautiously. “Tony… you need rest…”
There was no response.

He selfishly wants to stay, to get the other to rest properly, to eat, to give him some sort of acknowledgment. But after long minutes of pure silence, Stephen let out a soft sigh before turning around to leave.

A hand grabs him.

Relief flooded through him as he glanced towards the fingers that wrapped tightly around his left wrist. But that was short lived.

“I’m sorry.”

It made him frown. He quickly turned around to look at the brunette. That tone was just… so off.

“What…?”

He absentmindedly pulled his wrist away and Stephen sees the pure panic in the engineer’s eyes as his fingers slipped off the sorcerer. Perhaps seeing the realization hit the other, Tony hastily glanced away.

“I’m not going anywhere,” Stephen stated flatly. He tried to calm his own voice. Desperately trying to push down the anger that was starting to boil. Not at Tony… it wasn’t directed at his lover. No, it was directed at every goddamn person that caused this innate fear in the brunette. “I’m not leaving. I’m just giving you space if that’s what you need. I’m not mad at you.”

Tony swallowed hard, not meeting his eyes still. He was speaking fast now. “I’m sorry- I….I don’t know what came over me yesterday. Maybe it was the alcohol… I’ll cut back. I-“

There was at least some strength in his words, the casual nonchalant tone that was common for the engineer… the forced confidence, a front.
Stephen definitely sees the uneasiness in his shoulder, the way his gaze constantly shifts but never fully at him, the fingers that constantly flexes in anxiety.

“We both know you weren’t drinking, Tony. Not yesterday,” he said evenly.

That makes the other freeze.

Stephen reached out, a hand resting on the other’s jawline, coaxing the brunette to look at him. He smiled when he finally sees the familiar honey brown gaze. “I’m not mad. I really am not. You had every right to be upset about what happened in the past.” There was a brief pause, eventually letting out a soft sigh. “Tony… are you apologizing right now because you honestly feel you have something to apologize for… or is it that you are afraid I’ll leave?”

There was a moment of silence. Tony swallowed hard. “I… don’t want you to leave.”

Stephen wanted to say something. He wanted to say a lot of things. How wrong this whole situation is. How Tony shouldn’t be the one apologizing anyways. How he can’t just pretend to be in the wrong every time… probably even convinced himself he’s wrong… just because he’s scared to be abandoned the minute he voices an opinion or show that he’s angry. But more than anything, the sorcerer wants to punch a certain super soldier. Because he can guess where this behavior stemmed from.

But if Stephen was being completely honest with himself… perhaps he played a part as well. After all, he left Tony first. Took cruel stabs at his heart with ruthless words then left him to bleed.

He rubbed a thumb on the nape of Tony’s neck in small circles, the other arm wrapping gently around the brunette’s waist. He’s at least comforted by the fact Tony leaned into the touch rather than flinching away like the night prior.

“Tony, listen. I’m not leaving you. If you’re mad, you have the right to show that you are. I’m not going to disappear just because we got into a fight. …If… you still need space away from me I’ll give it to you… but I’ll be here when you’re ready…”

“No,” Tony blurted out. “I… just stay… please.”

“Okay.” He smiled softly. “Okay… but let’s… get you some water first then maybe some sleep.
We can talk… or whatever you need after you get some rest, alright?”

The other doesn’t say anything. Just leans his head on the sorcerer’s shoulder. Stephen swore he could sense Tony crying soundlessly.

“Yeah. That’s just a preview. This is opening night. Loki is a full-tilt diva. He wants flowers, he wants parades, he wants a monument built in the skies with his name plastered… …son of a bitch.”

“Son… just don’t.”

“How long till we get to New York?”

“About 20 minutes,” replied Clint.

“Stark will beat us there,” there was a trace of worry in the Captain’s voice.

The archer smirked, “Yeah well let’s hope he doesn’t get into too much trouble till we get there.”

Natasha stood to her feet, walking briskly towards the back of the jet past Steve. Clint didn’t even bother to turn but Cap watched her questioningly as she pulled out a burner phone, quickly dialing a number before putting it to her ear.

It was a quick conversation before the redhead returned to the co-pilot seat.
“Did you tell him to get out of New York?” Clint asked, almost nonchalant.

“He’s being stubborn.”

“Of course he is.”

There was a short pause before…

“Your boyfriend?”

Clint burst out laughing at Steve’s question. Natasha just shook her head with an eye roll while Steve seemed thoroughly confused at the reaction he was receiving in lack of an answer.

“No,” the redhead replied calmly. “Tony’s boyfriend. I was assigned to watch over him for the past year.”

“Sorry… Stark’s boyfriend…?” There was clear disbelief in the blonde’s words.

The archer had a smirk on his face as he glanced back. “21st century, Cap. You really need to get with the times.”

“I didn’t mean-“ Steve looked almost offended at that. “I don’t have a problem with people being gay! I just… didn’t think Stark would be the type to have a steady-“

“Oh, Stark has a steady alright.” Clint was still in fits and giggles as Natasha simply sighed, fixing him with a look. “Enough to have one of SHIELD’s best spy playing baby sitter for most of the year because god forbids a scratch ends up on that pretty doctor’s face-“

It was hours before Tony next awoke. There was harsh orange glow seeping from the large bedroom windows hinting it was well past the mid-afternoon. The sun will be coming down soon.
“Feeling better?”

Tony turned his head slightly, becoming closely face-to-face with a certain sorcerer. It occurred to the brunette that the other must have held him the whole time as he slept. Considering how familiarized he was to Stephen’s touch was, his body must have not even noticed.

He cleared his throat awkwardly. Everything was coming back to him now. Everything that he had done, said, heard in the past three or four days. But clearer… much too clearer.

Something must have shown on his face because there was a sudden shift in Stephen’s expression as well. Tony felt a pang of guilt as he sees the smile faltering on the other’s lips.

“Did you want me to leave you alone?” The doctor’s voice was carefully even.

The usual notes of panic tugged at Tony’s brain but this time he was able to rein it in, rationalized. He squashes away the silly insecurities, taking a few deep breaths as he harshly ran his finger through his messy hair.

“I… I don’t know…” he said, letting his head sink back onto the pillow, eyes fixing on the high ceiling above. That was as honest of an answer as it was going to get.

There was a moment of silence before Stephen props himself up on his elbow. Almost unconsciously his fingers find themselves on Tony’s cheeks, tracing the outlines lightly with shaky hands. He knew better. He really did. But he just couldn’t help it. Even the fear of possible rejection was not enough to stop him from reaching out. His desperation outweighed any fear.

It was just a touch. Tony wouldn’t deny him of something so simple, would he? …even if he was still upset with him.

But perhaps that’s why he should have stopped. Should have stopped because he’s unsure Tony would, especially in this state of mind. Stephen wondered at times lately if Tony ever was capable of denying him anything… even if it came at a price to himself.

He really, really should have stopped himself. Because it was just a touch now but for Stephen,
he’d always be selfish and want more.

The sorcerer was soon leaning in, pausing only when their lips were an inch apart. Tony can see the hesitance. The way Stephen seems to be searching for any trace of reluctance in the outlines of his face.

Stephen let out a heavy sigh as he pressed his forehead against the brunette’s. “You… need to tell me to stop… or…”

Tony does both of them a favor by crossing the final distance, their lips locking in a heated embrace. They kiss once, twice, until they both had a taste and remember once more they will never have enough.

“TONY!”

The engineer quickly turned his attention to the SHIELD agent.

Natasha simply sighed as she approached him in quick strides. She knew very well the direction the other was staring at. “Tony, you can’t get distracted right now. This is a battlefield. He’s far-“

“Not far enough,” Tony snapped.

There was a brief moment of silence as their eyes locked. Sounds of shouts filled the air, sound of rumbling, Hulk’s roar. They needed to get back to it. They were already outnumbered enough as it was.

“I… I need to go find him.”

“Oh, I can’t allow that. We need you here. We can make sure the fight doesn’t go across the city-“
“I CAN’T RISK THAT-“

There was a blast. Tony had just in time to put the faceplate back over his face before pushing Natasha out of the way. The blast landed instead on a nearby building, shattering through the wall.

Tony had his hands up, repulsor at the ready. But before he fires, a shield hits the Chitauri squarely in the chest, knocking it backward.

“What’s going on?” Captain America was approaching them, fast. Behind him, a bolt of lightning blasts away the rest of the alien army nearby.

Tony turned away, he didn’t want to argue. But he also did not want to hear any patronizing comments either.

Natasha took a quick glance at the engineer before stepping forward towards Steve. “We need to set up a better perimeter, ask the officers if we have to. There are too many civilians at risk.”

There was a pause as Captain had a stern look, a small frown appearing on his face. He looked back and forth between the agent and Tony as if trying to process the situation.

“Where’s the hospital located at?” But his question was not directed at Natasha.

Tony stared back into those clear blue eyes, hesitating. “…58th Street.”

Steve held his gaze. “I’ll get a perimeter as far as 39th Street. Anything gets past that, you go to him. Okay?”

Tony swallowed. Slight confusion as to how Captain knew but nodded none-the-less.

“…thank you.”
It was quiet... almost inaudible in the midst of the chaos around them, but Steve heard him just fine.

The smile that forms on the Captain, however... that, only Tony sees.

“Where did you sleep last night?”

They had just come down from the high. Stephen just barely managed to get off of the other before collapsing onto the mattress at his side.

“I know you followed me up here... but you didn’t sleep on this floor.” Tony’s voice was rough, uneven. Though most of that was contributed to their fervent activities just seconds prior.

Stephen let out a soft sigh, shifting to lie on his side. A hand absentminded traced the dips of the brunette’s naked back.

There was no point in lying. “I was downstairs. I slept in Romanoff’s room. Slept on the floor.”

The sorcerer takes careful notes of Tony’s expression, at any spec of change.

“The floor?”

“Tony,” he said firmly. “I didn’t-“

“Not a far fetched idea-“ Tony shifted his gaze. “I basically just threw you out after a spectacular meltdown. You were fond of her once. She’s pretty. You’re pretty-“

“The floor,” he repeated harshly. That came out stronger than he meant to. “I’m not going to fuck your teammate just because you yelled at me. Or anyone for that matter.”
“I can’t tell anymore…”

Stephen frowned. “What?”

“I can’t tell if you’re lying.”

He let the silence fall, not knowing what else to say.

“When you left…”

“Tony…. please…”

“I get it, you don’t want to talk about it. But let me finish.” That made Stephen close his mouth abruptly. “…Did you miss me? The years we spent apart. Did you think about me at all?”

“Of course I did.” If only you knew… “I missed you every second of it.”

There was more he wanted to say, much more words at the tip of his tongue. But his phone decided to chime at that moment. A text. Tony thought to ignore it but a glance at the screen told him it was Peter.

Tony blinked several times, trying to clear away the tears that he didn’t know was forming. At the corner of his eyes, he sees Stephen reaching for his cell as well. A group chat then.

**Peter:**
*Dad, are you busy?*

Tony quickly typed a response.

**Tony:**
*No, what’s up kid?*
Peter:
*What about you Doctor dad?*

Stephen:
*No.
Are you in trouble?*

Peter:
*I was thinking
dinner at that nice restaurant you took me to for my birthday?*

There was a pause in which Tony debated if he should just tell the Peter it was not a good time. But a part of him doesn’t have it in him to disappoint the teen when the kid rarely asked for things in the first place. The engineer could already sense the tenseness in Stephen, as the sorcerer seemed to be waiting for Tony’s decision on the matter.

Tony:
*Sure.*

Peter:
*Great!*

Tony let out a short chuckle as he pulled himself off the bed. He glanced towards Stephen as he picked up the pants that were carelessly thrown to the floor earlier. “We should get dressed—”

But Stephen simply held up his phone with an eyebrow raised, displaying the screen for the brunette to read.

Peter:
*Because I’m busy and I already made reservation for 7pm for you two. Have fun :D*

“Did we just get set up?” Stephen said with mild amusement.

Tony let out a laugh, ruffling his own hair into more of a mess. “Jesus- How did he even…“
There was a soft smile playing on Stephen’s lips as he locked eyes with Tony. “He notices a lot more than you think. But we were quite loud yesterday… He must have heard the fight…”

The engineer paces, not knowing what to do next. “We… don’t have to go-“

The doctor let out a soft sigh as he pushed himself to a sitting position against the headboard. “Maybe… we should go…”

The other turned sharply. “So we can just fight in public too?”

“Tony…”

“I know-“ His voice takes up a mocking tone as he waves a hand dismissively. “Tony don’t start a fight if you hate it so much-“

“That’s not what I was going to say.” That made Stephen frown. Had he said that to Tony? He was quite sure he never had. But someone must have. The sorcerer was starting to see a pattern now. The obsession, the mental breakdown, the insecurities… it was all fixation to something in the past. Perhaps the panic attack at Wakanda triggered more in Tony than Stephen has previously assumed.

“Sorry,” Tony said almost too quickly. “I…”

Stephen noticed how the other kept glancing at his face. The sorcerer quickly tried to neutralize his expression, making a mental note to make sure to remain passive.

He stood to his feet, walking to the other side of the bed to where Tony was, crossed armed. He held out a hand, gently squeezing at the other’s wrist.

“I was going to say… I don’t… want to fight with you. I don’t like fighting with you…” he let out a light scoff, more to himself. “It scares me.”
“That we might… not get through it?”

“No, no… Tony, we’ll get through it.” A small smile appears on the doctor’s lips as he stroked the other’s cheek. “It always just scares me when you’re not in my arms.”

The brunette relaxes a little, the shoulders less tense. He opens his mouth a few times but closes it once more without saying a word. Stephen continued to wait a while longer just in case. But Tony eventually fixes his gaze to the flooring.

“Let’s… go have dinner. Please?”

After a short silence, Tony nods. A small smile visible the next time he looked up.

“I transferred all the patients waiting for beds up to the nursing unit. Two of the paramedics are helping to bring down all the cots we have in storage.”

Stephen looked just in time to catch a water bottle being thrown in his direction.

“Drink. This is probably the only chance you’ll get in the next couple of hours.” Christine said as she opened a bottle of her own, taking large gulps.

“You stayed,” he stated as he continued to stare at the other doctor. There was a hint of surprise in his tone.

She smiled with a small huff. “Of course I stayed.”

“So did I.”

They both turned to see Nicodemus West leaning against the doorframe. There was a smile that didn’t quite reach his eyes. Must be all the worries of the troubled situation. Stephen notes, however, his usual arrogant façade completely gone, as well as, Nick’s usual antagonism towards him.
“And so did the half of the nursing staff. You can’t do this alone, Strange.”

Stephen stared at him for a moment, then nodded.

They say a person’s true character is often revealed in time of crisis.

“We don’t have much time, five minute tops before EMTs arrives—“

Stephen took a couple steps towards the door. “We need to convert the waiting room into triage. How many nurses—“

But he soon realized the two other doctors were no longer paying attention, looking somewhere behind him.

He followed their gaze, landing on the large flat screen on the opposite wall. It now displayed a scene of Iron Man flying over the buildings of New York, seeming to be directing a large missile.

No.

He’s unsure if he said that out loud. Nor does he have much time to care. There was sudden fear that radiated throughout his whole being. The surgeon reached into his pocket, hurrying to dig out his phone. The usual steady hands shaking uncontrollably.

I missed call. Tony Stark.

He dials it back frantically, hears the first ring, then second.

On screen, Iron Man was climbing higher and higher, gaining speed. One moment there was brilliant shine of red and gold against the blue sky, the next... nothing.

He couldn’t breathe. There was a loud clunk as the phone lands on the cold tiles.
Christine hurried towards him but Stephen held up a hand, stilling her from crossing that final distance.

...A loud cheering could be heard now just outside the door in the halls and main lobby. News reporters talked of end to the devastating threat.

Stephen swallowed hard, closing his eyes. There was definite ringing in his ears... he couldn’t feel his heart.

“You know... if I were Iron Man, I’d have this boyfriend who knew my true identity. He’d be a wreck cause he’d always be worrying that I was going to die...”

Don’t.

“... yet so proud of the man I’d become. He’d be wildly conflicted, which would only make him more...”

please...

“... crazy about me.”

- 

That infuriating charming smile he can still see if he just closed his eyes...

Stephen grabbed the first thing within reach, a lamp on the side table. He flung it with everything he had. There was a loud crash as it shattered against the screen.

Both Christine and Nick flinched, jumping back.

It was a cozy little place in Manhattan. The whole interior dimly lit. The main source of light coming from the fireplace at the center of the room.
It was a nice sit-down restaurant but, as Stephen had joked during Peter’s birthday, not as pretentious as the other high-end restaurants Tony frequented. Tony retorted back then of how there used to be a day the doctor refused to go anywhere but those snobby eateries. Peter had laughed at their bickering throughout the evening; simply glad they were all there together. There were a lot of jokes, banter, laughter…

Today the couple sat at a table further in, in one of the booths with half-drawn curtain giving them considerable privacy. This time, the bright teen was not with them. The two adults mostly silent.

Stephen seemed relatively at ease. Relaxed even considering everything that had happened in the past twenty-four hours. He wears a hint of a smile as he casually gazes at the fireplace. Tony admits that the doctor’s composure does somewhat quiet his own nerves.

“Why are you so calm?” he asked after a while.

The sorcerer turned his attention to Tony immediately at the words, the smile only widening as they locked eyes. “Why wouldn’t I be? You’re here. I told you, I feel most at ease when I have you with me.”

Tony lightly scowled at him though he could feel his skin flushing warm. Stephen only lets out a warm chuckle as he leaned back on his seat further.

“I always liked it here.”

“We’ve only been here once before.”

Stephen doesn’t speak.

“Were you here before?”

“Not in this lifetime.”
Something about the words sends a chill down Tony’s spine. “We also never talked about what you saw when you looked into the future…”

“Future… right…” The sorcerer was staring off now, looking at something in the distance but not really seeing it.

The engineer hesitates for a moment. “Is that all that was? Possible future?”

“It’s complicated,” he started but paused briefly as he stared into Tony’s eyes. “I saw the possible outcome… the futures of this lifetime. But there were other things I couldn’t quite explain.”

“Like what?”

“Event that never happened and ones I don’t believe will happen in this world.”

“Are they real?”

“Perhaps. In another life… Maybe they were alternative realities. Universes that mirror our own.”

That made his brain hurt. Alternate realities. Considering all that they have been through that didn’t seem like such a far-fetched idea but...

“So…” The engineer swallowed, hard. “So what happens in these… other lives?”

Stephen continues to smile but Tony can visibly see something behind those blue-green eyes. Flood of emotion that can’t simply be put into few words or millions. “Good, bad, sometimes there are heroes, villains, a world much like ours. Sometimes, it’s far more… normal. The mundane, jobs, friends, love, the domestic, the hardships… families and loss…”

Tony watched at the sorcerer, as he seemed to be tapping absentmindedly on the table. A habit of nervousness Stephen never truly rid himself of even with the pain that undoubtedly exists now. The engineer reached out, wrapping his fingers around the other’s hand, stopping the movements.
“Do we meet? In these… other lives?”

“Yes. Most of the time.”

He hesitated, “Are we together?”

Stephen’s smile doesn’t falter but his fingers squeeze Tony’s briefly. “In some.”

“But not all.”

“No, not all.”

“\textbf{What the hell? What just happened? Please tell me nobody kissed me-}”

Thor let out his usual good-natured laugh.

\textit{Steve gaped at him for a split second, a light flush rising to his cheek. Tony, on the other hand, seemed too hooked on adrenaline still to give much heed.}

\textit{Natasha raises an eyebrow though and once meeting her gaze, the Captain hastily cleared his throat.}

“We won…”

\textit{Those words seem to make the billionaire relax. His head falling back to the cement as he let his eyes fall closed for a minute. “Alright... Hey, alright- Good job, guys. Let’s just not come in tomorrow. Let’s take a day off. Have you ever tried shawarma? There’s a shawarma joint about two blocks from here. I don’t know what it is, but I want to try it- maybe Stephe- SHIT”}

That certainly makes all of them step back as Iron Man nearly jumped to his feet.
Steve stared at him, eyes wide as Tony manually undoes the mechanics of his suit, the metal pieces being tossed around without much care or patience.

“SHIT SHIT SHIT FUCK-“

Once done, the brunette wildly paced, looking around. Just his luck, the suit ran out of juice the minute he needs it the most.

“Tony!”

He turned to see Natasha now a good distance away, next to an abandoned motorcycle. She seemed to have successfully hot-wired it. God he regretted all the times he gave her hell the past year out of petty jealousy for taking his boyfriend’s time…

“Do you still know how to ride a bike?“ she calls out to him.

Tony doesn’t speak. He wasn’t sure if he wants to know.

But seeming to sense his uneasiness, the doctor reached over to thread his fingers through the brown locks. That drew the brunettes attention back to his boyfriend.

“Sometimes your… your hair is chestnut… other times… chocolate.”

Tony simply stares at the other, lips parting slightly but no words escape. There is sadness in that tone but he wasn’t sure he can fully grasp it even if he tried.

“Either way,” Stephen let out a huff of laughter. “It always reminded me of warmth… joyment in harsh winter.”

There was a sharp inhale as the sorcerer retracts his touch. Tony had a strong urge to grab a hold of
the other’s hand but wasn’t sure as to why. Stephen wasn’t going anywhere. He was still here, sitting in front of him. So why did it feel like…

“Sometimes… you don’t exist. You’re a hero in a legend or comic book. But even when you don’t exist, I’m still in love with you. I love the ones where we grew up together. When you shared with me your pain, laughter, secrets that were never meant for another to hear. Many days of entertaining each other’s bad ideas. We have more… time.”

”Whenever we met further down the line, when we are older, we are lot more discerning.” He lets out a huff of laughter. “Often times, we don’t get along at first. But we can never bring ourselves to hate each other for long. Maybe we are trying to make up for… all the lifetimes in which one of us… doesn’t exist. Ones where I wish… times had been less cruel. Ones where we just… barely never meet.”

Stephen’s smile disappears. Tony can see how he’s blinking quickly. A faint watery shine coming upon those icy blue eyes. “I hate those ones. Even perhaps more than the ones where one of us… looses the other in the battlefield. I knew… I’ll see you again. But I was always afraid if it would be the last time. Each time wondering if that’s… really you. What if you are perfectly happy without me… with another.”

Tony thought he should say something, wants to, but his mouth felt dry.

“I never burned as brightly as you. It was only appropriate that I should be the one to chase you across 14 million lives.”

It all hits him at once. Why Stephen changed so much. Why he still felt like his Stephen but something felt so different now than in the past. Why the doctor seemed to always have such sad look when he thought Tony wasn’t looking. Why he seemed so tense to have the engineer out of his sight. Why he held him so desperately at times. Why there were moments he acted with borderline obsession, much different than just a possessive streak from the past.

And it hit him… Stephen may have left him once… but how many times had he left Stephen in those 14 million lives.

The sorcerer didn’t just see the future as Tony assumed. He somehow must have lived through the lifetimes. Maybe not all 14 million but several at the very least.
How did he not go insane yet, Tony wasn’t sure. That kind of experience must be enough to drive anyone out of their minds. Guilt? This was guilt. But he also wasn’t sure if they could handle unwrapping the entirety of this tonight. Not after what happened recently.

Tony tried to collect himself the next time he spoke. “Can you tell me about our other lives? Ones where… we are happy… together. Your favorite ones.”

Stephen smiled again. “We once met in college. James got quite annoyed with us—“

That made Tony perk up. “My Rhodey? He’s there in other…”

“He’s always there,” The sorcerer said warmly. “He’s always in your life. So is Pepper and Happy…”

A genuine smile forms on Tony’s lips.

And Stephen went on. “There was this party. We’ve been dancing around each other since we met earlier in the week. At the party we managed to piss each other off again. Like I said, James had enough with both of our behavior. That night he said he had to leave early but when you tried to go with him he told you, you should stay. Told you how I had interest in you… You asked me out later that night.”

Tony couldn’t help but smirk.

“Well… stupid thing was we later found out that… he had said the same exact thing to me. But neither of us ever told him anything.”

Tony let out a laugh, shaking his head. Stephen couldn’t help but join in fondly.

When they both settled once more Stephen took another deep breath before continuing. “There was one where I worked at the front end of a restaurant. A night job while I was finishing school. You came in one evening with Pepper. It was busy night but I found you two a corner table. Always the corner table.” The doctor gave the other a look. “Not even five minutes and the front phone rang. I answered obviously being my responsibility. You called with your cell from your table. Wanted my number.”
Tony brought the water glass to his lips, a soft smile still evident. “Do I always chase you? That seems like me though- Can never resist that pretty face of your’s.”

“I was never as bold as you. I never even knew what I was missing in my life till you. Something so great that… when it’s gone, when it’s taken from you… you sometimes wish you never had it at all to begin with. Because it’s so painful…”

Stephen smirked. “But… just not this one. This lifetime… I approached you.”

“Yeah. Yeah… you did.” Tony laughed under his breath. A memory dancing in his head. One so vibrant that he could almost see it flashing before his eyes.

“We are a train wreck.” Tony doesn’t look at him, a hand absentmindedly swirling his cup.

The doctor’s expression doesn’t change. “Of course we are.”

“Some people waltz through life,” the brunette said bitterly. “Why couldn’t we be like that?”

“Oh, Tony…” Stephen leans in, “That’s because we’re doing the tango. And I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

The hospital was exactly as he had expected. It was pure chaos. There was floods of people that filled every square inch of the place; injured patients, crying loved-ones, frantic staff.

Guilt played on Tony’s mind as he crossed what used to be the main lobby. For once, no one paid much attention to him, didn’t even see him. It was an odd feeling, being invisible.

What he didn’t expect, however, was Stephen’s reaction when he finally found the surgeon.

“STEPHEN!”
The doctor didn’t even turn around, as if ignoring Tony’s voice. He just went right back to talking to a nurse. The brunette stepped closer, confused. The other definitely heard him. There was a clear second where the surgeon stilled all movements.

When Tony was finally close enough, he put a hand on his boyfriend’s shoulder. “Stephen-“ He knew they must all be busy. This was a catastrophic mess on another level for medical professionals. But he just… he just needed to see Stephen’s face, even if it’s just for a second. He needed to make sure the other was okay.

But Tony soon found… the other was far from okay.

The surgeon flinched at the touch. That definitely made Tony thoroughly perplexed. “Babe-what…?”

The next second, however, Tony had the wind knocked out of him as Stephen, whipped around, took one look at him with wide eyes, then pulled the smaller man into a crushing embrace.

Stephen’s hands were everywhere. First gripping tight around his waist, then his hair, the back of his neck, it was constantly moving. As if trying to find purchase… desperately grasping for some security that was just a bit out of reach.

“I… I…t-thought-“

Tony quietly lets Stephen do whatever he needed. Take whatever he needs. It finally dawned on the genius what this was all about.

“You thought I died.“

Those words made the doctor stiffen horrible. Tony felt a pang of remorse as he felt Stephen sink his nose further into the crook of his neck. The fingers on his hair clutched harder, the nails digging into his skin.

Tony let out a huff. “I can’t believe… you went back to work after thinking I was...”
Stephen doesn’t move anymore, doesn’t even try to meet the other’s eyes. “I had to. I didn’t know what else to do. I thought I would… I felt like I was losing my mind.”

The brunette swallows, hard. Perhaps he should simply stop talking. He wasn’t sure if he can sink any further into depths of profound guilt and personal shame. Even his father, with all his seemingly never-ending disappointments, never made Tony feel so much self-hatred as he did in this moment.

“Tony…”

He heard Stephen’s voice break. Oh no… Tony supposed he can and will sink further.

“I know… I know this whole damn world needs you. B-but… not as much as I do. I… I need you, Tony.”

Those words stab his heart. “Stephen… I’m so-“

But those words never got finished.

There was a loud bang. A distinct sound of a gunshot.

People screamed, many dropping their bodies to the ground in terror. In an instant, Tony roughly shoved Stephen back against the reception’s desk, putting his own body in front of the doctor, facing where the sound seemingly came from.

“EVERYONE GET ON THE FLOOR!” A tall man, dark blonde, most likely well into his 40s, stood only couple yards away. A handgun now pointing straight at the billionaire.

“You! It’s your fault! Bringing your war here! Some hero you are. My daughter is going to die because of you!”

Tony thought about closing his eyes but he couldn’t risk it. If the gun was fired, what were the
chances it would go through him? Would it be worth the risk of pushing Stephen away from him now?

“TONY!”

The trigger was going to be pulled any seconds now. He can see it from the man’s movements, his gaze. He was beyond reasoning.

CLUNK.

There was silence as Tony slowly opened his eyes once more. Behind him, he feels Stephen shift.

They both peered about, eventually seeing Christine now standing where the gunman had once been, a folding chair in a tight grip with both hands. She seemed to have given the stranger a good knock on the head. The man was now unconscious, sprawled on the floor, unmoving.

Tony leaned back towards Stephen slightly. “…I want one.”

“Back off. She’s mine.” he hears Stephen say flatly, though there was definite humor in those words.

He turned towards the doctor with an eyebrow raised.

“You have Pepper.”

“Oh my god-“

The two men quickly turned their attention back to Christine who seemed very near a mental breakdown. There was a loud crash as she dropped the chair to the floor as if it burned her.

“Ohmygod- ohmygod- I just- hit- oh god-“
“Woah woah woah- Christine, it’s ok-“

“Christine, calm down-“

They both stood to their feet quickly, arms stretched as they tried to hurry towards the other doctor.

“I- oh no- is he dead?! Did I-?”

“Christine, it’s going to be okay. It was self-defense.“

“I’m a doctor!” she cried out in distress.

“Come on, honey. It’s going to be okay-“ Tony tried to reason as he wrapped his arms around her, attempting to get her to turn away from the scene.

“Honey?” snapped Stephen with a frown.

Tony gave him an exasperated look. “Seriously?! You want to fucking do this now?!”

Tony and Stephen came stumbling in well past midnight. Laughing as Tony tripped over his own feet as they got off the elevator. The brunette was too keen on keeping their lips locked he wasn’t coordinated in much else. The sorcerer hastily strengthened his grip on the other’s waist to prevent both of them from toppling.

“Okay, okay I just want water then we can-“

There was a loud cough and the pair turned their attention to the inners of the common room. Natasha was sitting on the bar stool next to the kitchen island.
Tony smirked but parted himself a bit from Stephen. Although, the doctor’s hand on his waist only seemed to tighten. “Well… not the worst thing you caught us doing—“

Natasha let out a huff as she stood. “You seemed to be in a good mood.”

Tony swayed a bit on the balls of his feet, shrugging with a light smile.

Stephen remained silent, eyes locking with the redhead for a brief moment. He definitely notices the slight tension in the way Natasha carried herself at that moment. As if she was waiting for a turn in Tony’s mood.

But the brunette doesn’t seem to sense anything out of the norm. Wasn’t particularly looking hard anyways. He just darted around to the counter to pour himself a glass of water.

The SHIELD agent took a quick glance at Stephen, almost questioningly.

“I’m going to go check on Peter before heading up,” Tony called out as he types something on his phone.

“I think I may have left my book in the library.” The sorcerer said easily. “I’ll meet you upstairs.”

Tony gave him a smile, a quick nod before heading into the elevator once more.

They both wait until it fully closes.

“Did you tell him?”

Stephen didn’t turn to meet her eyes. Simply walks to the counter and slowly pours the water into a glass. “If I did, do you really think he would be happy with you?”

He tilts the glass to his lips. There was an awful silence.
“I didn’t do it for you,” he said answering the unspoken question. He turned around then, fully facing Natasha.

“You made a mistake.” A smirk appeared on his cold expression, the piercing gaze holding so much more than just simple anger. “What was it that you said last night? Sacrificing for the greater good that might not even exist?”

Her lips part just a bit, a flicker in those green eyes, an inkling of dread.

Oh, how many years he waited to see that look.

“He let out a sigh, not bothering to face the SHIELD agent who just entered the room. He doesn’t admit to himself that it was more that he was scared to try. Try and realize he can’t even turn his head fully.

How pathetic he must look. Stretched out on this hospital bed, his hands adorned with countless stitches and screws, being held up as if he was a mere puppet.

There was a soft click as Natasha closed the door behind her.

Stephen swallowed a bit forcefully. Ignoring the pain that followed. “Did he send you now?” his voice comes out horse from refusing water. But he rarely was in the mood the past couple days for anyone to assist him for such a simple task.

There was movement of a chair as the redhead took a seat beside the bed. “No.”

He finally glanced towards her, wincing painfully as he did so. But soon something else that strayed his attention from the discomfort. “What happened to your arm?”

Natasha shrugged almost dismissively. “We were out in a mission... when Tony heard the news...
about you.”

He stared at the cast she was wearing for a while longer. “You saved him.”

“Not even my dominant arm. It's just a bad sprain.” She said smiling softly. “I told you. I'll keep him safe.”

Stephen wanted to say thank you, he thought to… but the bitterness that plagued him these days nonstop held him back. There was a pang of shame that followed.

There was silence. Both of them knew what was coming.

“Why are you here?” he asked… though he knew… it was for formalities sake.

“To pull the trigger.”

A second, then two. He held his breath, feeling his heartbeat in his ears.

“You asked me to… pull the trigger on you if it ever came to him or you,” there was a hardness in her tone. Part of him was glad for her conviction because suddenly he was so unsure of millions of things. “Stephen. It's time. You’re…”

“Crippled,” he finishes for her.

He opened his eyes once more, this time directly meeting her gaze. The doctor was unsurprised to find her expression carefully blank. He’s well used to that look from her now. Though there was a hint of something lingering in those piercing green eyes. Was it pity? Guilt?

Guilt, he decides as he sees her shifting her gaze for a split second.

“More vulnerable than before,” she said evenly.
“I was not completely helpless, Romanoff.” He couldn’t help but snap. He wasn’t sure why he was fighting now. He asked her of this. But he had thought…

“I know. I know…” She sounded sympathetic. But he finds it even harder to swallow. He wishes she had been harsher, crueler, give him something to direct his anger at.

“Stephen… He’ll… he’ll always put you first. It’ll happen again. He’ll become distracted at the very mention of your name. One day soon, it’ll be between him or you and he will choose you. He will give up his life to protect you without even a moment of hesitation.

There was a short pause. He says nothing.

“He loves you. And that love will get him killed.”

Stephen took a shaky breath. “And what… what if… I was to be selfish.”

“Stephen…”

“There are… inventions, experimental procedures-“

Natasha gives him a blank stare. He knows… they know… but…

“Please.” There was desperation in the doctor’s voice, one that was rarely ever used. “Please… I lost enough. I can’t…. I can’t… lose him too.”

Those words tasted bitter in his mouth. What right did he have to plead for Tony now when he spent the past week driving the genius away? How many times had his temper gotten the best of him? How many times had he snapped at his boyfriend for something so minor as food, the noise, how the other was being too overbearing? Stephen thought back to how he yelled at Tony just this morning to leave him be the second he tried to help Stephen drink some water.

And here he was… ironically begging for someone to not… take him away.
“I… I love him. I can’t. I can’t imagine a world without him, Natalia.”

Natasha’s lips part ever so slightly, her expression softening just a bit. “I know,” she said after a brief pause. “That’s why… you need to let him go.”

Without taking her eyes off the now former surgeon, the redhead reaches for the phone on the bedside table. She dials a number, puts it to speaker. There was a soft sound of ringing as the agent placed the cell on to Stephen’s lap.

“Let him go, Stephen.” She said gently. “Because he won’t…”

The second ring, then third…

“Will you… will you look after him?” He takes in a trembling breath. “Promise me. Give me your word you’ll protect him.”

“Always.”

There was a soft click.

“Hey, Stephen… Is everything okay?” said Tony’s voice from the phone.

They both hear it. The never-ending worry that found permanent residence in the genius’s tone these days… but also the slight glimmer of hope and eagerness at the doctor’s call.

“It’s over, Tony.”

I love you. I’m sorry I never told you.

There was a defining stillness that stretched to every corner of the room.

“…W-what?”
Stephen let his eyes fall closed. “Don’t come back here.”

I need you.

“Stephen, babe…you… I… I know it must be really hard right now but don’t- don’t do this…”

“I don’t want to be with you.”

I thought… we would have more time.

“Please… we… we can get through this- just… just give me a chance…”

“God, why must you be so stupid. What part of this do you not understand? I. Don’t. Want. You.”

But I’ll always want more time. There will never possibly be enough time spent with you.

“That’s… that’s not…”

“I haven’t been happy for a while. I’m tired of all the dramatics and your need to play the hero… It’s not fun anymore, Tony.”

I’m so sorry… I’m so… so sorry.

“What’s going on Stephen… I… this isn’t you. Look, I can get to the hospital in 15. Just give me 10 minutes and we’ll talk-”

“I’M TIRED OF IT, TONY! I’m tired of all of it! I’m tired of you.”

But I love you.

There was a silence that followed.

And more silence.
How long as it been? Since they both sat there not moving an inch…

There was stiffness in the way Natasha sat, her back too straight, her expression just a bit too blank. She must have understood fully. He knows she did. …of how he took a stab at every insecurity Tony ever had. The doctor just plunged a knife and twisted it in every way possible.

The room suddenly felt too large, too empty. If Stephen had any emotions left in him, it would have echoed against the dull, white walls. There was just… so much space.

But it was all… familiar somehow. As if it were a word just at the tip of his tongue… though one that he didn’t want to remember.

The detachment… indifference… excruciating boredom… the bleakness of it all.

This was his life before Tony. Seconds, hours, days of mostly… nothing. Not sadness, not anger, not depression… just a lot of indifference. Being constantly bored and relishing in the few moments of mediocre pleasure that never quite satisfied the hunger he wasn’t even aware existed. Always starving for something more and not knowing what.

But this time, he will know. He will know what exactly is missing from his miserable life. And he’ll know… he will never have it again.

“Leave.”

She doesn't move.

"I said. Get. Out."

“I trusted you.”
Natasha just continued to watch him as he slowly, absentmindedly walked around the counter. He stood at his full height, nearly towering over the SHIELD agent.

“So tell me. What was in it for you? Did you get an order from SHIELD? I admit it was smart for them to send you. I just may have stayed out of my own desperation for him. After all, you were in the best position to make sure I still left.”

Natasha crossed her arms, her expression unchanging. “I acted alone. You were compromised. Tony would have died trying to protect you.”

He let out a scoff, “Oh don’t be boring. If you had done so for Tony. If all it was that you were looking after his safety, I would have forgiven you. We had an agreement. I asked you for that.”

There was a sudden change to his tone. The smirk completely fading and sudden coldness appeared in the icy gaze. “But you claimed to have changed your mind… five months after? What was so prominent that made you question yourself? It wasn’t Tony… it wasn’t I. Nothing changed. But SHIELD did. Your perception of SHIELD did. There was an incident with Pierce… the Winter Soldier…”

“Sacrificing for the greater good that might not even exist?” There was a short laugh that followed, cruel and harsh. “You question your own moral values, as do I. Because we are the type who’s moral compass is skewed. We trust someone or something to keep us in check. For you, that was SHIELD. You believed in SHIELD. Believed it enough to be worth all the gory sacrifice, worth dipping your hands in red. I’m sure it was definitely enough to destroy a single, meager relationship.” He gave her a mock frown. “Was it even a question?”

“You’re jumping to conclusions.” Nothing betrayed the calmness in that voice. The redhead didn’t even take a step back as the sorcerer approached.

“Am I?” he said barely above a whisper. “Was it really for Tony you had me leave? Or was it for somehow for SHIELD?”

Natasha blinked slowly. “Tony is an asset to SHIELD. Even by your line of claims-“

“No. Back then you all thought he was a potential liability. He was reckless, volatile. You wanted Iron Man to be kept in line at SHIELD, in Avengers, you would not have risked breaking his heart. So something… was worth that risk. What?
“Stephen. There is no conspiracy.”

Oh, that was good. He almost believed the sincerity in those words.

“I only did what I did because Tony already proved distracted by your vulnerability. Ultimately, he would have gotten himself killed trying to save you in some way. In some ways, maybe that was for SHIELD. For the world. The world needed Iron Man.”

He ignored her lies. “Who did you get your orders from? Was it Fury?”

She stared at him straight, a hint of sorrow in her eyes. A look he once saw in a certain hospital room. “I didn’t get any orders. It was my decision.”

He paused for a brief moment. Taking a shallow breath. “You know, don’t you? That if it is SHIELD behind this, not just you… not simply because of some good intention… It might not simply end with him throwing you out. It may be enough for him to abandon the Avengers.”

A frown comes upon her expression. “Tony is not as short-sighted as he once was.”

The sorcerer smiled, a smile that didn’t quite reach his eyes. “You said it yourself. He will choose me. What do you think he’ll love more? This team that once abandoned him? Or me?” He turned sharply around, pacing around the large space. “After all I’m not even just his boyfriend anymore… there is Peter… I’m practically part of this family he created and so desperately wanted all his life.”

Natasha took a couple steps forward. A seriousness now very evident in her expression. “What are you digging for, Stephen? What are you trying to accomplish? If you wanted to create hostility, bring me down, you could have told him about my involvement the minute you returned. There is no conspiracy. There was no order. …But I still convinced you to leave. You’re right, that will be more than enough for him to throw me out.”

Stephen surveyed her carefully. “Maybe I wanted to know the extent of the betrayal. Who else knew?”
“No one else knew.” She sounded a bit exasperated.

“Sometimes Romanoff… instead of the act itself… motivation is far more interesting. What could be so bad that you are so desperately trying to hide it? For you to be throwing yourself onto the knife… for you risk giving up the only family you ever have known. Is it enough to destroy the Avengers?” His voice remained completely even, to the point it was unnerving. “After all, you all are expecting eventually for the Captain and Iron Man to reach an agreement of some sort. To be a functional team once more. Would this prevent it?”

“Was it worth it?” He said in a whisper as he leaned towards her. “Whatever it was. Because you took him from me for ten years. I had ten years to dwell on this… to go over every grueling detail. Do you know what it was like? Watching the man you love be in the arms of another? Seeing him not even be properly appreciated when everything he has ever done was for you lot?”

He paused trying calm his voice once more. The rage he had suppressed for so long threatening to surface. “Having to simply watch as he laid out dying because of that sorry excuse of my replacement? I trusted you to protect him.”

Something dawns on Natasha’s expression. “You were watching. For how long?”

Dates were flashing in her head as she put the information together. Stephen left in February of 2013. She remembers distinctly since a couple months later was the discovery of Hydra’s corruption in SHIELD. Her and Cap made the decision of not involving Tony in that incident. The billionaire still too grief-stricken over Stephen’s departure.

Steve and Tony started their affair in 2014, Ultron was 2015, marking the start of a bump in Captain America and Iron Man’s relationship. The Civil War incident, almost a year after. Three years.

Thano’s attack came at 2018 and also the return of Stephen as now a Sorcerer Supreme. So five years between the doctor’s departure and return to the public world. It occurred to her they had been short-sighted thinking Stephen was still recovering all that time.

When had the other become a sorcerer? If he had already returned to New York by 2016 to witness the fallout in Avengers, why didn’t he make contact with Tony instead of waiting another two years? … Or was the doctor already back even before then… What has Stephen been doing all this time?
“Why did you not come back to him sooner?” She always assumed Stephen didn’t return till he gained his powers. She had naively believed the minute Stephen was able to return to Tony’s side, he had.

He doesn’t answer her. Ignored the question completely. “I hope it was worth it, Romanoff.” The sorcerer’s voice was low now, dangerous and sharp. “Because for me, it was not worth this universe.”

She held her ground. “What are you planning, Stephen?”

“Oh, wouldn’t you like to know.”

He gave her a tight smile before turning around walking towards the elevator. Before it closed, he turned around, peering at her with the same cold stare.

“You made a mistake when you pulled that trigger. You should have aimed for my head, not my heart.”

“It’s done.”

“You still question this?”

“I did it. That’s what matters.” Natasha opens the door that led to the emergency stairway, a little roughly than she had meant to. She adjusted the Bluetooth in her ear as she made her way down the steps at a swift pace.

There was a brief pause before a short laughter could be heard from the caller. “Got to hand it to the doctor. Managed to compromise two Avengers…”

A pang of anger hits her before she realizes, or perhaps it was the guilt. “If I was, I wouldn’t have just done what I did.”
Fury let out a sigh. “Romanoff-“

“I’m fine.”

Another pause. “No one can know about this.”

“Understood.”

“It’s for the greater good, Agent Romanoff. Stark was always meant to be a martyr. But for something far more important than Doctor Strange.”

“He knows.”

A simple statement the moment he answered his phone. He likes that about her. She was always efficient, never wasting time.

“How much?” The Director asked curtly. He doesn’t miss the odd tone in her voice. It was rare for the Black Widow to be shaken.

“I’m unsure. Enough to be digging. …I made a mistake.”

Fury let out a sigh. “I told you to watch your six with him.”

“I made a mistake,” she repeated bitterly. “…But you’re right. He’s planning something. He may have been planning for longer than we thought.”

Chapter End Notes
woowow this took forever to update. I just realized it was 10k words just for this chapter so that probably explains why.

Since I have basically a 4-day weekend (corporate holiday) and sort of as thank you for large amounts of comments I received in the last chapter, I just may do another update before this weekend ends.

Any preference on...
chapter update to this
another chapter to our sons,
or final chapter to definitely-not-boyfriend-not-really-friends-one-night-stand

???
NOTE

I know I said I'll never give the false impression of another chapter again (SORRY I really really am)
but wanted to clear this up so I won't waste any more of some people's time in the future / before it gets worse

............

I apologize but decided **not to make another update this weekend** and taking a short break from the fanfic world (probably just a week or so honestly but def for rest of this weekend - ahhh so sorry because I promised one more update during this long weekend). Couple things really wore me down more than I thought and I'm not sure I want to deal with continuing the storyline right now.

But I wanted to take this time to re-iterate: **PLEASE respect my creative decisions with this story.** I completely understand everyone probably has their own opinion and bias about each character and how they want things to play out, some very strong opinions, etc... but PLEASE try to respect the direction I take with this story and characters as well because well... sorry, it's sort of my fic??

**(TO CLARIFY:** this is not about like... people taking guesses what might happen or people vaguely saying what they would like to see? I love and have no qualms about people taking guesses how the storyline will pan out. There is a difference between you going "Is this going to happen??", "I wish they get a happy ending", etc. and borderline going into "That's not right because I think this-" like... what do you mean? I may not have the same opinion as you and you just stepped into my world by reading this fic???)

Give my approach to the ideas a chance for the duration of the fic (so to say) if you plan to continue reading it. That's honestly all I am asking :) If my approach bothers you that much, by all means, stop reading because I get it- I don't read some fics that are not my cup of tea either so definitely understand.

If you do have such strong opinions about how things should go, again, I get it, it's your preference. (LOL I'm here taking hours of my life to write this story because I had an exact idea about how I wanted things to play out- so can't throw stones.) But that's the thing, if I'm being completely honest... if you have that much of strong opinion, please consider writing your own fic to include all you wanted because I actually have this whole thing mapped out and chances of me derailing my own ideas/plans to accommodate your preferences are not exactly high;; Btw I don't mean this is like "fuck off" way I'm seriously saying you really should write your own fic because trust me it's kind of cool being able to throw in every one of your ideas into something and making it real (ok not like real-real but you get what I'm getting at).

And lastly, this is not my day job. This is just a hobby that I feel like doing till whenever I feel like stopping I suppose. I'm not getting paid to do this, it's not a commission fic and therefore, I don't believe there is much I should or should not be doing. I did take a lot of time to consider each
stylistic choice so I don't think I will be changing that any time soon either. Like all things in life, I have several reasons I do each thing and every detail and believe it's right for me. It may not for you and that's fine. It's not like I'm telling you how to write your stories, I'm just simply saying it's right for me, here, in this fic, for me.

Again, if you believe some things should be written in a certain way for your story, great. Please do. But that doesn't automatically mean it applies to me as well.

Ironically, all my fics always have the underlining idea that good and bad are relative to each person. What's right for you might not be right for someone else. What's wrong to you just may be right for someone else. Just because in your perspective, your mindset, your life something is "correct" it may not be some universal truth that applies to everyone.

Thankx

* Sorry if this comes out harsh but I think I tried to address it with some before but it just keeps happening LOL and really didn't want to waste any more of people's time letting them believe they can change my opinion nor did I want to continue wasting my time responding to these things when that energy can be spent on updating the story which is what I just want to do :')

At this point, please do what you need to... stop reading, un-subscribe, un-bookmark, etc. because you can't stand how I think or something...
And to those who will still stick around and continue to read this series, many thanks and I appreciate you more than you think ♡
Contrast. Contrast was an amusing thing. At least, it always had been to Stephen Strange.

He loves the artificial darkness of a room during midday. Enjoys the indulgence of laziness at a time where perhaps a respectful man should be busy about his day. He savors the loudness of indecent sounds that should be kept quiet… appreciates the feeling of heated body in a well-chilled room… Simply addicted to the beautifully, completely, utterly, vulnerable expression of a man who’s otherwise known to the world as a man made of iron.

“Stephen- I swear to fucking god! If you aren’t going to fuck me properly just get off so I can do it myself!”

Stephen let out a low chuckle as he gave a particularly hard thrust, hitting the prostate dead on. Tony only threw his head back with a quite vulgar moan.

“Oh, you wouldn’t do that, love. We both know what happened last time you tried to get yourself off with a toy.” He leaned in, just a shy of the other’s right ear. “You were an unsatisfied mess for hours.”

Tony looked back with a glare. “Shut the fuck up, Stephenie, and fuck me!” The back of his right heel dug at Stephen’s lower back.

The sorcerer leans back, straightening slightly. He then gave a mock, disinterested “hm” before slowly dragging his cock in and out. He had the brunette’s hip in a firm grip, lifted slightly still, which prevented Tony from having any leverage. Helpless to let Stephen drive into him at his own pace.

Of course, there was always that temptation to fuck Tony hard and fast. A thought that clawed at
him from the dark corners of his mind. The whispers that told him there was nothing more pleasurable than chasing that tight warmth.

But well… there was also the lure of seeing his lover in a hot mess under him, desperate and needy. It definitely had its own set of appeal.

The picture of Tony Stark taken apart piece-by-piece till all the genius could do was lie there and take anything and everything Stephen offered him.

Because that… that was for him, and only him.

Tony tossed his head to the side in agitation, his eyes closing shut in a frown. The fingers on Stephen’s upper arm tightened, nails soon dragging and digging in sync with the gruelingly slow pace.

A hand reached up, fingers wrapping around the delicate jawline. “What did I tell you?” he scolded, low and warning, “Your eyes don’t get to leave me.”

Tony let out a huff, turning his gaze back to meet the icy blue. The engineer always marveled at how Stephen’s eyes could remain still so translucent even with his pupils completely blown.

He arched from the bed involuntarily, but definitely, in vain. Seeing that look on Stephen always did something to his libido. He wondered if the doctor knew. But then again, knowing his sadistic sap of a boyfriend, he probably did. Which is why the sorcerer often insisted Tony didn’t look away for long when they fucked.

The brunette bit down hard on his lips, letting out a shaky breath as he tried to keep the eye contact. He could only imagine how he must look right now, laying flat on his back, legs spread, tears threatening in his eyes, body trembling uncontrollably.

Stephen grinned before returning to his ruthless slow pace. He definitely feels Tony clenching on him, so tantalizing tight. It almost breaks his resolve… almost.

“Stephen… c-come on~“
“Just a bit longer, darling,” he whispers adoringly as he leaned in once more, brushed away couple sweaty locks away from the other’s face.

He placed a gentle kiss onto Tony’s lips, feeling the smaller man almost instantly relax under him. It makes Stephen’s smile wider, loving the way his lover’s body unconsciously responds to him in every level.

Tony let out a breathless moan as he felt Stephen brush that particular nerve deep in him. “H-how... how much longer-?” His voice was shaky, his toes curling.

“Come on, sweetness,” he whispered as he locked eyes with Tony. He ignores the persisting question. “Spread yourself a little wider… I want to be deeper in you.” He definitely doesn’t miss the quivering of Tony’s thighs as he tried to oblige. “Make me proud, my love.”

“Stephen-“

The doctor ran a thumb down a heavy scar along Tony’s hips. He gave one experimental thrust, not much faster but much harder. Tony let out a cry that sounded more like a sob.

They were nearly flushed against each other now, chest to chest. Tony moaned as squirmed, trying to at least enjoy the friction his cock was receiving rubbing against Stephen’s abs.

“It’s a shame we can’t make a baby this way…”

Tony let out a huff. “I-I… don’t think I need to be telling you how biology works. Unless you’re going… to tell me there is s-some weird wizard thing-“

Stephen smiled, “No, there isn’t.”

A teasing smirk appeared on the brunette’s lips. “Y…you just want to fuck raw. You always had a thing for barebacking-“

The sorcerer shrugged. “I don’t see why we have to keep using condoms.” He let out a soft groan, chasing the wonderful tightness. “…Not like we are screwing other people.”
Tony tilts his head back, peering at the other from under his long lashes. “I’m starting to see the appeal in that idea considering you’re refusing to meet my needs—“

He notices a definite twitch in Stephen’s expression. Gotcha.

Stephen hands roughly pushed at his knees, spreading engineer fully in one swift movement. He rocked forward. Giving a thrust that had Tony gasping, open mouth, eyes wide.

“But wouldn’t that be something… You would love it wouldn’t you?”

The sorcerer’s voice takes on an edge Tony is familiar with. It’s dark, bottomless, and dangerously addicting. It’s a specific tone that sent a shiver straight down his spine.

“You would take me in so well. You always do.” A hand trails up to Tony’s stomach. Eyes dark when it meets the brunette’s, a sharp smirk forming. “I would love seeing the swelling of your stomach. Everyone would know… wouldn’t they? Who exactly laid claim to your body in the most intimate way. Who fucked you and pumped you full of their seed. Maybe they would be able to imagine how I had you on your back… or perhaps on your hands and knees… How you would have let me… with legs spread wide… took everything while moaning like a bitch in heat…“

Tony let out a whimper as his body desperately clenched again and again with need. He took an unsteady, shallow breath. “T-take it off.”

“What was that?”

“DAMMIT STEPHEN! JUST TAKE IT OFF!”

The next second, Stephen grabbed his arm, yanking Tony up and twisting them around. Soon, the sorcerer’s back was against the headboard with his lover on his lap. He swiftly pulled off the condom from his own cock, tossing it aside.

A hand finding Tony’s hips, Stephen spread his knees, forcing Tony to open his legs a bit too wide, losing balance. The engineer automatically doubles over, reaching for Stephen’s back for support but mostly only ends up falling back down, impaling himself on the other’s cock.
Tony let out a choked gasp at the new position, innate humiliation tugging at the back of his mind at the idea of being spread in someone’s lap. But he quickly ignores it, simply arching his back with want as Stephen kissed and sucked at his collarbone. He let his eyes fall closed for a brief second, enjoying the feeling of being completely full.

“Say my name when you come,” Stephen whispered in his ears.

Tony only nodded, not trusting his voice.

“Tony,” he warned sternly.

“Y-yes…”

Stephen fucked up to him, hard.

“YES!” Tony just knew he was going to feel this for days.

The other let out a soft laugh, “You know I like verbal acknowledgment.”

“You are seriously getting on my nerves today, Stephen Strange,” Tony growled with a particularly nasty glare. “I don’t even know why the hell I’m with you-“

The doctor gave couple hard thrust, deep and angled so perfectly that has Tony moaning loudly, his visions blurring.

“…o-okay- yeah… I remember why-“

He let his forehead fall to the crook of Stephen’s neck, panting openly and lips mouthing lazily on the naked skin. Tony was grateful his boyfriend didn’t insist on keeping eye contact. This was starting to become too much. His body and mind feeling faint.
The next minute, Stephen was thrusting into him with earnest, a pace that has Tony gasping.

“Stephen-“ he moans out, full of want and hunger. “Stephen…”

The trembling fingers found the back of Tony’s neck, threading the digits through the chocolate brown locks before closing in a firm grip. He sighed onto the other’s cheek, pulling them close.

“STEPHEN!”

Stephen continues fucking him until Tony is all but writhing. A couple more particularly precise thrust and Tony cums with a scream, splattering their stomach with white, hot mess. Stephen fucks him through it and them some as the engineer helplessly claws at his back, drawing dark angry lines.

Then he lets go as well. White pouring through Stephen’s vision as his own orgasm hit him fast and intense. It’s always a remembrance of how Tony just about ruined him for anyone else.

They stay still for the moment. Both panting and trying to catch their breath. Tony doesn’t even bother to lift his head from the doctor’s shoulder.

After awhile, Stephen ran a hand down the engineer’s back, then to his waist and hips, to the thigh. His fingers tracing the inner muscles with the stickiness that’s leaking from his entrance.

Tony twitches in response, “I hate to say this but… I’m getting too old, babe- Give me a minute…”

Stephen let out a light laugh. “No, no… I was just thinking…” A short pause. “…how our child may have been.”

That had Tony slowly push himself straighter. “Where…” he swallowed, trying to calm his nerves. “Where is this coming from? You didn’t want…”

A thought started to plague his thoughts. Did Stephen suddenly change his mind of wanting kids? He did often hear about some feeling the need for biological kids later on in life.
For Tony, Peter and Harley were plenty. Hell, he sometimes even dotted on Nebula as if she was his daughter when she was around. He already made his peace about never having biological kids but also felt what he had more than enough. More than he ever thought he’d have for that matter.

But then again, even if they were “playing house” as Rhody often called it… Tony supposed he wasn’t a hundred percent sure if Stephen really felt they were his kids no matter how fond he was of Peter or how well he played the father role when needed.

Tony didn’t want to think about it but… what if… just what if… Stephen wanted, no, needed something he couldn’t give him.

“I… Stephen… do…” his brain short-circuited. He couldn’t find the words he was looking for. “Do you… need-“

“No.” Stephen shook his head a bit before cupping the other’s cheek with trembling hands. “No, no… I don’t mean it like that, Tony. It was just an amusement.” He let out a huff of laughter. “I’m probably just getting old too.”

Tony stared for another couple seconds, trying to calm himself. “If… that’s what you need… there are other ways-“

Stephen gave him a warm smile. “Tony, it’s alright- I didn’t mean it in that way,” there was slight laughter in his tone.

“I’m… there’s Peter and Harley. I don’t need anymore. I’m quite satisfied actually-” Tony was starting to speak very fast now.

“I know.”

“I honestly think they only survived me because I didn’t have the chance to screw them up when they were any younger. Couldn’t you know… drop them or fuck up too badly-“

“Tony-“
“Sometimes I think I’m doing okay with them—”

“You’re doing more than okay.”

“They don’t hate me—”

“Tony, they love you…”

“How can you be able to commit?” That… came out before Tony could stop himself.

Stephen stared at him questioningly, a slight frown appearing on his face. “What?”

Well, he supposed it’s too late now. “…Are… Okay, let’s face it. We both know where this relationship is heading. Or at least I hope we are. …What I mean is… do you think you’re going to be able to commit to them even if they aren’t your biological kids? Someday? …Does them not being related to you by blood matter to you? I’m not asking you to tie the knot with me right now but if this gets any further…”

Tony looked away, eyes turning towards the darkened windows. His voice was starting to lose strength. He swallowed, hard. “Peter… Peter already thinks of you as a second father and if… if you can’t- If… if you are just playing along because of this—” he points a finger between the two of them, hastily, before letting his hand fall.

Stephen was straightening up now, realizing this has just gotten more serious than he had thought. It didn’t occur to him initially that Tony might take this direction from his teasing.

“How can you be able to commit?” That… came out before Tony could stop himself.

Stephen was straightening up now, realizing this has just gotten more serious than he had thought. It didn’t occur to him initially that Tony might take this direction from his teasing.

“Tony,” he said firmly. “Tony, really. I don’t NEED kids.”

Those large doe eyes snapped to him in seconds.

“I—” Stephen realized the perhaps wrong choice of words almost immediately. “I didn’t mean that. Well, I don’t need kids. Never felt the need for kids adopted or biological. But I’m glad for Peter.
…We both know Harley won’t exactly be fond of the notion just yet so…” He gently traces Tony’s cheeks with the pad of his thumb. “I’m not… pretending or just playing along if that’s what you are thinking-“

The corner of his lip twitch. “So you’re not using me for practice?” He said sarcastically.

They both let out a soft laugh.

Stephen quickly pulled the other in for a kiss, letting out a deep exhale as they parted. “I’m quite satisfied. More than, actually. And I am already committed to this… I take my place in Peter’s life quite seriously. And your’s.”

Tony smiled, relief flashing behind those dark gaze. “I love you.”

The sorcerer returned the smile easily. “…I can’t imagine a lifetime I won’t love you, Tony.”

.........

They eventually take a short nap that lasted well past the afternoon.

Tony awoke first, as usual. Soon, blinking and rubbing his eyes trying to clear his vision. He turned a bit to see the sorcerer comfortably asleep with his arms still tightly wrapped around Tony’s own body.

A small smile formed as he saw how relaxed his lover looked. Stephen rarely looked so carefree these days. It wasn’t as if the genius didn’t notice that the doctor only slept soundlessly when Tony was within his grasp. An act he previously believed was traced back to some line of possessiveness but well… he knew better now.

The billionaire let out a quiet yawn as he carefully reached for the tablet at the bedside table.

Tony had learned to adjust recently, figured out how to half-heartedly work on his tablet while still not disturbing their position. But he only managed to pull up couple files before the familiar low baritone reached his ears.
“What are you working on?”

There was a long pause in which Tony’s stopped all movements. Slowly he turned his gaze. A smile lingering that almost seemed forced.

It made Stephen’s stomach knot, automatically reaching for the other.

“No I’m fine,” Tony said quickly with a short laugh. He let out a sigh. “I’ve been meaning to talk to you about this actually…”

“Aright,” the sorcerer said hesitantly as he pushed himself up to a more sitting position.

“I’m… thinking of retiring.”

Stephen blinked. “From Avengers?”

“Yeah… I mean, I am getting old,” Tony looked away, running a hand through his messy locks.

“Are they forcing you?” He had to ask. He knew logically SHIELD would be in fear of what it meant for Tony Stark to leave the Avenger now but he had to be sure. It was so odd to think Tony would voluntarily leave the team for simple reason as he’s getting old.

“What? No-“ The engineer let out a quiet laugh as he shifted position. “No, no one is forcing me to. It’s my idea.”

There was a silence that stretched for a long while. Stephen fought to keep his expression carefully blank.

“I thought you would be happy-“
The corner of his lips twitched as he lowered his gaze just a little. “I mean… you were never fond of me doing the whole hero act to begin with and you definitely don’t like the Avengers now.”

“I… Tony, I tried to be-“

“I know, I know. I’m not blaming you. It’s fair you felt that way. You were supportive still and that was more than I could hope for.”

Stephen licked his lips, his mouth suddenly feeling dry. “So what now?”

“Well,” Tony took a deep breath. “Only Fury knows. We were talking about how maybe I should slowly phase out. I’m already not heavily involved as I used to be anyways so… even less I suppose. I’ll be available for emergency case and I’ll still help in the background stuff. You know, stuff that won’t be too physically straining… maybe recruiting. There will also be a lot to deal with for finishing out the new Accords and fine-tuning all the logistics and rules… the politics…”

“Alright.”

“I’ll have more time for Peter and Harley… I was thinking maybe starting some personal projects… charity works-“

The sorcerer let out a light chuckle. “You’re starting to sound like some rich housewife-“ he said teasingly.

Tony gave a mock-offended look before shifting to lie on his side once more.

“Well,” he said sarcastically. “I’ll have more time for you too. You know, when you’re not off saving the world with all your wizard things. I’ll have dinner waiting.”

He snorted. “You can’t cook.”

“Thought that counts, babe.”
Stephen laughed.

“Well- not like you were ever with me for my use in the kitchen.”

He rolled his eyes. “No. Clearly for your use in the bedroom-“

Tony frowned at him, mouth a gasp. He looked as if he was going to make some remark but then, simply gave a shrug as if a thought occurred to him. Which only made Stephen chuckle, shaking his head slightly.

“So,” The doctor leaned as well so he was half-laying on the bed, propped by couple pillows. “I suppose this means I didn’t have to join the Avengers… then again, there was nothing that said I can’t leave at any given time…”

“I was hoping you’d stay actually.”

Their eyes locked as the two turned towards each other at the same time. A frown started to appear in Stephen’s expression.

“I was hoping… with Peter still being there… I know there’s Rhodey and I trust Carol and T’Challa. But I just… would worry less if you were still there.”

Stephen raised an eyebrow, his tone steeping with fake exasperation. “So what you are asking me is… to stay in a team that I definitely did not want to be part of, that I only joined because you asked… to babysit your child-“

“Hey,” Tony retorted flatly. “We just talked about this. Commitment, remember? To Peter?” He let out a dismissive snort. “…as if you don’t already consider him your son too-”

The sorcerer rolled his eyes. Although the truth of the matter was he already made up his mind to oblige, that did not mean he would do so quietly. Especially with just how much dealing with the rogues got to him even on the best of days.
“So you managed to take advantage of me.”

Tony’s eyes snapped up, raising an eyebrow. “What now?”

Stephen continued on with a dramatic sigh. “I see how it is. So somehow you got me to commit in co-parenting with you without you so much as having to give any commitment in return… how convenient, Anthony.”

It was Tony’s turn to look exasperated. “Are you insinuating something?”

“I’m simply stating what I observe.” Stephen started to half-heartedly pick at his nails, propping his head on the other forearm.

There was silence as Stephen eventually closed his eyes pretending to rest. Tony, on the other hand, sat in the same position, motionless. The doctor had half a mind to perhaps check on the other’s expression just in case but then…

“Ask me.”

The sorcerer opened his eyes. “What?”

A rare seriousness was visible behind the large brown eyes. “Ask me what you want to ask.”

Stephen blinked several times, unsure he was really hearing the words correctly.

“I asked you last time. It’s your turn.”

Stephen continued to stare for a moment longer, his mouth slightly parted. Tony doesn’t miss the flicker in the icy gaze of something akin to innocent happiness.

“Let me give you a hint.” There was a soft smile that started to play on the billionaire’s lips. “I’ll say yes.”
“I…” A second pasted, then another. He knows the answer… so why does it still feel as though his heart will beat out of his chest as their eyes locked? “Tony… will you-“

“Yes,” he blurts out.

Stephen let out a laugh, genuine, carefree. “Seriously? Can’t even let me finish?”

“You were taking too long,” came the flat reply.

The sorcerer gave him a look. And Tony waved a hand, almost dismissively as he rolled his eyes. “Sorry. Fine, we both screwed up. …Go on then-“

Stephen shook his head as he pushed himself up once more. He knew he must have had a stupid grin plastered on his face by now.

The doctor soon reached forward, pulling them together into a kiss. Enjoying how Tony sighed into it and savoring the spark of trill he can practically taste at the tip of his tongue. It lasted what seemed like both forever and no time at all.

“Anthony Edward Stark… will you marry me?”

“Yes.”

Chapter End Notes

Okay, so a bit of a short chapter (for my standard anyways) … basically, I had this whole thing in my head but tbh lost a bit of motivation today. But still wanted to post this part at least because I haven't updated in so long :')
Lack of flashback because I was in the mood to write something simple and happy. We'll get back to that in the next chapter-

BTW with everyone who keeps saying how they want fluff - you guys do realize the times I write something all happy and fluffy, I get like half the comments/ general reaction compared to if I write a chapter filled with angst & drama. LOL I mean... in that regard, what do you think my selfish ass is going to do? I'll give you a hint: I have a history of doing a lot of shit in life just purely for reactions.

But well... I had a pretty damn shitty two weeks and was in a mood for something sweet and this chapter was long coming for the next set of plot so I guesssss *cough* tony's "retirement" won't be so simple *cough*

Anyways, hope you all enjoyed the break from the heavy plot and the fluff ♥... Do you all even remember the plot still lolololol

edit: Ahhh btw thank you for all your support in last chapter/note. I originally was going to delete that note at some point but so many wonderful things people said I wanted to keep;;; Honestly kept me from just deleting the whole damn fic when I was in a particularly foul mood last week ngl... so really appreciate it //cries ...in the end I prob would have regretted it if I did

also since the prequel fic to this is completely done I'm looking for something to start that can maybe add to this but not set on just what yet so if you have any suggestions, feel free-

EDIT 2.0: If you want some hints about the main plotline, read comments below because I ended up posting some while replying LOLOLOL
Chapter Notes

Because I love you guys... another new chapter within one week ♡

**Going a little bit back on the flashbacks...** it's going to be events leading up to Stephen's famous accident.

1) Few days ~ a week after New York Invasion - their first engagement
2) A mission in Rome involving Tony, Steve, Nat
3) The night at the hospital after Stephen's crash

& hopefully... this finally answers the questionssssssssss

BTW might be a REALLY good idea to read our sons BEFORE this chapter so you don't get confused on the dynamic...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“**Well, this is certainly going to be quite a cleanup.”**

*Tony let out a small huff, a smile already spreading across his lips without so much as a backward glance. It was a voice he recognized all too well.***

*There were sounds of crunch and soft shattering as Stephen crossed the room amongst the rubbles. Soon, strong arms wrapped around the engineer’s middle in a tight hold, lips pressing down on the nape of his neck. Tony tilted his head forward, giving the surgeon a bit more access.*

“Yeah, well, redecorating can be fun,” he said nonchalantly as he continued to stare at the blueprint laid out in front of him.

“**Avengers Towers, huh?”** Stephen read out loud. “When will they move in?”

“In about a month when this is all fixed up. I’m speeding up the process a bit since most of them decided to stay in New York and now temporarily living in god-awful SHIELD accommodations.”

*He took a large gulp of the coffee before setting the mug down at the corner. “Plus Thor should be*
back in couple weeks too. I want them to have some type of home to return to soon…”

There was a grim silence Tony takes note of but waited till the other spoke. He already made this mistake before. Stephen definitely was the type who hated being told how he is feeling or what he is thinking by another… even if it was dead on the mark.

“I admit... I’m not fond of the idea.”

The billionaire turned around with a deep breath, leaning slightly on the edge of the worktable as he faced his boyfriend with a smile. “You can move in with me too?”

The surgeon remained stoic for a moment longer. Though eventually let out a sigh as he placed his hands on the table, either side of Tony, leaning slightly in. “You want me to be okay with you living here with America’s golden boy, a literal god, another brilliant doctor you couldn’t stop talking about- must I go on?”

“And your Nat.”

Stephen gave him an exasperated look, rolling his eyes.

“You forgot Legolas by the way. Which is great because there is this running joke he’s always being forgotten so I’m going to tell him about this. And...Hey! I’m okay with you letting her sleepover at your place once in a while, Doc. A beautiful red-headed super spy with piercing green eyes? You know, the one that you even felt threatened by when we all first met-?”

He gave Tony a glare. “OKAY. Okay- I get the point. Trust. ...Right.” Stephen backed away, taking a couple steps to nowhere in particular as he ran a hand through his hair.

Tony fidgeted with the digital pen still in his hand. “You know you have nothing to worry about, right? You know I only want you... Besides we’re all technically living on different floors-”

“I’m not worried about you, Tony. I trust you.” He turned around, their eyes locking. “I just don’t trust them.”
“You trust Nat.”

“That’s because I now know she won’t jump you.”

Tony let out a scoff. “And what? You think the other ones will? Like you said, they are gods and I’m just…”


The billionaire smiled, though it didn’t quite reach his eyes. “That means nothing here, Doc.” He quickly set his gaze to the flooring. “I’m just… someone who pays for all the shiny new things. I don’t measure up to them. They are heroes. Like… real heroes.”

Stephen reached forward, fingers settling under the other’s chin to coax him to look up. “I wish you stop doing that…” Then added as an afterthought. “I also hate how they are making you feel…”

“…Sometimes I don’t even understand how I got you.” It was just barely above a whisper.

“Anthony-“

“Sorry,” he said quickly. “Forget. Delete. I’m just being dramatic. Just probably tired and too much-“

“Tony. Stop.” Stephen said it as gently as possible but that didn’t stop the genius from flinching slightly.

It’s been a thing as of late. Since Loki’s invasion, something in Tony changed a little. There was more jumpiness, anxiety, and nervousness… Of course, the whole city was sort of going through a sort of PTSD. No one can blame them after all that happened, all they have seen… But for some reason, Stephen had not expected that from Tony.

He always saw Tony as strong. Too strong. Someone who had always been the one to shoulder the burden and made it look effortless. Perhaps he should not have forgotten, Tony was human too.
The doctor tugged at the other’s hips, flushing their bodies together as their lips locked. It was gentle, slow-paced, languidly enjoying each other’s warmth. Tony automatically relaxed, the tension starting to slip away as he closed his eyes.

When they parted, a smirk formed on the brunette. “You know… if you are so worried… you can tie something on here that sends a very clear signal I’m taken-“ Tony lifted his left hand to the other’s eye level, wiggling the ring finger teasingly.

That… stunned Stephen for a split second.

He confessed it wasn’t as if the thought never occurred to him before. There was no harm in indulging in a little daydream once in a while. But he had always assumed that Tony would never be willing to go for such commitment. This whole monogamous relationship thing was a miracle for the billionaire as it was.

Perhaps it was the odd look in Stephen’s expression, Tony’s playful gaze shattered in an instant. “I- damn I didn’t- It was more of a joke. Bad joke- I just thought it would be…nevermind.”

“It would be what?”

Tony ruffled his hair as he set his sights to the far end of the room. “I don’t know- Something you might be interested in? I mean… let’s be real here, babe, you can be incredibly possessive at times. I thought the idea of tying the knot, claiming someone as your’s… might be right up your alley.”

“It… admittedly is.” Stephen had gotten a hold of the other’s hand in his, removing them from the brown locks. The surgeon absentminded started to play with the area around Tony’s ring finger. Feeling the shiver that ran throughout the body of the smaller male as he held him still.

The doctor let out a soft laughter. “So… are you… what? Asking me to ask you… to marry me?”

“No.” That surprisingly sounded a lot more confident this time.

The next second, Tony gave light push making Stephen take a step back. He watched with curiosity as his boyfriend quickly strode across the room, crouched next to the fireplace, dug around
underneath. Soon, Tony pulled out a small box from the tiny space between the furniture and the
flooring.

He frowned, though amused, as the billionaire started walking back, a grin on his face.

“I’m asking you actually.” There was a pause, the smile didn’t falter but there was something
more serious that underlined the whiskey brown eyes. “… Stephen Vincent Strange… Will you
marry me?”

The doctor let out a brief laugh, joyous, effortless, with a touch of nerves that were starting to hit.
He felt his heart skip a beat as he stared into the other’s intense gaze. Distinct warmth spreading
throughout his body that felt it can melt his very soul.

“Yes.”

The next heartbeat, their bodies were intertwined once more as Tony nearly leaped into his arms.
This time the kiss was intense, passionate.

For someone who always known he can be vain and very materialistic, Stephen didn’t even bother
to glance at the ring. He currently already had what he wanted in his hands.

He soon grabbed firmly at Tony’s thighs, turning them around and lifting the other onto the table.
Tony laughed as he felt the doctor hurriedly claw at his clothes, his own legs wrapping around
Stephen’s waist.

“You know half the wall is blown out in this room-“

Stephen smirked as he stared directly into Tony’s eyes, just before he pulled away the other’s shirt
and started on the pants. “Let them stare. I’m about to let all of New York know who you belong
to-“

Caught up in the heat of the moment, they both did not hear the soft ding of the elevator before it
opened.
“Stark...?”

That was a voice Stephen did not recognize.

“Cap?”

Tony looked up hastily, his eyes locking with Steve Rogers who stood frozen just outside the elevator doors.

There were exactly two seconds of the blonde trying to comprehend the scene in front of him before... “OH GOD-“

Stephen quickly reached for his blazer that he tossed aside earlier, throwing it over Tony’s bare shoulder, covering the other’s body before turning around. Though by then the Captain had his back turned, seemingly trying to press the elevator button at a rapid pace.

“I- I am so SO sorry! I didn’t- I didn’t know you had company-“

Tony chuckled as he shook his head. “Rogers, it’s okay,” he called out. “Just knock next time.”

“Y-YOU CALLED ME HERE!”

Oh, Stephen can literally hear the blushing in that tone. Even completely turned, he can see the man’s ears have gone completely red. The doctor let out a quiet huff of laughter, very much entertained at the idea of Captain America being flustered out of his mind.

“Oh RIGHT- ...blueprint-“ It just occurred to Tony he texted Steve to come see the plans. Moments before he was distracted by Stephen’s impromptu visit that completely strayed his attention.

“Yes, the damn blueprint, Stark!”

“Language, Captain,” he teased.
The elevator’s door finally opened and Steve tripped on his way in.

“SORRY!” Tony called out, though couldn’t stop grinning. “I really am!”

“NO, YOU’RE NOT!” The blonde had a hand to his temple, perhaps to hide his own flushed face or to block his view. He seemed very intent on keeping his gaze to the ground. “I—I’ll just come back later—“

The elevator clicked shut and Stephen turned back towards his boyfriend… no, fiancé, with an exasperated laugh, shaking his head slightly. “So… that’s Captain America…”

“See- nothing to worry about,” Tony replied as he once again wrapped his arms around the other’s neck. “I’m not into blondes—“

Stephen raised an eyebrow. “You’re very into blondes. That’s your usual type. Fair-haired, blue eyes. I was the weird exception.”

The billionaire shrugged. “Maybe my taste changed.”

Stephen gave him a look.

“No seriously!” Tony said with faux, but thoroughly convincing, innocence. “You would think between the shiny golden locks and baby blue-eyed demi-god and my childhood hero I wouldn’t know where else to look during the Invasion but you should have seen Thor’s brother. Tall, dark, handsome. I offered him a drink actually—“

“I’m seriously reconsidering that proposal, Anthony.”

“I’M KIDDING!” The brunette let out a nervous laugh before draping his arms around the doctor once more. “Here, let me make it up to you—“ He pulls Stephen towards him, claiming the other’s lips firmly, his hands traveling downwards to the belt.
“So,” the surgeon said in between kisses. “under the fireplace-“

Tony pulled back a bit clearing his throat. “Yeah well… remember all your short jokes at me? Reversed. Figured you probably would see it if it… was… that low-“

Stephen laughed.

“Peter?” the doctor gave a firm knocking, waited, then slowly pushed the door open.

The room was pitch dark as he entered carefully. Peter clearly still sleeping, bundled up in thick blankets. He knelt down next to the foot of the bed, a hand gently on the shoulder of the child giving a light shake. “Peter, breakfast is almost ready…”

This was one of the few days out of the week he or Tony went out of their way to wake up the boy. Most of the time they did not even enter the room unless given permission. But Peter had insisted on regular Sunday breakfast together and last time they had let the teen sleep thinking they were being kind… they were given cold shoulder for the rest of the week.

But before he could say another word, something… or someone… shot up from the other side of the bed.

Stephen grabbed a hold of Peter by the collar of his pajama, giving a harsh pull back, basically throwing the teen behind him. The spiderling certainly woke up as he hit the ground in a harsh thud and a groan.

But Stephen only stood to his feet, conjuring up a shield as he faced the unknown form… till he realized…

“…Harley?”

Harley, who now was rubbing his eyes, turned towards the sorcerer with a frown. His messy hair covered much of his face. “Why are you being so fucking loud?”
Stephen had a definite exasperated look but deactivated his magic none-the-less. “Why…? When did you get here?”

Peter let out yet another groan as he tried to lift himself up.

The doctor spun around, hastily helping the teen. “Sorry- Are you alright?” he muttered.

“I’m fine- Just… not a fun way to wake up, Doctor Dad-“

Harley let out a snort before looking down at his makeshift bed on the floor, as if contemplating on going back to sleep.

Now that Stephen was getting a better look at the situation, it seemed as though Harley had claimed a spot on the floor to sleep in. A spare comforter, pillow, blanket, laid on the ground in the space between Peter’s bed and the opposite wall. Why the teen didn’t just go use one of the many spare guest rooms when he had full access to FRIDAY’s security system was still a mystery.

“Does Tony know you are here?”

“Nope.”

Stephen paused. “…Shouldn’t you let him know?”

“I tried to.”

“He got here Friday night,” said Peter half-heartedly as he crawled himself back onto his bed, plopping down with a grunt.

The doctor continued to look back and forth between the two teens with a frown. Realizing the sorcerer would not drop the subject, Harley rolled his eyes.
“Pete, cover your ears.”

Peter looked up at the blonde with a frown. “Why?”

Harley glared. “Because I said so.”

“Just do it, Peter.” Stephen added sternly before the spiderling can make another retort.

With a dramatic sigh, Peter plugged his ears tightly with his fingers.

That snapped both Harley and Stephen back to glaring at each other.

“I got here Friday night,” Harley said slowly as if trying to make some emphasis.

Stephen crossed his arms. “It’s Sunday morning. You were here two days without letting us know?”

“I tried,” the teen hissed. “Do you remember what you were doing Friday night? Or whom?”

That… snapped Stephen’s memory. He closed his eyes with a slight grimace as he pinched the bridge of his nose.

Stephen, himself, had arrived back at the compound Friday early evening. After so much time apart, he and Tony fell into bed almost immediately, and as usual, the several rounds of sex lasted well into the night.

Then the mid-morning came and… the proposal… Well, technically he supposed it wasn’t exactly “the” proposal considering this was their second time run at this. But none-the-less, after that Stephen didn’t exactly let Tony out of his sight.

Harley sighed. “And seriously? You both didn’t even leave the room yesterday. And I know what you two would be doing all day locked in a room—“
“I-I get the point!” he snapped. Stephen hated to admit but his voice stuttered. A habit he hasn’t done since god knows when. The doctor tried to take few deep breath hoping to regain his composure. “…Why didn’t you take one of the guest rooms? You could at least have had a bed…”

Harley just waved a hand dismissively. “I’m not used to having so much space.”

There was an awkward pause as the doctor tried to not read too much into those words. He knew that tone, one that screamed not to ask further questions.

“Can I stop this now? Please? I want breakfast-” whined the other teen.

Their attention turned back to Peter and Stephen gave a nod and half-hearted wave for the boy to relax.

“Here… let’s all just go eat- Tony must be waiting…” Then with another sigh, the sorcerer straightened up, motioning for the two teens to do the same.

“Wait-“

Stephen turned his attention back to Harley once more but despite calling out, the kid now seemed intent on not meeting his eyes. The doctor looked towards Peter only for him to purse his lips shut, looking quickly away as well.

“…What’s going on?”

That was when Harley reached over, flicking on a light switch. As the room splashed with warm light, now Stephen saw, very clearly, a visible bruise on Harley’s left eye, split lip, and dozen of other smaller cuts.

He simply stared, expressionless.

“I had an accident.”
“Accident...” he repeated flatly.

“I was distracted. On my phone. Collided with a bicyclist and landed badly on the pavement.”

Stephen didn’t speak any further. He had to give where credit was due, however, Harley delivered the lie quite convincingly. Not many fully understood the concept of lying well. Not too much detail but not too little, reasonably convincing excuse, confident tone but not too much to the point of defensiveness… If he didn’t know any better he may have just believed the teen.

“I don’t want Tony to worry… I know… you can help- …magic… cover, heal, whatever-“

“You want me to lie to Tony… about your well being. You, his kid,” the sorcerer’s voice was surprisingly even still.

Harley rolled his eyes. “Come on, he’s not going to do anything to you even if he does find out- We all know he forgives you for just about everything.“

Stephen narrowed his eyes. This child clearly underestimated Tony’s protective streak. Stephen, however, did not have a death wish. “Oh, he will kick me to the curve. This is different. You two are his priority before I, do you understand?”

He heard Peter gulp off to the side, clearly tensing up now.

The blonde seemed to not know what else to do next, he continued to glare at a corner of the room, hands reaching up to roughly ruffle his own hair in frustration.

“Peter…” The doctor turned towards the younger teen. “Go downstairs. Tell Tony we’ll be there in a minute. Don’t tell him… about this… yet.”

Peter, wide-eyed, nodded before darting out from the bed and out the door.

They remained still for another minute, then two. Harley seemed to be at a loss for words, for once,
but Stephen knew better than to think it was due to him. It was clear in many ways that the teen hardly cared much for most people’s opinion… much less his father’s boyfriend he didn’t fully approve of still.

Stephen let out a sigh, running a hand over his face, pacing slightly as he thought.

“I’ll just leave,” Harley said coldly as he stood to his feet. He quickly grabbed for a bag nearby, shoving a handful of books that littered around.

“Hey!” Stephen reached for the kid’s shoulder but Harley twisted away sharply.

“Look, I get it, okay?” he said throwing up his arms before letting it drop to his sides. “You don’t want to stick your neck out. I wouldn’t either. …I’ll just come back in couple weeks when this-“ He motioned to his face. “looks a bit better.”

“I’m not going to let you leave here after seeing that,” the sorcerer stated in exasperation. A definite frown settled on his face.

After a moment, he took a deep breathe, stepping closer to the teen. He waved a hand near the boy’s face, a green glow emitting from his fingers. In split seconds, the wounds started to heal at a rapid rate.

“Thanks,” Harley muttered, realizing the pain was completely gone now.

“I’m not condoning you to lie to him,” he said firmly. “It was simply unnecessary in having you be in pain any longer… nor for him to break his heart seeing the actual wounds… You still will tell him. Today. Or I will.”

The teen let out a huff before slightly nodding, though grudgingly. Then, he started towards the door as well.

“That anger…”

Harley stopped dead in his tracks.
“Control it. If not for yourself, for everyone around you. You think that pain was bad? It’s nothing compared to what those who care about you will have to endure because of you… who will bleed every time they see you bleed.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.“

“I know wounds from a fistfight when I see one.”

The sharp heels clicked softly as she strode over to an open table. The waiter quickly pulled the seat for her and she sat down gracefully.

“What would you like to drink? The waiter asked.

A red wine, please. Nero d’Avola. the redhead replied in well-versed Italian. She crossed her legs, the hem of her dress rising just a little.

“Oh, you’re drinking alone? This is… in Rome, not in the law.” It was in English but with a heavy accent.

Natasha noted the voice. The elegant long neck, accentuated by the sophisticated updo, turning ever so slightly as she set her sights. Two men in stylish suits sat at the next table, both smiling at her now.

She fixed them with an impassive stare. “Ma è legale disturbare una donna?” But it’s legal to bother a woman? It was smooth in delivery, perfect down to the last syllable.

Both looked impressed.

“Parli molto bene l’italiano.” You speak Italian very well.
“Grazie.” Thank you.

He went on with a smirk. “What are you doing tonight? I’ll show you the city.”

The other gave his friend an exasperated look. “He’ll show you the city,” he repeated mockingly. Then turned towards the redhead once more. “He’s not Roman. He’s a bumpkin.”

The corner of her lips twitches upwards. “Where are you from?”

“Naples. …It’s so beautiful. Like you.”

Natasha’s lips form a small smirk as she reached for a cigarette, putting it to her lips while searching for a lighter. As if on cue, one of the men holds out a lighter for her. She leans slightly, taking the light. A short inhale and she blows out the smoke in a long drawl, the cigarette between her two fingers in a delicate hold. “Grazie.”

“If I were that cigarette in your mouth, I would die of happiness.”

She raises an eyebrow, giving one unimpressed stare.

But before they can form any more thoughts, they noticed that her attention was led strayed. Following her gaze, it landed on a man with dark wind swiped hair, sunglasses even at this hour, walking towards their direction dressed in an expensive three-piece suit.

Natasha glanced slightly away as the man easily sat at the next table. Other side of the two Italian’s, divided by her table in the middle.

The newcomer took off his sunglasses as he settled, “Whiskey, neat.” He called out to a waiter before fixing his gaze towards the redhead.

She stared back, a sly smile playing on her lips.
“May I join you?” Tony asked with a smirk.

“Yankee. Hey, go home!” blurted out one of the men from the opposite side. But before he can go on his friend muttered, “He’s an American billionaire.”

She tried her best to suppress a laugh before glancing towards the two Italians.

“Vecchio… e brutto,” He’s old... and ugly. One said with a smirk to her, vaguely gesturing to Tony.

The genius let out a snort but didn’t bother to make a retort. Natasha turned her attention to him once more, their eyes locking.

A smile played on Tony’s lips, a look of impressive sincerity visible in those expressive brown eyes. “I’m only in Rome for one night.” He said in a low tone. Confidence etched in them. “I won’t have my heart broken.”

Natasha smiled, amused, playing along silently.

Behind her, the two men let out a sigh, throwing up their hands in exasperation as they muttered to one another. But they soon became completely silent as Tony stood to his feet swiftly, pulling out the seat next to Natasha’s at her table, sitting down casually.

The waiter arrived just in time, setting a glass in front of the billionaire.

“Room 616,” Tony said to the waiter.

She gave him a very suggestive look. “That’s right near my room.”

Having no choice but to admit defeat, the two men huffed, muttered, then stood to their feet.

“Good Night, Signorina,” one said dejectedly in a mock bow as they both walked away.
The two Avengers sat quietly for another minute then Tony raised his glass in a mock toast, “To whatever they were saying—“

“You know exactly what they were saying, Tony,” Natasha retorted with a smirk. “...How you were ugly... and old.”

Tony let out a small laugh, taking a swig of his drink. “Does that bother you?” he said playfully, raising a brow.

The redhead gives him a teasing glance, looking sarcastically offended. “You think because of the way I’m dressed that I’m shallow?”

Tony doesn’t miss a beat. “I was just hoping you were easy.”

A moment and the two broke into soft laughter.

“Nice dress though,” he said after they settled once more. “You look amazing by the way.”

The redhead gave the engineer a look, taking a sip of her wine. “Don’t let Stephen hear you say that. I don’t want to deal with any more of his passive-aggressiveness.”

“Stephen? Passive-aggressive? No... he’s just outright aggressive.” Tony said with exaggerated seriousness. They exchange a knowing smile before he went on. “...I thought you turned in for the night, Red. If you wanted a drink you could have called me up. Unless you really were trying to land a lay but... come on, they were beneath you-”

Natasha smiled, “I was just trying to blend in. I thought you would still be on a call with the pretty doctor.”

He snorted. “You... blending in? In that look?” A short pause. “He had a hospital emergency. The call got cut short. Plus we’re probably heading back tomorrow anyway. This mission was a bust.”
“Well,” she said as she leaned back a little. “Sit here for a bit then. You’re a pretty good deterrent I realized.”

There was a comfortable silence between them as each enjoyed their drink and the open air. Though quite late into the evening, there seems to be no shortage of customers at the outdoor bar. Soft sounds of music filling the calm air, the laughter and chatter of pedestrians mixing with soft clutter of glass and silverware.

Eventually, however, she glanced towards her teammate only to realize the billionaire’s attention was fixed on a family by the large fountain at a good distance. Two small boys were tossing coins into the water while the parents watched.

“Having second thoughts?”

Tony snapped back towards her. “What?”

“I saw the ring.”

“Oh… Did you-“

“The team doesn’t know. Nor does SHIELD. But you should inform them soon if you two are serious about it,” she replied with a small smile. For some reason, he believes her. “He doesn’t want kids still, does he?”

“Guess not,” Tony replied nonchalantly.

“Do you want kids?”

“No.”

She gives him a look. “You sure?”

Tony looked down at his drink, swirling his glass absentmindedly. “I don’t know… But what I do
know is... I want him.”

There was a pause before she reached out, a hand to near his, palms up. Quietly, he sets the glass down, placing his hand over hers. They smiled.

“Hey-“

They both looked up quickly, eyes falling onto a very familiar blonde. Tony’s smile slipped slightly as he realized an odd look on Steve’s expression.

“Capsicle.”

Natasha side-eyed between the two subtly.

“I...” Steve paced a little, eyes darting about before meeting their’s. A frown appeared on his face as his sight then lands on their interlocked fingers. “Are you two...”

“No,” they both said in unison, separating in an instant.

“Oh. Uh...” Steve cleared his voice. The small crease between his brows disappearing. “We’re leaving in the AMs back to New York. Just got the call. Seems it may have been a false alert here and Fury wants us back ASAP.”

Tony stared at the Captain for another couple seconds, before taking a quick glance to Natasha’s direction. Gears turning rapidly.

“Great,” he blurted out after a while with his trademark smirk. He gulped down the rest of his drink in one go and stood to his feet in a hurry. “I’ll turn in for the night then. Old man needs his rest. You two kids have fun-“

Steve briefly looked confused, mouth opening to form words without anything coming out.

“W-wait what?” he said eventually but Tony already gave him a firm pat on the shoulder and left.
All the while, giving Natasha a teasing smirk.

Steve stood there frozen. Watched as Tony walked away then quickly turned towards Natasha. “I-...“

Natasha gave him a knowing look. “Steve. Sit down.”

The Captain gaped at her, eyes wide. “I- he-... I’m sorry I don’t-“

She rolled her eyes. “I know you don’t like me that way, Steve. Stop freaking out and sit down.”

He swallowed, hard. Still looking a bit flustered as he took a seat opposite her’s.

“He’s way off, I swear-“ the blonde started but was quickly cut off.

“You like him.”

“What? Wait-!“

“Don’t worry, it’s kind of cute.” She gave him a half-hearted shrug.

Steve stiffened in an instant.

“The whole team knows you have a crush on him, Cap. Well everyone except Tony it seems like-“

“I... how-“

Natasha gave an exasperated huff. “Steve, you give him the puppy-dog eye every time he walks into the room. You two bicker every other day but once he walks away upset, you look like someone took a stab at you in the guts. You always jump in when Fury yells at him about anything. You make every excuse in the book for him to spend time with you. I refuse to believe you
really managed to break your phone five times in two weeks. ...You look like a kicked puppy whenever he leaves to spend time with Stephen...”

“I...” He shook his head. “I’m...not...”

Natasha sighed as she leaned in a little. “But that’s... all it has to be, Steve. You do understand that, right Cap?”

“I know,” he said a little too quickly.

“The world needs the Avengers. Iron Man is good for the team... if something happens to jeopardize-“

“I know!” Steve’s gaze darted up, a bit taken aback himself at his own outburst. “I... I’m sorry-“

She just nodded without a word.

He looked away, running a hand through his hair nervously. “...I think... I met him. Tony’s boyfriend... well not exactly met-“

“Did you walk in on them? Don’t worry I did that plenty of times. You’ll get used to it.”

Steve chokes on air.

“You’re... dropping out...”

“No... just taking a year off.”

“Why?... just... WHY.”
Peter glanced at Stephen from the opposite side of the table but the sorcerer just shook his head subtly, silently telling the teen to stay quiet and not get involved.

“Harley, I don’t ask a lot from you. I let you do whatever the fuck you goddamn want 99% of the time. I support you in whatever you want to do-“

“Then support me now!”

“I asked for one thing. ONE thing! I just wanted you to finish your education!”

“Oh come on! You brazenly partied your way through college and grad school!”

“I STILL GOT MY DEGREE! In fact, I don’t flaunt it like someone here, but I have three doctorates. I don’t care what you do with the extra time, kid. You’re smart enough. You won’t even have to put in that many hours. Just get the damn paper!”

“Tony…” Stephen started gently. “It’s just a year-“

“Yeah, why are you being so dramatic about this?!“ Harley cuts him off. Then after a moment of silence...“It’s about the will isn’t it?”

That made everyone pause. Both Stephen and Peter looking up while Tony appeared rather stunned.

Harley ruffled his own hair with a sigh. “I-… ran across the paperwork in the lab-“

“You mean you snooped around my stuff-“

“I…” A faint flush came upon his face. “I had a thing, okay?” he said speaking very fast now while making a quick gesture at Peter’s direction. “I really thought maybe you’re leaving everything to him.”
Peter spat out his orange juice but the other teen went on without a care.

“I don’t actually care about the stuff just wanted to know if I just wasn’t in the picture anymore… turns out I’m your successor for SI.”

“What does that have to do with…?” Of course, Stephen suspected something like this to already be in the works. Considering how many near-death experience Tony has had in the past several years, he must have kept up a contingency plan. After all, even with Pepper being the current CEO and having a good amount of control, she did not technically own the majority share of the company. That always remained in the Stark family. And considering Tony didn’t have any biological heirs...

“There is a list of conditions I have to meet to take over Stark Industries,” the boy muttered in answer.

Tony started to sit himself back down, a grimace as he put a hand over his face. “It’s… it’s basic things. Like college education, no felony charge… I know… it’s still not fair.” He let out a heavy sigh. “If you were related to me by blood, the board wouldn’t have even dared… Pepper and I are still fighting it but just… Harley- please…”

“Okay so… I get it. I do. But I have a plan.” Harley stared back in earnest. With a pleasant smile, he clicked threw his phone, pulling out an email, setting it down on the table in front of the engineer. “While I take a year off, I won’t be wasting time. I’ll work. Look, I passed all the entrance tests for working at Stark Industries. Only missed two questions but I really think I’m right actually- I’ll make a case for it later. Anyways- In fact, I was chosen for all the highest internships while competing with people with at least five more years of experience.”

“What-” Tony’s eyes snapped up.

“Well… of course I forged my name so I won’t get flagged. Did I mention I'm brilliant enough your background checking people couldn't figure out I forged it? But just wanted to prove a point that I can… I can qualify on my own and it’s not some special favoritism-“

A frown came upon the brunette’s face, trying to follow where this was going.

“I just… need you to get me an internship with Pepper instead. A job as her assistant or something… I’ll tail her for business and logistic things and I’ll work with you for the
development side. After that, I’ll better know what to pursue in terms of education so I won’t waste time throwing myself at the unnecessary thing.”

Stephen side-eyed Tony. The kid actually thought this out. Even he was impressed.

Tony seemed taken aback as well. But the sorcerer can tell, and by now, he was sure Harley did too… there was something else there.

“Kid… I understand. You’re making sense but…” Tony’s eyes shift, lowering his gaze as he leaned his chin on the palm of his hand. “Just… what if-…”

“It’s just a year,” Harley said, almost pleadingly.

“A lot can happen in a year.”

The teen let out a huff. “I know! That’s why I want to be here! Every god damn time you go out there and nearly get yourself killed I think about how all we do is basically trade texts every ten days!”

That makes Tony hesitate for a brief moment. “I-… Things can happen in a blink of an eye, kid. I can’t always be here to protect you. The sooner you get your own ground where the board can’t even touch you-”

Harley threw his hand up before letting it drop. He gazed at the ceiling, then around the room… then… “It’s not just going to be you on your own anymore. Right?”

Stephen held his breath, trying not to jump to conclusion…

“If you’re so worried about the what if-… by law, he’ll…” he nodded towards Stephen. “have a say in your asset if you can’t-”

“Wait…” Peter perked up from his seat, finally speaking up. “What… is going on…?”
Stephen glanced away and Tony became a bit tongue-tied. They hadn’t really worked out how to tell the two teens but this definitely was not it.

“Well… we… uh…”

Harley beat them to it. “They are getting married, Pete.”

Peter visibly appeared surprised, turning back towards Stephen and Tony, eyes-wide but with a grin.

Tony groaned. “How the hell-“

Harley simply rolled his eyes, leaning back while crossing his arms. “I’m not stupid, you know. Come on, I refused to believe you guys would be cooped up in a room all weekend… for you to not be in the lab once… unless something happened. Besides…” He nodded towards Stephen, who froze from sudden attention on him. “He wouldn’t have pulled the father act earlier unless something secured his position-“

But the teen quickly closed his mouth, exchanging a look with the sorcerer as he realized his slip. The cockiness slipping in a matter of seconds as he muttered a curse.

Tony frowned at his fiancé. “What happened earlier…?”

When no answer came, his gaze fell on Harley, who only glanced up for a split second before looking away, then to Peter, who suddenly seemed very interested in his pancakes once more. Getting impatient, Tony sighed before setting down his fork forcefully with a loud clunk. He savored the way all three of them flinched in unison.

“Stephen,” he said warningly.

“Yes, dear-“ the doctor replied immediately with a sweet smile.

Tony raised an eyebrow. “You do realize that only works on you when it’s me.”
Stephen clicked his tongue. Smile disappearing immediately as he looked away again. “Worth a try-“

“One of you, talk before I lose it.”

Harley gave Stephen one last pleading look that the sorcerer was completely convinced he learned from Tony. He returned it with a solid glare and the teen simply sighed.

The blonde cleared his throat. “I got into an… accident.”

Tony stared at the teen, expression unusually serious. The doctor fixated on his food, half-heartedly thinking someone was definitely getting murdered today and he really rather it not be him.

Recognizing the silence, Harley elaborated hesitantly. “It was… it looked… bad… bruises and cuts… Strange healed it for me earlier… I didn’t… want to worry… you…”

“Accident?”

The lack of answer from the teen was already very telling.

Peter choked, coughing loudly excusing himself from the table in a rush. Obviously, done on purpose. Stephen rolled his eyes silently wondering why he didn’t think of that sooner…

“You’re grounded,” Tony’s voice was rising quite rapidly, a particular edge forming. “You’re fucking grounded! …For- till never!”

Harley gives him a look of pure indignation. “For till never…?”

“YES!”

The teen turned to Stephen with exasperation but the doctor didn’t even look up. “You heard your
father. …For till never.”

Harley let out a sigh, rolling his eyes. “…So… but this means I can stay, right?”

“YOU LITTLE SH-“

“Agent Romanoff, an incoming call from Director Fury. It’s urgent.”

“Little busy right now-“ She jumped, landing on the roof of the next building.

“It’s urgent.”

“Alright,“ Natasha threw her weight behind a wall, the sounds of bullets echoing on the other side. “Patch it through.”

“Agent Romanoff. Strange has been in an accident-“

She stilled. “…How bad-“

“His car drove off the cliff. Emergency surgery. Doesn’t look good. This mission was a set up to get you and Stark away-“

Tony.

“Does Pepper know?”

“Most likely. The hospital would have called-“
“I need to call you back.” She hung up quickly, switching intercoms. “Tony?”

There was no answer. She looks around for any sign of the flashy armor of red and gold. “I NEED EYES ON TONY!”

“Nat?” It was the Captain’s voice.

“Cap, find Tony! NOW!”

Then they see it. The Iron Man armor crashing through the window of a nearby building, falling five-six story down, hitting the ground with a thud.

“Dammit-“ She jumps.

............

Natasha stared… stared and stared till she wasn’t sure if she was actually seeing anything anymore. There was ringing in her ear she couldn’t quite shake off… getting louder and louder.

“Nat.”

She turned quickly, eyes landing on her best friend. She gave her usual stoic smile.

Clint stares in the same direction. Tony was crying… actually crying, near hysterically, as Steve held most of his weight up.

“They were going to get married.”

That snaps his attention to her once more. “…It's not your fault.”

“I told him I’d keep the doctor safe. It was my job.”
“And you told the same to Strange about Tony. Nat... We can’t... always win. It’s part of the job. It’s a reality.”

“I know.” She let out a scoff. “…I shouldn’t get attached.”

Clint shrugged. “I wouldn’t say that…”

The redhead frowned.

“Ever wondered why Fury assigned you to them?” he said almost nonchalantly. Natasha knew better than to get offended. Clint always had that tone even when he was being serious. They all had their own ways to cope. “Maybe he wasn’t just testing Tony... He needed to see if you could get attached. To be in a team.”

“How’s that supposed to make any of this better?” she replied flatly.

“It doesn’t.” He let out another sigh. “I’ll go debrief about what happened in the mission. You guys stay here. Bruce already contacted Jane Foster… tried to see if we could somehow reach Thor. Maybe he’ll know some Asgardian… medicine or… something-”

She nodded.

One more squeeze on her shoulder, then he started down the hall.

A second pasted... a minute... then an hour. Truthfully, she wasn’t sure. But Tony looked about the same, crying still... but perhaps that was not the best indication of time. She leaned against the wall, still staring, watching.

“Agent Romanoff.”

She blinked fast, trying to clear her vision. “Fury.”
Fury took a few additional steps forward until he was standing next to her. “We need to talk.”

“They are saying he’ll make it. But barely.”

“Not about Strange. We’ll get to that but…” He nodded towards the two co-leaders of Avengers.

She followed his gaze, now noting that Tony had fallen silent finally, though probably lost his voice rather than actually calming down. The brunette was still resting his head on Steve’s shoulder.

“They seem closer.”

Natasha paused for a second. “They had to be. They've been in the front line together for almost a year.”

“We both know that's not what I meant,” He gives her a look.

She remained silent.

There was a sigh as he walked towards a chair, sitting down. “How much do you know about project TAHITI.”

“Terrestrial Alien Host Integrative Tissue I. Level 9 project designed to revive a fallen Avengers. Shut down when the subjects started losing their minds.”

“Well… we’re completely shutting it down now… for good.”

She straightened up, a frown coming upon her expression. “What do you mean… why was it even revived…? Who… did you test it on?”

“Phil Coulson.”
There was a chilling silence that followed. Natasha turned around sharply, pacing. “What happened-?”

“We’re still handling the situation. But what you need to know is… it’s being shut down. For good.”

“What does that have to do with this?” her voice remained remarkably blank given the circumstances. “Even if it worked, SHIELD wouldn’t have wasted it on Stephen Strange.”

Fury leaned back against the wall. “We both know who that contingency plan was ultimately designed for.”

There was a pause before…

"Captain America."

“So now… we need a new backup plan.”

She let out a short laugh, empty and detached. “Clint… he actually thought you sent me to them so I’ll learn attachment-"

“I did. Originally. … Stark and Strange are intense. They are the type of people that naturally draws out emotions from others. Whether it’s love, hate, anger, sorrow, loyalty…”

She turned back at him abruptly, “Then why now?”

The Director stood to his feet, hands coming to rest on his hips as he slowly walked towards the agent with a heavy sigh.

“Stark… is many things… He’s obsessive, emotional, sometimes borderline unstable… But unlike Strange, his problem was never that he cared too little, it’s that he cared too much. Someone that extreme, that intelligent, but still oddly moral, it’s rare. He’s the type who will do anything to save the one he loves. And he can do… a lot. For now, that focus has been on the doctor. What if, that focus can be re-directed?”
“You…” She spoke slowly, trying to comprehend herself. “You want him to be with Steve… so that he’ll be a martyr if…”

“Romanoff. Tony Stark has always been meant to be a martyr. At least this way, it will be a worthier cause. ...It would also help him to focus a bit more on the Avengers team rather than his attention straying unnecessarily elsewhere.”

She could feel the heartbeat in her ears. She had to try to remember to breathe.

“How are you so sure that he will…” Her mind was racing a mile a minute. Parts of this weren’t making any sense. Nick Fury knew Howard Stark, to plan for his son’s… “You said before how important Tony is. You don’t even actually dislike him as much as Tony thinks you do-”

For a split second, he withdrew eye contact, a thin smile coming on his lips as he visibly swallowed.

Natasha took a step forward. “What are you not saying?”

There was a silence that washed over. A quiet only interrupted by footsteps and equipment being moved far away.

“Before… A week prior to Thor’s crazy psycho brother arriving and all hell broke loose... there was a small malfunction involving the Tesseract during a test. I got hit with an energy wave. Flatlined dead for over a minute. But what I saw was more than just one minute.”

He sighed as he paced. “I saw flashes of what seemed to be alternate realities. I admit, I only saw bits and pieces…” he let out a scoff. “Maybe because I’m just human. Couldn’t handle the energy." he let out a short laugh. "...But what I saw of worlds without Captain America. When he had fallen. Trust me, one life is a very small price to pay-“

Natasha continued to stare, mouth slightly a gap, questioning.

He gives her a look. “Considering the things we saw, does this really seem far fetched?”
When their eyes meet next, her mouth felt incredibly dry, her voice hoarse. “Did… Tony… in other worlds-“

“Most of the time, yes.”

“For Steve?”

“Yes… Without hesitation.”

“Were there times he didn’t?”

“Yes.”

But she already knew the answer. It comes out in a whisper, “…When he’s in love with Stephen Strange.” A whisper, more to herself.

After several seconds, she walks to the nearest wall, leaning and sliding down to a sitting position. A hand coming up to her temple. She can feel the massive headache forming. “We’re ruining… their lives. We’re potentially messing with fate-”

“Even without the Captain in the picture… Strange will not recover from this. Not really. As of now, he just became Stark’s greatest weakness. A very public weakness. In this line of work… one day, Stark will undoubtedly die protecting the doctor. And what a waste that would be…”

There was a short pause before Fury went on. “No one can know about this, Agent Romanoff. Not Barton, not the team… certainly not the Captain.” he let out a harsh sigh. “We make the hard decisions, so other people don’t have to.”

They walked silently down the corridor, their footsteps echoing softly. Tony was dressed in one of his dark grey three-piece suits, fidgeting to re-adjust his cufflinks, Stephen in his full sorcerer robes.
Surprisingly, at least to Tony, Stephen seemed very calm, composed as ever. But as if sensing his nerves, the corner of the sorcerer’s cloak wrapped around Tony’s shoulder. The engineer smiled, giving the red fabric a soft stroke.

As they neared the double doors, they both came to a stop. A silence, then Tony reached for the handle.

“Ready?”

Stephen smiled.

Tony let out a small huff. “…You sure about this?”

“Are you?”

There was a pause. “…You remember what it was like? You won’t be able to get a moment of peace… the press… the questions… the stares…”

Stephen let out a low chuckle. “Well, now if I get irritated I’ll just magic myself away.”

Tony shook his head with a small smile.

“It’ll be fine, Tony.”

That made him glance up, eyes meeting the sorcerer’s piercing gaze.

“It was a small price to pay… hell, maybe I even enjoyed the attention back then.” The doctor threaded his fingers in the other’s hair, giving it a light stroke. “After Thanos the existences of sorcerers are not exactly a secret. I already had a talk with Wong about the details… The public already knows the Sorcerer Supreme exists within the Avengers…”
“It’s just… this is a different type of scrutiny-“

“I know.”

“It seemed like your life was finally more peaceful… away from me.”

“Would you like for this to stay in the quiet?”

Tony looks at him directly in the eyes. “I want what you want.”

There was a pause. Then the sorcerer leaned down to claim the other’s lips in a brief, chaste kiss. “I want to be part of your life. In every way. I can finally do that… if you let me.”

Tony smiled, sincere and honest. “Okay.”

Another silent exchange of a look, Tony pulled the door open.

The sudden noise of a crowd filled the air as they yelled for his attention. Cameras flashed, there was spew of questions being thrown as the pair made their way to the center podium of the pressroom.

But as soon as the billionaire spoke, they all fell quiet. “As you may already be aware who this is next to me… Doctor Strange, Sorcerer Supreme… who fought by my side and played a key role during the battle with Thanos, a hero… and recent addition to Avenger’s team. There have undoubtedly been speculations in regards to his past or association to the other popular name of ‘Doctor Stephen Vincent Strange’, who appeared frequently in the press over a decade ago… many time, alongside mine.” He paused, taking a quick glance towards his right at Stephen’s direction. “I’m confirming now that he is the same person. And today, we are announcing our engagement-“

The muttering soon became shouts as questions were being yelled from left and right. Many stood to their feet, reaching over as far as they can. The flashes of cameras nearly blinding them as the reporters and cameraman pushed and shoved.

Tony still calmly went on. “No date has been set but it will be a private affair amongst family and
close friends.”

“Mr. Stark, when did you two get back together?”

“Was this a recent affair-“

“What about Captain America-“

“Doctor Strange, how did you jump from being a neurosurgeon to-“

Stephen ignores them as he stepped closer, pulling Tony in by the waist. As they share a kiss, the flashing of lights became near excessive, brightening up the room like no other times before.

As they broke apart shortly with a smile, a certain blonde reporter manages to get just a little closer, staring directly at the sorcerer. “How does it feel to be have landed arguably the most eligible bachelor of our time, some might consider you to be the luckiest man alive-“

But before Stephen could even try to make a reply, Tony lightly pushed forward, saying directly into the recorder, “Pretty damn amazing. Not even sure how I did it.”

Behind him, Stephen let out a huff of laughter and Tony’s sight lands on the far end of the room. At the back corner, slightly away from the crowd stood Pepper, Happy, Rhodes with Peter and Harley… all laughing and smiling at him.

“Captain?!“

Clint got up immediately at the shout, at Sam. “What’s going on-“

“Where’s Cap?”
“No idea. Maybe downstairs?” Hawkeye slowly stood to his feet from the couch, realizing the odd look in the other. “Hey, where’s the fire?”

Sam let out a sigh. “Turn on the news.”

Clint reached for the remote, turning on the TV quickly. “…ah shit-“

Sam paced a bit before running a hand over his face with a groan. “I’m going to find him just in case he does anything stupid-“

Clint nodded. Then stood in silence as he watched the other leave the room in a sprint. He eventually turned back towards the flat screen, a moment... then plopped onto the couch once more…the corner of his lips twitching upward as he closed his eyes.

Chapter End Notes

Honestly- not sure how I finished the next chapter this fast LOLOL I may have overdosed on coffee tho
Almost forgot to mention, the Rome flashback scene was inspired by one of my favorite TV show: Mad Men (if anyone knows LOL)

& In case anyone is curious...
this whole thing sort of started when I was reading up more on project TAHITI about 3-4 months ago. I actually am not all that into Agents of Shield BUT some of the concepts in there are quite interesting. That and... canon ref of how many times Iron Man sacrifices himself over and over again to save Cap because "Captain America is more important"? But to be fair... in comics, Cap returns the favor a bunch of times too / personally, I think they have a much deeper relationship? ...In some ways, I guess I treat the comics worlds as different alternative realities in fic world lololol

Also just sayin'... I honestly am not writing to make sure every character is forgivable, or any, quite honestly lolololol (tbh in my personal opinion, everyone is just... being human & there is no such thing as "good" human) In that sense, I’m not trying to convince you either or to like a certain character or not... since that is incredibly subjective

Edit: Btw, before everyone jumps on my throat about Fury- to clarify, he saw glimpses and flashes of things that might have been beyond his understanding and who knows, like everyone often do, saw it through glass of his perception, bias, and fear... But-
well, again, like most people do... he jumped to conclusions and felt he can do something about it, that he NEEDS to. If theoretically there are millions of possibilities and alternate Earth/life... while Stephen can handle sorting through it all as Sorcerer Supreme, Fury probably couldn't... and he DEFINITELY did not see everything or perhaps even clearly.

I mean- lol again, shitty human tendency... Isn’t hindsight an amazing thing. Ironically, yes, I purposely made it so it’s similar to what Tony did in Ultron (yes not exactly the same but same underline of human arrogance)
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

Okay soooooo...
A flashback chapter of Captain America: Winter Soldier timeline w/ everyone being somehow affected by Stephen's departure after the accident but handling it in different ways. Exploration chapter of Tony with the rogues before they were rogues

Tony is a mess, Nat’s new pastime is exasperating Steve, Steve is trying to deal with his crush on Tony, Clint just wants to get through the day… and Sam… simply wants to know the worst-kept secret in Avengers that everyone, except him, seems to already know.

+ special feature of Tony being the mother-hen of the original Avengers and coming to save their ass even after a mental breakdown

You know what will make me super happy? If people can accept that I’m not going to unnecessary character bash Cap 😌

See the end of the chapter for more notes

[Earth, April 2013]

“How many pirates?”

“Twenty-five, top mercs, led by this guy. George Batroc. Ex-DGSE, Action Division. He’s at the top of Interpol’s Red Notice. Before the French demobilized him, he had thirty-six kill missions. This guy’s got a rep for maximum casualties.”

Steve took another minute then glanced away from the monitor, readjusting his gloves.
“Hostages?”

“Mostly techs. One officer, Jasper Sitwell. They’re in the gallery.”

“What’s Sitwell doing on a launch ship? …Alright, I’m going to sweep the desk and find Batroc. Nat, you’ll kill the engines and wait for instructions. Rumlow, you sweep aft, find the hostages, get
them to the life-pods, get them out. Let’s move.”

Rumlow gave a quick nod before turning around, “STRIKE, you heard Cap. Gear up!”

Steve and Natasha headed towards the ramp, preparing for a dive.

“Secure channel seven.”

“Seven secure,” replied Natasha as she strapped on the parachute. “Did you do anything fun Saturday night?”

Captain glanced at her. “Well, all guys from my barbershop quartet are dead so… No, not really.”

“Coming up by the drop zone, Cap,” called out the pilot.

But Natasha went on in the same casual tone. “You know, if you ask Kristin out, from Statistics, She’d probably say yes.”

“That’s why I don’t ask.”

“Too busy or too scared?” then added before he can even reply. “Or too busy staring at Tony’s ass-“

Steve gave her an exasperated frown before jumping off. “TOO BUSY!”

“............

“What about the nurse that lives across the hall from you? She seemed kind of nice.”

“Secure the engine room, then find me a date,” Steve said with a sigh.
“I’m multitasking,” she replied playfully, easily keeping up with his strides. “There is always Elena from legal. She likes you. If brunette is more of your thing.”

Steve comes to an abrupt stop, turning around to face her directly. “Okay I get the point!” he said raising his voice a little.

“What point?” Natasha gave him a blank stare.

He sighed, his hands falling to his hips. “You don’t want me around Tony… in that way. Isn’t that why you’re trying to set me up with every woman that even sets afoot in my life for a split second? …You were close to Stephen Strange, you were both of their close friend. I get it. …He’s gone but you feel uncomfortable with anyone getting in-between that or Tony dating anyone new-”

“I never said that.” For the most part, her expression remained carefully passive. If the SHIELD agent was being completely honest, she wasn’t even sure why she was so fixated on this matter. Especially when technically, she supposed if she was going to do anything at all, she should be trying to get Steve and Tony together not lead Steve away.

“Okay, well-“ The Captain gave an exasperated huff, throwing a hand up before letting it fall. “You don’t want me to be insensitive and bothering Tony when he’s grieving. Maybe you just don’t like me- I don’t know?! Regardless, yes I get it. It’s inappropriate. I’m trying not to bother Tony at all with my feelings the best I can. Plus you can relax Tony clearly is not even CLOSE to being over his ex and even if he moves on, I’m not his type because EVERYONE, literally EVERYONE seems to know I like him but it goes right over his head! Or maybe he WANTS to completely ignore it- or he’s trying to let me down easy- either way, I GET IT!”

Suddenly there was a sound of gunshots. Steve turned around sharply. Lunging forward at the stray pirate, twisting the man’s arm till the gun drops the ground. He screams in pain.

Natasha blinked. “Wow. This really has been bothering you.”

Steve throws a punch at the mercenary, knocking him out instantly. Admittedly, little harder than necessary. He shoots her a glare.
“A symbol to the nation. A hero to the world. The story of Captain America is one of honor, bravery, and sacrifice…”

Steve continued walking through the exhibition. Lowering his head a little as a crowd of students passed by, his face hidden under a baseball cap.

He came to the Smithsonian from time to time to reminiscent on the past, to see the familiar faces. Though thoroughly uncomfortable initially, he eventually got used to hearing the narration of his life. At times it sort of brought him comfort. He knew the story. He knew how it ended. It was predictable, constant, safe.

Today, however, it fell on deaf ears, his mind somewhere completely else.

“How simpler the world had been back then. He knew his allies, he knew his enemies. He knew he could trust his team with his life. Knew their intentions. There weren’t so many secrets.

As he stood in front of a large photograph of Bucky, his mind strayed towards a certain redheaded teammate.

How Natasha carried out a secret mission for SHIELD, within their joint mission, right under his nose. How he would have been blind to it all if it wasn’t for his accidental intrusion when she was backing up the files. His teammates now were so much more… complicated than the Howling Commandos.

“You just can’t stop yourself from lying, can’t you?”

“I didn’t lie. Agent Romanoff had a different mission than yours.”

Soon the conversation with Fury was replaying in his head. There was a lot about that talk that made him think, reconsider, hit him over the head with the fact that the world was not like how he remembered it.
“Soldiers trust each other, that’s what makes it an army. Not a bunch of guys running around and shooting guns. …I can’t lead a mission when the people I’m leading have missions of their own.”

“It’s called compartmentalization. Nobody spills the secret because nobody knows them all.”

“Except you.”

“You’re wrong about me. I do share. I’m nice like that.”

It replayed in his mind over and over again the whole day. As he drove here, as he walked in circles at this large exhibition. But once again, it arrived at a specific end that he couldn’t stop…

“This is Project Insight. Three generation Helicarriers synced to a network of targeting satellites. Once we get them in the air they never need to come down. Continuous suborbital flight courtesy of our new repulsor engines.”

“Stark?”

“Well, he had a few suggestions once he got an up close look at our old turbines. But just suggestions and not personal involvement. We were initially hoping Stark will be leading the final check but as you know, he’s mostly out of commissions since his fallout with the doctor.”

“Why don’t you just call him. He’s… he doesn’t seem completely well obviously but he answers most of the time.”

“Cap, if he has been answering your calls, that’s the only call he has been answering for nearly three weeks. He’s been evading everyone else… quite well I might add.”

Steve pulled his cellphone from his pocket, looking through the call history, at the name “Tony Stark” clearly visible at the top.

He hesitated, his finger hovering over the send button as he paced a little on the same spot. Then, with a small sigh, he pressed.
Putting the device to his ears, he walked slowly towards a corner of the room away from the crowd.

One ring… then two…

Maybe he had been just simply lucky. Tony just happened to be in an answering mood or not busy when he called.

Three…

He thought about just hanging up. But then.

“Capsicle, please don’t tell me you broke your TV again-“

“I-…T-Tony. Hi-“ He stuttered, not really prepared for the other to actually answer.

“Yep, one and only.”

“I…uh…”

“…Did you really break the TV? Because it’s fine if you did. I’ll have JARVIS call someone-“

There was a soft laugh in that voice Steve distinctly hears. The usual playfulness that was lost for so long. It made him smile unconsciously. “No, I… I didn’t break anything actually. Not even at the tower.”

“Oh. Okay…” There was a short pause. “What did you need?”

Suddenly his mouth felt a little dry. A pang of guilt hitting him at the implication of Tony’s response. The billionaire assumed Steve called because he needed something… because that’s the only times he ever called.
To be fair, the Captain had tried to avoid bothering the genius unless a reason came up that he had to. Partly because he didn’t want his personal feelings being discovered, and another because it was re-iterated to him over and over again how busy Tony was.

But then again… he may have also been, as Natasha soon discovered, been creating excuses to talk get Tony’s attention by asking about random tech issues, purposely breaking some device around the tower… pretending to be lost around the city… But from Tony’s perspective, it probably seemed as if Steve only talked to him when he wanted something.

He grimaced slightly as he put a hand over his forehead. Damn… what was he even doing?

“Hey, Doritos, is everything okay?” Tony asked in response to the long silence.

Steve let out an exasperated laugh at the nickname. “It’s… alright.”

“…Are the kids okay?”

Steve can practically see the smirk in that tone. The frustratingly charming smirk that was practically ingrained into the Captain’s mind. He can feel the heat rising to this cheeks, very grateful the genius can’t see his reaction.

It was a joke. A running joke after it was implied by a SHIELD employee how the two co-leaders were practically playing father and mother, the rest of the Avengers being their kids. It probably didn’t help that Tony naturally fell into the mother-hen role since the very beginning. Always going out of his way to meet their every need, fussing about their well being, showering them with everything money can buy.

But, although relatively harmless, and perhaps very unlike “Tony Stark”, the billionaire didn’t make much comment in regards to that particular jest. Possibly, simply out of respect to his boyfriend… well… former boyfriend now. Following his lead, however, Steve didn’t mention it as well, just generally shifted the topic whenever it came up.

In fact, this was the first time the genius said anything to even acknowledge the existence of that particular joke. Steve didn’t want to read too much into it, he really didn’t… but…
“They are all fine. Bruce is away on a conference. Thor is taking care of some Asgardian matter… seems like he’ll be gone for a while. Clint seems to be doing his own thing… Nat and I are trying to hold down the fort…” He sighed, pacing again. “…I- I just… don’t understand her-“

There was another long silence before Tony next spoke. “That’s because you’re still trying to understand her from your perspective, Cap.”

He frowned, tried to say something but the other cut him off.

“Steve, you’re… you. Noble, honest, idealistic… We love you for it, Cap. You know we do. But… we’re not all like you. We can’t all be like you. Some of us don’t see the world as black and white… there is not always right or wrong answers… there are endless amount of variables, moral gray. Someone like Nat… she lived a life very different from yours…”

The corner of his lip twitches upward. “Like you.”

There was a short, soft laughter on the other end of the line. “Yeah… like me. She’s not all bad, Cap. But if you keep trying to understand her only from how you see the world… well… you’ll never really understand…”

He let out a sigh. “Yeah… yeah, I suppose you’re right.” He paced a little back and forth. “Wish you were here. You’re better with her-“

There was a huff of laughter. “Sorry.”

“No- it’s fine. Didn’t mean it that way…” Steve paused for a moment, swallowing. “…Tony… where are you?”

He never asked till now. Tony had disappeared from the tower a couple weeks back but knowing what had just happened to his long-term relationship, everyone simply understood and didn’t ask too much question.

Steve wondered if Tony would just hang up on him or give some roundabout answer. There was a sudden flash of dread that the genius perhaps will simply not take his call in the near future.
“…Hello?” he said with a bit of uncertainty.

“Georgia.”

“Georgia…?”

“A lakeside cabin in Fairburn, Georgia. It was my mother’s… I thought about selling it couple years back but… Stephen liked it so…”

That took a stab at his heart. A familiar tug of jealousy at how Tony always said that name. If Steve could see him, he would see the smile associated with that word, the subtle light that appeared in those doe eyes at the very thought of the precious doctor. …Though perhaps that may not be such a case anymore.

But he tried to brush the thought away. “Okay… Well… just… if you need anything-“

“I’ll be fine, Cap. Just need some time away. …Can you…”

“I won’t tell anyone,” he replied quickly.

“Thanks.”

“Tony,” he called out a bit too quickly, afraid the other would hang up on him. He silently berated himself how clingy that sounded. “I-… just… take your time… but just… be careful, okay? And if anything comes up… call us. It doesn’t have to be… me. Call Banner or Nat… at least…“

There was a soft chuckle. “Aww, I didn’t know you cared so much, Capsicle. You say that now but you want me to call you, right-“

“S-shut up, Tony!” Steve snapped, a little louder than he meant to. In a panic, he looks around to make sure he hadn’t drawn unwanted attention.

But his rattled tone only seemed to egg the billionaire on.
“Oh captain, my captain!”

“STOP!”

“Don’t… do this to me, Nick…”

“Stand back! Three, two, one. Clear!”

“No pulse.”

“Okay. 200, please. Stand back! Three, two, one. Clear! Give me epinephrine! Pulse?”

“Negative.”

“Don’t do this to me Nick… don’t do this to me…”

“Time of death, 1:03 AM.”

“............

“I need to take him,” Maria said evenly.

Natasha didn’t respond, her eyes still locked on Fury’s lifeless body. Steve took a step closer about to reach out but she suddenly stood to her feet, heading for the door.

“Natasha!” He quickly followed her.
As they entered the hallway, she sharply turned to face him. “Why was Fury in your old Brooklyn apartment?”

“I don’t know.”

“You’re a terrible liar.”

Steve let out a sigh. “We… we should call for backup.”

Her stomach drops. “No.”

He gave her an exasperated look. “Nat. We can call Tony. At least-“

“No!” she snapped, a little louder.

The Captain frowned, getting increasingly frustrated how to deal with his redheaded teammate. Quite frankly this was the most emotion he had ever gotten out of Natasha, however, contrary to his expectation, it was not helping him be any less confused. He tried to remember what Tony had said to him about needing a different perspective, needing to sympathize…

“Natasha. This is serious! Fury is dead! We can’t just-“

“I’M NOT LOSING HIM TOO!”

That shocked him out of his senses, efficiently shutting him up. But the outburst seemed to have surprised the SHIELD agent herself as well.

Natasha blinked quickly, her expression becoming cold once more. Her voice was surprisingly calm the next time she spoke. “Stephen… is gone. Fury is gone… I’m not.“ She doesn’t elaborate, she couldn’t. Million of thoughts and what ifs were racing in her mind.

How right was Fury about the future? If… if this ended up with Steve in danger would Tony… She was not ready. Selfishly, she was not ready.
She swallowed, turning her gaze up to meet the clear blue. She had to make it reasonable, logical enough for the Captain to understand. “You love him. Don’t call him. Tony… he’s not okay. He’s still recovering… distracted… He’ll get himself killed.”

Steve simply stared back for another minute then, “Okay. Okay… we take care of this. You and me.”

She nodded.

“Cap,” a voice came behind him. They both turned to see Rumlow with the STRIKE team. “They want you back at SHIELD.”

“Yeah. Give me a second.”

“They want you now,” he snapped.

There was something in that tone. A feeling of sudden uneasiness swept through them. Steve glanced at Natasha once more, exchanging a look.

“Before we get started, does anyone want to get out?”

“Can I help you guys with anything?”

“Oh, no,” She wraps her arms around Steve easily, her voice suddenly becoming frighteningly sweet. “My fiancé was just helping me with some honeymoon destinations.”

Steve, on the other hand, visibly flinches, an awkward smile forming as he quickly stared back at the Apple employee. “Right! We’re getting married,” he added, trying to play along.
Natasha side-eyes him with a look that clearly spelled out *you’re hopeless* but turns back to the computer non-the-less, continuing to trace the signal from the flash drive.

“Congratulations. Where do you guys thinking about going?”

Steve chances a glance at the monitor. “New Jersey.”

The employee was leaning in with a small frown. Steve froze instantly, but then, “Oh- I have that exact same glasses.”

“Wow,” Natasha said with semi-suppressed sarcasm. “You guys are practically twins.”

“Yea I wish,” the employee said with a laugh, then vaguely motioned up and down Steve. “Specimen. Uh… if you guys need anything, I’ve been Aaron.”

“Thank you,” Steve replied politely. Though as soon as he walked away, his voice takes on a more urgent tone. “You said nine minutes, come on-”

“Shh, relax. I got this.” She didn’t even look up from the screen. “You’re really bad at this undercover thing, by the way. No wonder Tony and I were always married-“

The Captain’s attention snapped back to her “What?”

But she ignores him. “Got it, let’s go.” She pulled out the flash drive, pocketing it into her hoodie pocket before dashing out the store, Steve hot at her tails.

“What do you mean married to Tony-“

“During missions. We always played the couple because you are just so awkward. Even though technically you would have been way better for the role since you look so vanilla- blend right in. “ There was that usual sarcasm in her tone, one that always perplexed the Captain.
“Vanilla?” he almost sounded offended.

“Relax,” she said with a smirk. “Not saying you’re not pretty. Everyone knows you’re quite a looker- just… typical handsome.”

But before Steve can make another comment, he spots familiar faces and uniform. “Standard tac-team. Two behind, two across, two coming straight at us. If they make us, I’ll engage, you hit the south escalator to the metro-“

“Shut up and put your arm around me, laugh at something I said-“

“What?”

“Do it-“ She hissed.

Steve hastily did as he was told, arms around her shoulder, leaning in and laughing. The agents walk right past them.

“So awkward-“ She repeated teasingly. Watching as the characteristic frown appeared on the blonde’s face.

They reach the escalator at a quick pace, eyes scanning left and right for any sign of further trouble. Then they see him, Rumlow on the opposite side, going up, they will run into each other very quick under close proximity.

Natasha turned around sharply. “Kiss me.”

Steve seemed scandalized. If the situation wasn’t so dire, she almost might have laughed. “What-“

“Public displays of affection make people very uncomfortable.”

“Yes,” he retorted with great deal of exasperation and earnest. “Yes, they do-“
She let out a huff muttering, “God- even Stephen wasn’t this difficult.” Then she pulls him in by the collar of the jacket, their lips locking.

Rumlow glances away, unconsciously as he passed the pair.

The redhead pulled back a little, “Still uncomfortable?”

“It’s not exactly the word I would use. …Wait- Stephen Strange? You brought civilian into your mission?!?”

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“Where did Captain America learn how to steal a car?” She asked nonchalantly in the passenger seat.

“Nazi Germany.”

“Hm…”

“And we’re borrowing. Take your feet off the dash.”

“Sure, dad.” Natasha obliged, removing her feet from the dashboard slowly with a small smirk.

He took a deep sigh, gave her an exasperated stare. “Not you too-“

“You love it,” She said, leaning her head back a little. “You get to pretend you’re parenting with Tony-“

There was a long silence that stretched. Steve couldn’t get a good read on her. Whether she didn’t want him around Tony or she did, it felt like some odd back and forth. Or perhaps it was neither, he couldn’t ever truly tell with the read-headed agent.
But something had been bothering him since their little incident at the mall. Or perhaps, even far before. “Did you… did you like Stephen Strange?”

To his surprise, there was no shock, no defensiveness, she remained completely calm, almost disinterested. Natasha turned her gaze towards him but her expression was impressively blank. “Like meaning how you like Tony?”

He chances a glance in her direction. “I—yes I guess—”

“I liked him.”

Steve just blinked rapidly, trying not to show any emotions …or judgment. He supposed he couldn’t throw stones even if-

“I like Tony too.”

He chokes. “Wait- what?”

“Not sure it’s same definition as yours though. I don’t exactly have a clear define line between liking someone as friend or… more. The term friend itself is pretty vague. There are two types of people in head… people I like, people I don’t like. Why you ask?”

“You- you implied you kissed him back at the escalator.”

“No, I didn’t.”

“Yes, you did!”

“I could have easily meant he was being difficult. Like how you were.”

“Is that what you meant?”
“Question for you then. Which, you don’t have to answer,” A small smirk played on her lips. “I feel like if you don’t answer it though, you’re kind of answering it, you know?”

“What?” he snapped.

“Was that your first kiss since 1945?”

He scoffed. “That bad huh?”

“I didn’t say that-“

“Well, it kind of sounds like that’s what you’re saying.”

“No, I didn’t,” there was definite amusement in her tone now, playful. “I just wondered how much… practice you’ve had.”

“You don’t need practice.”

“Everyone needs practice.”

Steve turned to her sharply, before trying to fix his gaze back to the road.

“He’s a great kisser.”

“…Strange…?”

“Why do you assume by he, I mean Stephen. I could have meant Tony-“

He looked beyond exasperated now, gapping at her.
“Now you assume I kissed Tony. I could have simply heard from Stephen. You assume a lot, don’t you, Cap. One line of thinking-“

“Will you ever just give me a straight answer?”

“No. This is fun-“

Steve tried hard to not roll his eyes.

“I can see why Tony likes screwing with you. You give great reactions.”

“We’re not screwing!”

“Clearly. Or maybe you might not be this pent up stressed. Would have had more practice too.“

Steve let out a dramatic sigh, adjusting his grip on the wheel, trying to desperately focus on simply driving. “…It’s not my first kiss since 1945. I’m ninety-five. I’m not dead.”

There was a pause.

“Tony had a lot of practice.”

He nearly swerves. Natasha smirked.

Hearing the knock, Sam leisurely strode over, “Yeah coming-“ he called out.

But as he pulled the door open, his expression fell. At his doorstep were the Captain America and the redheaded woman he had seen a couple days ago, both looking worse for wear.
“Hey man,” Sam started uncertainly.

“I’m sorry about this,” Steve said with his usual earnest. “We need a place to lay low.”

“There are lots of people trying to kill us—“

Sam gave a small nod. “Not everyone.” He opens the door a little wider and steps aside, letting them enter.

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Natasha sat on the edge of the bed, staring at the opposite wall without really seeing it, her hands idly scrunching up her hair with a towel. Millions of thoughts were racing in her mind, memories flashing through.

“You okay?”

The agent looked up, eyes landing on the Captain and his ever-sincere gaze. He almost seemed sympathetic, compassionate… neither of which she particularly fancied right now. He doesn’t understand. Wouldn’t understand.

“Yeah,” she replied simply, her voice even.

He strode over closer, taking a seat next to her. “What’s going on?”

There was a short pause as her eyes meet his. There weren’t many that sat so close to her so casually without a second thought.

“Why are you here?”

“To pull the trigger.”
For a brief moment, those baby blue gaze turned glacial blue-green. One that held more intelligence and cunning, a sharp contrast to Captain’s honest stare. Natasha soon feels her stomach turn.

“I… I love him. I can’t. I can’t imagine a world without him, Natalia.”

“When I first joined SHIELD, I thought I was going straight. But I guess I just traded in KGB for HYDRA.”

“No one can know about this, Agent Romanoff. Not Barton, not the team… certainly not the Captain. We make the hard decisions, so other people don’t have to.”

She paused for a moment. “I thought I knew whose lies I was telling, but… I guess I can’t tell the difference anymore.”

Steve smiled. “There’s a chance you might be in the wrong business.”

For a moment, Natasha let’s those words sink in. Then lets out a huff of laughter. “…I owe you. You saved me.”

He shrugged. “It’s okay.”

“If it was the other way around, and it was down to me to save your life… and you be honest with me… Would you trust me to do it?”

The Captain meets her eyes straight, the smile not faltering. “I would now. And I’m always honest.”

She smirked, “Well, you seem pretty chipper for someone who just found out they died for nothing.”

He let out a sigh. “Well… I guess I just like knowing who I’m fighting.”
“I made breakfast.”

They both turned to see Sam by the doorway of the guest room. Steve frowned at the odd look on the other’s expression.

“…If you guys eat that sort of a thing.” Sam looked from Natasha then back to Steve. “…After you guys are done having a moment…“

Natasha scoffed, shaking her head. Steve gawked at him, mouth open but no words coming out.

The wood creaked as he climbed the short steps of the front porch. He glanced around, his sights briefly landing on the lake not too far down the hill as he reached the door.

He made a quick, firm knock, waited then, “STARK?”

There was no answer.

“Tony, come on! It’s been weeks!”

Clint let out a sigh before trying to peer into the inside through a window. But then he sees it…

He cursed under his breath before swiftly aiming a hard kick. There was a loud clunk as the door swung open, the latch completely broken off. The archer rushed in, towards the body that laid out in the living room. He reaches for the neck, checking for a pulse, letting out a sigh of relief when he feels a rhythm.

“Jesus-“ Clint muttered as he does one lookover of the room.

There were scatters of empty bottles of hard liquor, some shattered on the floor, and with it litters of newspaper articles, reports, files. He sees one large header, two words that stand out
immediately: Stephen Strange. Clint definitely doesn’t need to a closer look at the rest to see what all of it was about.

“Tony!” He roughly shakes the limp body. There was a groan in reply. “Tony! Come on!”

“Legolas… Shut. Up.“ His voice sounded weak, disoriented.

Then his eyes land on it, the pills scattered nearby. Clint picked up the bottle, trying to read the label. “Stark, when did you take this?”

“Donno-“ the billionaire slurred. “C-couldn’t… sleep… just wanted to sleep-“

“God dammit-“ Clint nearly throws the brunette over his shoulders, dragging him into the nearby bathroom. He leans Tony over the toilet, admittedly, roughly holding him up. Then efficiently shoved two of his fingers down the other’s throat.

There was a harsh gagging sound as Tony hurls, doubling over. He can already feel the billionaire’s resentment.

“You need to get it out! You can’t mix those with alcohol!”

Tony simply groaned loudly, coughing at intervals.

Clint let out a sigh, patting the genius in the back. “You can make some joke about gag reflex later,” he said half-heartedly. “…just don’t tell Cap or he might get the wrong idea and kill me-“

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It took grand total of six hours before Clint manages to get Tony coherent. Now, the billionaire sat slouched on the dining room chair, looking like death.

Clint threw a plate onto the table, sliding it over to in front of the other. Tony simply stared down at couple pieces of toast and scrambled eggs.
“Didn’t know you can cook,” he said evenly, though his voice still sounded rough.

The blonde shrugged as he pulled up the chair opposite, sitting down.

There was an unnerving silence as they both avoided each other’s gaze. Then, slowly, Tony picked up the toast, taking a bite. As soon as he tasted it, there was a sharp tug at his brain, his stomach, that told him it’s been too far since he last ate any real food.

“So… you’ve been tailing him-“

Tony looked up for a brief moment, eyeing the SHIELD agent who sat cross-legged now. He reached for the large cup of water he had been sipping. “Yeah well… you know me. Obsessive, volatile, unstable… Not that far-fetched I’ve became that crazy girlfriend who stalks their ex.”

Clint let his eyes fall close, running a hand over his face. God, Natasha should be here not him. He’s not good at this sort of thing. He would say all the wrong things and things will go spiraling. But then again, he supposed Natasha probably was not in the best mental state either.

He and Tony had talked quite often after Avengers had formed and they became relatively close, bound by the same dry humor and need for mayhem and pranks to relieve pent up stress. But that was just it, their interaction was heavily based on humor… this… this was something else.

Sensing the other’s displeasure, Tony threw the toast back onto the plate. “I get it. You’re disgusted-“

He let out a sigh. “No.”

“Pathetic?”

“I don’t care you’re tailing him, Stark,” he snapped without really meaning to, still not meeting the other’s gaze. “We don’t care that you’re stalking him. We care what it’s doing to you.”
The brunette quirked an eyebrow. “We?”

Clint turned his gaze up from his hand. “Me. Natasha. Cap... okay maybe Cap hasn’t really figured out all this yet-“ he gestured vaguely towards the living room. “Just knows you’re not okay. To be fair I didn’t know it got this far either… suspicion maybe but thought Rhodes and Pepper were monitoring you.“

Tony turned away with a sigh. “Well… that’s why I’m here. It’s the only place off the grid… Pepper and Rhodes don’t even know. For the record, I didn’t really intend for it to get this far-“ He picked up the toast and shoved it into his mouth. “I really did originally come here to get away… then got bored. Brilliant idea to set up JARVIS here. Thought it would kill time… then after… google…. It got out of control-“

The archer gives him a look then sighed. “…Okay- let’s hear it. What’s the doctor up to?”

Tony let out a small huff. “Experimental treatments. A lot of them. Every surgery, treatment, drugs his connection can get… and it went far. Depleted his bank account, used all his resources…” There was a pause before adding. “He’s going to get himself killed-“

Clint lowered his gaze for a moment before turning back towards the other. “He’s… desperate. Probably trying to find a way to get back to you-“

“You don’t know what he said,” came the sharp reply. The next time their eyes meet, there was coldness Clint had not seen before. “He’s… desperate to get his life back. Willing to die over it. If I were him, I probably would be doing the same. But it is NOT to get back to me. He made that very clear- that he was done with me.”

The blonde didn’t know what to say further, just ruffled his own hair with a sigh. What did people say in a time like this? “He was in pain. He probably just was lashing out- Men… ya know? We do that-“

“He said he was sick of me. Tired of me. Wasn’t happy for a long while even before the accident-“ It was coming back to him in a rush. The words of the conversation he didn’t even admit to himself. Didn’t repeat to anyone who asked.

Tony picked up the fork, stabbing at the eggs before harshly pushing them to his mouth. “He probably was feeling generous enough to try to work things out before the accident… stuck
around… had the patience to tolerate me a little longer. Then after, clearly just couldn’t do it anymore.”

Clint simply stared, taking in the words. It all sounded a bit… out of character of the Stephen Strange described by Natasha. Perhaps, Tony was exaggerating fueled by his own insecurities and anger but some of the basis must be from somewhere real, the truth. It all can’t be all in the genius’s head.

“But on to my second point,” Tony waved the fork at him in a mock threat. “Even Pepper and Rhodey don’t know about this place. It’s completely off the map. So Cap ratted me out-“

Clint sighed. “It was an emergency. Plus seems like I came just in time.“

That made Tony raise an eyebrow. “What emergency?”

“…Just in case… things go south.“

His eyes narrowed. “Now I think about it, why are you here and not Nat?”

Clint was tapping his fingers on the table in a nervous habit. “Nat is busy… with Cap.” Then registering the look the other was giving him. “Not like that! Jesus, Stark, how dense are you?”

“Did you just call me stupid, bird brain?” he retorted easily. “I’m not the one who couldn’t get the toaster to work-“

“I thought it was voice activated! Everything else in your tower seems to be!”

Tony let out a scoff. Though soon they both had a small smile playing on their lips as they remembered the incident from a couple of weeks back.

“Okay, but really though what’s going on?”

Clint licked his lips. “There was an incident… Fury is dead. I don’t even know details, we have to
get a rundown later about the whole thing. But Cap and Nat are on it. They are handling it. Trying to shut down Project Insight-“

“Project Insight?” his eyes widened a little. “They are going against SHIELD? Why are you not there? Who’s backup?”

“Calm down,” the blonde tried to reason, getting ready to grab Tony if necessary. “Look, it’s Cap and Nat. The best soldier in history and the best spy in the world. They will be fine. I worry for the other guy against them actually. Short version: Hydra infiltrated SHIELD. It seems that it’s been going on for a long time. Thor came back couple hours ago. We couldn’t reach Banner for some reason so Thor went directly. If possible they are going to try to get other people on the list to safety… in case Cap and Nat can’t shut it down.”

Gears were turning in his head, trying to put everything together. “Why are we not going then? Why are we not helping? Why didn’t they call me?!“

Clint quickly grabbed Tony’s arm, pulling him back down to the chair. Though it hardly took effort. As soon as the brunette stood, he nearly lost balance from fatigue.

“That’s why,” he muttered. “Look Stark, I’m here in case something goes wrong… if they can’t shut it down we’re both targets. Better to be in pairs if that happens and we have a rendezvous point. You can’t… you’re in no condition to fight.”

Tony gave him a very offended stare as if he was just about to put up a fight to prove him wrong.

The archer briefly wonders if Iron Man armor was hidden somewhere. “Do it for Nat,” he blurts out quickly. “Just… lay low for a little longer… for Nat.”

The billionaire gave him a questioning stare. “What does Nat have to do with-“

“Apparently she made a strong case to not have you be part of this right now… or so said Cap.”

“Oh for god’s sake-“
“She doesn’t want to risk losing you!”

That stops Tony dead in his track, freezing for a moment as a silence washed over them.

Clint let out a long sigh. “Hey- she just… I get it you lost a lot but she lost a friend too. She hasn't had many friends before. None of us did. Strange didn’t just walk out on you… She then lost Fury. You were… we suspected you were compromised. Apparently, she didn’t want you on the field. Cap thought she had a point so… We only leave here if it’s dire.”

And more silence.

“You… haven’t been talking to her either, huh?”

Guilt washed over him. In truth, Tony had been actively avoiding the redhead ever since Stephen’s accident. His mind associated the agent naturally with Stephen. He would lay eyes on her and his mind would automatically turn to the doctor. After the breakup, it had been worse. To the point, Tony hardly could even meet her eyes.

“I think… she thinks she already lost you too… Sure, maybe I don’t know what’s fully going on here but she’s acting up. Badly, recklessly. Maybe it’s guilt-“

“It’s not her fault,” Tony said quickly. “I should have been with him that night. I was supposed to have been going to that ceremony with him-“

“And her job was to watch him. Look Stark, to me, it seems like you both are just… on a path to self-blame in ridiculous proportion. I get it, I feel bad for what happened to the doctor too but… he left. He left you. In a cruel way from what you are telling me. You both need to move on.”

There was a pause in which Tony stared at the corner of the table.

Then there was beeping. Clint quickly fished out the phone from his pocket reading the screen. “They did it-“

Tony let out the breath he didn’t realize he was holding.
But the smile started to fade from the agent’s lips. “…Uh—… ok so… Cap is in the hospital— and…shit—“

The billionaire shots him a glare.

Clint swallowed. “Okay yeah… You’re right… we should go—”

“Do you solemnly swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth?”


“Why isn’t Captain Rogers present?” asked the committee general.

“I don’t know what there is left for him to say. I think the wreck in the middle of the Potomac made his point fairly eloquently.”

“Well, he could explain how this country is expected to maintain its national security now that he and you have laid waste to our intelligence apparatus.”

Her expression remained completely blank. “Hydra was selling you lies, not intelligence.”

“Many of which you seem to have had a personal hand in telling,” retorted the general.

“Agent, you should know that there are some on this committee who feel, given your service record, both for this country and against it, that you belong in a penitentiary, not mouthing off on Capitol Hill.”

…………
The double doors opened, a crowd of people filing out into the hallway. In the mist, they spot the familiar redhead.

Steve quickly rushed over. “You alright?”

“Perfectly fine,” Natasha replied curtly, straightening up with her usual restrained smile.

The captain let out a sigh, “You should have let me go in-“

“Will you two get a room?” Sam called out.

Steve gave his usual exasperated stare back but Natasha simply rolled her eyes.

“Who is he?” said a familiar voice.

They all turned to see Rhodes and Banner heading towards them quickly. Natasha and Steve both smiled making quick greetings.

“Thor?”

“Back at the tower. Thought it may be best given… you know, earth politics not really his thing“ Then Bruce looked over Sam, “Is he an Avenger?” he asked Cap.

Rhodes let out a scoff, “Clearly not, if he thinks these two are a thing-“ He pointed back and forth between Natasha and Steve.

Steve frowned at him but Rhodes just simply smirked back.

Sam let out a short laugh, smirking. “Now you all are just trying to throw me off. They’ve been flirting this whole goddamn time-“
“Oh really now?” Rhodes said, faking a faux surprise as he gave the Captain a look.

Bruce let out a short chuckle. “You’re… off,” he said softly to Sam. “Way off…”

Sam stared at all of them in turn, a clear confusion forming in his expression as he crossed his arms. “What you all getting at?”

“Guys stop-“ Steve said sternly. Though most of them just grinned at him.

Natasha pats Sam on the back with a smirk. “When you figure it out, you’re an Avenger.”

“What is this?” Sam looked thoroughly perplexed, “Some initiation riddle?”

But before he can question them any further there was the sound of many footsteps. Soon, a crowd of tac team was heading their way down the hall, in front was secretary of defense himself.

“Avengers, Captain Rogers, you are all under arrest. Come quietly or we will be forced to take action.“

“You should have let me go in with you,” Steve repeats to Natasha quietly.

She doesn’t look at him, eyes fixed on the crowd forming. “You’re still injured. And this is not your wheelhouse-“

“You’re right, Red. It’s mine.”

They all turn abruptly. Eyes immediately landing on Tony who strode down the hall dressed to the nines in one of his impeccable suits. Clint closely following behind.

The brunette pulls off the sunglasses sharply as he stops in front of Natasha. “Missed me?”
She tried to smile, though it doesn’t fully reach her eyes. Tony thought he saw something there he couldn’t quite place but there wasn’t much time to dwell on it.

He put a hand to her shoulder before turning to rest of them, bluntly ignoring the secretary and his army of agents.

He points halfheartedly at Steve, fixing the rest of them with a stern look. “If something goes wrong because dad had a stupid idea, what do you do?” He paused for a moment before pointing at himself. “You call mom.”

Rhodes let out a snort; Bruce shook his head with a smile, while Clint and Natasha pursed their lips suppressing a laugh. Sam… looked around at all of them, still confused.

“I’ll fix this-” Tony steps in front of them and Steve make a quick grab at his arm.

“Tony, it’s dangerous-“

“Capsicle,” He fixes the other with a stern stare. “You’re in my world right now. The battlefield is yours, politics are mine.”

Steve stares for another second, then blinks before letting go.

A moment, then Tony took a half step closer. “What do you want?” It was barely above a whisper.

“What…?” The Captain frowned in question.

“What do you, Steve Rogers, want out of this? Do you just want this to go away? Do you want to rebuild SHIELD? Do you want to retire?” He looks at the other straight in the eyes. Their gaze locking in a heated stare. “I’m late to the party, I don’t fully know what is going on so I’m trusting your judgment here, Cap. So I ask again… What. Do. You. Want.”

Steve swallowed. Ironically, Sam had asked the very same question just before this whole thing started. Back then he didn’t know the answer… but it didn’t seem to be an option now.
“I…” He blinked slowly, taking a breath in and out. “I… I want Avengers. How it should have been from the start. Ours.”

Tony let out a huff, a soft smile playing on his lips. “Okay.”

Another look, then he fully turned to face the secretary of defense. His demeanor takes a 180 turn. “You’re not arresting them.”

The other frowned at him, thoroughly annoyed. “Is that a fact, Mr. Stark?”

Tony took a couple more leisure steps forward, hands falling into the pockets of his slacks. He stops right in front of the cabinet member.

Guns all turned towards the brunette in the seconds. Steve lunges forward but was held back by both Clint and Rhodes.

Tony simply smirked, the usual arrogance seeping in his tone. “You’re not taking them. I don’t like people taking my things. Even a god couldn’t do it, you certainly can’t.”

There was a cold silence as no one moved.

“Avengers has proven to be a threat to national security. You are a group of mercenaries with a dangerous amount of power with absolutely no oversight. SHIELD is gone. Thanks to two of the Avengers, I might add. How do you even expect this group to function without so much as a leader?”

“We have a leader,” Tony replied simply. Then his voice takes a more mocking tone. “Captain Steve Rogers. You know, America’s golden boy. Captain Handsome. Very popular with the media for almost…” he pulls a face as if he’s thinking hard “six decades…?”

“Seven,” came Natasha’s voice behind them.
Tony made a quick turn, “Thank you, sweetheart.” He let out a huff of laughter. “I bet it would be uproar if you try to make him do a perp walk. How long do you think it would take for there to be a riot on Capitol Hill after the public finds out that you arrested him? Maybe 24 hours… tops? I’ll tell you what, I’ll make it 6. You know, because I can. Do you even have enough intelligence agents to contain the situation? Oh right, they’re all busy trying to figure out which senator, congressman, governor, judge is HYDRA… OH and cabinet members, of course. Wait are you clean-?”

“How dare you!” The secretary looked livid, barely able to contain his anger.

“Back in 2011, the government tried to take my suit. Failed but… you know. You remember that right? Senator Stern? Turns out he’s HYDRA. And everyone wonders why I have trust issues-“

“This is much bigger than one suit-“

“Exactly,” he cuts him off quickly. “We’re a team. We’re the Avengers. From now on this will be an independent team that the government can’t oversee, can’t corrupt.” He paused for a brief moment. “You’re not going to put us in prison. Want to know why?”

“Do enlighten us,” the other replied sourly, with great deal of sarcasm.

“Why is that, Red?” Tony called out.

Natasha doesn’t miss a beat. “Because you need us. Because the world is a fragile place and maybe we helped make it that way but we are also the ones best qualified to defend it.”

There was a pause as the cabinet member took a shaky breath as if trying to suppress the anger that was rising. “You think we’ll let you all just waltz out of here?”

"I do. I really do." Tony stepped closer, there were sounds of clicks as many raised their weapons, ready to fire. The billionaire doesn’t even flinch, but his smirk completely disappeared.

The next second, his expression became uncharacteristically serious, cold. “I have army of lawyers who will rain upon this place the moment I give word. I have buildings full of top PR specialist in the world who will spin this story in ways that will disgrace this administration to the point the next generations wouldn’t even want to mention your names. My people. My team. I don’t care
who you are... the President, a King, or god, you lay off of what’s mine. You touch them, I swear to god I will flip your world upside down, make your life living hell. And just then… MAYBE, if I feel kind enough, I will end you. Don’t. Test. Me. I’ve been having a very, VERY shitty month.”

The two glared, neither backing down, but both already knew which party already lost.

“We’re leaving,” Tony said loudly.

The rest of them quickly walk forward, Natasha and Rhodes nudging everyone towards the exit. Sam looked visibly taken aback but Natasha grabbed him, pulling him with them. They simply walked straight through the crowd of tac-team.

Steve was the last to linger, his eyes still fixed on Tony, waiting.

The billionaire turned around one last time. “You want to arrest us? You know where to find us. 200 Park Avenue, the big tower that says Avengers.”

…………

“Holy shit…” Sam let out a laugh, the nerves finally getting to him. “That was cool-“

Many of them had a smile or smirk on their lips as they strode down the steps, enjoying the fresh air and warm sun that embraced them.

“Hey Platypus, you driving?” Tony asked from a good distance ahead of the group.

“Yeah, I can take most of them back. Tower?”

Tony just gives thumbs up before turning back around, taking quick strides towards a very eye-catching luxury car parked not far away. Soon, Steve sprints to join him. They all watched as the pair walked down the sidewalk. Moments later, the Captain switches sides so he’s walking the curb, a hand unconsciously hovering over the brunette’s waist.
Sam makes a dead stop, staring with a frown. The rest of the Avengers watched in amusement as the gears visibly turned in the newcomer.

“Is Cap... fucking walking curbside so… what? Nothing would splash Stark’s skirt?”

Clint burst out laughing, holding onto Natasha for support.

“Wha-“ But whatever next comment faltered as Sam watches Steve opening the car door for Tony.

They see the brunette letting out a chuckle as if amused by the act but seemingly still not fully getting the intention behind it. Probably just chalking it up to the Captain being old fashioned. He says something to Steve, obviously teasing, the usual Tony Stark smirk plastered on his face. Sam’s eyes narrowed as he sees a definite pink flush arising in the Captain’s cheeks.

The former air force turned to the rest of them suddenly, his eyes landing on Natasha. He pulls a face. “You and him… not really a thing…”

“Nope.”

“Because... he... and him-“ He grimaces, pinching the bridge of his nose. “Got it.”

Clint comes up, patting Sam on the shoulder. There was a very visible grin. “Welcome to the Avengers.”

Chapter End Notes

Already know this is may be an unpopular chapter LOL but sort of was necessary for plot so-

Also, I've been reading so much negativity about Steve lately... (and yes I get it, I was hella salty over Civil War and the whole bid too... but I guess in my headcanon, it's hard for me to believe Tony/Steve was COMPLETELY bad? Personally, I kind of see it as one of those mixtures of really good & really bad.) ...and quite frankly, so much negativity about anything makes me like... eh- So ultimately, this chapter was sort of... for my sanity LOL;;;
I'm starting to realize now, I'm not so antagonistic towards Cap (I thought I was)

😊😊 Simply put, I do see the basis for Stony. I used to be very into it. Some of those concepts will appear in this fic. It is just simply that, right now, I find IronStrange currently A LOT more interesting. *cough* can't ignore that IW chemistry *cough* ....But yeah- it's not like I hate on Stony.

So... I'm not going to write Steve as some completely bad character / unreasonable character bashing. Sorry to disappoint- (Ok but that also doesn't mean I won't have some scenes of Cap dealing with some karma tho - as it showed up couple times in previous chapters already lololol)
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

Well you wanted the Siberia footage leak LOL

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“So it’s Captain America, then now Doctor Strange, who’s next? Thor? Hawkeye? Winter Soldier? I mean let’s face it, Tony Stark can’t make up his mind! I give it a month... at most before they call off the engagement.”

“You forget Doctor Strange and Tony Stark has history. He was there long before Captain America or even the Avengers. This is a love story-“

“What love story? Tony Stark is a notorious playboy-“

“Who had a monogamous relationship with Stephen Vincent Strange for what we can assume from 2009 all the way to 2013-“

“Exactly, assume. Stark has an endless amount of PR representative and money to spin the unsavory-“

“There were endless amounts of photographs with him with other women AND men, definite evidence of cheating, wild parties-“

“Tony Stark is a slut! Come on, the only time he behaved was the two years he was with Steve Rogers.”

“I mean who would even THINK of cheating when you have America’s golden boy in your bed-“

“What more can you want really-“
“If he was actually going to settle down? ACTUALLY, settle down it would be with Captain America.”

“This is clearly just a rebound after the Civil War. Classic going back to your old flame to get attention—“

………..

“The question is, who really left who. We never really got a clear answer. Neither party ever confirmed it. It was first that Stark left Strange because he didn’t want a disabled lover… Then rumors that it was actually the doctor who left the famous billionaire because he was unhappy—“

“I don’t think it matters who left who. Seems like they can’t handle the hardship. That is not a good basis for a healthy relationship.“

………..

“They are too alike! These are the two individuals who both had an infamous reputation of being arrogant, egotistical playboys. Two very narcissistic personalities in a relationship is a recipe for a disaster!“

“They don’t balance each other in any way. We definitely know how outrageous Tony Stark can be. He needs to be with someone who can rein that in, be sensible, loving, patient…“

“Like Captain America—“

“Yes!”

………..

“Do you how many public fights the Stark and Strange were caught in? 57 different accounts on social media. And more people are coming forward with new ones.”
“Couples fight. These are two people who had very high-stress jobs, who had cameras following them around 24/7-“

“It sounds very heated to me. Some would argue it’s verbally abusive-“

“There were also several photographs of Stark having visible bruises around that time-“

“Stephen Strange can be very manipulative. He’s intelligent, calculating, incredibly ambitious... He knows how to work the optics. Initially, the public was sure he was just another one of Stark’s arm candy. But as time passed, some were convinced he basically was running the show during the time he was with Tony Stark in the 2000s. So the question is, is he doing that now with the Avengers? And why is Captain America letting this go on-“

“Regardless of who left who, couple months after their breakup in 2013 Stark visibly spiraled out of control. The alcohol, designer drugs, endless amount of one night stands that made his heyday before Iron Man seems like child’s play. He was arrested on several occasions, ended up at the hospital for overdose on 4 counts... that we know of, by the way... This is not a healthy reaction!”

“No I agree, it was mentioned several times even far before then that Stephen Strange was a bad influence... if that was even possible for the infamous billionaire. They both just about amplified each other’s worst tendencies.”

“It was Captain America that pulled Stark out of that mess. They even mentioned that during an interview in 2014. Tony Stark actually said, and I quote, I would not have survived through that time if it wasn’t for Steve.”

“At the height of his career, there were numerous interviews emphasizing how he did not want kids. Doctor Strange never corrected that statement even till his disappearance from the public’s eyes-“
“Isn’t Tony Stark adopting two boys?”

“Exactly! And it is being said by several sources Strange and Stark only been back together for a couple of months. This is highly irresponsible.”

“Tony told you to stop listening to that.”

Peter slammed his laptop shut, turning around sharply to face the elder teen. Their eyes met for a split second before Peter reverted his gaze to the corner of the room.

Harley stared at the other with a sigh. He can see the dark circles forming under the brunette’s eyes. The kid must have not slept and stayed up fixated on whatever garbage the endless amount of media outlets were spinning about the new announcement of Tony Stark and Stephen Strange’s relationship.

He, himself was not happy of course. But Harley had pretty much expected half the things everyone was dragging out in regards to their soon-to-be parents. After all, he had done his homework way before this. Already read through every articles, feature, and interviews there was about Tony and Stephen from the past. If he was being honest, this was just the tip of the iceberg of what could be spun to gossip. Tony and Stephen had never been particularly discrete and considering their personalities and habits, they were definite fuel for a mountain of scandals.

But Peter had always been much more sensitive than he, or as Stephen described recently, sensitive in different ways. And considering how the blonde just about picked a fight with every damn person who gave him the wrong look, Harley supposed the wizard might have had a point.

“Do you think they look at it?” Peter eventually asked in a near whisper.

“No,” Harley lied, as he sat on the bed.

Peter let out a snort, shaking his head a bit. “You’re lying, huh…”
“Yep.”

There was a moment of silence as all that could be heard was the soft ticking of the clock.

“It’s going to be alright, Pete,” his voice was soft but firm, collected, even. He subconsciously tried to emulate Tony and Stephen. The two adults always seemed to calm the kid down just by saying couple-few well-delivered words.

There was another pause before, “You said it before… if they leave you once, they can leave you twice-“

“I-,” Harley gave him a stern look. “Hey, he’s not going to leave. I didn’t… I barely knew the wizard when I said that.”

The words tasted a bit bitter at his tongue.

Of course, the blonde teen said a lot more things about the doctor once he found out he and Tony were back together. He was skeptical, weary. Harley admitted, however, though never to the wizard's face, he may have been wrong a great deal. Stephen had proved over and over again that he genuinely cared about all of them. It shocked the teen on occasions just how it was visible in the little things.

“Okay but,” Peter was getting up from his seat now. “They are right about one thing. He left. He left before because things got tough-“

He ruffled his own hair. “Saving the world is tough, time travel is tough, nearly dying is tough… this? This is just annoyance, Pete. They’ll be fine.”

Peter stared back, not completely convinced. But if Harley was being completely honest, he wasn’t sure either.

There was a small, sad smile that twitched at the corner of the spiderling’s lips. “You know… You would think after dad nearly sacrificing his life to save the world… people would stop trying to tear him apart…”
Harley let out a sigh. “Yeah well… that’s the media for you. Fickle.”

“Pepper, for the last time, I will not sit here and just-… yes-…yes…y-yeah I get that!” Tony stopped himself abruptly. Couldn’t help but to glance sideways at Stephen who now stared back, an elegant eyebrow raised.

Tony tried to lower his voice an octave as he turned away slightly. The clear frustration still remained, however. “I get all that but I- of course, I trust you. Yes… YES! …. Ye- Pepper… Pepper- goddammit, woman, let me talk! I-”

Stephen reached over, swiftly grabbing the cellphone from Tony’s clutches. “Pepper, Tony is sorry. He’ll let you go back to work.” Then hung up tossing the device over his shoulder.

The other gave him a very insulted look. He opened his mouth as if to argue but the next second, the doctor grabbed him by the wrist and pulled him back onto the bed.

“My turn,” he said with a sly smirk as he pinned the startled brunette. Stephen slowly climbed on top of him, kissing and nipping at the exposed flesh around the neck, shoulders, soon, exposed chest.

The billionaire gave him a perplexed but still amused stare. “Your turn?” he said with a mocking glare. “We’re taking turns now?”

A long low moan erupted from Tony’s throat as the sorcerer pulled them into a kiss. He can almost taste the other’s heat and possessiveness at the edge of his tongue.

“Yes,” Stephen replied as he pulled back a little, dragging Tony’s bottom lip lightly between his teeth. “You get to spend your turn doing what you want.” His voice was low, bottomless, a perfect pair for the pure mischievousness that was visible in those icy blue eyes.

The doctor slipped his hand underneath the engineer’s button-up, feeling him up shamelessly, full of intent and promise. “You spent your turn talking. You spent your turn with your attention elsewhere… But fine. Your turn.” He licked up a strip along Tony’s jawline then a little dramatic
huff of faux annoyance. He smirked as he felt his lover shiver at the sensation.

Stephen dragged his nails along the other’s chest, a bit forceful, leaving red, angry marks in their wake. Mark of ownership.

“…But now…” He shifted so they were inches apart, eyes leveling. “Now, it’s my turn. My turn is all about kissing. My turn also has various other fun things…” He makes emphases by trailing the elegant fingers along the other’s beltline. “I’m sure you’ll thoroughly enjoy.” Another swift, almost chaste kiss. “Mine is a no talking turn.”

Tony was staring back at him his eyes completely dark. “What if I like you talking? You talking always gets me going-“

“Then I’ll talk, you stay quiet. When it’s your turn, you can talk. My turn, you shut up…” He laid gentle kisses all along the sharp jugular. “-and let yourself be kissed. Wait your turn.”

The brunette let out a low moan as his eyes fell closed for a moment. For a moment, he simply laid there, pliant, as he enjoyed his boyfriend’s… no, fiancé’s… lips cover him in all the right ways.

Got to love having a lover with a photographic memory and immaculate skill of analyzing his every twitch, every shudder, every hitch of his breath. Tony couldn’t deny that Stephen always knew exactly what he wanted down to the last detail and delivered it with just as impeccable timing and precision.

But right now, his mind was racing. Right now, a gloom clawed at the back of his mind, demanding attention.

Tony swallowed, blinking quickly. “I think I need my turn now-”

There was a sigh. Stephen stilled his movements, his head dropped to lean lightly on the other’s shoulder.

“Two seconds I swear-“
The sorcerer gazed up at the brunette, giving him a look.

“Babe,” There was determination behind the expressive gaze. Tony licked his lips before going on. “I just… this is wrong. Just so fucking wrong. They are dragging your name through the mud. Fine. I’m a slut. That’s not false—“

“Tony,” he said warningly.

“You call me a slut all the time—“

Stephen frowned as if insulted at the association. “I don’t mean it like that—“

But billionaire just continued on. “But I did not actually cheat on you. I would never—… We were happy for years! YEARS! We were good. And what is this fuckery about abuse—”

Feeling resigned, Stephen removed himself off of the other. Sitting next to the smaller male, “Tony, we both knew this was coming…”

“I can handle whatever they say about me. I get that it’s my fault but… you… Our relationship? Who doesn’t fucking fight once in a while? Who doesn’t say the wrong things once in a while? If cameras were pressed up against your life twenty-four fucking seven, there are bound to be at least one or two things that come out that can look bad. That can be analyzed to appear disastrous. And all these people throwing out terms like abuse and unhealthy about other people’s relationships as if they know— All the damn judgment as if they have any right—“

He finally takes a breath. Pausing as he flopped further onto the bed with a huff.

“Okay… Okay, I’m done.” His tone suddenly lost the antagonism that had been building just a split second prior. “Your turn again. Come on. Kiss. I’m focused.”

Stephen doesn’t even move. Doesn’t bother. “Let’s just give it a second,” he said calmly.

“What?” Tony looked at him, puzzled.
“Wait…” He replied, almost half-heartedly.

There was a short silence, barely half a minute, before…

“I’m JUST saying-“

Stephen rolled his eyes as Tony gestured wildly. But listened… always listened.

“They act as if they care but all they want is the drama and the fun of casting judgment. They are not us. They don’t know. But cast horrendous judgment based on their mentality, their perceptive, their life- as if it is the fucking same! Their life is not my life. …So every couple in the world has to be a specific way, fall into a mold, rules, to be considered happy? Who the hell gets to even decide on that? Who the fuck gets to decide what is right or wrong for every damn person in the world?!”

“It’s starting to seem like you are wanting validation on whether or not we are happy.” He ran a gentle finger at Tony’s cheek, ones that were now flushed pink with anger. “Should we talk about this?”

He stiffened, looking away. As he always did when the conversation turned to his own insecurities. “I thought we don’t talk on your turn.” It was as though the brunette pouting.

The doctor gave him a knowing stare. “Tony…” he coaxed.

Tony snapped back. “We were happy. We are happy.” It was a question disguised as a statement. Too afraid of the answer.

Stephen smiled warmly as he pulled the other into his arms. “We were happy, Tony. It was good. We had a good run. It’s good now. It’s going to be great.”

He sinks into Stephen’s arms, burying his face.
“Maybe I should… cancel the business trip. Pepper can go instead to Japan. It’ll probably send the wrong message to leave at a time like this anyways- Something about how I don't care about my family enough...“

Stephen continued to run his fingers through the chocolate locks. A thought occurred to him Tony never cared much for media circus before. Could brush it off when needed. They even had much fun causing much of the mayhem in the past. But he supposed things were a lot more complicated now. And they took a stab at what mattered most.

“Tony… don’t let them dictate what you should or should not be doing. We’re fine. I can handle the boys. It’s only for a couple of days. If anything you should be showing them that it’s business as usual. Their words matter so little.”

“…I love you.”

He smiled. “I’ve always loved you, Tony. And I always will.”

A long pause then…

“… So back to your turn-“

Stephen chuckled.

Tony had lingered for much of the morning, nearly dragging his feet, making it quite clear he wasn’t all too keen on leaving. Knowing the possibility, Pepper seemed to have delayed the plane to leaving at noon rather than late AMs.

“Dad? How do you make whipped cream?”

“The name is literally the recipe,” Tony replied to Peter.

“OH-“
The two adults watched as the spiderling walked right back into the kitchen. There was a short silence as neither moved, tense, as if waiting for an explosion.

“Your son,” Stephen whispered under his breath, turning back to his book.

“Oh so now he’s my son-“ Sarcasm was basically dripping from Tony’s tone. “When he’s being a dumbass in the kitchen he’s my son but when he wins gold in Academic Decathlon suddenly he’s our son?”

“What’s whole clowns?” Peter shouts from the next room. “…OH, cloves… cloves-“

A second, then, “Yep- nope-“ Tony rushed to his feet. Practically running when he hears the sound of the stove being turned on.

Stephen shook his head with soft laughter. He can almost hear the My baby! that was never outrightly said by the billionaire.

“Morning.”

The sorcerer flipped to the next page. “Good Morning, problem child.”

Harley gave him a look of offense. But then after a moment of thought shrugged. As if to say eh I guess that’s true.

“What’s going on?” The teen eventually asked as he sunk into one of the couch.

“Peter wants to cook breakfast,” Stephen replied, evenly.

“…Should I go pick up food from the bakery?”

Silently, Stephen reaches over to Tony’s wallet, pulling out couple twenties and handing it to the
blonde. Harley took it with a snort and a quiet laugh.

He made a move to leave but before the teen could walk to the door, Tony called out.

“Harley, one sec-“

The kid turned towards him questioningly.

The engineer let out a small sigh as he strode over to him slowly. “I got you that internship with Pepper. It's finalized.”

His face suddenly lit up. Though Harley had never been as open or transparent as Peter, it was a notable change the billionaire definitely recognized.

“You start on Monday. And we need to get you some business clothes-“

There was a subtle smirk playing on Harley's lips. “So I can stay?”

The corner of his lip twitches upwards. “We really should set you up with your own room-“

They share a smile for a moment… Before a crashing sound could be heard from the kitchen. Both of their heads snapped in the direction. Tony made a move towards the next room.

“T-…Dad-“

He stopped, froze in place, as he turned back around to look at the teen. Even Stephen glanced up.

Harley had his gaze to the floor then somewhere far end of the room. “Thanks.”

Tony reached out, ruffling the teen’s hair into a mess. The blonde resisted a bit, wearing an exasperated grin. Then in a whisper, “…You’re getting breakfast right?”
Harley shrugged but nodded. “Yeah-“

Tony just gave him a defeated look, waving him off.

............

It was fairly peaceful most of the early afternoon after Tony's departure. Stephen sat with Peter with a book as the teen finished up his studies, occasionally helping when it was a topic he understood fairly well. Harley took to lying on the couch in various positions, flipping from reading and playing with his phone.

“Let me know when you two are hungry,” the sorcerer said softly around 2 PM. They had eaten late breakfast and skipped lunch entirely. At some point, he figured he should feed both of them a snack. Perhaps something heavier if taking into account Peter’s metabolism.

“I think I’m kind of hungry,” Peter replied in his usual hesitant voice.

Stephen gave the kid a small smile before turning towards the blonde, “Harley?”

Harley didn’t answer, too intensely engrossed with something on his phone. The doctor could already guess what the teen was focused on, however. There was the distinct sour look on his expression that had been too common the past several days.

He wondered if he should say something. Be firm and carry out what Tony wanted. Prevent the two boys from paying too much attention to the junk that’s being spewed by the media. Neither of the adults had ever been keen on censoring before but it was clear after a while the toll it took on both Peter and Harley.

Tony had been at a war with himself since. The billionaire never believed in taking away choices from his sons but was also having strenuous time seeing his kids upset, as if it pained him personally, greatly. Stephen spent the last week watching his fiancé telling the kids off verbally, probably fully knowing they will most likely not heed his words, as if he couldn’t just have FRIDAY censor all source on all their device and feed if he wanted certainty in the matter.
But, in the end, Stephen was a realist. He may have better luck with Peter… but even with recent progress, Harley hadn’t fully accepted Stephen’s place in Tony’s life, let alone his own. The teen luckily didn’t seem too upset by their engagement, however, and that alone made Stephen feel grateful. …But whatever the doctor says now about what he can and cannot do will certainly fall on deaf ear- or worse, appear as nagging from someone who had no right. And Stephen, finally after many years, knew now to pick and choose his battles.

The doctor let out a small sigh, rather choosing to focus on the matter he can do something about. “Harley,” he repeated a bit louder. “What would you like to eat-“

_Feed them. Have them sleep at a reasonable hour. Keep them alive till Tony gets back. This should not be too hard._ He thought with a vague sarcasm and amusement.

But he barely got his words out before a ringing could be heard. Stephen looks towards his right, to his phone. James Rhodes.

He put the device to his ear without a second thought, “Hello?”

There was no greeting. Just a rushed, anxious, “Are you watching the news?”

“No,” Stephen replied simply. But before he could hear Rhodes’ elaboration…

“Uh… Doctor Dad?”

The sorcerer turned his attention to Peter. First taking note of the worried look on the teen’s face, then to the screen he was holding up. He couldn’t help but frown trying to figure it all out the content. Then, it hits him all at once.

_Iron Man, Winter Soldier, Captain America. HYDRA Siberian Facility._

It appeared to be not a recording from the Iron Man suit but one from many cameras that undoubtedly existed in the bunker. How it was still operational at that time or how anyone managed to get a hold of the footage was a mystery… although currently, least of his concerns.
Stephen watched as the number indicating views continued rising at a rapid rate. “James-“

“Stephen. I have to ask- Did you…?”

“No.”

“Okay… okay. Tony is on his way. He’s using his suit so he shouldn’t take too long. Are you at the tower with the kids?”

His eyes automatically land on the two teens. They both stared back at him with evident concerns on their expression. “Yes.”

“Pepper and I are 30 min out. I think you need to be on full lockdown-“

“STRANGE!”

Too late. Stephen let out a heavy sigh as he hung up the phone. Slowly, steadily, he stood to his feet. He wanted to tell the two kids to leave the room but ultimately knew it was quite pointless. Plus, he wasn’t sure how he felt about them leaving his sights at the moment.

The doctor, for once, hurried his footsteps to meet the Captain. Wanting to put as much distance between this and the kids. Steve, as usual, quickly crossed the room, the usual determination written across his face. He and Stephen more or less meeting near the middle.

Behind the soldier, the sorcerer could make out the rest of the rogues filing out of the elevator. But something about this was different than usual. There seemed to be a lot of mixed emotions playing in the air, as Sam, Clint, Natasha, all didn’t even seem keen to meet his gaze.

Barnes was the only one who followed quickly but appeared more concerned, exasperated. As if he wanted nothing more than to drag the Captain out of this floor.

“Was it you? What? The engagement wasn’t enough for you?” came the harsh tone.
That snapped Stephen’s attention back to the Captain. His expression hardening almost instantly.

“Want me completely off the team and out of Tony’s life?”

The sorcerer scoffed, “Oh I did not even need this footage for that, Rogers.”

Steve’s voice rose a little, “Was it you?”

“No.”

He let out a short, harsh laugh, his hands falling onto his waists as his gaze darted away for a second.

Barnes automatically stepped forward, grabbing at his friend’s shoulder. “Stevie, seriously, this isn’t the time…”

But Stephen’s patience was already reaching its limits. “I had enough of your dramatics, Rogers. You have the nerve of stomping in here demanding what? An apology? I would not have remorse even if I had been the one to leak that film.”

It doesn’t take long for their eyes locked in a cold glare. Neither showing any signs of backing down. Stephen straightened his stance, jaws clenching, hands balling into fists in the pockets of his cardigan.

“You had problems with us being back here since day one. I wouldn’t put it past you to try and sabotage this team-“

“You sabotaged the team yourself,” the sorcerer nearly snarled. “You deserve everything that is coming to you. I bet even your fellow rogues didn’t fully know the details of what happened in Siberia. You never told them did you? Is that what this is about? Afraid this will finally tarnish your perfect reputation?”

An uncharacteristic coldness, anger flashed in those clear blue eyes. The Captain looked outright infuriated. “Is that why you did it? Couldn’t handle the public thinking I’m better for Tony than
The corner of his lips twitched into a mocking smirk. “We both know you are not. The proof is in that film.”

Steve took a step closer. They were now standing only a foot apart. That made everyone else in the room shift nervously.

“That footage was sealed… not under my final direction but Tony’s. On the day where we started the new Accord. We both agreed it was for the team’s benefit to not dig up the past and move on—“

“Are you really upset because you truly believe this will harm the Avengers as a team or is it about you?” Then he lowered his voice an octave, his tone cutting through, though barely above a whisper. “…Are you afraid? That they will finally see you for who you really are… imperfect, judgmental, arrogant man too stuck in their old ways? Who nearly killed the man he claims to love because things just got a little heated—“

“You just ran away when things got heated—” the Captain blurts out.

“So did you. In the end, he chased you there. At least I left for his benefit. Because I truly believed it was better for him. You left him because he just simply did not agree with you. Because you couldn’t handle not being the leader, who was right. Because things always had to be done your way. You didn’t think. You didn’t think enough. You nearly cost him his life. …And you don’t… it doesn’t even haunt you—”

“How the hell would you know?!?” Steve shouts back. “Don’t tell me how I feel, Strange. You don’t get to make assumptions on how—“

Stephen doesn’t wait for those words to finish. “Do you think about it? Everyday? How you nearly ended his life?”

“I wouldn’t have killed him!” He sounded clearly offended, appalled. “I was just trying to stop him. I didn’t want Tony OR Bucky dead. Things got out of hand because we’re superheroes with powers. Of course, it looks bad but I would not have killed him. Don’t you dare claim—“

“You left him there in sub-zero temperature with no means to get help!” Stephen couldn’t help but
shout back now. A crack in his carefully masked anger. The thought of keeping calm for benefit of the two teens behind him getting chucked out the window. There was a sudden feeling of shame but he couldn’t stop himself.

“He laid in the hospital bed for days in a coma. See, Rogers. If I were you…I wouldn’t trust myself with him. I would never allow myself near him after that. But you…you are a selfish man who continuously tells yourself how you didn’t mean it because, for you, your happiness is worth more than his safety, his life.”

“I-…” Steve swallowed. The words sinking in. For a brief moment, there was stuttering, a hesitation. But he hid it well. “I made a bad judgment call…but that does not mean…I didn’t…that I’m not regretful. I never wanted him hurt. I made a mistake…that does not make me-“ He paused for a moment. “I could have never killed him.”

Stephen looks him dead in the eyes, “No, you just don’t want to believe it.” He let out a steady breath, trying to reign in on the hideous anger that was rising to his throat. “You just can’t believe…even for a second…that you may not be a good person. You know what’s more dangerous than a man who knows himself to be evil? A man who doesn’t acknowledge that everyone is capable of it. Even himself.”

There was a tense stillness that washed over. Neither Steve nor Stephen moved an inch, the glare still fixed on each other. Around them, there was some uncomfortable shifting.

“Are we…” Sam started hesitantly. He wasn’t looking up, his eyes fixed on the flooring, arms crossed. “Are we seriously not going to talk about how…we nearly killed both Rhodes and Stark…and what? We’re still staying at his compound and…everything that goes with it?” There was an awkward pause before he turned directly towards Natasha. “Did you know about this?”

At that, Stephen regarded the former Air Force, finally understanding what was the cause of sudden change in the mood within the group.

“No…” Natasha said evenly after a brief reluctance. “I was…not allowed in the hospital room.”

She doesn’t say the rest. She doesn’t exactly state how, after she had let them escape and Tony finally was back on US soil and admitted, she was barred from the hospital. Upon who’s orders, she never found out. When she finally had a chance to see Tony again, it was weeks later. He didn’t look well, battered, but was standing. Now that she thought about it, a miracle given what he had endured displayed in the footage.
But their conversation escalated quickly and Tony made it clear she should leave before he had her arrested. And the redhead left then without further question.

Sam looked like he was about to say something but the door soon opened again, rushing out was Bruce, quickly followed by Thor.

“Someone please tell me this is a bad joke,” said Bruce in an instant, surveying the room.

Barnes flinched, looking as if he wanted to blend in with the wall at this point. Steve swallowed. Finally turning around from Stephen to face the rest. “Banner…”

“Cap… did you guys really…” There was a pause before he let out a laugh. It sounded distant, bitterness clearly written all over it. “You know… when I came back and saw Tony I gave him this whole… thing… about how… how could he not call you and patch things up? Airport thing? Fine. Okay, I got it, Things can get out of hand. I know that first hand. But …The fucking two of you, supersoldiers… how the… you two went at him at full force-“

Steve hesitated but took a step forward. His voice was evidently softer, gentler than how he had been addressing the sorcerer. Almost trying to reason. “He wasn’t going to stop. It wasn’t like he just took it. He was firing back- He would have killed Bucky out of anger then regretted-“

Bruce was already shaking his head, his eyes falling closed momentarily before fixing the Captain with a stare. “Don’t! Just don’t, Cap. Maybe you want to believe that. You need to believe that…” he let out a shaky sigh, taking off his glasses swiftly as he ran a hand over his face. “But deep down I think you know too. That-… that was far from Tony going at it with full force. There are missiles built into that suit that can level a building-“

But before neither of them could utter another word Thor turned towards Stephen. “How could you let him near Man of Iron?” He sounded accusing as if revolted by the mere thought.

Natasha frowned, voice stern, “Thor, that is not on-“

“I do not need you to defend me,” Stephen snapped coldly.
The redhead quickly closed her mouth, kept her eyes locked as Stephen continued to glare.

“All of you should be ashamed of yourself. Turning your sword upon your brethren.” Thor took turns peering at the rest of the rogues before fixating on the Captain. He pointed a finger directly at Steve’s chest. “You. You will not be near Anthony any longer. Not on my watch-“

Steve frowned, crossing his arms but he seemed to be debating his next words. Thor had always been the one for heroism but never been this protective before of Tony's safety. Stephen remained emotionless but at the corner of his eyes saw Natasha giving the god an odd look.

Clint let out a defeated sigh as he leaned against a wall. “Okay… okay- but let’s be fair here.” He started carefully. “You nearly strangled him during the Ultron incident.”

Thor seemed visibly insulted. “Who’s side are you on? Are you really defending yourselves after-“

“No,” Clint replied, pinching the bridge of his nose with a grimace. “I’m simply saying we all made terrible mistakes at this point. We are all guilty of something. Rather than pointing fingers-“

“He nearly died!” Bruce sounded beyond exasperated, throwing up a hand before it fell to his side once more.

Another silence fell as each of them seemed to be lost in their own world. Some were pacing, some turned away.

Stephen nearly forgot about the two teens. He spun around hastily, his gaze falling onto Harley who now stood very close to Peter. And Peter, still sitting at the table looking pale. The doctor slowly walked over to them but before he could get close, there were footsteps.

Clint was the first to come out of it. “Director. Agent Ross.“

Fury, Everett Ross, and several other agents were stepping out of the open elevator, a grave expression on their face.

Fury scanned the room quickly, taking it all in. “I understand there is a lot of anger and confusion
but right now we need to discuss the more pressing problem.”

Bruce looked as if he was going to argue back, staring at the Director in outrage. But Fury held up a hand.

“Rest assured, we will talk about that footage. I’m told Stark is on his way back,” he quickly replied, still calm and collected. “We will discuss the content of the footage when he is here.”

Then he turned to address everyone in the room. “But right now, this… this is the highest breach of security. It is a catastrophe-level of a problem if SHELD’s database is hacked. There were only two sources that had access to that tape. SHIELD… and by that I mean only Ross and I had access to that tape after it was sealed… and Stark. If they can get to this, then every intelligence information is at risk. And I’m sure I do not have to spell out for any of you how much of a problem this is. If they can get to this, we have no way of telling what else they can get do.”

“Mr. Stark also insisted that this is a priority.” Ross continued evenly. “Access to our files, secret identities of all the heroes and agents and their loved ones, our satellite, missile launch access, passwords, override systems, plans-“

“Shit-“ muttered Sam under his breath.

That seemed to have snapped everyone back to their senses as well. They were too caught up by what they were seeing in the footage none of them gave too much thought into what this could ultimately mean.

Clint chanced a glance at Steve then Natasha before stepping forward. “Do we have anything to go by right now?”

Fury gave a huff of a sigh. “We are still untangling the webs but first and foremost, it is hard to believe it can be an outside job. Both SHIELD and Stark’s database is heavily guarded. State of the art security system that puts the Pentagon to shame. So… did any of you noticed anything unusual recently-“

Ross had a hand to his temple. “Are we sure it’s not Stark?” He said softly with a grimace. As if desperately hoping it was Iron Man at this point.
Stephen can see the reason in that. If it had been Tony who simply leaked the tape out of some vindictiveness, it most likely at least was not some greater threat their security.

“It’s not Stark,” Fury replied simply. He seemed completely confident in the matter. “I spoke to him right after it appeared online. It’s not Stark.”

“Who will gain something out of this?” asked Sam. “What is this about? …To get us to fight?” he let out a huff. “I mean it’s working—“

“Strange,” came the Captain’s voice.

Stephen turned his icy gaze back to Steve. “Oh believe me, if it had been me I would not have done it anonymously.”

“No need to be making unnecessary accusations, Captain,” Fury said warningly.

Steve crossed his arms but his eyes did not leave the doctor. “It is not an unfounded accusation. You are the one has something to gain out of this and had full access to anything of Tony’s. Lord knows Tony lets you do whatever you want without question—“

“Of course you would know,” he shot back.

But whatever Steve next says, falls deaf in his ears. The room slowed suddenly, all noise fading. Something stopped his brain…

“We heard your complaint, Captain. And this incident was already escalated to the UN. IF it is anyone in this room,” Ross started firmly. “I would like to remind you all that you have signed a binding contract that literally spells out exactly against something like this. If we find out that it is one of the Avengers or someone of SHIELD, they will be punished to the fullest extent. It would be best to come forward now so we can make an effort to find some sort of agreement.”

Then added as an afterthought, “…If it is anyone else, any civilian, well… most likely they will never see the sun again.”
Stephen stilled trying to think. There was something there… something just out of his reach. But his mind was screaming at him that it was important. A grain of thought.

“That anger… control it.”

“Stephen!”

The Colonel and Pepper finally arrived. Came into view as soon as they stepped into the room at a hurried pace. But the next second, there was an evident shift in Rhodes from concern to pure anger as his sights fell on Steve.

“You son of a-“ the Colonel lunged forward without a second thought.

Everyone had barely any time to react. There was a sickening sound as a fist met bone. Soon, Rhodes and Steve were on the floor.

“JAMES!” Stephen rushed forward, pulling the Colonel off Steve. Rhodes was fighting him tooth and nail, trying to get back at the blonde. As much as Stephen himself had been debating the action for the past years, this was not the place. Especially not right now. They both fell back to the floor in a tangled mess as Stephen tried to hold the other back. Soon, Thor and Bruce joined in to help.

On the other side, he could see Barnes pulling Steve away, Sam rushing in to help if needed. But for once it didn’t seem all too necessary. The Captain didn’t even struggle. There was something odd in the way he lowered his gaze.

“Boys, out. Now. Go to the bedroom.” The clicking of heels could be heard as Pepper went to rush the two teens out.

Boys… Stephen looked towards them. Peter seemed frightened. But the usual obedient teen did not move his feet. Then his eyes land on Harley. There was something that the sorcerer had never seen before on the blonde. Something was wrong. The tenseness alone screamed wrong.

“What's the plan?” asked Clint to the Director.
But Fury fixated on Steve and Rhodes, evidently not wanting to take his eyes off them just in case things got out of hand.

Realizing, Ross answered, “We have every hacker, operatives… SHIELD, CIA, FBI, Black Ops, everyone and every organization on top of this. So you see, no need to make accusations right now… we will find the one behind this eventually, no doubt about it. And they will pay a hefty price. Now if any of you can think of anything that might help—”

Rhodes finally seemed to have calmed down a bit, though still glaring daggers at Steve.

But Stephen’s mind was racing. Dread soon finding him, distracting. His eyes were scanning the room, trying to debate out the millions of factors…

The Captain noticed the sudden change, the subtle oddness in the way the sorcerer was now acting. A small frown forming as for a split second their eyes met.

“I ran across the paperwork in the lab—”

“You mean you snooped around my stuff—”

There was only a handful of people who knew about Siberia. Who had access and the motive.

Who would have been smart enough to be able to get to the footage, bold enough to release it… but reckless enough that did not think through the full extent of the issue it would potentially create.

Suddenly, his heart filled with dread.

Stephen didn’t dare look to confirm…there was no need.

*Harley.*

The sorcerer let his eyes fall closed for a brief moment, trying to level out his breathing. Trying to quiet the panic that radiated throughout his whole being.
People were talking. He couldn’t make out who or what they were saying now. He didn’t care. None of that mattered right now.

“I did it.”

There was an eerie stillness, everyone freezing where they stood. As Stephen slowly stood to his feet, there was a wide range of expression staring back at him.

Rhodes finally turned away from the Captain completely, pushing himself off the floor as well in a hurry. His eyes now fixed on the doctor with one of pure confusion and disbelief.

“What…?” Ross seemed perplexed, taken aback by the sudden confession.

“You heard me.” His voice was even, stern. “I leaked the footages.”

Ross blinked rapidly. “Doctor Strange, do you understand what you are admitting to?”

“Yes. Fully.” Stephen said simply. “I leaked the footages to the public.”

Peter push past Pepper but Rhodes quickly rushed over, stopping the teen. “Doctor dad!”

Harley was also crossing the room at a fast pace. “Wait- No-“

“ENOUGH!”

It echoed. Reverberated to every corner. Stopping the two teen dead in their tracks, flinching horribly.

The sorcerer would have felt bad if it wasn’t for the dire situation they were in. Both Rhodes and Pepper were watching him with nervousness and concern.
He swallowed before spinning back around to peer at the small crowd. For a split second, Stephen glances at the Captain then Natasha. Their bewilderment was soon replaced by the dread of understanding. He sees both of them side-eyeing the teens for a split second.

Steve visibly paled, blood draining from his face as he forced himself to look away.

“Very well,” stated Ross after clearing his throat. His attention did not leave the sorcerer after the remark, except to take a quick glance at Fury. “Doctor Strange, we would need you to come with us for questioning.”

“I’ll come quietly. Don’t bother with the handcuffs, we both know I can escape if I wanted to.” The doctor replied matter-of-factly. He waved a motion with a hand, his clothes soon changing into his sorcerer robes. The Cloak of Levitation soon found its place on his shoulders.

No one seems to dare to make a sound as the SHIELD agents and Ross began to walk Stephen to the exit. Although, from the look of it, it seemed more as if the sorcerer was walking them out.

A soft ding before the elevator opened.

Then, rapid fluttering of the red fabric as the cloak shoved all of them into the elevator, minus one sorcerer. There was a loud exclamation, confusion, but before any of them could rush back out, the metal doors already closed.

“FRIDAY!” Stephen cried.

“Doors already locked, and reinforced, Doctor Strange.”

“What-?”

“Stephen!”

But Stephen didn’t pay attention to anyone else, hurrying across the room back to Harley and Peter.
“Harley,” he said hastily. But the teen refused to meet his eyes.

They didn’t have much time.

The doctor grabbed the teen’s shoulder in a firm grip. “Harley, look at me. Look at me!” The blonde finally turned the deep blue eyes to meet the sorcerer’s, letting out a soft exhale that seemed all too shaky.

“…Listen to me carefully. Tony will be here soon. You stay here. You do not do anything. Do you understand?”

“Christ-“ It was Clint’s voice, evidently distressed upon realization.

Suddenly, there was other muttering of curses. From the look of horror on many of their faces, most were catching on.

Harley swallowed, petrified. It felt so wrong to see the usual arrogance fall apart. “…Yes.”

The sorcerer took a deep breath, eyes searching. “Control that anger. It’s crucial you understand that now. Do not do anything rash. Do not be foolish. You wait quietly till Tony gets back. You hear me-”

There was now loud thumping and shouts from the other side of the elevator doors. Several watched it with nervousness, then back at the scene playing in front of them.

“And you both keep an eye out for each other.” Stephen turned to Peter who appeared as if he was about to be sick.

“Doctor Strange! Open this door right now!” It was muffled shout from Ross.

A second, then two… Stephen frowned, squeezing his grip a little tighter… and both of them nodded, reluctantly.
He straightened up, his eyes still not leaving the two teens for a moment longer. He signaled with a hand; whispering to the cloak, “Stay.”

The red fabric that was hovering draped loosely over the elder teen’s shoulders.

Another long stare and he spun around, making long strides towards the other end of the room.

He stopped next to Natasha, grabbing her forearm in a stronghold. “You owe me,” he said in a low tone. There was an edge to that voice that paired with the icy sharp gaze. “You owe me everything. Every ounce of happiness you have right now.”

The desperation, the dread, panic. They stare at each other. The unspoken request…

He let out an unsteady exhale. “He is his child. Tony’s child-“

The redhead held his gaze, then nodded.

Stephen stepped back from her, letting out a huff.

But before can leave a hand stopped him. He soon came face-to-face with Fury.

“Don’t. Talk.” It was barely above a whisper.

A pause, then the sorcerer gave a short, momentary acknowledgment. The Director retreated his hand.

“FRIDAY, open the door.”

The AI obliged. Though Stephen definitely sensed a pause, a hesitance. Ross seemed just about livid as he swiftly stepped back into the room. As the other agents filed out around him, Stephen peered around one last time. Many appeared disinclined to let this all happen but also terribly
uncertain what else to do.

He silently walked with the agents who now stood closer than before. This time, he matched their pace.

Harley swallowed. His whole body was trembling. He blinked back the tears, everything starting to sink in.

Then he snapped, rushing forward. Rhodes harshly grabbed him to hold him back.

The teen resisted, “DAD!”

Stephen turned, eyes widening slightly their gaze locked. He wasn’t sure what he was feeling anymore. Endless amounts of conflicting emotions fighting, clawing to get ahead.

But as he watched Harley, it appeared the kid was clearly feeling the same.

The doctor chanced a worried glance towards Ross but the agent already was turned away, a hint of guilt lingering in the stiffness. It seemed as though the man didn’t find the teen’s behavior as anything odd, most likely just assumed it was a child being a child, not wanting to separate from their parent in this type of circumstances.


Harley let out an unsteady exhale, but stopped himself from saying the next words.

I’m sorry.

………

As soon as the doors shut there were shouting.
“A kid- a fucking kid!”

“We can’t turn him in-“

“Of course we are not turning him in!”

“We can try to explain-“

“It escalated to the UN, it’s not that simple-“

“Okay, but are we going to let Strange take fall for-“

“You shouldn’t have made this much noise about this, Cap, or this may have been settled quietly!”

But Natasha rushed over to the elder teen, a hand on his shoulders to snap him back to sharp reality. “What device did you use to post it? We don’t have much time.”

Sam stepped closer, “Nat, what are you-“

“Getting rid of all the evidence-“

“SOMEONE EXPLAIN WHAT THE HELL IS GOING ON!”

There was a sudden halt in all movements, all noise fading.

Complete attention was on Tony as he marched into the room, his armor receding with each step. He scanned the room quickly. Anger, anxiety, concern, all wrapped into a single intense stare.

After a moment, however, it was clear he was searching… searching for one person who was no longer there.
Steve turned away in shame.

Only one other person looked more horrified than the Captain. And that was Harley.

Chapter End Notes

Okay cutting this chapter short again because I went overboard on outline LOL
...again

why do I always do this...

I got questioned several times about update schedule- I kind of don’t have one? I try updating weekly but you know... shit happens lolol. I would set a specific schedule if it wasn’t for that if something changes for that week, Ao3 doesn’t have a good method of notifying readers or making an announcement so lololol

BUT ... honestly, in terms of next chapter though, I’m thinking of waiting till 1600 kudos to update ngl HAHA;; so see you in 2 weeks ish? Or 1600 kudo - whichever comes faster lolol

Find me on tumblr :’)
wspaceblog.tumblr.com
If you have any questions, new one-shot prompt, would like extensions of some of the scenes from this series, etc. feel free to reach out!
Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

Sorry it took this long to update the chapter but there was a lot of shit happening in my personal life then also got super sick at some point – I’m still a bit disoriented :’)

BUT I would like to reiterate two things tho because clearly it never got through to some-

1) If you REALLY REALLY need a “villain” in a story or type to need one-sided character bashing, this fic is NOT for you. If you want to twist my intention / words to fit that, I can’t stop you of course... but please don’t make it seem like “I” am writing that (when, at that point, it’s in your head) or more importantly push as if I also need to feel that way

2) If you really want to nit-pick of course there are plot holes or some things might not completely make sense lol it’s fanfic, not some fancy published work. I do TRY to research and put thought into things but of course, it’s not perfect. Sure maybe I can spend endless amount of more time planning and researching but the truth of the matter is then, you guys will never get any more update because it’ll be too much work for a hobby??

Thankx

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Route to Metro General!”

“NO! I am not going to that fucking hospital! I will never set foot in that hospital again even if my life.”

“Tony, I swear if you don’t listen to me right now-“

“NO!”

“YOU’RE BLEEDING OUT!”

“Cap, if you make me go there so help me g- ughHHH-“
Tony threw his head back writhing. There was a sound of ragged breathing and a loud thump as the billionaire smashed his fist down onto the flooring of the ambulance. For a moment his eyes were tightly shut, gritted teeth, trying to stop himself from screaming. The next, the two Avengers had their gaze locked, both watching each other, eyes wide.

“Tony….” came the Captain’s steady voice. It managed to hold it’s usual seemingly unshakable resolve, the earnest. “…please.”

The brunette stared into the baby blue eyes. Two deep breathes. In, out, in, slower out. He swallowed. “…Jarvis, call Christine Palmer.”

............

Clunk. Clunk. CLUNK.

Steve swallowed, hard. He watched, a bit wide-eyed as the very pretty woman, a doctor clearly, chucked down various medical tools onto the metal tray with each use. She seemed dismayed, irked. Definitely knew Tony enough to be on the first-name basis but almost refused to meet the billionaire’s eyes other than to glare from time to time.

An old friend? Upset the billionaire managed to land himself in another dangerous situation? An ex? From a relationship that ended badly? Tony had many.

To be frank, Steve’s bet was on the latter. After all, by now the Captain had definitely understood better what they meant by “woman’s scorn”. And this doctor, Christine Palmer, seemed to be acting very much against her real nature by being cold, unreasonably rough. People don’t manage that often without some strong emotional drive behind it.

Christine had dismissed the other nurses and staff as soon as the bleeding was managed. She was currently dressing the wound herself in an efficient manner as Tony intermittently flinched from time to time at the unforgiving pace.

“When was the last time you drank water?”

“…Christine, sweetheart-“
“Drink the damn water, Tony.”

Tony closed his mouth with a snap. Eyes locking with the soft hazel gaze that did not entirely match with the harshness of the words. Steve watched as the engineer silently lifts the cup to his lips, taking a large gulp, eyes never leaving the doctor. Steve absentmindedly wondered if maybe Tony had a thing for doctors. There wasn’t much in the world that held the genius’s undivided attention for this long.

“I’m going to draw blood.”

“Oh come on-“

“I’m not asking.”

Tony scoffed, “Is that even legal-“

“Ma’am-” Steve made a motion to step forward, but Tony gave him a look, stopping the Captain dead in his tracks.

“Cap… can you maybe wait outside? Please?”

Steve hesitated for a long while but eventually swallowed before nodding. He ran his fingers through his now messy hair. “….Okay. Okay, I’ll just… be right outside, Tony.”

Tony briefly flashed his well-practiced smile, “Thanks.”

Christine waits till the Captain left completely, the door closing shut with a click. “I’m going to check for alcohol and substance abuse.”

Tony opened his mouth but she beat him to it.
“I’ll run it myself. It won’t get leaked to the public. But if I find that you are killing yourself-,” her voice breaks without meaning to. He sees the tears forming in the almond-shaped eyes. Although the next second, she shook her head before going about the task at hand. “I’ll send them over to Pepper and James. I doubt they would be letting you out of their sight for the next weeks-“

There was bitterness, bite, in the way she spoke.

Tony let out a sigh, though he didn’t try to fight her as he felt the needle pressing. “Why are you being so judgmental today? Are you PMS-ing or something-“

That made her stop. She looked up, suddenly making eye contact in an intense glare. “You expect me to be kind to you right now? I haven’t seen you in months. MONTHS, Tony. And now you just stride in here flaunting about how you’re moving on when he suffers? I’m his best friend!”

The words caught him off guard, the meaning soon sinking in. Suddenly, the pretend nonchalant wiped clean from his face. “You think I’m not suffering? You think-“

“You broke up with him!” Her voice was not loud, barely above normal speaking volume. But that tone, the ever heated sincerity behind those hazel orbs, she may as well been yelling. “Just because… because what? Because he doesn’t fit into your fun, extravagant lifestyle anymore? Because his injury is troublesome? …You… I thought you loved him. I thought—… he NEEDED you. And now you just… He LOVED you. He loved you with everything he’s had. He loved you in ways I never thought it would be possible for him! And you just… threw him away… so fast… It’s only been months-” She stared at him with almost desperation. “Not even… just months and you already moved on with HIM??”

Christine lowered her gaze, throwing aside the tube with an unsteady exhale. “I’m sure… it must be wonderful. Finally dating someone who is also a hero. The most beloved Avenger.” She was cleaning up now, putting away the tools that she finished using loudly. Anger resonating with each movement.

“Someone who can really keep up with you and be at your side in every aspect of your life. I’m—… I get it. Iron Man is huge part of your life. I get that. But… You know Stephen was always… so damn worried about that. So insecure that he wouldn’t be enough for your trilling superhero life. I kept stupidly telling him how that won’t matter to you-“

But Tony wasn’t listening. He already stopped listening after her first sentence. The words replaying over and over in his mind.
“He broke up with me.”

It was quiet. Much too quiet. The words felt foreign even as he uttered them.

She paused, staring at him with disbelief. “What...?”

“He... Stephen... he broke up with me.”

There was a sigh before he looked up to meet her eyes once more. A ghost of a smile playing on his lips at an attempt to suppress a scream. He swallowed his pride, trying to form the next words. “I begged. I begged him to just... give me a chance... and he... You should have heard him. He sounded so... I didn’t know... How unhappy he must have been... and I guess... I didn’t know. He said he was tired of me, Christine.”

She turned away, fixing her gaze to the far end of the wall, biting her lower lips. Tony can already see the streaks of tears trailing down her face.

“Hey-“ he said softly. He swallowed, hard. Reaching out to put a hand lightly on her shoulder, pulling her towards him. “Hey, come on-... Christine, sweetheart, it’s-“ It’s not okay. It’s far from okay. But he admits he never liked seeing woman upset... at least ones he cared about.

The doctor leaned against him. First hesitantly before falling completely into his arms. Christine had a hand over her mouth, trying to quiet the muffled cries.

“It’s...” Tony placed a hand to the back of her head lightly then trailed down gently to pat lightly at her back. “It’s going to be alright... It’ll be alright in the end-“

“No...” she replied almost inaudibly between sobs. “No, it’s... not.”

He felt the familiar tinge of burning in his eyes, the tears threatening to form. He looked around, trying to fix his attention elsewhere, his gaze soon falling to the glass door where the Captain stood at the other side.
Steve had his arms crossed, his eyes down cast after glancing at the crying doctor. A look of confusion, nervousness, sympathy clearly visible as he paced.

“If you were... if you just stayed with him... he would be okay. I just kept thinking how... you’d know- what to do...” She took a sharp inhale. “It was just easier to blame you than... to accept he’s... I shouldn’t have... believed all the stupid gossip. I knew that. I really did. I’m... sorry-“

“He... he didn’t tell you,” That caught him by surprise. Tony had simply expected Stephen to have told Christine about their breakup. She was his closest friend. Who was helping him then? Who was by his side? It couldn't be an easy adjustment after the accident.

“No... No he didn’t.” She took a half step back, wiping her tears away with the corner of her sleeve hastily. “I think... I’m losing him...he’s pushing me away.”

Blur. Everything was a blur.

“Nat, if we delete that computer, we are burning the only evidence that will vindicate Strange-“

“This was what Stephen was asking for. We don’t have much time before some agent-“

“There are a lot of agencies involved, a lot of moving players. There are tons of gray area to this! We need to play our cards right... We need to think about this carefully-“

Cold.

It felt cold.

He felt a wave of shiver that radiated throughout his body. His own blood felt cold, foreign. He flexed his fingers, hands balling into fists only to quickly open them once more. He needed the reminder. A reminder that this was still his body, his own limbs, that he still had control over something.

“Tony-“

“Not one more step, Captain. That’s my warning-“

“Thor, this is not the time!”

“Cap, maybe you should-“

“For God’s sake, he’s not breathing!”

That particular edge in his tone. One that only appeared on rare occasions. A crack to the perfect, proud, infallible demeanor.

Cap. That was Cap. Tony could always make out Steve’s voice. Anywhere, anytime. Especially out in a battlefield. It cut through the fog and kept him from straying. Even now.

He hated to admit it. Especially… now.

“What will happen to him?”

“We can’t be sure. There is no standard procedure for something like this.”

“UN was already distrusting of those with supernatural powers and Doctor Strange is the epitome of everything they fear. If they use this as a chance to put him down for good-“
“Come on, Strange can break out of there in seconds-“

“He won’t.”

“And even if he did, what? That’s signing up for never being able to live out in the open again- What about Stark or the kids-“

“Breathe, Tony. You need to breathe-“

Bruce. That soothing, mellow tone. It often calmed him.

But it’s not what he wanted right now. It wasn’t right.

Tony wanted the familiar low baritone that often held a hint of satirical laughter. That was right.

The words that always flaunted the sharp intelligence. The gaze that exuded bold arrogance. There was a pang of shrill pain as he thought of the particular shade of icy blue-green.

“TONY!” Rogers…? “BREATHE!”

Tony gulped in the air, harshly, abruptly.

He felt a little light-headed as he locked eyes with the Captain. There was relief in the blonde’s expression as he finally stopped struggling against Sam who seemed to have still been holding him back.

It was wrong. That shade of blue… it was wrong. But at least… it was familiar.

Things were moving too fast, then too slow, then too fast again. Tony couldn’t fully focus on any of the conversations. The expression. The emotions. He couldn’t even feel the full control of his body, his movements, the words that flowed from his tongue.
His kids. Where are his kids?

“Pepper.”

“Yes, Tony?”

“I need… I need you to take the kids to the bedroom. To Peter’s.”

“Dad-“

“Da-… Tony … I didn’t mean… I didn’t want-“

“Harley. Harley… it’s okay. It’s going to be okay. I’m not mad at you. But I need you to go with Pepper right now. Okay?… Peter… Peter, don’t… no, no, don’t cry. Hey it’s going to be alright-“

Lies. It felt like lies.

“We don’t have time!”

“This is irreversible!”

“Even if we don’t wipe this out now, what are we going to do? Turn it over to the UN and have the kid stand trial?!?”

“We already agreed not turning a kid in!”

“Then what happens to Strange?”

“He’s a kid. The UN has to understand that. He was upset, impulsive, overcome by emotions… They might just let this go-“
“He’s not that young. We see him as a child but he’s nearly 21. They will see him as an adult.”

“So it’s either the kid or Strange…”

“… Maybe… Tony— what… what would you like us to do…”

The hard decisions. Always the hard decisions. Shoved to him as if it was some courtesy.

He didn’t want to hear it. His brain didn’t want to process it. None of it was real. This can’t be real.

He doesn’t… he can’t-

“Delete it.”

The world came to a sudden halt. A silence so empty it echoed his wretched emotions.

Tony swallowed as he looked up, meeting the eyes of the one who spoke.

“Deleted it,” Steve repeated as he turned to each of them then back to meet Tony’s gaze. “If they trace it back to Harley, they won’t hold back on him. And Strange… it’ll prove he just lied. … Strange has leverage. They fear him enough they won’t do anything rash at the very least. Get rid of the device. Any evidence that indicates who really did this. The kid will be safe and it’ll buy us more time to make a plan on what to do next.”

Tony let the breath he didn’t know he was holding. Another long look, then he turned away. Hands stretching over onto the cold surface of the table, leaning heavily.

A book. Old, foreign, definitely not anything common.

Next to piles of papers and textbooks.

Tick tock.

Tick.

Tock.

What time was it? The sunlight from the window didn’t reach to this side of the room anymore. How long has he been standing here? There was less noise. Less presence.

He kept looking without really seeing. Kept listening without really hearing.

Tony rubbed his eyes, blinked harshly trying to clear the blurriness that just would not go away. Or was it all just in his head.

He heard Rhodey at some point. The voice that was unmistakably Pepper as well. The careful touch he became so accustomed to over the years.

They were trying to help. They were trying to make sure he’s okay.

“Platypus… I… just leave. I need… space.”

Rhodey… Pepper… Harley… Peter…

“Tones, come on-“

“Tony, we can’t just leave you like this-“
It wasn’t okay. They weren’t okay. They were upset. He, Tony, he needs to be here… he needs to make sure they are okay. That was his job. So why couldn’t he be here.

He needs to make sure they are okay. He needs to… That was his responsibility.

“Get out! …Just please. Get. Out.”

He’s failing.

He’s failing to protect them. As he failed to protect Stephen.

He was… supposed to have protected him. But he selfishly couldn’t get a hold of himself. He couldn’t… not right now. He didn’t have the energy to assure them… that it’s okay. To make sure everyone is okay.

He was not okay.

Tony was not okay. He could feel it. The familiar anxiety, the panic… just a step away from the cliff that led to a fall.

But that was… this was Stephen’s job.

It wasn’t Rhodey’s… Pepper’s… this was Stephen’s job.

He needed… Stephen.

He needed the rest of them… to leave.

He didn’t have the energy to be strong. To be what they needed him to be.

He dug. Dug, and dug, and dug. Tony was in their bedroom. His and Stephen’s. How did he get
Clothes were flying all over, making random piles all around him as he rummaged through drawers and drawers. Where was it?

Closet. He ran towards the door. Nearly tripping over the mountain of fabrics. He kicked them away without a second thought.

He clawed at the boxes, throwing them open one after another. Flipping them, the content scattering onto the floor unceremoniously. Where was it? He needed…

Found it.

Tony let out a sigh of unmasked relief. The air coming out shaky, unstable, almost a sob.

He reached for it, the white dress shirt stained with spots of red. With trembling hands, he fingers the inner lining of the right cuff until he felt it… the feeling of cold metal… a small heart made of shrapnel.

He felt his knees give out, hitting the hardwood floor with a thud. It hurt, but just a splinter compared to the stab he feels in his heart. He wanted to scream. Scream and scream till his lungs gave out as well, till all the oxygen left his brain.

He brought the shirt close to his chest, burying his wretched cries into the soft fabric.

“Tony… here…”

Tony stared at the shirt that was being laid gently on his lap. The confusion was at the tip of his tongue but then, he felt a tiny metal between his fingers. He turned it slowly, revealing the heart-shaped metal, barely a centimeter in width, sewn to the inners of the cuff.

“He was… wearing it when he was admitted. I didn’t have the chance to give it to him before he…”
disappeared,” Christine said quietly, hesitantly. “I… mended it the best I could- I couldn’t get all the stains out. I wasn’t sure… if it was proper to give it to you… but… it felt wrong to throw it away.”

Tony smiled softly as he put a hand over her’s.

She smiled back at him, or at least tried to. “I know… what it meant to him and…”

He took a deep breath, twirling the metal lightly between his fingers, reminiscing.

It was a tiny pendant he, Tony, cast himself with some of the shrapnel removed from his heart. He had sewn it to one of Stephen’s favorite dress shirt. Quite badly he might add. He had never sewn anything before in his life and had to get a quick lesson from quite exasperated Rhodey.

“Tony, I told you! If you are going to take my clothes, put them back. …Wait, what is this?”

“What does it look like? A heart. I cast it from the shrapnel. …I sewed it there.”

“Clearly. It’s terrible stitches.”

“HEY!”

“You never sewn anything in your life have you?”

“Oh, shut up, Doc. … And stop grinning! Why are you grinning?!”

“…Your heart on my sleeve, huh?"

“…Shut up, Stephanie—”

He had forgotten that Stephen had been wearing it that night of the accident. The surgeon often did
when he had to go to an event without Tony. A deliberate choice the billionaire knew Stephen’s pride never let himself admit out loud.

“Thanks… for this.” Tony gave another light squeeze over Christine’s hand before standing to leave. “And for stitching me back up too.”

He stood to leave, grimacing as he felt a shot of pain in his lower abdomen. But it wasn’t unbearable and frankly, he has been in worse shape before.

“I’m sorry,” Christine blurted out.

Tony turned towards her once more, questioningly.

Her eyes darted towards the direction of the door, though subtle. “From what I said before. I mean… I just… I’ve been Stephen’s friend for a long time. But I am sorry. You deserve to move on. You deserve to be happy.”

She wore a sad smile, a bit forced from what Tony can assume.

He had to think over the words for a moment to realize what she was getting at.

“Oh. I’m… no,” he said in a hurry, letting out a huff of laughter at the thought. “It’s not like that. Cap and I are friends… sort of… I think. Teammates, for sure. But completely platonic. Pretty sure he doesn’t even swing that way and has a thing for Nat. I mean look at him. The guy is the epitome of the 40s stereotypical American Dream with the house in the suburb, a stay-at-home wife, white picket fence, 2.5 kids with a dog. Though pretty sure Nat won’t go for that-…The media is just spinning gossips… you know how it is-“

But he quickly stopped himself as Christine gave him an odd look. “What?”

There was a slight frown that overcame her expression. “… He… he hasn’t left your side since you got here… he basically hasn’t taken his eyes off you since you got here. I’ve… seen interviews and news. Saw how he looks at your other teammates, how he talks about them. It’s different… the way he looks at you. He doesn’t see you as just your friend, Tony…”
He didn’t turn around. Simply lift the glass to his lips, taking a large gulp. The amber liquid led a trail of burn down his throat.

There was a soft sound of the elevator closing, footsteps drawing near.

Steve took a deep breath in, eyes surveying the unusual mess that scattered around the lab. He opened his mouth as if to speak but…

“Why are you here?”

The words died at his throat. Steve knew what he was in for when he came down here. Completely knew he would be unwelcomed. He would be lucky if he made it out without at least a couple of objects thrown for his head. But still, the coldness of Tony’s words, the quiet bitterness and anguish it carried, simmering just beneath the surface… it made him flinch.

Tony let out a harsh laugh. “Do you really think I want to see your face right now, Rogers? I heard about how fast UN got involved because of your bitching. Fine, I get that they may have gotten involved eventually either way but if you just didn’t speed it up we could have-…” he let out a scoff before throwing back the rest of his drink, drowning the rest of his anger in it. “…Seriously, why the fuck are you here?”

Steve continued to stare for another minute. The baby blue eyes meeting the whiskey brown. There were so many things unsaid. So many things Tony could simply guess.

That was the thing about them. They didn’t agree on so many things, bickered at every chance they got, opposite sides in terms of fundamental beliefs and morals… often told they were too different to actually understand each other.

But as their gaze locked, the silent moment as they simply stood still… it always felt like they did.
Some understanding that surpassed logic or reason. Something that was far more innate, build into their bones.

Tony felt his anger starting to falter. He hated it. Often hated that aspect. How he was always swayed if he continued to stare into those clear blue orbs.

It was often said that Stephen was his weakness. But he knew the truth. Stephen had and always will be his greatest strength. Steve… Steve will always be his greatest weakness.

“Get out, Rogers.”

“No.”

His head snapped up towards the Captain’s direction at the blatant retort. The anger rearing its head once more. “I’m not in the mood right now, Cap. Get the fuck out before I make you.”

“No,” Steve replied once more. His arms were crossed though his expression told Tony the Captain was far from angry. He seemed… sad, resigned, but determined.

“What the hell is your problem?!”

“My problem is that you can potentially kill yourself!”

Tony closed his mouth, glaring at the other. Though subconsciously, he set down the glass in his hand.

Steve took a step forward, swallowing hard. “You’re… not okay. You needed to be reminded to breathe earlier. You’re off the deep end. You’re disassociating in the worst of ways. Do you even remember how you got here or the past couple hours?”

He sighed, looking around before fixing his gaze back to the brunette. “You can hardly even look at your kids… This is not like you to be unable to… Now you are drinking on empty stomach… I… I know when things… get there. When you’re just a half a step away from hell-”
“I am in fucking hell, Rogers,” he snapped through gritted teeth. “I was this close. THIS FUCKING DAMN CLOSE… to having it all!”

“Tony-“

“All the sacrifice I made to get here. Every goddamn drop of blood, bead of sweat, the fallen tears-IT WAS MY TIME! I DAMN EARNED IT!” The brunette crosses the room in quick strides, pointing a finger directly to the other’s face. “…You… You always take everything from me!”

He realized how crazy he must look right now. The raw emotions fully on display.

But to his surprise, for once, Steve didn’t look judgmental… just… sad.

“I know.” The Captain stepped back, running a hand over his face, shaking his head slightly. “I also know… it shouldn’t be me here right now. But I’m only here because you managed to chase everyone… and I mean everyone out of here. It’s to the point Rhodes and Pepper let me down here because one thing greater than their want for my blood right now is making sure you are alive. You managed to drive everyone away but you’re not going to get me to leave.”

Tony was just about snarling, “You really think I can’t-“

But Steve cut him off. “You already hate me. I’m not afraid of much else.”

There was a long silence as they both stood their ground. A tense moment where each of them wondered of the next step.

Then it hit him… his mind was clear. For the first time since Tony had arrived back at the compound, since he heard of the chaos that had transpired, he felt clear-headed, focused. He was here. Not floating off somewhere in the corners of his thoughts, didn’t feel trapped in his own body, his body finally felt like his own. He was in control.

He took a deep breath, letting his eyes fall closed for a split second before turning back towards Steve.
“You made the call,” he said softly, a definite contrast to his earlier tone.

Steve’s expression turned to one of confusion. “What?”

Tony turned away, hands reaching for the bottle to refill his glass. “When they were all arguing about what to do next. And they asked me. …You made the call. To erase the evidence. You made the decision.”

“Look. Tony-“ His voice was even but there was underlining of nerve as if he was just waiting for the other to start yelling at him once more. “Strange already turned himself in. I’m sorry… but… there would be no use both of them being taken in-“

“I know,” he stops him. “I know. …It was the correct choice. But why did you make the call for me?”

Steve let out a sigh, glancing away. “You know why-“

“I need to hear it.”

There was a short pause, a tense one.

“You would have hated yourself…” he started softly, slowly. “If you made that call, having to choose between your… fiancé-“ Steve licked his lips. The words tasted bitter, even now. “…or your kid… either way, you would have never stopped… hating yourself.”

They both looked up at the same time, their eyes meeting.

“You…” Steve pursed his lips briefly then let out another heavy sigh. “You already hate me… not much loss there. And I figured… better you hate me than yourself. … You shouldn’t… make that call. It would have killed you.”

“hm…” The corner of his lips twitched as he glanced away. “Well… no one else… understood.”
Tony let out a bitter laugh before lifting the glass to his lips. The harsh truth.

As much as he loved Pepper and Rhodey, as much as they loved him in return, the reality was that they never fully understood him, not in this way. They dealt with each other well, knew just how to interact with one another, they had a great dynamic… and they put up with him better than most… but never just… got it.

Perhaps, before Stephen, that was the reason for the loneliness Tony couldn’t shake quite shake off… even when he felt like he never had the right to be. It felt like an insult to what his two friends were giving him already. Wrong to want more.

Steve… as much as they bickered, as much as they disagreed… when push comes to shove, oddly enough, he got it. Maybe not to the level as Stephen. The Civil War incident was proof of that… although there were many other factors playing during that event. But, he came close.

How did it all turn out like this? Would it have been different had he just… been stronger? If Tony just didn’t let the loneliness and the misery overtake him. Never stopped believing Stephen would come back to him.

If he had just never acted on this… Perhaps things would have been simpler between him and Cap. Between the whole team, in fact. They were good as friends. It was a shame…

He raised the glass to his lips, not wanting to think any further into the convoluted mess that was his life.

“How many is that?”

A second, then two, Tony simply stared. Then slowly lowered the cup. “Four,” he said simply as he slid it away from him.

Steve nodded, still watching as Tony moved away from the table and the liquid poison.

Then, the blonde started to pace.
Tony’s eyes lingered on him for a bit, noting the tenseness of the shoulders, eyes darting around but mostly landing back onto the floor, an awkward nervousness the Captain tried to reframe from acting on in public.

“You seem… better. I can leave… if you want. I can get Rhodes… or Bruce, Nat… Thor…”

“No,” Tony blurted out. He shocked himself at the rashness of the answer.

Steve cleared his throat. “No meaning… I shouldn’t leave? … Or leave but just don’t get anyone else…? Because at the very least I’m telling Rhodes…”

The engineer debated the question. He knew… what he wanted but wasn’t sure if he had the right to want it. Familiar guilt was settling in from the corners of his mind.

“Stay,” he turned away. “I… can barely… take care of myself right now. I don’t know how to be… not okay… around them… Not in this way. Maybe my anger at you is helping me focus.”

Steve snorted but nodded, running a hand through his own hair then settling at the back of his neck.

“I’m not fucking you though.”

That made Captain snap his gaze back up, very much startled, offended even.

Tony noted, however, Cap didn’t choke on air or become completely flustered as he used to. But, well, he supposed after many years even Steve would have become used to his outlandish remarks.

“Really, Tony?” Steve said with a frown. “I’m not- … I’m not here hoping to take advantage of you! That’s not what I’m doing!”

The billionaire gave him a flat stare. “Then what are you doing?”
Steve opened his mouth though closing it back up almost instantly. He seemed as though he was asking himself the question, trying to figure out the answer himself.

“I guess… in a way this… this was me trying… to be your friend.”

It wasn’t a lie. Steve definitely missed this. Being able to talk to Tony, being able to be around him. He missed the unique friendship that they shared. It was so rare and incomparable to anything else – something he didn’t fully appreciate till it was too late. He desperately wanted it back. The only thing that he wanted more was… well… more.

But he was slowly coming to terms with that as well. About Stephen Strange becoming a permanent fixture once more in Tony’s life. Steve had to admit, he hasn’t gotten there fully yet but today had helped. He didn’t have to like it but it helped for him to see.

Strange didn’t hesitate to throw himself to shield Tony’s kid. Probably fully knowing that it will, quite possibly, be at the cost of his own happiness with Tony. After all Steve heard about Strange, how the sorcerer never wanted kids, he was surprisingly good with them… almost instinctively knew how to be with them. The whole thing reminded him of Tony in an odd way.

It haunted him for several hours. What would he, Steve, have done if he had been in Strange’s position? He wasn’t sure.

“Did you…” Steve started quietly. He wasn’t sure if he was ready for the answer. “Did you want me to stop?”

Tony was just staring at him. The Captain can see the gears turning in the genius’s head.

“Tony, you never… actually told me to stop. It’s always not now, you don’t want to talk right now, you want me to leave you alone now, but you never tell me to stop… trying. I need… Tony I just need you to tell me to stop… not Rhodes, not Strange, not everyone else… I need you to tell me to stop trying…”

There was long silence as they stood still, eyes locked. The only sound was the soft vibrations of the many engines in the lab. Then, with a soft sigh, Tony leaned back onto one of the work desks to steady himself. He didn’t realize how tired he was, how his legs felt like giving out.
"...friends?"

"...yes."

“I…” Tony bit his lips for a moment, debating his words. “I don’t want you to stop trying.” A pause. “…but I’m not ready to say yes.”

Steve smiled softly. “Okay.”

“You can’t just take the earpiece out like that! Not out in the field!”

“Well if you stopped yelling at me I wouldn’t have had to!”

“Tony, this isn’t a joke! That was dangerous!”

The billionaire let out a scoff, walking even faster. But Steve was hot at his tail, matching the long strides rather easily. Of course, he can. The Captain was at least a good several inches taller in height. Which lately had pissed Tony off more than he’d like to admit.

In fact, everything about the first Avenger was irking him. Those perfect jawline, the tall well-toned frame, the golden blonde hair, the clear sky blue eyes… And that voice. The voice that somehow can be so gentle and commanding at the same time.

It was all getting under his skin. All the traits that first made Tony easily warm up to the Captain, made him even become fond of him… now… all it did was clawed at his conscience.

“You nearly got yourself killed! This isn’t a one-man show. We are a team. You can’t just throw away the communicator just because we weren’t letting you do what you want!”

“It got the job done, Cap. Stop being a bitch about it-“ Tony snapped.
Steve frowned, quickly closing his mouth. Lately, Tony had been quite temperamental. Acting out left and right, taking any chance to go against him from something minor as food choice to directions out in the field. And for the life of him, Steve could not figure out what had caused the sudden turn in their dynamic. Things were good. They were great. Then suddenly, it wasn’t.

Sure, they didn’t always see eye-to-eye but Tony had never been this irrational or unreasonably snappish. Especially not for something as serious as the team’s safety.

He grabbed for Tony’s arm, careful not to overexert his strength. But the Captain only had to pull slightly before the other to came to a halt. But as their eyes met, something made Steve’s stomach turn.

“Tony, what’s going on?” he blurted out before he could stop himself.

“Nothing.” The voice sounded odd. Not particularly angry but off. “Only thing going on is you, Cap, are over-reacting.”

“I…” Steve was taken aback. “I’m- no. I’m not over-reacting! You acted on your own when you should have waited for one of us to get to you! You rushed in with no backup then threw away your communicator when I pushed for you to wait-“

Tony didn’t know why he was arguing still. He knew. He knew this time, he was clearly out of line. But he just wanted to yell. He just wanted to shout at Steve until he had something more tangible to hate. “You were annoying! I got the job done. That’s what matters!”

“You got lucky. You could have died! If Thor didn’t manage to get there in the last minute-“

“Well, I didn’t!”

Steve ran a hand over his face, the frustration starting to overtake him. This was definitely not like any of their other arguments. This was outright getting unreasonable. Childish even. This wasn’t making any sense.

“Tony, do you really not see what you did was a problem?”
“Whatever-“ Tony muttered before sharply turning around, walking away once more.

The Captain gritted his teeth, hands falling to his hips. He didn’t want to. He really didn’t. But there was no other choice if the other was not even listening, being this stubborn. “You’re benched.”

That stopped him dead. There was a defining cold silence before...

“What?” Tony sounded offended, very offended. He took couple swift steps back towards Steve, fist clenched, jaws set.

Steve, however, remained grounded. “You heard me. If you are refusing to work together as a team then I can’t let you out in the field. This is dangerous. Not just for you but everyone else with you out there.”

Tony let out a harsh laugh. “You can’t fucking be serious, Rogers. Just because I went against your orders once-“

“This isn’t the first time this week! You’ve been doing this for the past four missions. Doing whatever you want without any regard for anyone else or the plan. And if you are not even going to talk this out like an adult then you are not giving me any other choice. “

There was a tense silence, their gaze locked in an intense glare. Tony was stepping closer. One. Two. Till they were barely a foot apart.

Steve can already sense it. The storm that brooded, foreboding, behind those penetrating dark eyes.

“Nat goes against your orders all the time. I don’t see you lecturing her or benching her-“

“She doesn’t- Tony, that is different and you know it-“

“Why.”
“Why what?”

Tony let out a laugh, though his eyes remained cold, frigid. “Want to talk, Cap? Want to be adults? Why don’t we talk about your actual problem? Problem with me-“

Steve stared back, slightly confused. Although a particular dread that had haunted his dreams for past months was starting to knock at his heart. “What? I don’t have a problem with you, Tony-“

“No?” That sounded sarcastic, a feign surprise.

Steve’s brain was running a mile a minute. He gulped involuntarily. They were too close now. Much too close.

Tony was leaning in. Steve had a split second of debate whether to take a step back, although, in the end, his pride got the better of him.

“Do you follow the rest of the team around lecturing them? Or am I just special, Cap-“

Something caught in his throat, uncomfortable heat rising to his neck. “I-“

“Would you have benched any of the others if they pulled this? Would you have kept going on and on about their safety? Freak out to ridiculous proportions every time they do something with some risks? …See, I used to think maybe it’s because I’m the only one on the team that didn’t have some superpowers or some black op training. Which fine, I get it, understandable. Or that we had some… nice friendship thing going so you just cared a little more-…..”

There was a pause before a snort. “What if I just let you bend me over? Would that help you stop being so fixated? Clear your head? Would that help you to lose the extra interest in me?”

Projecting. Maybe he, Tony, was the one fixating. Maybe that’s why Steve had been getting on his nerves when technically, truthfully, the Captain wasn’t doing anything out of the norm. Maybe… just maybe… all Tony needed was one good fuck to satisfy the curiosity, the tension… and they can both just move on.
Tony smirked, watching as Steve open his mouth several times without being able to form proper words. Those blue eyes were wide, shocked, scandalized, somewhere halfway between embarrassed and offended.

God, it was so obvious. After all, Steve didn’t have much talent for lying. Christine was right. How did he not notice before? How could he have been so blind to the clear signs? He was THE playboy for god’s sake.

Right. Because of Stephen… there was Stephen. Or perhaps… still. Maybe that’s what this all was about. The guilt for feeling anything remotely to… interest… for another.

Stupid Steve fucking damn Rogers.

Tony had to admit, if he really was being honest with himself, really dig deep into his subconscious, he may have had a small crush on America’s golden boy from the start. It didn’t help that the engineer spent much of his childhood looking up to the other man as a hero, thanks to all of Howard’s endless stories. Didn’t help that the Captain was so easy on the eyes.

And once Steve started paying attention to him, really paid attention… took interest in his work or opinion, followed him around seeming all too happy with the simple thought of spending time with him… Tony couldn’t help but become fond of the blonde. He was human. He liked feeling liked. He liked feeling wanted.

But he could have ignored it. Happily went on with this friendship, comradely, or whatever it was. Didn’t have to think about anything more. Ignorance is bliss.

But Steve just had to… just had to be like him. Like him, to the point, everyone knew and now it became impossible to ignore. Impossible for Tony to not think about it all the damn time.

Once you know, you can’t un-know. A burden that can’t be put back into Pandora’s box to lock it away.

The billionaire stepped even closer, their faces near inches apart, sharing the same air.
“Curiosity, right, Cap? That’s what this is about? Why don’t we just do it once? Any way you like. Though I bet you want me underneath you. Moaning your name as you finally have your way-“

“Tony…” he said warningly.

But Tony could already see the cracks. The way the pupils dilated, his stance too rigid, the way that gaze kept stealing quick glances to his lips.

He doesn’t bother to wait. Wait for the other to come to terms with some annoying debate about morality.

Tony threw his weight onto the other, grabbing the sides of Steve’s face crushing their lips together, flushing their bodies.

For a heartbeat, Captain remained motionless, clear shock in the way his eyes became impossibly wide. Then hesitantly, a hand rose to the brunette’s waist in a gentle hold, started kissing back, slowly, cautiously.

Tony started using his teeth, forcing his tongue between Steve’s lips, rough, demanding, releasing the tension from the argument just moments before. Cap was starting to follow suit, his touch becoming bolder, more confident with each passing second.

Then, Tony felt himself being pushed, his back soon hitting the cold walls of the hallway with a soft thud. He threw his head back with a low laugh. Arching his back to grind their bodies together. A moan escaped both their lips as their cocks rubbed together beneath the layers of their clothes.

Getting an idea, the brunette shifted his weight, wrapping both his legs around the other’s waist. Steve caught and held him as if it was nothing, the firm hands supporting Tony up by his thighs. Of course… super-strength. Tony knew. And yet, it didn’t dampen the appreciative shiver that ran down his spine as he felt the strong body and grip on him.

He threaded his fingers through the sun-kissed hair, enjoying the softness slipping between his fingers.

But as their eyes locking in a heated stare, he was taken aback.
Just as quickly, however, Tony hastily brushed it aside, feigning ignorance.

Pretending he didn’t see the look of pure adoration behind those clear blue orbs. The look yearning, affection, passion that stretched far beyond simple lust.

And just as quickly, he disregarded the quickening of his own heart.

“So who really leaked the tape?”

“I did.”

Everett Ross ran a hand over his face as he leaned back on the chair.

They have been at this for the past days. He doesn’t know exactly what exactly transpired for it to all get here but his instincts told him something was not right.

“I know you didn’t.” He said with great deal of exasperation. “You’re for some reason protecting who is really responsible. Look, Doctor Strange, We don’t want to prosecute you but if you continue to lie, that’s what you are forcing us to do.”

“I already told you. I made your job easy. I confessed. Now go about your way in deciding the appropriate penance and stop wasting both of our time.”

Stephen, who was sitting opposite side of the metal desk from the agent, merely closed his eyes, almost getting comfortable.

He let his mind wander elsewhere.

To the warm sun, soft bed Tony didn’t want to leave from just this morning… Because that’s what it was in his head, just this morning. That particular laugh. The real one. Not the one that was often
faked for the world. One that reached all the way to the large doe eyes.

“Why are you protecting them? Who can you be this hell-bent on protecting? I know it’s not Stark. Stark did not release that footage—“

“Oh, do shut up,” the sorcerer snapped. Annoyed to be interrupted from his own world that held where he truly wanted to be. Not this cold, boxed room. “Your voice is starting to be grating to endure.”

But Ross didn’t relent. “Someone close to Stark then. Someone who must also care about Stark’s well being. It gives them the motive and a reason why you would be this insistent on protecting them as well.”

Stephen let out a huff. “You assume you know me—“

“I know I’m right about this.” The agent said as he leaned forward once more, leaning his arms onto the cold surface of the desk that separated them. “Because I’ve seen you since you came back into Tony Stark’s life. You hardy care about anything, anything at all. There are only two things you went out of your way for. Threw yourself in headfirst. Your duties as Sorcerer Supreme… whatever that even really means… and anything and everything pertaining to Stark.”

He paused for a brief moment, eyes fixed on the sorcerer. “Don’t make me. I will get to the bottom of this one way or another. I will interrogate every person in Stark’s life. Starting with Colonel Rhodes, Pepper Potts, his two boys—“

“Did you know, that Fury has me under close watch?”

There was a silence that followed. Empty, much like the dark interrogation room they were in. Ross sat still, trying to fully understand the implication of that statement.

Stephen slowly opened his eyes, peering at the other man with almost a bored look. “Do you know he fears me enough to have me under surveillance?”

The sorcerer then sat a little straighter, a small smirk playing at the corner of his lips. “I know. He probably already knows that I know. It’s this game we have going since the day we met actually…” He spoke in a nonchalant manner, as if they were talking about something insignificant
as the weather.

Ross’s expression remained impressively blank, though his mind was going a mile a minute, getting lost in the endless train of thoughts this has created.

“But you do not need to know any of that,” Stephen went on. “All you need to really know is that he fears me. While I’m part of Avengers, I’m an asset. If I choose, for any reason, to deflect… I’m the greatest threat. He fears it.” Then added in a chillingly light tone, “…And he merely seen a hint of what I can do.”

Stephen raised a hand, flicking his wrist. Ross had just split seconds to duck before a blast of gold energy shot straight towards the direction of his left ear. It hit the two-way mirror that was behind him, shattering it completely, as well as, tearing though the opposite wall of the viewing room. Couple agents who had been watching from the next room all looked petrified.

But Ross didn’t have much time to pay them much attention, his gaze sharply turning back onto the sorcerer as he spoke again.

“This? This is nothing.” There was still the same calmness in the voice, but now it was lined with something the agent could not pinpoint.

“The telekinetics, the portals, flight, the magical lightning, pyromancy, cryomancy, are just a taste of what I can do. Did you know I’m not casting spells from a book to control the elements much like many sorcerers? I’m rewriting the codes.”

The next second, their eyes locked. Something there made a shiver run up the agent’s spine without really understanding it.

“I’ve collected endless amounts of relics with powers you can’t even fathom. I can conjure them and draw powers from them at will. I can do it right here and no walls, your petty guards, the useless security systems can prevent me.” He gave a quick glance towards the viewing room, then to the concrete walls around them. “In fact, all your tech to control those with powers are Stark tech and I know him... he would have given you nothing, nothing, that can be used against me.”

The sorcerer slammed a hand onto the desk, the sound reverberating around the four walls. In an instant, the other agents in the viewing room had their weapons raised. But Stephen didn’t bother, didn’t even give them a second glance. He fixed his eyes on Ross who still sat on his chair watching him.

“I am THE most powerful mortal. I am destined to be the greatest Sorcerer Supreme to have ever lived. I have the power to move the world and shake them to their foundation. I can tear planets from the heavens and place them into new sky. Fury? SHIELD? The United Nations? You can watch me all you want… at the end of the day, I’m untouchable. No matter how much a menace I can become.”

He let out a short, soft laugh. “So you see, the reasoning? Whether I’m truly innocent or guilty? That matters very little.” He took a deep breath as he sat back down, almost too calmly. “You are not looking at the bigger picture, Agent Ross. Don’t be stupid. It’s boring. This is going to be your only chance. The only chance to put me down. This is the only chance I will allow. So stop asking the stupid questions and Get. On. With. It.”

“Oh get Fury down here so he can do it himself.”

The silence stretched for another minute, then two. Then Ross blinked quickly trying to fully recover. He waved a hand towards his back, signaling for the rest of them to drop their weapons before facing the sorcerer once more.

“From what I understand,” he said evenly. “Fury has yet to hand over your contract to the UN. Stalling actually. My best guess is that he’s seeing how this plays out. Debating if you being an Avenger means you’ll be allowed leeway or by claiming that the contract was never fully processed… well… that would potentially mean this is not a breach of contract.” He paused for a moment, thinking. “I don’t know what mind game you two got going on but he seems to be trying to keep you from being prosecuted. You’re right, maybe because you are an incomparable asset as of this time or he knows the havoc Stark would undoubtedly unleash if we keep you here for long. …Who knows what really is going on in that head.”

Ross turned his gaze towards the other end of the room. He knows he doesn’t have the full picture, both with this situation and another that was definitely there but seems to be only visible to some. He doesn’t dare think that he has Fury fully figured out, or rest of the Avengers for that matter. There was a long history here and he was just scratching the surface. He often wondered… but well, this isn’t the time. He had a job to do.

“…I’m trying to help you, Doctor Strange,” he said as he fixed the other with a stern look. “I’m
trying to tell you… if you just give up the correct name, you would be able to leave here. Seems like no one will even reprimand you for perjury or at the very least stalling a very imperative and urgent operation.”

“Are you really thinking of going down for something you did not do? Are you really ready to accept what comes with that? You will never see Stark again. At the very least I know that means something to you.” He let out a sigh. “…Have you accepted the fact you’ll be giving him no choice but to move on? The popular choice would be Captain America… one you clearly seem to despise. There are words going around from agents monitoring the compound since you got here how Captain Rogers and Stark might be patching things up.”

“Do not bother me with rumors,” came the quick snap of a reply.

That… was the most honest reaction he had gotten from Strange since this all started. As minor as it may be. Just a split-second flash of emotion before it was carefully wiped blank. It almost takes Ross by surprise.

“It’s a fact Stark seems to have been allowing Rogers access to the floor. Your floor. That’s not rumors, not speculations. That is an observation.”

“Are you telling me you are willing to accept the possibility... with you out of the picture, that Iron Man will move on with Captain America? How do you know for a certainty that it wasn’t simply your presence that stopped the two of them from making things work between them again?”

He was speaking fast now, low in tone. The agent doesn’t bother to hide his own emotions. If it just means they can have some sort of honest conversation… “I know… you care. I know you love him. I know you seem to love the two boys and the family you two seem to be building. Give me a name, tell me the truth, and you can go. Go back to him. Go back to that perfect family of yours. Because I don’t believe the gossip. I think you two are quite happy together. I think you will give up the world for them.”

He waits. Seconds past. Then a minute. “Who released the footage, Doctor Strange?”

“Me.”
“Come on, Clint- just let it go-“

“Why don’t we just play a board game or something?”

“Because last time we played monopoly, we nearly killed one another over fake money.”

“How the fuck did this end up so tangled??? Where’s Tony?”

Clint had been trying for the past thirty minutes to untangle the mountain of cords that prevented them from watching a movie. Thor, Bruce, Rhodey waited patiently in various positions on the couch, looking more amused than bothered. Sam had been trying to help, though not very successfully. And Steve had been doing the last of the dishes from dinner in the nearby kitchen counter while Natasha dried them.

“It’s tangled wires, Clint. That’s not Tony’s job,” said Steve with a sigh, as he handed another dish to the redhead.

Clint scoffed. “As if you don’t call him for every little tech issue-“ he muttered.

Natasha had heard, of course, but it only made her take a sideward glance at Steve. Now that she thought about it, the Captain’s, quite frankly, conspicuous attempts to get Tony’s attention were becoming less and less occurrence as of late. Although, his fixation for their residential billionaire surely hadn’t dampened.

But before she can continue her train of thought, the elevator opened, revealing Tony… and an attractive tall blonde.

All of the team stared as the pair separated from a heated lip-lock. Tony didn’t look flustered one bit as his gaze landed on them.

“Right. Movie night-“ Tony said quickly with a smirk. He strode over quickly to the kitchen to pull out a bottle of wine from the cabinet. “Sorry, bit busy tonight but you guys have fun-“ With that, the billionaire got back onto the open elevator, arms soon wrapping around the woman once more.
As soon as the door closed shut, Rhodes let out a scoff shaking his head a bit.

Sam whistled.

“So he’s moving on, huh? Back to his old ways.” Clint remarked, still half-heartedly fidgeting with the cord. “About time… I guess better than moping around here pining for the pretty doctor-“

But there was a sudden crash making all their heads turn towards the kitchen. Steve was soon griping his right hand with a towel, the shattered pieces of glass littering around.

“Sorry,” the blonde said quickly, not meeting any of their eyes. “Uh… I’m going to go wrap this up-“

They watched him leave with varying levels of confusion. Natasha stared down at the small droplets of blood around the broken pieces of crystal.

She doesn’t mention it… what she already can put together. She simply cleans up the mess quickly before following Steve.

She also doesn’t mention the bits of the conversation that she ends up overhearing.

“We fucked. Don’t make a big deal out of it, Cap.”

“What is this about, Tony? …You did that on purpose. Parading her just to-“

“I wanted sex. I’m about to get it. I’m bored. So unless you’re offering to warm my bed instead just let me go about-“

“…Are you so upset by my feelings for you? Or yours?”

“We were just blowing off some steam! Stop making that into something when it isn’t. I was trying to help you get it out of your system so it’ll end this temporary thing you have for me. If I knew you would be this clingy-“
And next chapter, we finally will see what happened when Stephen came back to NY after becoming a sorcerer / just pining all around

Anyways thank you for patiently waiting for the update and glad to know (from several who contacted me in some way) that it was wanted. Really appreciate it, honestly. Also a good reminder for me I need to update haha;; I still don’t think I can have a regular schedule going in terms of new chapters but if you guys get curious, want status, have other question, feel free to continue contacting me on here or my tumblr.

...........

Andddddd Let’s take a vote
So I’ve been thinking of maybe writing another side story (~ 3-4ish chapters long? Or maybe shorter chapters but more so it’ll be more frequent updates) to this series that involves accidental time traveling for the rogues + couple other avengers. The question is to where?

Option 1: Early ~1990s.

Not having much other choice, they enlist the help of Peggy and Howard for help. While staying at the Stark Mansion, the team crosses path with young Tony (in his early 20s) home from grad school. This one, you can read in a lot more detail [here].

Option 2: Sometime after Iron Man 2 but before Avengers.

This will focus more on Stephen/Tony’s wild dynamic in their heydays. The Natasha of that time is on a mission away and the Natasha of future/current timeline has to help navigate the situation since neither Tony nor Stephen knows any of the other Avengers (yet) other than Rhodey. Keep in mind, during when Stephen & Tony first dated / before Stephen became sorcerer, none of the Avengers team met Stephen Strange other than Natasha. So this will be the first time they see how Stephen was before the accident – which is a startling contrast to how Stephen, the sorcerer Supreme. If any of them had thought Stephen was more of a bystander when he didn’t have powers, they soon realize they were sorely mistaken. Stephen, the young, successful surgeon, is a lot more lively, chaotic, impulsive, and definitely difficult to keep alive than Stephen, the sorcerer. Past!Tony (since it is before Civil War incident) gets along with everyone very well and is doting – a harsh reminder for the rogues of how it used to be. Steve, enjoys being back on Tony’s good graces (even if it’s a temporary one / not “his” Tony) and def wants to keep it that way by helping keep Past!Stephen out of trouble ...but is about to lose his head from Past!Stephen’s antics. Basically everything they thought they knew about Stephen, his past relationship with Tony, as well as, the
odd but functioning friendship of some sort the pair had with Natasha, ends up being questioned.

& please send me good vibes so I may update another chapter by this week :’)) I admit there is a good chance I can since it’s a three day weekend but hoping my energy doesn’t just go... poof
You know what... I missed Stephen too
so here's extra serving-

warning that Stephen may not be the most reliable narrator

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“So... when are you going to contact him?”

Stephen put his cup down with an exaggerated sigh, peering at Christine with a penetrating gaze. How many times has she asked this today? When was she going to relent? Stubborn woman-

But he supposed, she would have had to be stubborn to still be his friend.

“He’s moved on. It would be unkind for me to waltz back in now.”

Even as the sorcerer said those words he wished she would contradict him, hoped, desperately. How selfish he was. He just about tore out Tony’s heart the last they spoke. Completely severed their priceless relationship in the cruelest manner in Tony’s book. And still, he hadn’t stopped hoping... that just maybe... Tony hadn’t moved on. That he would love him still.

“You know he prefers the tango,” she said as she started putting away some of the groceries from the several bags she brought with her. She smiled at the exasperated huff she gets. “And no, I don’t think he did.”

Wong would be pleased. Perhaps, that’s why he never minded Christine coming by to the New York Sanctum every week or so.

Ever since their chaotic reunion at the Metro General due to Kaecillius’s attempted coup, and extended explanation aftermath, Christine had taken upon herself to visit him at the Sanctum week after week. Quite oftentimes, bringing with her large amounts of food after learning they kept very little in the complex, mostly due to lack of funds.
It probably also helped that she was extremely polite, kept her hand to herself, very kind, didn’t pry too much into the sorcerer business…

“Oh hello-“ She said with a bright smile as Wong stepped into the kitchen. “Tuna melt, right?”

Stephen doesn’t miss the genuine smile on Wong’s face as he took the sandwich from her with a polite, “Thank you. Really appreciate it, Miss Christine.”

The sorcerer rolled his eyes. He’s never seen the other man smile till Christine started coming by. It helped that she was pretty. Everyone liked pretty things.

“I have to be off. I’m covering a shift,” she gave Stephen a squeeze on the shoulder. Though afterward, she still stood there, bouncing on her feet a bit.

“What?” he retorted with a small frown. He knew that look

“I…” She was smiling. That smile that usually meant she wanted something. “So the annual charity gala is coming up- I was thinking you can go with me?”

“Christine,” he replied with a sigh. “That life is very much behind me. You also do not want to bring with you a crippled surgeon who was disgraced from that hospital-“

“He’ll be there.”

Stephen stared up at her, becoming dead silent.

“He’ll be there. Tony... rest of the Avengers actually too. They are special guests for all that they have been doing to protect the city and... Stephen... he…” She had a sad smile on her lips, a genuine reflection of her kind concern. Almost pleading in the way she repeated softly, “…he’ll be there.”

He didn’t speak. His mouth suddenly felt dry.
Christine swallowed, glancing at Wong for a moment before turning her gaze back to Stephen. “I know there’s… nothing against you… being a sorcerer and… having a life outside of it?” she started with a bit of hesitation.

God… she must have asked Wong. Stephen pinched the bridge of his nose with a grimace.

“You’re… I know you said you left because you were worried about being a burden… You don’t have to anymore? You can hold your own ground. I saw what you can do. The magic and spells… It’s what you always wanted. Being by his side even out there.”

She sounded… so genuine, eager… so hopeful that it hurt for him to hear.

“Captain America.”

“What?”

He let out a long sigh. “I’ve seen the tabloids… the news. I followed it even back when… Steve Rogers. He moved on.”

Christine had a hand over his, coaxing him to look at her. “I saw him. Just a little over a week before you came back. He told me there was nothing going on. Stephen, he didn’t even-Tony didn’t even know the Captain had interest in him. He was completely blind to it because… he was so caught up in you-“

He doesn’t comment. He tries to control the rising of warmth in his chest.

He’s sure he doesn’t have to. Christine always noticed a lot that he never said. A trait he many times took for granted.

“I’ll think about it,” Stephen replied evenly after a long pause.

That seemed to have satisfied her… for now. She gave him another smile before turning to leave.
“And eat something.”

“Bye, Wong,” she said with a wave at the double doors.

Wong smiled back, waving as well.

There was a short silence that followed.

“I like your friend,” Wong noted casually. Soon there was crumping of papers as Wong unwrapped the sandwich.

“You only like her,” Stephen retorted with another eye roll, crossing his arms.

“You have other friends?”

The former surgeon frowned, fixing the other with a look of indignation.

But Wong seemed not bothered one bit. “You should go. Go see Stark.”

He let out an exaggerated groan.

“Or you can put some actual effort in becoming the next Sorcerer Supreme.”

“I told you. No interest,” Stephen replied flatly, finally standing from the kitchen counter. “I’m completely satisfied with this job, thanks.”

“Right. Because you took the job of being the new Master of New York Sanctum without so much as a complaint because you did not have any ulterior motive.”

Stephen let out a sigh before simply walking away. He learned the hard way not to argue with Wong. The man had a talent for figuring out some deep-buried truth from the little Stephen said
"I’m tired of you sitting around here pining!"

"Oh, do shut up!"

“I liked you better pining around the Sanctum.”

Stephen’s eyes shot open just as the familiar echoing feeling encompassed him. The mirror dimension.

“I already created an illusion around the security feed.”

The Sorcerer Supreme let out a long sigh. How many days has it been since he was here? In this bothersome box? Must have been nearly a week if Wong came to check-in. “How is he?”

Wong crossed his arms, giving the other an unimpressed look. “He hasn’t killed himself with guilt… yet.”

Stephen glares at him.

“The kids are fine. Tony had some… issues accepting what happened but he recovered after a day or so. He seemed clearer-headed this morning. From what I heard, him, Fury, and Ross had a spectacular shouting match yesterday. Everyone evacuated the scene-“

The doctor let out a scoff, a small smirk playing on his lips.

“Well… more… Tony shouting and the two trying not to get their head chewed out. Apparently all of SHIELD ended up with some system malfunction due to a virus afterward. All screens just kept running cat videos. Can’t be proven but most likely Tony throwing a tantrum-“
Stephen chuckled fondly before finally turning to meet the other’s eyes. “And the kids?”

“They are fine now. It was Harley’s idea but Peter knew from the start. They are kids… didn’t think things through. How much of a messy situation it is right now with the new Accords, UN, new power structure… Tony had trouble getting them to even eat for days. Just like their father. Ridiculous amounts of self-blame. …They are good kids… good heart.”

“Yeah…” he said almost wistfully. Then Stephen took another deep breath. “The Sanctum...?”

“Just ask what you want to ask.”

Stephen regarded the other with a flat stare. A long silent pause as he tried to quiet the tugging at his heart.

“Is he…?” Did he even want to know?

“No,” Wong replied sternly. “But they seem to be on slightly better terms. At least civil. Rogers is trying to help. Did help, actually. But Tony is still putting some careful distance. …You said it yourself. They most likely would patch things up eventually for the most part. ...You know it’s not like that-”

“I know,” he snapped before he could stop himself.

“Don’t make the same mistake, Stephen.”

Stephen stared at the other for a moment longer. “I know.”

It started with what supposedly was a sarcastic comment.

“Stop me at three,” Tony had said.
Almost an afterthought for the billionaire when Steve kept following him around looking like a concerned puppy for the fourth time this week. Although, if he was being completely honest, it was not a completely unfounded concern.

Twice. Twice, Tony had landed himself in the hospital due to some overdose... this month. Nearly every day at this point someone had found him collapsed on the floor of a random space around the tower from some alcohol bingeing.

Rhodey had finally given up. They had gotten into a bitter shouting match just a couple days back that resulting in the Colonel leaving with a loud slam of the door.

Since then, Steve had been relentless.

“Then tell me how I can help!” Cap had shouted.

“You want to help? Fine. Stop me at three. This-” he poured himself a full glass of scotch, lifting it to eye level at Steve in a mocking manner. “This is one.”

Tony doesn’t expect an answer, much less a question.

“Will you answer truthfully if I ask?”

He scoffed. “Sure.”

“Always?”

And he does. Always.

Since then, day after day, a hand stopped him from pouring that fourth cup. No words, no judgment, just a light touch that held his wrist from reaching for the bottle.

Soon, there were no missing hours from his memory. No waking up with the cold tiles pressed up against his face. No mornings of simply emptying his stomach.
Then, something in him wanted to push.

“Go wait in the room, honey,” He whispered to the fair brunette he had brought home that evening, leaving a trail of kisses on her delicate neck. “Get comfortable.”

She gives him a knowing smile before departing down the hall.

Tony doesn’t bother to address Steve who had been lingering. Simply reaches for the large crystal decanter on the bar setup.

A hand comes up to stop him. “How many is that?”

“Seriously, Cap? That’s what you care about?” He feels the irritation that lined his tone. Not even sure why.

Steve has his arms cross now, eyes darting from the floor to him back and forth several times. “I… Look I get… it’s your choice. Who you sleep with… You’re right… it’s not like you promised me anything… I have no right to tell you- …I suppose as long as they are not dangerous-“ He let out a unsteady sigh.

Tony smirked, twirling the empty glass in his hands absentmindedly. “So what? You’re really not going to stop me? After all your crap about how…” his voice trails off, turning his sights to the floor.

“So what? You’re really not going to stop me? After all your crap about how…” his voice trails off, turning his sights to the floor.

“Do… do you want me to?”

Tony doesn’t know the answer. He just knows that Stephen would have.

“Tony… I know… you’re hurting. I know that much. I know he was important to you. You loved him… love… him.”

Steve let out a snort. “I can’t be him. I heard a lot about him… from Nat. He seems… very different
from me. I’m sure he’d know what is the right thing to say right now, what to do. I don’t… know what is the right thing to do… for you.”

Tony swallowed, hard. He doesn’t look up, he can’t.

“All I know is that… I care about you. And I… want to help… And if all I can do for you is stop you from drinking yourself to death… then sure, I’ll do that.”

There was a long silence that follows. Neither really daring to look at the other.

“Okay… I’ll… I’ll leave you to your evening.” Steve bites on his lips, forcing on a smile that only lasts for a mere second.

But just as he heads for the door, Tony spoke once more.

“He’s in my head. All the time…”

The Captain turned back around, slowly. Though Tony is still facing the floor, he can make out the pieces of the heartbroken emotions. It makes his stomach turn.

“…I worry about him. He’s gone. He doesn’t… want me anymore and I can’t stop thinking about him. All the damn time. …It… stops… when I’m with you. …I think less. …And I’m not sure… I want to.”

“How many is that?”

Tony let out a small huff. “First one,” he said raising the scotch in a mock salute. “Cap, seriously… I’m fine.”

Steve let out a small sigh, though the frown relaxed from his expression. He took long strides towards the desk Tony had been working from, making sure to approach from the engineer's line of sight. It was a habit Tony noticed from Steve ever since the panic attack incident at Wakanda.
He made a quiet scoff, more to himself. Leave it to Steve Rogers to do something considerate when he wanted to stay bitter.

Did he want to stay bitter? …No… probably not if he think really deep on it.

Quite frankly, Tony hadn’t felt a burning need to rekindle his friendship with the Captain these days. He did once. Once upon a time, there were vicious hatred as well at the mere mention of the Captain's name.

But the five years he spent mourning for Stephen, Peter, and many others after the snap, it had all died with many other fixations he once thought were important.

It was a combination of some odd acceptance towards life, towards people, perspective… some peace he had reached within himself … and some desperate hope to bring those they lost back that helped them work together during the time heist. With very minimal trouble he might add. But Tony had to admit, he may have expected an apology then. If Cap just said sorry at that time… without being prompted…

But here they were. Yes, he no longer felt it a necessity for them to be friends. He had sworn for months it was unwanted even. But if Tony was being completely honest… truly honest… he was inevitably human. No matter his intelligence, through all logics and reasons, all the claims he didn’t have a heart… he is, in fact, simply human. Emotions, relationships, people… they are very odd thing. A defect to the logical world.

It was, very much, not a necessity. But it would be nice.

It may have also helped that, after the Siberia footage was released, the team had been giving Steve and Barnes varying degree of cold shoulder to complete hostility. Although, admittedly, Tony had soon reached some sort of sympathy for Barnes.

Just yesterday, what started as an innocent training session soon turned into a violent uproar. Tony may have purposely been a bit slow to respond when notified, letting Thor get in some extra punches at Steve.

If it had not been for his dreaded worry due to Stephen’s arrest, he may have grabbed popcorn and had FRIDAY run endless amounts of rants and outcry from the media upon his behalf.
Maybe that’s what he had been missing. Some validation for his anger. Tony didn’t think himself as some sort of a victim. Never really his style. It made him cringe slightly whenever people portrayed him in that light. But when you had just about the whole world thinking you MUST be the one to have done something wrong, expect you have no right to be upset… it was almost essential to cling to the anger. As if desperately holding onto it so not to be confused by those who claimed it was not justified.

But when those around took your side, gave some indication that you had every reason to be upset… suddenly, it didn’t feel that important anymore.

He grudgingly wondered perhaps this was why Cap always had such an easy time being the “bigger person”. Why do you need to try so hard proving yourself, to fight that you were right, when everyone else would do it for you anyways? Of course, it’s okay to let things slide once in a while. Just because you let it go did not automatically mean everyone would assume you were admitting you were wrong.

Such an odd, complicated thing.

Steve soon set down a cheeseburger and a can of soda onto the desk, breaking Tony away from his personal musings.

“The kids already ate…” then added after a short thought. “Your kids… don’t worry I didn’t bring it to them… Rhodes did. Pepper is still with them.”

“Thanks,” Tony replied curtly.

Oh, he knew he was being petty. He knew in the end he will most likely accept Steve’s extended hand. But that didn’t mean he would not take the time to make the other sweat it. Especially when he was in such foul mood.

“If you’re fine then why are you not letting any of the team down here? They’re worried.”

Tony spun a little in his chair as he unwrapped the burger. “I’m… just tired. I can’t… I don’t have the energy. I need to figure this out and I’m too exhausted to be taking care of other people right now.” He paused before quickly adding. “…I’ve been regularly checking on Peter and Harley… they come down here every day. But that’s different. You can never really just… stop being a
parent, you know?… just because it gets hard—"

Steve let out a small sigh. “At least you can let Rhodes and Pepper down here… I swear they are plotting my murder…”

Tony remained silent, simply taking a bite without really looking at the other.

“…Then why am I here?” came the question after a long pause.

The billionaire gave him a glance before turning back to the monitor. “…Because I don’t have to take care of you.” He wasn’t exactly sure how else to explain this better. “I never really had to. It’s… different.” They were equals. Had been before. That was their dynamic. Something that was very rare in the world to find for anyone.

“…Then why am I sneaking in here?”

Tony fixes him with a look. “That’s for your benefit. So Thor won’t try to kill you again.”

Steve cleared his throat. “Fair enough.”

There was a long silence. Tony can feel the Captain staring.

“So what’s the plan? About Strange…”

“I… I’ll figure it out. I have to.”

There was a sigh as Steve focused his sights on the far corner of the room. He was leaning on the desk now, half sitting as he crossed his arms. “Apparently he gave quite a scare to some of the agents who had been assigned to watch… and Ross. Ross was convinced Strange is covering for someone. Said how it must be someone close to you. Talked about interrogating everyone… Strange snapped. Probably was trying to get the attention back to him. It worked but…”

Tony swallowed. “…It made it hard for them to let things off.”
“But…” He let out a huff. “at least, they are definitely too scared to do anything rash. There is a
debate internally both from upstairs in SHIELD and the Council how to handle the situation…”

Tony took a finishing gulp of the scotch that remained in the glass. “And how do you know this?”

“…I asked around when I was called in today. Took a peek at the security footage… Tony, but
there is something in the way he talked about Fury-…“

But before the Captain can go on there was loud coughing from the elevator behind them.

They both turned hastily to see Peter at the door.

Tony gave the other a look and Steve stood to his feet, heading towards the elevator. Both of them
definitely don’t miss the harshness in Peter’s expression.

The engineer would have almost thought the deep frown as cute if the situation wasn’t so...

He doesn’t say anything, just gave the teen a soft smile, waiting. It wasn’t long after the elevator
closed that Peter finally spoke.

“I don’t like this.” It was just barely above a whisper.

Tony slowly stood from the chair, choosing to lean on the desk instead as he gave the other a
confused look. He tried to read Peter’s expression. A faint blush was visible upon the teen’s
cheeks. His arms were crossed, appearing to be incredibly agitated which was definitely rare. Of
course, Peter had been understandably upset since Stephen had been taken from the compound but
this… this felt like something else.

“Pete-“ But he was soon cut off.

“Why is he even here?” Peter blurted out, eyes fixed onto the flooring. There was a startling
amount of resentment in that tone.
Tony crossed the room in a hurry, reaching out to put a hand on his son’s shoulder but Peter took a step back. It catches the billionaire by a surprise to say the least. The kid had never been anything but fond of rare physical affections from Tony. He didn’t even have the chance to hide the shock, the hurt in his expression.

A moment of guilt flashes in Peter’s eyes but he mostly remained determined. The teen took a shaky inhale, blinking rapidly away the tears that started to form. “I don’t… like him here.” Then he started speaking quickly. “He shouldn’t be here. Steve Rogers. He shouldn’t be here with you when Doctor Dad isn’t… here…”

Ah.

Tony swallowed. “He’s— okay. …Yeah.” He smiled, desperately trying to keep his voice calm. “Okay. Of course… I’ll tell him not to be here from now on, Pete—“

There was a pause as Peter turned his gaze down once more, kicking his feet. Then after couple more seconds passed, nodded.

“You… you said— We asked you to let us turn ourselves in...” The teen harshly wiped away a streak of tear. “You said it was going to be okay. You’ll fix it. I know it’s— our fault. I-I… knew what Harley was doing, Should have stopped him. I-“

“Hey,” Tony put both hands on either side of Peter’s shoulder, squeezing gently. “Hey… it’s okay. It’s going to be okay. It’s not— you didn’t know this was going to happen. Harley didn’t know. You both were trying to help. It’s okay. I promised you, I’ll fix this. Stephen is going to be fine. I’m not going to let anything happen to any of you, okay? You got that, Pete?”

Peter swallowed, nodding reluctantly. There was sniffling, however, and that… tore at Tony’s heart.

“…you… you should just let us—“

“No.”
“But you tried-“

“I didn’t try everything, Pete,” he snapped without really meaning to. “We don’t talk about that. Not until I try everything.”

Peter flinched slightly at the harshness of the words. Though, for some reason at that moment, it was comforting.

Tony took an unsteady breath, his fingers unconsciously tightening. “Hell will freeze over before I let them take any of you away from me.”

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Nervous. That’s what Stephen realize. He was nervous.

It was an unfamiliar, atrocious feeling really.

He never had much fear of social situations before. Not even when he was in grade school. He knew he had a particular knack for it. Thrived in it. Showing off, impressing, getting in people’s heads, the emotional game, knowing exactly what to do at precisely the right time. It was a puzzle he definitely understood. He once mused that he even felt more comfortable around strangers than those who knew him well.

But tonight, it was different. …Actually… everything was different now.

He was no longer the high profile surgeon. No longer had the reputation, the presence, the funds, the power that immediately grabbed attention. He knew he had gotten older, no longer in his high prime… ugly scars that littered his hands to boot.

Crippled. A sorcerer or not, he was still… crippled.

Would Tony care? He claimed he didn’t when he sat next to his bed after the accident. But people say a lot of things. Seeing it, in reality, was always another. Would he even want him now?
He couldn’t help but remember the little things Tony used to say. How he loves Stephen’s clever fingers, loves how he could keep up with him, how he was pretty...

What was he thinking? Had he lost his mind? Tony… beautiful, smart, his Tony… the still ever the billionaire, a renowned hero, member of the Avengers, pretty much a royalty if the United States ever had such a thing… taking him back… now… when Stephen didn’t have anything anymore to offer. And that wasn’t even counting all that he had said during their breakup.

He sharply turned, making a run for it. Though a hand quickly grabs hold of his arm with surprising force.

“I know you’re nervous-“ Christine said gently, still not letting go. She was in a dress of beautiful silvery lavender. Though currently, she had a section of it roughly bunched in her other hand. As if preparing for a chase if Stephen really chose to run for it.

No, she didn’t know the HALF of it.

“I know you’re scared but… Stephen, please, don’t run. Not now.” She soon had a smile, putting a faux whine to her voice. “I’m wearing heels-“

No, for some fucking reason I can apparently do no wrong in your eyes. He wanted to say. She wasn’t seeing him. Not really. Not seeing him for who he inevitably is now. She always saw him through rose-colored glasses.

But he gave in, still. Swallowed, nervously looking around before going back to fidget with the cufflinks. God, the suit felt so wrong now. So hard to deal with all these details with his trembling fingers. He never noticed how tiny these buttons were before when he used to wear them on a regular basis.

Christine lightly pushed away his hands, helping him adjust the cuffs. “So… What’s with everyone? Why didn’t Nick recognize you?”

Oh.

“Distortion spell…” He replied in a mutter. “They can see me. They’ll remember me, remember talking to me even. Well... they’ll remember that there was someone …But they won’t be able to
recognize who I am. It won’t stick in their memory. Won’t be able to remember any identifiable
details worth remembering… They’ll try to think what I looked like, what I sounded like, and they
will draw a blank. It won’t even occur to them that it’s odd... would seem like any other details
most people forget, cannot recall, because it’s not worth remembering.”

“Stephen…”

“I’m here to talk to Tony… doesn’t mean I would have to parade my presence to everyone else. I’ll
drop the spell when I get him in private,” he said sternly. Then added after some hesitance, “... please. I don’t... I still have my pride, Christine.”

She smiles at him, though hints of sadness were traced in those almond eyes. “Stephen you’re...
There is nothing wrong with how you are now.”

He looks away. “Let’s just go in.”

And Stephen would love to pretend he took the time to look around the elaborate grand ballroom,
taking it all in. How he had eventually searched and searched amongst the large, boisterous crowd
for any sign of that windswept brown hair and doe eyes.

But no.

It almost takes an embarrassingly short amount of time for his eyes to gravitate on Tony.

He also looks away just as quickly.

Getting the hint, Christine pulled him lightly along as she made some small talks with couple
coworkers. Stephen supposed he technically knows many of them. They had been his coworkers
once as well. But he cares very little about that. Not at all care about what they have been up to or
how they might have been.

He stands by Christine, replying politely when needed. Just enough not to grab unnecessary
attention. But otherwise, his attention is fixed not far away… with Tony, who stood near the bar
with several of his teammates.
They were laughing, joking animatedly. About what, Stephen couldn’t really tell. A bit too far to hear the exact words. But they seem… happy.

Tony looked rather well. Which the sorcerer found a bit surprisingly. Glad, but surprising. He had been worried for some time of the endless amount articles and news that came out regarding the billionaire’s slip back to old habit. And the photos… god, those photos. It physically pained the doctor to see Tony in such a state of… depression? Anguish? Sometimes visibly thin and dangerously sleep deprived.

But today, the billionaire appeared… well.

He looked like the Tony Stephen remembers him to be - confident and lively, sporting an impeccably fitted tux. The engineer’s face was full with a healthy glow, his eyes were clear and bright, filled with emotion… there was not even the glass of hard liquor in hand. The brunette seemed simply drunk with happiness.

Then, Stephen’s eyes had strayed to Captain Roger’s hand… that always seemed to be hovering at Tony’s lower back.

Jealousy shot through him before he can even assess the situation. One that made his blood boil with resentment. The sorcerer had nothing particularly against the Captain per se but he never liked people touching what was his. But then again… Tony currently wasn’t his, he supposed.

Stephen ripped his gaze away quickly, trying to calm himself.

He tried to not think about it, what that can all mean. How Rogers always seemed to stand next to Tony, never strayed too far. How the Captain always grabbed two of anything offered to him, glass of champagne, appetizer… always handing the second one to Tony. How Tony so casually just took it with a pleased smile.

Stephen grudgingly remembers the days where Tony only took things from his hands and no one else’s.

But there were also other things.

How people seemed to so easily accept Roger’s place. How no one thought twice before stepping
aside to make room for him by Tony. How they addressed both of them without requiring some prompting from Tony.

How the few times they were separated for brief moments, and when Rogers looked around as if trying to make his way back... everyone casually stepped aside to make way.

The Captain never fought to be noticed. He was so effortlessly noticed. He seemed quite content, letting Tony talk and carry most of the conversation. But the few times he spoke, eyes turned to him immediately. Tony, for once, seemed not concerned about unintentionally overshadowing his companion while drawing attention to himself.

Was that what it was supposed to be like? Being equal to the great Tony Stark. Something Stephen made valiant attempts for so long but in the end, fell short.

“Christine?”

It was an abrupt awakening. Back to reality as he forcibly convinced himself not suddenly turn around at the voice he recognized so well... voice he missed sorely.

Stephen had been a good distance away from Christine now, had made an excuse about grabbing a drink as he lamented his own thoughts. Christine, on the other hand, had been talking to Nick about some case but the other doctor seemed to have walked off at some point. The sorcerer had made sure to keep a good track of where the Avengers was at all times but seemed he missed Tony and Rogers walking towards their direction while he was preoccupied.

He could feel Christine glancing at him subtly. But realizing Stephen was not going to budge from where he stood, simply stepped forward toward the two Avengers.

“Tony,” She greeted with a smile. “And hello again, Captain Rogers.”

“Steve.” The Captain replied easily. “Thank you. For helping Tony that night.”

“Oh, no no... that was nothing. Just glad to see you’re better, Tony.”
There was an uneasiness in which Christine carried herself. Stephen definitely knew why. He could understandably see how her loyalty to him, her best friend, and her genuine kind nature were at a war with one another. She kept peering back and forth between Steve and Tony… mostly giving Steve a look that didn’t quite express the usual warmth.

But as if sensing this, Tony took a half step to the side, leaning away from Steve.

Christine cleared her throat, desperately trying to find something to talk about. “Oh… uh… I think there is a smudge-“ she motioned to the Captain’s left, right above the chest pocket.

“Oh…” Steve seemed visibly flustered, letting out a small laugh as he took a good look. He turned towards Christine once more giving a nervous smile and little tilt of his head. “Must have not… noticed… I’m… not used to these types of functions… as you can tell-“

“Here-“ Tony swiftly pulled out the red pocket square he had been wearing.

“Uh- …Tony it’s okay-“

“Come on, it’s going to bother you-“ The billionaire folded the fabric once more before neatly putting it into Steve’s pocket, covering the smudge efficiently. “There. Problem solved.”

Steve soon had a soft smile on his lips. The appearance of sincerity, adoration, clear in those baby blue eyes as they fixed upon the brunette. “Thank you-“

Without much thought, Tony smiled back. “No problem.“

But then, he caught a glimpse of Christine’s expression. The happy grin shattering almost instantly as he realizes the look of utter disappointment in the other’s eyes.

“I…” Tony cleared his throat awkwardly. “I should… go-“ Then briskly walked off in a hurried pace.

“Tony?” Steve gave a concerned look, eyes darting from Christine then at Tony’s leaving form. “What-“
Stephen doesn’t wait. He bolts out after Tony the second an illusion spell is cast. One that allowed him to be invisible, hidden from the naked eye - especially one Steve Rogers. He definitely doesn’t need to draw attention right now. A random man chasing after Tony Stark.

Thankfully, even without fully seeing what was happening, Christine seemed to have picked up on what was going on. As soon as she realized Stephen missing from couple yards behind her, she hurried to grab the Captain’s attention, to buy time.

The sorcerer hears her voice in some distance behind him, saying something about how Tony may need some space.

He knows he’s not going to get another chance like this tonight. To have Tony away from the crowd, away from Roger’s keen hands.

Stephen doesn’t blink, eyes stationed on Tony’s back as the billionaire darted swiftly past the crowd. He sprints as fast as he can while not colliding with endless amounts of tables and guests. There was a fear in the pit of his stomach, an overwhelming dread that suggests if he even looks away, for even a second, he’ll lose the other somehow.

But soon after crossing the hall, Tony pushed past a door to his right. A supply room? Thankfully, no one was there. Instead, it was filled with various items organized on rows of tall shelves.

The door closed behind him with a bang that made Stephen flinch. Tony snapped his gaze towards the direction, eyes wide.

His heart stopped.

Everything… stopped.

The sounds, the bustling of movements just down the hall, his mind, the racing “what ifs”, the doubts… and with it, the grief he felt for months, the misery… the utter torment of being away from...

Stephen stared as his gaze locked with one of whiskey brown. Everything was going to be okay, he
thought. There was a calmness that washed over in him. A ghost of a smile forming on his lips as he stepped just a bit closer.

But Tony’s eyes don’t follow him. He appeared to be still fixated on the door, a bit confused.

Ah… the spell. He never lifted the illusion spell let alone the distortion charm. He’s invisible to Tony.

But just as the sorcerer lifted his hands to undo all the magic, the door behind him swung open once more.

Without meaning to, he rushed to hide behind a nearby shelf. Rolling his eyes as it occurred to him technically there was no need, not as if anyone can see him currently. Why the hell did he even hide? He let out a silent groan.

“Tony-“

Stephen peered around trying to see the newcomer. Damn…

“Tony- what-? Are you okay?”

Tony let out a grimace as he ruffled his hair harshly. “Fine. I’m fine, Steve. Just… just…”

Steve stood there for a moment, motionless.

“She’s… his friend… Metro General… she knows Strange somehow…”

His own name takes a sudden hold of Stephen’s attention.

“I… Christine- …yeah. Yeah, she’s… Stephen’s closest friend. …was or is… I’m not sure.”
There was a long silence that stretched between them. One where Steve continued to give Tony a longing stare and Tony turned his gaze to the floor, his expression one of guilt. It was then that Stephen had the confirmation. There was something going on between them.

He wonders if he should leave quietly. Wonders if he should run or… jump in.

Because part of him, the selfish part of him, even now, believes Tony is his. That was what was right.

“Do you want me to stop?” Steve said calmly after awhile.

Tony looked up. “What?”

The Captain cleared his throat. “Stop… trying I mean.” Another pause. “Look I can… wait… as long as you need. Till you are ready for… I mean… what I’m saying is… I can wait. But… is there even a someday? For you? Is it more time you need or is it just me? Do you… want me to stop trying…”

This time, the silence is near unbearable. Stephen doesn’t even know what to do at this point. This definitely did not seem like a conversation he should even be listening to. He doesn’t have the right.

But then a voice rudely tells him he does.

Yes. Just say yes, Tony. Tell him to just fuck off.

You’re… you’re not supposed to be with him.

“I don’t…” Tony bites his lips briefly, his sights darting around till landing back onto the Captain. “I don’t… want you to stop trying… But… I’m not ready to say yes.”

What?
There was ringing in Stephen’s ears. His body suddenly felt numb.

“Oh, okay.” Steve took a step forward, a soft smile on his lips. “...Will you tell me? When you are ready?”

Tony let out a small laugh. “Yeah.”

Stephen let his eyes fall closed. The room felt like it was spinning. He wanted… to sink to the floor. His heart must be there. It definitely was not in his chest.

Steve, on the other hand, appeared quite… happy. “I’ll… go tell the others not to worry- They saw you running in here.“

Stephen imagines punching that stupid grin off his perfect face.

Tony opened his mouth couple times, no words coming out. But just as Steve was at the door he blurts out, “I’m scared. To fail.”

Steve turned back towards the brunette, questioningly. “What?”

“You’re… you, Steve. You are… perfect.” Tony paced a bit, his eyes blinking quickly as he seemed to be trying hard to compose himself. “See here’s the thing. My longest… functioning relationship was with Stephen. He and I… we were similar. He wasn’t perfect… not that I loved him any less for it. God I… I loved him for it. But maybe… because he was the same…”

“The thing is, everyone in my life who gave a damn… Pepper… Rhodey… Happy… They all seemed like they love me for who I can become. I know. I should be grateful. It’s like, they saw something good in me even when I was… not. But… it felt like they never saw me. Stephen… he… seemed like he loved me for who I was, in the now. Not some distant better version I had this potential of becoming.”

“Tony… I’m not...” A slight frown formed on his brows. “I’m not asking you to change. I do see you.” He took a couple steps forward till they were only a foot away. “I... I like how coffee seems to be a food group for you. How you always have some clever comeback. How intelligent you are. ...How you get lost in your own world, in your work... how your eyes light up when you talk about them.”
“I see how you can tell I don’t understand any of it at times.” He let out a huff of laughter, running a hand through his carefully combed hair. “But you never belittle me for being… not as smart compared to you. How you sometimes act distant and cold, pretend you are some arrogant narcissistic jerk the media makes you out to be… but in reality, you care… so much for people that are yours. You never turn any of the team down for something as minor as us being stupid enough to not get the toaster working-”

Tony coughed out a laugh. Steve soon joining in. The next time their eyes meet, a smile was back on the billionaire’s lips.

“I see how you visit the memorial of the ones who died during the New York Invasion. Every Monday morning… right before sunrise. How you read through all the names. I love how your eyes light up when you see kids happy to see you… calling you their favorite hero. …Tony, I meant… what I said… you are mine too. You are my favorite hero. Not because you are perfect… but because you’re… so human. You’re right everything special about me came from a bottle-“

Tony made a look as if to interject. “Cap- I didn’t-“

Steve quickly shook his head a little. As if to say it was alright. “But you… everything special about you… is you. You build it. You worked for every bit of it. You struggle, constantly, with yourself… but you never stop trying.”

“Tony that’s… why I am in love with you. You show me that you don’t have to be perfect to be great. You make me have hope for this… time. I finally feel like… I’m living in the now when I’m with you. That I can belong here, in this time, without endlessly hoping for a past that I missed out on. I’m… remembered for how I died. But you, you are remembered for how you lived. Lived against all odds. You live life to the fullest. It’s contagious. Everyone feels so alive just by being around you…”

But then he noticed how Tony was simply staring at him now, mouth a bit a gasp, an odd look in his expression that he couldn’t tell was good or bad.

“I’m…” Steve said quickly. “I’m sorry- I didn’t mean to… I don’t… mean it to… make you uncomfortable…” He swallowed, motioning to the door awkwardly. “I’ll leave-… yeah-“ He turned sharply, making quick strides.

“Steve-”
“Yes?” Steve looks almost immediately, the look almost reminds Tony of an eager puppy, it was quite endearing.

Tony let out a short laugh, letting the smile stick. A weird calmness coming over him. “... You make me want to be better. Being around you, you make me want to be better. Maybe it's that... I- I have my standards now... of what I want to be for you. Who you deserve... and I'm scared... I'll fail-“

“Tony, I'm not perfect,” the Captain replied earnestly.

“You certainly don’t act like it,” Tony said easily. The usual teasing tone was back now. “When was the last time you did something... I don’t know... even remotely out of the line or selfish? You don’t even want to be here. I can tell. You’ve been stiff all night. But you don’t complain. I bitched about it since last week and all through the ride here-“

“Should we ditch?”

“What?”

Steve tried not to laugh at the startled expression on the other. “I mean... like you said, I don’t want to be here. You don’t want to be here- We can make some excuse-“

Tony raises an eyebrow. “Steve, you can’t lie to save your own ass.”

The blonde gave a look of mock offense. “I can-“

Tony let out a laugh. “As if you can do something that impolite, Cap. Come on... let’s go back there. The kids must be wondering where we went-”

Steve continued to watch as Tony gave a pat on his shoulder before swiftly walking through the door.
Stephen did the same. Watching as it dawned on him… he already missed his chance.

Perhaps that time passed him long ago.

Eventually, however, it occurred to the sorcerer he was so lost in his own thoughts he didn’t notice that Rogers hadn’t left yet.

The Captain had his gaze first fixed on the ceiling, then to the ground. Couple deep breath as his eyes closed. Stephen wasn’t sure what the other man was thinking but it looked as if he was trying to work himself up for something.

Then, after another minute or so, Steve went out the door in a hurry.

Curiosity got the better of him and Stephen followed quickly. He turned the corner just in time to see Rogers approaching a crowd of people. Tony seemed to have been talking to some members of the board with several of his teammates either involved in the situation or just casually listening in the background.

“We have an emergency-“ Steve called out.

It was stern, direct. A very distinctively commanding tone that Stephen did not realize the other was capable of judging by how the other had been acting around Tony - all flustered, uncertain, and abashed.

It was an impressive 180 change. But Stephen supposed perhaps this was how most people saw the Captain, persona of dignity and power.

They all turned towards him with concern.

“What’s happened?” asked Natasha.

Clint straightened up, “Do we-“

The board members simply took a step back, making way, as if automatically accepting the lacking explanation. The other Avengers, however, was a separate story.

Tony’s expression was blank, though there was a hint of shock.

Thor and Clint definitely looked a bit confused for a moment. Bruce and Natasha appeared to have already understood but carefully hid their laugh. Sam raised an eyebrow, giving Steve a smirk. Rhodes, having the usual knowing look, nudged Tony forward a bit while giving Steve an exasperated smile…

But Steve’s gaze never left Tony, holding out a hand.

And Tony, biting back a smile, reached out.

Stephen didn’t watch them leave. He wasn’t sure if he can stomach it.

He spun around, heading towards the other exit. He at least threw down the illusion spell so to have people around be able to see him there, try to move around him. He honestly did not have the energy to do it himself.

By the door, he ran into Christine.

“Stephen! Stephen, what’s wrong?” She was tailing him closely. Nearly sprinting to keep up with his long strides. “Stephen!”

“Stephen Strange… Doctor Strange!”

He opened his eyes, gaze immediately landing on Ross.
The agent looked tired, resigned.

“You are free to go.”

A frown came upon the sorcerer’s face. He still remained seated, mind racing. He’s almost afraid to ask. “Why?”

Ross gave a thin smile. “The real culprit came forward.”

It had been four months since the charity gala. Stephen had thought about that night nearly every day. Every minute of the day if he was being honest. It lingered at the corners of his mind, looming, haunting, each time dragging the knife deeper into his heart.

He had briefly mentioned what he had seen to Christine soon after. What he had overheard. She seemed to be convinced he should still get in contact with Tony. To try. To fight. It wasn’t as if Tony and the good Captain were completely official. Even if they were, Tony may still…

But that would be wholeheartedly selfish. Break up with a man, stomp on his heart, become the very reason for his long months of suffering… then just as he is about to move on, to have a shot at newfound happiness… sweep in to ask for a second chance. It was, by all means, a very ridiculous, selfish notion.

She had replied, since when had he not been a little selfish? Why stop now when it mattered most.

Because it mattered most, he supposed. Perhaps, for once in his goddamn life… he shouldn’t be so selfish. To be the better man. To be the man he had always wished he had been for Tony.

More like… Steve Rogers.

But it did not stop Stephen from wanting, letting his thoughts wander. A part of him still thought to maybe… just maybe… still go running to Tony’s doorstep. To explain, to yell, to beg if he had to.
Then he thought maybe tomorrow. Or the day after. Maybe the day after that... he’ll have the courage.

Not the courage to face the other. No. Courage... for the rejection.

Because cowardly, right now, he had hope. He could fantasize endlessly of that “yes” as much as he wished. Cling to it when it hurt a bit too much. If he got a real... not one from his nightmares, not one from his insecure musings... a real “no”... That was it. It was over. And he was definitely not ready for it to be over.

Then those days became weeks, and those weeks easily became a month.

And now... four months later, Stephen was staring at the front page of a newspaper. One that depicted a large colored photo of Iron Man and Captain America in a passionate kiss.

He remembers the event to be one from just yesterday. He had been here, in fact.

There had been an attack at Stark Industries. One that Tony had not hesitated to throw himself in. Many of his fellow Avengers was also at the scene to help.

Stephen had questioned if he should get involved. Especially once Pepper’s life became at stake. The CEO seemed to have refused to leave before making sure all other employees were safely evacuated. A bold move that nearly resulted in her almost getting throw out from the 12th-floor window, which undoubtedly would have resulted in her untimely death.

But before the sorcerer could make a move, Steve Rogers got there first.

There wasn’t even a scream. But the shock, the dread, was clear amongst the large crowd that had gathered. A total, utter silence as the body of Captain America hit the ground.

Then he saw the familiar flash of red and gold. From a distance, Stephen could do nothing but watch, almost in a trance, as Tony threw aside his helmet to quickly kneeling beside Rogers.

That look of horror... the tears that formed in those doe eyes. The sheer agony as he cried the
Captain’s name over and over again. Hysterically yelling at some of the officers who approached to help… screaming for them to not dare touch the body. Shielding the limp form with his own.

And when, miraculously, Rogers opened his eyes. Took a desperate gasp of agonizing breath...

The sorcerer saw how Rogers tried to smile through the pain. Whispered something that couldn’t be heard from the distance. It seemed as though the Captain had been trying to console Tony, to calm him. He saw how Tony’s careful mask shattered.

Stephen wondered… had Tony ever looked at him like that? Ever looked as if he was totally, completely, hopelessly in love. Had he ever stared at him like that… with absolute disregard for everyone around him? Like nothing else mattered, as if there was nothing else in the world existed… as if it was just the two in that moment.

It seemed like the perfect romance scene every love song had been written for. One Stephen never believed in. A love that he thought was merely fiction. A notion he spent most of his life scoffing at.

Leave it to Tony to prove it can be a reality.

That kiss… the kiss that had everyone cheering.

Everyone except Stephen.

“Do you still love him?”

That snapped his attention, his gaze turning in haste to look at Wong who stood not too far away.

Right. They should be heading back to the Sanctum. They had been out on a walk. But now, Stephen stood in front of the newsstand, to stare at the endless amount of photos that only made him feel numb.

“I can’t imagine the lifetime I don’t.”
Stephen had assumed that was the last of it.

Though perhaps, he never fully admitted to himself that it was all over. He was still unsure if he ever can.

The day after, the sorcerer visited a florist nearby 177A Bleecker Street. Ignoring all the newspapers, reports, magazine that depicted the image of two certain heroes.

It was everywhere. Flooding all types of media outlets. Seemed to be multiplying with each minute that passed. The headlines that read “Power Couple of the Century”, “Genius, Billionaire, Playboy, Philanthropist Finally in Love?”, “The Love Story That Broke the Internet”.

He thought to visit Christine. Hide in her apartment for rest of the week if he needed to. She would understand. She always understood.

Stephen had planned to pick up some tulips. Remembering how the other doctor enjoyed having flowers in her home. He hadn’t done much nice things for her recently when she never stopped caring for him.

But as he stood waiting for them to wrap the blooms, a familiar blonde walked in.

The sorcerer recognizes the man immediately even without the usual patriotic getup and instead, a simple white t-shirt, jeans, a dark bomber jacket, and a baseball cap. Stephen had just enough time to cast the same distortion spell from the gala.

The Captain appeared quite chipper considering his obvious state. There were dark bruises and cuts that adorned that perfect face, slightly stiff in the way he held himself. But Stephen supposed, any normal human would not have even survived that fall, let alone be walking around merely two days after.

The doctor tried to school the rising temper. One that formed just simply from having to breathe the same air as the man that replaced him in Tony’s life. He tried to mind his own business as the florist started to fawn over Rogers upon realizing who he was up close, assisting the Captain who clearly seemed to be in unfamiliar territory.
It was very apparent why he was here, however. Stephen’s hands clenched from inside the pockets of his cardigan.

It made him sick… his own reaction to this. Stephen never believed himself to be a good person but he hadn’t realize just how truly ugly his own personality was till now. Couldn’t even be happy for Tony to be finally… happy.

Tony deserved better than this. Better than him.

“He was here first- you can finish helping him. I definitely don’t mind waiting.”

That sharply tugged Stephen’s attention back to reality, unconsciously turning his gaze towards Rogers. Noticing that he was staring, the blonde smiled politely.

“Hi,” Steve said extending his right hand. “Steve Rogers.”

“Vincent… Vincent Stevens,” Stephen replied returning the smile, calmly shaking the offered hand.

If Rogers had noticed the trembling hands underneath the thick gloves, he doesn’t mention it. Only courteously adding less pressure than probably normal. As their eyes meet, Stephen understands.

It was not because it was the “proper” thing to do. Not in the way Stephen knew, learned, behaved with perfect manner when needed… But clearly a natural instinct that reflected a certain goodness of character.

Yes, this man was definitely a startling contrast to him. The sorcerer remembers Tony’s comment from that night. How Rogers couldn’t even make a decent lie…

He let out a soft huff. And here he was, Stephen can lie through his teeth without much trouble.

“For Tony Stark?” It falls from his tongue before he can stop himself. Quickly wondering with
exasperation why he was punishing himself even further.

A flush came upon Steve’s cheek as he nervously ran a hand over his hair, settling behind the back of his neck. “…Yeah,” he let out a nervous laugh. “…I guess… everyone in city knows about that…”

“More like the whole country,” Stephen comments letting out a soft chuckle. He thanked the gods above, if there was one, that it sounded natural without the hint of bitterness he truly feels.

Then he noticed Roger’s choice. “Red roses?”

Tony doesn’t like roses. It’s too typical, boring. He almost said out loud. Though he manages to stop himself, quickly looking away.

“Uh-… yes?” came the almost hesitant reply.


Rogers was soon giving him a questioning stare.

“His mother’s favorite. Must have read that somewhere,” he said quickly. “Tony Stark… well, his life isn’t exactly… private. Roses seem… a bit old-fashioned.“

But the Captain soon didn’t seem to think anything odd of the situation, easily accepting the explanation. He smiled once more. “I don’t know… sometimes a bit of old-fashioned isn’t so bad-“

Stephen considers the statement for a moment.

Ah well… he may be right.

Perhaps that’s what Tony needs now.
“House in the suburbs, white picket fence, 2.5 kids?” He said, teasing slightly.

What Stephen did not expect was the sincerity that underlined the answer that came.

Steve smiled, “Yeah I get that a lot… But Tony wouldn’t like that. He loves the city and the lights. And I have to say, I’m starting to see the appeal too. Kids sounds nice though…” He let out a small laugh. “But way too early for all that…”

His heart stopped. The sorcerer felt the cold dread starting to form within him. “…Does he… want kids?” He didn’t… Tony said he didn’t-

There was sudden stiffening in the blonde. But that expression, Stephen already knew.

“Well… uh…” Steve cleared his throat. He doesn’t say but the sorcerer could already guess what was troubling the Captain. He wouldn’t be shocked if Natasha already gave some kind of rundown about Tony life. How the details of the billionaire’s life should not be talked about so freely with strangers.

“It’s alright,” Stephen said, careful to keep his voice calm. “I apologize for intruding on private matters. Don’t worry… I’m… rather a private person as well… not many I could even blab it to-“

Steve looked as if he was considering him for a second. Then after a short while, smiled as he turned his gaze back to absentmindedly watch the florist working at the far end of the store. “Thank you.”

Trusting… this man obviously was far more trusting than Stephen ever had been. Good-natured even. The type who can generally get along with most, not because he was smart enough to be able to play the social game well, but because he knew how to interact with others honestly, genuinely.

So Tony went and found himself someone who was the polar opposite of him. He wondered just how much of that must have been his own doing.

But he supposed… it was for the better.
He should be happy… for Tony.

...Just not today. Maybe tomorrow. Or the next day… or the day after that.

Chapter End Notes

Please give me a shoutout if you are still reading this fic :’)
I like knowing my efforts to update is not in vain- it gives me the strength to continue
lmao
Chapter 16

This is the one chapter that I ask you don't skim it because the likelihood of getting lost os pretty high LOLOL but of course, can't stop you if you choose to-

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“…All you asked was that I keep an eye out for Man of Iron- You should have… NO! You made it seem like they were having one of their usual qualms!”

Tony paused for a moment as he stepped off the elevator, staring through the glass screen towards the source of the booming voice.

“Yes, yes you did! …Listen here, I will not repeat myself yet again!”

Thor had his back turned, seemingly angrily yelling at the opposite wall. Even through what supposedly was a soundproof barrier, the Asgardian’s voice was pretty audible if one was to focus.

“…You should have told me EXACTLY what happened between the Captain and Man of Iron and not some vague- …This was no laughing matter! This is far more important than one of your passing amusement-“

Tony approached the doorway. He wasn’t trying too hard but the other seemed not to have heard him entering.

“No, I will no longer be entertaining your questions! It’s my turn! …I... I don’t know what’s going on with the sorcerer-! …no, I’m not useless- ENOUGH! I am done with your games! You will tell me exactly what you know or-“

He cleared his throat loudly. Thor spun around, dropping his hand immediately as his eyes widened for a split second. Just as quickly, however, the shock was replaced with the usual good-natured smile.
“….Man of Iron!”

“Thor,” Tony greeted simply. The billionaire still stood at the doorway, hands falling into the inside of his pockets as he widened his stance.

He quickly scanned the room, although it appeared as if Thor was talking to himself. There was no presence of anyone else. And it wasn’t as if Thor ever bothered to learn how to use earthly communication device like a phone, webcam, email…

Tony took a deep breath before taking few steps forward. “Point Break… I need to talk to him.”

The Asgardian’s expression turned to one of questioning, too innocent for it to be true. “My friend, I don’t know who you mean-“

Tony had to admit, if he didn’t know better, he just may have fallen for that seemingly sincere tone. “Thor. I already heard from Rhodey-bear you kept questioning him about me. Sorry, big guy, but you are not that subtle and as much as I would love to think it’s because we’re suddenly all buddy-buddy… we both know you were closer to Cap. If something changed, it’s because of him. So where is he?”

Thor stayed quiet, though the engineer can see the slight faltering in that smile.

He let out a sigh as he watched the blonde subtly gulp.

“Tell him… I have a way to make this situation benefit all of us. Tell him, he owes me and I’m cashing in.”

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He walked at a quick pace towards the large foreboding building. Not in a hurry, never in a hurry, no, but simply taking long, efficient steps.

Past the large free-standing SHIELD logo at the entrance, past one of the many double doors, the
scanners. Easily entering through the visitor’s entrance.

Eyes turned to him for brief periods but none lingered for long. Just the usual glances security and employees gave to someone not a regular. It probably didn’t help that his full dark suit attire, down to pitch black tie, was a sharp contrast to many gray and blue suits.

After giving a quick glance around the space, he leisurely stepped towards the front desk, which was protected by tall thick screen.

The woman on the other side merely gave him a nod of acknowledgement.

“Good Afternoon, I’m here to see Director Fury,” he said in a silky tone.

“Do you have an appointment, sir?”

“No.” He glanced up towards the security camera at the corner, staring straight into it. “But show him the feed. He’ll want to see me, I assure you.” He stood facing the recorder still, watching as the device seem to follow even the slightest change of his movements. A sly smirk played on his lips as he turned away after a few more seconds.

The woman gave him a questioning look but proceeded to type into the keyboard.

But he doesn’t bother waiting. He spun around away from the desk, taking a few steps away towards the center of the lobby. Soon he stood right on top of the SHIELD logo embossed onto the tiles underneath his feet. Waiting.

There were definitely more obvious stares now as many employees even slowed their pace to stare at him with curiosity.

He takes a moment to straighten his sleeves, adjusting the emerald cufflinks.

Then… the alarm.
There was an excessive round of flashes and loud ringing. In seconds, security and heavily armed tac team quickly surrounded him from all sides, fingers at the trigger.

The smirk widened as he raised both hands slowly above his head.

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“If this doesn’t work-“

“It’s going to work.”

They exchange a glance. Tony staring directly at the former crown prince with something far more than just outright determination. Thor soon relented with a sigh before going back to his nervous pacing.

Then there was the light ping of the elevator as Steve quickly stepped out into the room. He only paused for a brief moment as Thor’s cold gaze landed on him. Although soon, the Captain focused on Tony instead.

“What’s going on? I just got your message and the alarm rang-“

Tony ignored the questions. “Did you stop the others?”

“I…” He let out a small huff before going on. “Yeah, I already told everyone not to respond to the alarm but Fury is calling non-stop now. Tony what the hell is going on-“

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Ross rushed down the steps that led to the control room, the adrenaline pumping his blood. It doesn’t take long before he reaches the main monitor. Stops next to Maria Hill, his eyes never leave the screen.

“Jesus… is that really…?“
Hill turns slightly towards him. “Loki Odinson slash Laufeyson. Most famously known for the New York Invasion of 2012. Adopted brother of Thor. Loki disappeared from Earth the same year. There has been no sighting reported of him since. But considering how there were not many detailed visual during that incident and no in-depth description that was released to the public, it is hard to say for sure… It doesn’t help that with everything happened within range of two-three years around Thanos’s attack, much of our data is a mess—”

Ross tries to level his breathing as he continued to stare at the man… no, Asgardian… shown on the display. The god looked rather calm, lounging on the chair at the center of the locked and reinforced barrier. There was a slight shift of his gaze as he peered straight into the camera. The smirk widening before he fixes his sights towards the front once more.

Everything about this being made the SHIELD agent feels uneasy. He feels like he can’t gauge him even if he tried.

“…What we do know is that Thor had informed us during a briefing in 2015 that Loki had died during a battle in their attempts to rescue Jane Foster. Although years later it was confirmed that he had survived, posed as Odin, and ruled Asgard till a coup led by their… sister… Hela. Loki did aid Thor, Valkyrie, and Doctor Banner in rescuing many of the Asgardian civilians and neutralize the threat. Although on their voyage to Earth to seek refuge, was ambushed by Thanos. Thor seemed quite convinced during the brief meeting after the snap that Loki was murdered by the Mad Titan. This time, for certainty… but…”

“And he just… what? Suddenly comes back from the dead again to turn himself in?”

“Technically it seemed that, in terms of Asgardian grounds, Loki was cleared of all charges upon his assistance in safely returning Jane Foster and protecting the Reality Stone. His… endeavors of posing as the king? That seemed to have never even been perused. Makes sense given all the disorder that ensued right after.”

Ross leaned against the desk with both fists, letting out a sigh. “So he’s only a criminal on Earth, under our law and jurisdiction. So why come here? All he had to do was avoid Earth… Where is Fury? Was anyone able to get in contact with Thor?”

Hill had her arms crossed. “Avengers compound has been notified but none have responded. Fortunately, Loki surrendered himself without so much as a fight.”
“Unfortunately, this isn’t the first time he pulled something like this. He can’t be trusted. He purposely got himself arrested in 2012 to take down the helicarrier and disperse the team.”

All of them turned around quickly, watching as Fury strode in with a grim look. But before Ross can even utter a word, Loki’s voice resonated from the speakers.

“It seemed someone with the authority to make decisions have arrived. It’s been a while, Director Fury.”

“I want the feeds up on the overhang screens,” Fury said loudly. Two of the techs nodded and rushed to heed the command. “Hill, keep trying to get in touch with the Avengers compound.”

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“This is bat shit crazy-“

“What-… Stark what the hell actually is going on?!“

“Tony, why would he even be doing this? How do you know he’s not just playing you-“

“Are we really going to forget he led Thanos’s army here?! He’s a mass murderer!”

“So what you are telling us is that you trust Thor’s phycho brother-“

“Adopted,” Thor muttered under his breath.

Bruce, though pinching the bridge of his nose from a headache, let out a snort.

“I get Thor but how are you so calm about this?” asked Clint to Bruce.

Tony stared them down, mainly Steve, Clint, Natasha, and Sam who were the source of most of the
complaints. Gone were the days where their anger had him frazzled. Although Rhodey didn’t look all too pleased with the idea nor did Barnes.

“Raise your hand if you killed someone or in some way linked to the death of some mass pollution-“ Tony raised his own, looking around. Most of the others didn’t bother but they got the point.

There was a brief pause as many preceded to pace or turn around to sigh.

Rhodes, however, blinked couple times, fast. Suddenly a memory was coming to him. “This is why you had all those questions about Tony at Wakanda-“

Bruce looked up as well, setting his sights on the Asgardian. “And how you knew about these two’s,” he pointed vaguely towards Tony and Steve’s direction. “…fallout before me-”

“He…” Thor switched his weight to his other leg, swallowing hard. “…My brother didn’t tell me much. He had been vague. We didn’t exactly have a chance to. Not with everything with Hela and then Thanos-“

“Okay you know what, this is getting stupid,” Sam said standing up. “Why don’t we go around and actually talk about what each of us knows because seems like everyone just has a piece of a story. Starting with you Stark, why the hell are you working with Loki? How did he end up here in the first place??”

“Wait…” Clint turned his gaze towards Tony. “Did you know he was alive before even Thor?”

“…which time?” Natasha muttered sarcastically under her breath.

Hawkeye gave her a look before going back to fixing his sights on the billionaire. “Why didn’t you tell any of us this?”

Steve let out a sigh. “How… how did this even happen? How could you trust him after-“

“You all are still here aren’t you,” Tony snapped with a glare.
That shut the Captain up abruptly. Tony simply raised the glass to his lips, taking a sip, the cold stare still lingering on the blonde as if daring him to speak again.

Sam took a step forward. “You do realize while Loki was pretending to be Odin, he didn’t keep a good eye on rest of the realm and that’s how Thanos was able to carry out his plan, force the dwarves to construct the infinity gauntlet as well as carry out his plan- Thor told us this… If we had known Loki was posing as Odin maybe-”

Tony let out a harsh laugh. “You forget you all went rogue and we weren’t exactly on speaking terms. You know, after I nearly died?!” He paused but only for a second. “I am not explaining myself to you about this. Not right now. Only thing…”

He let out a sigh before turning towards the Asgardian, “hey, Point Break… sorry. Sure, I can say I didn’t know how to even reach you but… I didn’t even try. I knew you were upset thinking your brother died… the first time… But… he just…”

Thor simply regarded him for a moment before nodding, “He would not have trusted you if you had. I know my brother, Man of Iron. Besides, I eventually figured it out… And if this works…”

“... You must have many questions. So let’s start with why I’m here.”

Fury sighed, “I do not care why. I’ve learned the less we listened to you the better.”

Loki raised an eyebrow, “Oh but this is good. Good for you in fact.”

There was a pause, a silence, as he exchanged a glance with Ross and Hill.

“Why are you here?” Ross interjected.

A soft laughter could be heard. “You must be Agent Ross. I believe we never had the pleasure.”

There was a short pause before, “I want a pardon. I want full pardon for any and all past crimes committed against this planet. It will be signed, it will be sealed. It will not be revocable, non-reversible.”

“What?” Ross said out loud before he could stop himself. He had an incredulous look as he frowned at Fury.

The Director, however, still wore the same flat expression. “And why do you believe you will be granted this?’

“Ugh, such dull questions.” He drawls out with faux boredom. “Where shall I start? I have been cleared of all charges in Asgard, I would assume by now that you have figured out Thanos was truly behind the invasion and not I. In fact, I have aided to save Thor and Doctor Banner’s life against the Mad Titan. I played my part in the Great War. You can ask either of them to confirm.”

“Your previous actions still killed hundreds of people in the past. You can hardly be considered innocent.” Fury went on.

“And that’s why I’m proposing a trade.” A smirk played on Loki’s lips as he leaned back against the chair, the long legs crossing almost gracefully. “You give me this and I will certainly make it worth your while.”

Fury let out a short, cold laugh. “Okay… let’s here it. What do you have?”

“Information. Information you desperately want… have been seeking in fact to no avail.”

“Information about what?”

“About Doctor Strange, of course.”
There was sudden silence that resonated around the room. Ross froze from where he stood and Hill stared at Fury in mild confusion. The Director, however, paid neither of them attention.

He let the silence linger a bit longer before going on. “...What he has been doing for the years he’s been back in New York. The missing years you cannot place him before the Mad Titan’s attack. Information regarding the full extent of his powers, his strengths, his weaknesses. I admit, while I do not have all the answers yet, I do believe I am much further along than where you must be, Director. With the pardon, you are giving me access to... figure out the final pieces... And I am more than willing to share once I do.”

“...I am aware the sorcerer is currently locked up. This is going to go two ways, as you know. One, he will be set free in the end for one reason or another. You would want him back in the Avengers as he is yet not a great threat and his skills are an asset. You’d rather he be in Avengers, in fact, and not against.”

“...But you are concerned about having his powers checked. ...Yes, I’m aware of the little scare he gave you all days back. Oh, I do not blame you. You have every right to fear. You currently have no being who can directly contend with his abilities should he ever decide to go against your little organization. Not really. And that is, undoubtedly... a very alarming concern... Especially given the... history...”

Fury turned away from the monitor, pacing slowly though still listening.

“...I’m offering myself as a solution. Additionally, having me on your side means you no longer have to be reliant on the Midgardian sorcerer for his knowledge in the realm of magic, the powers, the dimensions, the worlds in which you cannot even fathom. We all know the witch is significantly lacking in that department even if you can get a hold of her... she’s but a child with very little control, knowledge, the discipline...”

“...Or two, for whatever reason he is never released... well, you will then be one sorcerer short. I believe that’s a vacancy I can easily fill.”

“So what?” Fury retorted, evenly. “You want to be... an Avenger?”

Loki smiled. “How about let’s say informant for now. Special cases, I am more than willing to involve myself and provide a significant amount of help.”
“And why are you doing this? Why do you want a pardon from us? You can easily go anywhere else in the universe and do as you please.”

“Because I’m desperately bored in this exile. Earth has proved to be quite entertaining.”

“Bored? You are doing all this because you are bored?”

Loki rolled his eyes. “While that may seem insignificant to you, it is quite a pressing problem for me.” He let out a short huff. “Plus, Thor would be pleased. Of course, that is not my greatest motivation but we are in a path to patching things up, so to say, my brother and I. To an extent, I like seeing him happy and off my case… and I admit, it has been quite boring without his annoyance from time to time. Avengers definitely will prove to be an endless amount of amusement. Filled with those who are much more entertaining than regular Midgardians…”

The Asgardian took a deep breath as he leaned forward, the piercing emerald gaze peering straight into the camera. “What I am offering you is a guarantee to no longer have me as a threat to humanity. I am offering to abide by the rules. No murders, no damage, no taking over your little world. I believe this is a great offer for you.”

“…You have an hour to decide and present me with the pardon before I assure you, I will walk out and there is little you can do to stop me.”

After a moment of silence, Fury flipped the switch, cutting off the mic on their end. “Get the council on the line,” he said.

Ross stepped forward. “Are you really going to trust Loki? Doctor Strange is not a threat. …What are you so afraid of that you are willing to trust Loki of all people over Strange who has not actually done anything… malicious…”

“You do not know him like I do,” the Director snapped back. “With the right… motivation, he is far more dangerous than Loki. I do hope it never comes to that but if for whatever reason he snaps, you don’t want to know what Stephen Strange is capable of. If it is a choice, I will take my chances with Loki. This is a contingency plan. Not a bad one. And if, and again, I hope, both parties prove to be well-behaved? Well, we will have two strong sorcerer in Avengers.”

.........
“Half of you… I’m asking you to just trust me.” Tony exchanged a long glance with Rhodey and Bruce. Then turned to Steve and soon the rest of his old team. “The other half, well… you owe me and this is it. This is what I’m asking for. This is what you do. You do not respond to this alarm right now. You do not accept the call from SHIELD. In about an hour or so they are going to release Stephen. I’m going to pick him up. You will most likely receive another summon from Fury within the next 30 min after, then you go. Simple. I’m literally spelling out what I want you to do.”

Clint paced towards the couch before leaning against the arm. He let out a sigh. “…Okay… but then what? Are you expecting all of us to lie? Did you forget some of us here are terrible liars?” He subtly nodded towards the Captain’s direction. As if on cue, Steve turned to him frowning, as if offended.

Tony didn’t miss a beat. “You wouldn’t have to. Just be your usual dumb confused selves-“

“What?!”

But it didn’t faze the billionaire. He merely gave the same flat look. “Don’t lie,” he said dryly.

“How is that even going to be possible?” Steve said with a small sigh. “Are we supposed to tell them we don’t know you were working with Loki?”

Tony gave him a look. “Am I not working with Loki?”

“You are,” the Captain replied harshly with a slight frown.

But Tony ignored the clear outrage. “Then, that’s what you say.”

There was a short pause as some exchanged looks.

Quietly, finally, Barnes spoke up. “…I’m not the only one confused… right?”

.........
“Your pardon.” Fury threw down a large thick stack of documents onto the table in front of Loki. “It’s done.”

The Asgardian calmly reached over flipping through the pages, stopping once in a while to get a detailed read on some parts. “Good,” he said after a long while. “All past crimes, correct?”

“Yes.”

Ross, who had been standing not far away, had his arms crossed. The look of annoyance and reserve about the whole situation clearly stamped across his forehead.

“So… do we have a deal?” The Director said coldly.

A moment later Loki smirked towards Ross before turning towards Fury once more. “Of course,” he said almost too pleasantly.

There was a twitch in Ross’s expression but both he and Fury eventually turned around with a sigh, as if to leave. But they only got as far as the door before…

“Oh and by the way, I released that Siberia footage.”

“What the hell is going on?!” Ross was beyond furious as he slammed a hand onto the table.

They had moved to a conference room, much to Ross’s dismay. However, considering the very too recent pardon, he couldn’t object much. Though, if he was honest with himself, he was fully aware they only had the god detained because he was willing.

“Either you are lying or you are covering for Strange! Which seems rather odd considering your previous statements about giving us information about him. And why would Doctor Strange even turn himself in for you?!” Then the SHIELD agent swerved right around toward Fury who was leaning against the far wall.
It only took split second before a thought dawned on him. The Director looked too calm. It only confirmed his suspicion that Fury knew more than he let on about this whole ordeal.

But Loki soon spoke, evenly, almost uninterested. “I leaked the tape for a bit of mayhem. As I said, I have been incredibly bored. But I admit, it did not have… the impact I wanted. But it did provide the perfect opportunity for this pardon. …As for the Midgardian sorcerer, he may have been led to believe it was his son who leaked the tape. I supposed, technically Stark’s son still for now. He had… wrongly assumed… after many of my… nudging. ….And well, to take away the precious doctor away from Stark… I had thought it would be the final push to cause total chaos within the Avengers.”

The Asgardian locked eyes with Ross, who was wearing a frown but his breathing seemed to be leveling out now… As if almost believing…

Loki soon smirked, “Now… that is what you will tell your little UN if asked.”

A second of silence.

“What…? What does that even mean!?”

Fury let out a sigh. “Harley, Stark’s adopted son, released the footage. Doctor Strange was, in fact, covering for his son.”

Ross sharply turned once more, the wheels turning in his head as he pieced together all the details of the last several days. “You… you knew? And you had me interrogating the man for days-”

The Director fixed him with a look. “Strange wouldn’t have given in no matter what you tried. … But I wasn’t sure what you would do if I had told you. What your motivations fully were. You seemed bit of a boy scout.“

The agent appeared offended. “I… I would not have turned in a child! There must have been some way-” Before all this got too out of hand and complicated.

But Fury ignored it, fixing Loki with a cold stare. “But what real question is, why are you
protecting Strange now-“

There was a moment of silence before the Asgardian spoke.

“Stark and I had a deal. He knew I wanted a pardon and gave me the opportunity. In exchange, he gets his beloved doctor back.” He still remained seated on the chair opposite them. His long legs propped still onto the desk that divided him from the two SHIELD agents.

“It appears as though you did not want Strange off the Avengers. Not yet anyways. In fact, you wanted him still within your merry band of heroes for his unique skillset. …I have given you a way. You wanted to be prepared for the possibility Strange ever becomes a threat. ...Well, here I am. I just solved all your problems. Win-win, I was not lying about what I had been saying before. And I will keep my end of this deal, keep a close eye on the Sorcerer and share with you my findings. Now, I have Stark’s trust. What is better way than to keep watch on the doctor than being Stark’s friend? What better way to appeal to Stark than aid him in returning the precious sorcerer back into his arms-”

Ross pinched the bridge of his nose, shutting his eyes with a grimace. He didn’t like this. Didn’t like this at all. He was used to people lying through their teeth. In fact, he believed himself pretty good at dissecting a situation, recognizing deception, manipulation… but this whole situation… he couldn’t make out what was up or down.

Loki certainly was of no help. His mind was a bag of cats. Ross truly could not tell where the lies ended and truth began. Or was it some odd combination of both in every word that came out from that mouth? Was that even possible?

Fury’s expression remained impassive as he approached the large conference table. “So what is in it for you in all this?”

Loki rolled his eyes. “A pardon. I told you. Not a lie, Director.”

“And you’re offering to spy on Doctor Strange and Stark?”

“Doesn’t that what it sounds like?”

“Why?”
“Ugh. Such repetitive questions…” The god threw his head back in an exaggerated sigh.

“Why are you really doing this?”

A resigned smile formed on his lips. “Again, I’m bored. Being bored is very boring.”

But Fury simply raised an eyebrow. “You cannot be doing all this simply because you are bored.”

“Have you lived for millennia? No,” sarcasm was dripping from those words. “Then you wouldn’t really understand, would you?”

Another silence washed over them as neither Loki nor the Director seemed to be willing to back down from the stare-off. But after a minute or so, Fury slowly placed both fists on the cold metal surface, leaning heavily.

“So…” he said with surprising nonchalant tone. “Stark knew you wanted a pardon. You two have made some kind of contact far before this. Enough for him to actually trust you, to deal with you.”

Loki let out a small huff before carrying on with a display of his usual indifference. “I was here briefly during my time posing as Odin. Turns out being on the throne of Asgard can be a quite dull job. Those idiots who largely believe throwing a punch solves everything… too many… Thors… Anyways, I came to collect the drink Stark promised me. Which, still have not been paid to this day…” His voice trailed off almost wistfully.

“You thought to just waltz up to one of the Avengers? When they all believed you to be dead?”

“Oh, I thought it would be hilarious. …And as it turns out, I had nothing to fear. By the time I got there, most of your heroes were on the run it seemed. Led by the actions of one Captain America—” There was a hint of annoyance in the way Loki referred to Rogers that had Fury frowning.

“You seem quite fond of him.”
Loki let out harsh laughter. “The Captain?”

“No.” He replied coldly. “Stark.” Then a pause before. “Did he sleep with you too?”

Ross let out a mortified, “Director!”

But the Asgardian only let out an amused laugh. “Oh, you humans… such simplistic one line of thinking.” His piercing gaze glanced at Ross for a quick second before locking on Fury once more. “…We both know Stark was still heartbroken over his boy toy to let his eyes wander. No, not over the Captain. Even with that wound still fresh, he was not the man Stark was really, truly, pining after, was he? …But that is the problem is it not, Director? Your problem never really went away…”

“I don’t know what you are talking about.”

“You don’t?”

“Do you even know what you are talking about?” He lowered his voice down an octave. But when no reply came, he went on. “How do I know I can trust you?”

“Do you trust anyone?” Loki retorted coolly. Then he let out a small sigh. “But here’s a reason, just for the entertainment sake. …Because you have no other choice. I just became your best bet. That’s why you so willingly got me the pardon and that is why you will trust me… for now.”

“We’re live at New York headquarters of SHIELD where sources claim there had been yet another major arrest this morning. Whether it is linked to the investigation regards to the major leak last week remains to be-“

“…second major arrest for SHIELD within weeks. First one, of course, being the arrest of Doctor Stephen Strange who confessed to leaking the highly confidential footage between Captain America and Iron Man-“

“It has been the subject of countless debate just how fair that arrest was. Many seems to agree
Doctor Stephen Vincent Strange was justified and should be released—“

“…The question being asked over and over again, was it really wrong for Doctor Strange to simply revealing the truth that SHIELD seemed to have covered up at the expense of Mr. Tony Stark—“

“SHIELD has yet to make an official statement as to the identity of today’s arrest—“

They all still remained in the large common room, some pacing, some half seated on various surface. Multiple monitors were on to various news channels, which endlessly reported of the events at the SHIELD headquarters.

The phone, the alarms continued to ring but none were answered. After a good hour, several in the room who seemed to be bothered by the continuous ringing even appeared accustomed to it.

No one spoke. They had tried, of course. Soon after Tony’s departure from the compound some voiced concerns, however, due to so many disagreements within the group, no one could properly mediate the conversation past couple sentences. After all, Steve knew better than to think he had the same power and respect over the team dynamic at the moment.

Now they all avoided looking at each other, everyone too tired to argue regardless of their personal beliefs.

“We interrupt this broadcast for some breaking news. It seems a limo just arrived at the SHIELD Headquarters just roughly four minutes ago that belong to none other than Tony Stark…”

“Oh here we go—“ muttered Clint under his breath breaking the long cold silence.

Many whipped around to stare at the monitor.

They watched as Tony stepped out of the car, many SHIELD agents rushing forward from the building to help hold back the crowd of reporters that soon circled the billionaire. They were shouts of questions that all blurred together but Tony simply paid no heed, crossing quickly to the main entrance.
“This will be the first time Mr. Stark is seen in public since his fiancé’s arrest- SHIELD officials state no visit was scheduled for Iron Man today.”

It seems that the crowd had not yet picked it up but the Avengers can see it. Far behind in the distance at the corner of the screen, behind the double doors, there was a crowd of more operatives surrounding a tall figure in dark blue robes that stood out a little against the black uniform.

Soon the cameras zoomed on the scene and they could make out the Sorcerer Supreme. His eyes were on Tony who was getting closer and closer with every stride. However, before the pair can reach each other Stephen sharply turned his head.

Of course, they couldn’t make out fully of what was going on without the audio but another second and Fury came into view with Ross closely behind. They seemed to be saying something… or at least trying to.

Tony ran forward pulling Stephen behind him. It looked as if the billionaire was shouting at full volume making Ross snap his mouth shut. Fury, though still giving the usual flat stare, simply rolled his eyes but seemed to back off.

The camera crew and the crowd of reporters finally closed in enough for the microphone to started picking up sounds.

It was muffled but they heard the end of Tony’s final words. “…I don't fucking care! He is leaving with me. That’s final. AND TOUCH HIM AGAIN AND I WILL BREAK EVERY BONE IN YOUR BODY, GOT IT? …come on, Stephen-”

Tony didn’t waste time in grabbing ahold of Stephen by the hand, leading them out. There was a brief exchange of a glance from the pair before they exited straight through the crowd that had gathered outside.

Screams and shouts of questions followed them all the way back to the limo but none were addressed. A small smirk played on both of their lips, visible when the camera caught them at a right angle.

“An unprecedented sight. Tony Stark seems to be escorting his fiancé, Doctor Stephen Strange off the SHIELD site.”
“…It is still unclear if Doctor Strange is cleared of charges pertaining to-“

“…A bold move as if he’s daring the world to come between them-“

Sam whistled and Clint let out a huff of laughter as many channels started to shift out from the frame of SHIELD headquarters. There were continuous debates and discussions from various reporters and anchors of what they had just witnessed but soon most of the Avengers turned away, no longer paying attention.

Rhodes and Bruce were trying to hide a smile, Clint and Natasha had a slight smirk playing on their lips… Sam and Barnes quickly turned to Steve who continued to stare at the monitor with a blank stare but definitely locked jaw.

But they didn’t have much time to say a word before FRIDAY interrupted. “Incoming call from Director Fury…”

That was just about all the warning they got before Fury’s usual stern tone greeted them.

“I know you all were ghosting our calls. Get your asses down here now.”

“Are you okay?”

“I’m fine.”

Tony put a hand on the other’s thigh, squeezing gently. “Hey, I’m… sorry, I know you don’t like car rides but…”

“Optics,” Stephen replied simply. A small smile was on his lips. “I know. It’s fine, Tony.”

“Are you sure you’re okay? You’ve been locked up for days-”
Stephen let out a short sigh. “Wasn’t so bad… just annoying. …How are-“

“They are fine. Harley and Peter are back home with Pepper.”

There was a short pause but before Stephen can open his mouth once more Tony beat him to it. “I’ll explain later- yeah?”

The sorcerer stared at him for a moment longer, their eyes locked. Tony held his breath, studying the other’s expression, desperately hoping to not come across any displeasure.

“Tony…” He finally said in a low tone.

“Just trust me, please? I just… needed to fix…. I needed you back-“

“I know…”

“I couldn’t just stand by and let them take-“

“I know…”

“I swear I know what I’m doing- …I thought this through-“

“I know.” Stephen reached over, grabbing ahold of Tony’s forearm in a firm grip, tugging just enough to get the engineer’s attention. “I know. …I do trust you. You don’t have to convince me.”

There was a brief flash of surprise that came over the engineer’s face. What that connotes, took a stab at the doctor’s heart. But before he could speak in regards to it, Tony quickly put on a smile.

“We should get away for a while. A vacation… away from all this and just you and me. …God I missed you-“
Stephen smiled unconsciously. Just about glowing at the genuine affection that greeted him when he stared into those doe eyes. “Sure,” he said happily as he traced the other’s jawline with the pad of his thumb.

“No going to lie, doc. It was terrifying but also incredibly hot how you jumped in to save the day. And I heard about the power play during interrogation—” A smirk was now playing on the billionaire’s lips as his voice took on a more playful tone. He shifted his position to get closer, nearly ending up on the other’s lap.

Stephen simply let out a low chuckle, always too fond of Tony’s antics in this department. It didn’t hurt it always did wonders to his ego. “Tony… I will always… protect what’s your’s…”

“Just wait till we get home, babe—” Tony ran a hand down the other’s chest, almost clawing by the end. “I’ve been dying to get my hands on you for days—”

But something tugged from the back of his mind. “Tony…” He swallowed, hard. He downcast his sights for a brief moment before looking up to meet the other’s gaze. “…We should talk… about… I need—… I need to tell you about when I got back to New York…”

Tony gave him a quizzical stare, “…okay…?”

Stephen opened his mouth once more, about to continue, but then he felt it. There was a surge of energy that made his skin crawl.

At the corner of his eyes he saw the blazing red.

It happened fast. He had just enough time to grab Tony and cast a shield around them.

“STEPHEN!”

The loud screeching of tires. A deafening crash and a roar.
It was truly… a chaotic situation to say the least.

The shouting started nearly the minute they entered the conference room. Being greeted by the sight of not only Fury, but also Loki set many of them on edge. Clint remained standing near the doorway, far away from Loki as it was physically possible. None of them could really blame him, however. Thor was the only one who seemed pleased at the sight of his brother, but that was not a surprise.

Loki stood, leaning against the large window, nonchalantly gazing out, seeming very uninterested at the numerous questions being fired at Fury.

In the end, they oddly came to the conclusion of one unifying story.

Loki had cut a deal with SHIELD, in exchange for being pardoned from all his past crimes, he would assist the Avengers on an as-needed basis. With greater threats continuously looming over them, another sorcerer and practically a demi-god was not something SHIELD could easily pass on. On top of that, he would keep an eye on Stephen Strange. Loki’s presence on the team alone, another sorcerer, would naturally keep the balance of power. They obviously no longer had to rely on one sorcerer.

Loki will take the fall for the Siberia footage leak and to the UN, that would be presented as the truth. What really happened. It was just another trick by the trickster to cause a bit of mayhem within Avengers and SHIELD. He only came clean about the event when another, a better opportunity arose.

Strange would be released and cleared. With the pardon already given to the god for every past wrongdoing, they would have no choice but to cut their losses and drop the subject. At the very least they know for sure it is not a continuous security breach. And, considering what they would get in exchange, the reasonable deal in place, they will save face and would be able to let this go rather easily.

What had been bothering Steve, however, was why SHIELD seems to continuously view Strange as such an immediate threat… or was it just Fury? Of course, he understood the obvious. The logic that one person having one distinguished power with no one to match does pose a problem if the said party ever turned on them. But they were treating the situation as if that was a… high chance possibility for the near future. Was this related to what Strange was referring to? There was some animosity between him and the Director that is underlining this whole situation? Of course, the Captain had his own misgivings regarding Strange and he was definitely sure the feeling was mutual. However, regardless of the animosity Strange showed on occasions, Steve couldn't imagine yet of him actually turning on humanity.
Then there was the second question of who’s side is Loki really on? Yes, what Tony told them as the plan and what Fury was saying matched up perfectly. But as convoluted situation goes this was far beyond crazy.

Tony seems to believe Loki offered information about Strange to SHIELD only to speed up getting a pardon. Another bargaining chip. Since after that fiasco during the interrogation, the UN, Council, SHIELD were all on edge in regards to the Sorcerer Supreme. They would jump at the chance for a resolution moving forward. Tony knew this and instructed Loki to utilize the knowledge.

Fury, on the other hand, seems to think that Loki was truly going to spy on Strange. That Loki was also crossing Tony. The fact that by giving this impression they had hatched this plan together and now successfully aided in securing Strange’s freedom without Harley ever being mentioned, he had the billionaire’s gratitude and trust. Perfect way to get close to the pair and gain information on the Sorcerer Supreme.

The very maddening part to all this, Steve honestly couldn’t tell which was the real truth. He can see it going both ways. And judging by the anxiousness around the room, seemed most of them were not fully convinced either. It was all very… Loki. Or was he just playing both sides?

But one thing was true, however. Tony was right. None of them had to lie.

“Okay what game are you playing?” exclaimed Sam. “First you’re working with Stark and now you’re working with… SHIELD… against Strange? Do you just flip sides on a whim?” Then he turned to Fury. “…I know the wizard doesn’t like the Avengers but he’s not really some… urgent threat- …this guy, on the other hand, proved he is a menace!”

“For now-“

“Against Stephen means against Tony,” Rhodes said looking directly at Loki. “Did you just double cross my best friend? You think I’ll stand here and-“

But he didn’t have a chance to finish his sentence before Hill barged in. They all turned to her quickly without a second thought.

“We have a situation-“ She quickly turned on the monitors, which displayed…
Those who were seated began to stand, eyes glued to the screen. A part of the city was being nearly leveled by a large creature. It was massive. Massive enough to make the skyscrapers look like miniature models in comparison. It’s had a dragon-like head with two curing horns, walking on all four legs that displayed enormous claws at the end. A long tail was swishing menacingly. If it had to be described, its skin looked as if it was made of running lava, cooled black on the surface but destructive heat underneath.

Thor acted first, as if about to dash out to the scene. Steve and Clint closely second.

“Stop,” came the bored tone.

They all turned hastily towards Loki.

Thor was frowning as he set his sights on his brother. “They don’t stand a chance against a fire dragon! I don’t know how it even ended up here but we will sort that out later, brother-“

“My doing, I’m afraid,” Loki replied simply.

Thor appeared horrified, others in the room sharing the sentiment wholeheartedly, “LOKI!”

But the other god simply stared at the rest of them, mainly the rogues. “None of you stand a chance against something like that. I suggest you do not bother. Probably only get in the way…”

“What the hell?! ARE YOU INSANE?!” Clint was shouting now. “Actually don’t answer that. I already know the answer to that!”

“I’m simply doing what I promised,” the Asgardian went on with a smirk. He glanced towards Fury. “I believe Stark and Strange are already on scene.“

“What?!“ Steve crossed the room in quick strides. “You son of a- you bluntly threw Tony in
danger?!”

“I wanted to see exactly what the Sorcerer can do.”

Both Natasha and Barnes were stiff, standing too straight sharing a similar horrified expression.

“Relax… the Sorcerer would not let anything harm Stark, I’m sure. Stark is there just as a bit of motivation-“

“Fucking christ-“ Rhodes didn’t bother to waste any more time, running out, pushing past Hill on the way.

Natasha stepped forward “We need to go, Cap- now!”

Loki rolled his eyes. “Must I always repeat myself, you all would do little to no good-“

Thor was soon up in his face. “What have you done?! What if this little plan of your’s gets out of hand!” Then he took a deep breath as if trying to calm himself. “…You always have a backup plan, Loki- I hope you have one today-“

The other god simply smiled. “Of course. You are my backup plan, brother… as well as Doctor Banner. I suggest you two get going-“

There were collective groan and shock that filled the room but Thor and Bruce simply bolted out without another word.

But just as the rogues were about to follow Loki let out a dramatic sigh. “Again, stop getting in the way.”

“You do not get to tell us what to do!” Clint shouted back.

“How sure are you that Strange can handle this?” Fury finally spoke.
Silence fell from the rogues but mostly out of shock.

“Quite certain. …I’m sure you did your homework. All the rumors of his help to multiple heroic organizations on Midgard, already held up his own against three demonic entities. They are all true. I simply want to see a live demonstration.”

Fury shot him a look.

The Asgardian simply raised an eyebrow. “And you don’t?”

After a moment the Director let out a sigh.

“Rest of you, stand down.”

They fixed Fury with a look of disbelief.

But the Director simply gave them his usual stern look.

“We should be helping them! If Thor and Banner will be needed—”

“Oh please,” Loki let out a scoff. “I only said that to get rid of my brother. His voice can be so infuriating to put up with at times when I need to think…”

There was mutter of curses and exasperation.

And the last of the Captain’s patience snapped. Ignoring Loki, he stared at Fury dead in the eyes. “You are scared of Strange. I don’t know why but you are afraid he’ll turn against you soon. What is this about? What can you be this afraid of you are willing to risk Tony’s life just for bit of information—“

“Captain,” came the firm reply. “You are about to see for yourself why exactly I’m concerned.”
Steve ran a hand through his hair. The frustration nearly coursing through is vain. He glanced quickly towards Natasha but she looked... blank... too blank. It’s not a look he had seen in awhile. But at the moment, he couldn’t pay it much heed. He turned towards the Asgardian with a glare.

“What’s in it for you? What is the point in all this for you?”

Loki only stared back. The light smirk still playing on his lips but oddly no sign of clear emotions.

“The point?” the god repeated calmly.

“...Stop acting like a heartbroken bitch, Anthony, and think like a warrior! What. Do. You. Want.”

“I WANT THE THRONE! ... I want... what you what you have. I want what you took. What you took with no hesitation and no remorse. I want... what I deserve. WHAT I AM OWED!”

Loki let out a scoff, his expression cold. "Someone like you... you will never understand, Captain."

"Steve..."

That stopped him from outright shouting. The Captain turned towards Natasha who was giving him a stern look.

"He's... been back... in New York before Thano's attack," she said evenly. "At least two years. He didn't contact Tony for some reason. He's planning something, we just don't know what."

Steve frowned, "And you didn't tell us this?"

"Under my instruction, Captain," Fury stood from his seat, walking calmly towards the Captain America. "Till we knew exactly what we were dealing with-"

"But it was enough for you to make a deal with Loki,” he retorted through gritted teeth. But then
he looked around to rest of them, fixing on Natasha. "How did we not know for two years he was back?"

There was a laugh. Loki shook his head as he leaned further back onto the wall behind him. "I've been back for quite some time and none of you even had a clue. You're asking the wrong questions, Captain. Quite obvious ones. Magic, of course."

They continued to stare at him, slightly curious.

"My best guess is some distortion spells or some illusions. You may simply not have seen him even if he was in front of your face... or even if you had, you would not remember details of one's traits. Making it impossible to recall at a later point-"

Then something hits him.

"*For Tony Stark?*"

"*How about dahlia. Red.*"

"*Vincent... Vincent Stevens.*"

Stephen Vincent Strange.

"Cap...?"

"Stevie!"

His gaze snapped up. Natasha and Bucky were staring at him with a look of concern.

"Not two," he said slowly. "...He's been back far longer."
Chapter End Notes

I know it's been a long while =___=
hope you all have been doing well ♡

Ngl part of the delay was I was mildly concerned how this new development will be received but so far seems people like it so thank youuu :) you all make me so happy ♡♡♡ (sorry will respond to individuals when I can get a breather from work)
Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

Just got the chapter back from friend who was editing it for me because I just COULD NOT do it myself this round;;;;; so much shit going on-

....Tony finds out about what happened when Stephen returned at least & flashbacks of *cough* aftermath of Civil War

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Hello?”

“Stephen, you need to come to the Metro General. Now.”

“Why? What happened?”

“It’s Tony… you have to see him.”

“Christine, I told you. That is not happening anymore. It’s been—two years? And this charm was only for you to contact me for emergen—“

“Stephen… Stephen, you need to… come here… you… you need to come to say goodbye.”

“I… what…?”

“…He’s… h-he’s not going to make it through the night. I’m… I-I’m so sorry—”

There was utter silence in the room as they watched the scene unfold amongst the monitors. The team could not stand still, pacing and fidgeting, as if itching to join in on the fight. After all, it was very uncommon for them to be on this end, being the spectators rather than in on the main stage.
For a good first couple minutes, it looked as if Thor and the Hulk had things managed. For the most part anyway. After the two arrived Tony focused more on evacuating the public, Rhodes soon joining to assist. And the Sorcerer Supreme appeared intent on having their backs than fighting off the giant creatures.

But then another dragon appeared, then two.

In short while, it became clear there was a limit to what the Hulk can do with sheer brute strength and Thor’s thunder was just not doing as much damage. Between the two of them, it was becoming increasingly difficult to keep all three dragons in the area to not cause any more civilian casualty.

And still, Stephen seemed to be lingering back. After successfully aiding in evacuating residence, he looked as if he was not eager to do much other than making sure the beasts didn’t wander off.

“What is he doing?!” there was a clear edge to Clint’s voice. He hadn’t stopped pacing since the situation started. “…I...we should be there... we should go and-”

Fury considered him for a second before turning to Loki “You said he can handle this-“

But the god remained just as calm as he had been for the last hour. “He’s waiting.”

“Waiting for what?” Steve snapped, his usual frown settling in.

“For the other sorcerer. The one he’s always with,” he drawled out lazily. “He would need a big enough portal to return the beasts, keep it stable enough, and it would require assistance.”

But before another word can be exchanged, there was an ear-splitting roar. All eyes snapped back to the screens just in time to see the Hulk being flung back, landing a block or two away.

“JESUS!”

Sam and Clint were cursing. Bucky and Natasha were silent though Steve could recognize the
shock, the horror in their eyes. He shares their sentiment, though there was a rising anger that quickly overpowered fear.

They see Thor hurrying forward but while dodging the snap of the first dragon, he does not see the tail of the second. Soon the Asgardian was seen thrown literally through a building, the dust created by the impact overshadowing a good amount of visibility they had of the scene.

Then the confusion set in. They couldn’t make head or tail of the situation just by what was being shown from the footage. There were flashes of spells, it looked as if for a moment the doctor had the situation, the dragons falling back… But then there familiar blasts of the repulsor and suddenly the spells were redirected… They both manage to dodge out of the way just in time.

“I need a communication line with Stark.”

They all looked at Loki with varying emotions. It appeared for a moment as if Steve was going to argue. But after a pause, Fury nodded, gesturing to Hills. Maria gave a look but proceeded in getting out a spare earpiece, seeming to enable it, before tossing it to Loki.

The rest of them gawked for a moment, exchanging glances, but the god was already speaking into the device, a clear disregard for their opinions.

Clint let out an exasperated scoff. “Seriously? He fucking knows how to use it? Why can’t Thor ever learn-“

“Oh I’m sure Thor is only pretending to be dumb just so he can avoid things he does not want to do,” Loki muttered low.

But they all heard him. Clint frowned, looking to the rest of them as the words sank in.

“Stark, I suggest you get out of there and let your boy toy handle the situation.”

“You son of a-,” They see Iron Man pausing mid-air on one of the screens. His voice heard on the communication line. “I- NO! I am not leaving him here!”
Loki frowned, letting out a harsh scoff. “Ugh the idiots, the pair of you-“

“Nuh-uh! You are not-“

“TONY!”

They don’t know who yelled first but Tony snapped his attention back to the battle, just in time to see one of the dragons rearing its head. He aimed a missile but it only bought him a couple of seconds. Then, a portal opens just in time swallowing over the armor. They soon see Tony fall right behind the sorcerer, at a safe distance away from the fangs of the large creatures.

Loki gritted his teeth, obviously annoyed to those in the conference room.

He miscalculated this aspect. The Midgardian sorcerer’s obsession. Probably exasperated by his recent imprisonment away from his beloved.

“Stark,” he stated coldly once more. “Let your sorcerer handle this. You are getting in the way.”

“What the hell are you-“

“ANTHONY!”

That made all of them flinch for a moment, taken aback. Steve exchanged a glance with Natasha who was also staring intently, eyebrow raised.

“He’s playing defense because of your presence. Fall back and let him handle this properly!”

A short silence washed over them, the tension clearly felt by everyone in the room.

“Fine. But if this goes south... if he gets so much as a scratch... I fucking swear, Reindeer Games-“
“Yes, my head will roll,” Loki snapped, talking rather quickly now. “Now move, mortal!”

And to their surprise, they see the Iron Man zooming away. Then there was Thor, finally coming back to the line of sight, as well as, the Hulk. Both of them looking a bit worse for wear.

“Thor-“ There was a green glow to a gesture Loki was making.

“Loki?” The voice sounded a little distant, muffled slightly, but clearly Thor’s. Some couldn't help but dart their eyes around the room for a second. It was clearly not the communication line.

“Get out of the way.“

From the monitor, they see the blonde lift his hands exasperatedly. “Have you gone mad, Loki!? They cannot handle threat such as this-“

“Thor, brother dear,” The endearment sounded sarcastic and definitely threatening. “… for once in your life, stop your arrogance and listen-“

“I will not let them be killed-!“

“You are not always the hero, you big oaf! You are not always automatically the one to save the day-“

“Of course I am!”

Loki then let out a harsh scoff. “Fine! Your life. Not mine.“

“What are you-“

But before the other Asgardian could utter another word there was an enormous blast of lightning. One that was burning gold in color, a sharp contrast to Thor’s electric blue. The concrete below shattered, what remained of the buildings around crumbling in the wake of an enormous amount of energy that straight shot towards the beasts.
Even from the feed on the screen, Loki definitely sees the pure disbelief in Thor’s expression, just before the blonde threw his body weight away, away from the line of fire, barely managing to get away just in time.

“What in Odin’s name-“

But the God of Mischief only rolled his eyes.

The blast, unlike Thor’s, seemed to have more of an effect. One of the dragons was knocked right off its feet, screeching as it fell, definitely struggling to get up. The creature’s skin that made contact with the energy was emitting a large amount of smoke. The other two, noticing this, seemed to be falling back momentarily, growling but not approaching.

Thor steadily stood to his feet, though seeming to be finally giving some merit to the warnings of his bother, remained back. The Hulk, on the other hand, went on a rampage, lunging towards the dragons once more.

The Asgardian, noticing it, hurried forward. But before he could reach his teammate, the Hulk abruptly was pulled back. The large green body hit the ground with a solid thud that reverberated. Glowing red restraint now circled his limbs, stretching over more and more surface every passing second.

Stephen, taking long strides forward, gave another sharp flick of his wrist. The Crimson Band giving its final tug, completely securing the Hulk.

“Did… did he just stop that Hulk…?”

Steve recognizes Sam’s voice but couldn’t bring himself to turn to face him, his eyes glued to the screen.

The Sorcerer Supreme was already crossing more and more distance, giving neither Thor nor Hulk not so much as a side-glance as he passed them.

Everything from then happens quick. No one spoke, many holding their breath, but their gaze
never leaving the monitors.

There were blasts of fire, lightning, and various other spells they cannot identify. But one after
another Stephen easily deflects the flames roared by the dragons while knocking them back with
his own.

All of them notice the large portals being conjured, the flash, the sparks of it grabbing attention
almost immediately. A newcomer could be seen shortly after, the Asian man many of them knew
to be Wong. They worked seamlessly in taking control of the situation. Wong mostly making sure
the large gateway stays open as Stephen tries to rein them in, in one form or another.

The last of the dragon put more of a fight but eventually passes through the gateway.

After the two sorcerers seemed to be having a conversation, still glancing at the portal slowly
closing just in case. The two appeared rather concerned about something.

As expected, Tony rejoins them shortly after, landing right in front of Stephen. They watched as
the doctor’s attention immediately shifts to his fiancé, it looked as if he was peering him up and
down, a frown deepening in his expression.

Then…

Suddenly there were shouts.

Even Fury stood to his feet, there were curses loudly being thrown. Steve felt his heart sink.

On the ground, Stephen turned sharply just as the last dragon reared its head through the still
closing portal. Why was it not closing faster? Something was wrong.

They were in the direct line of the beast. There wasn’t enough time.

The sorcerer innately senses Tony making a move just behind him… and he knows at the pit of his
stomach, the brunette would only care for Stephen’s life and not his own. There was a tug of
sudden panic.
Stephen waves his hand, soon there was a sword in his tight grasp. It glowed brightly with hot sparks, almost blinding. With gritted teeth, lunges forward, darting quickly right under the large snout, and slashes upward.

There was a splattering of blood as the head was cleanly cut off.

And as the final sparks of magic disappeared, final gateway closed, the relief settled in.

Those in the conference room continued to stare, nearly gawking at the screen, not sure what else to do just yet. Fury, however, quietly turned off the intercom, disconnecting the communication of the room from the field team still being on display.

They watched Hulk being released shortly after, Thor and Tony managing to calm him down back to Banner. Wong and Stephen appeared to be talking quickly with Rhodes soon joining them.

Then there was a second, then two.

“Damn…”

“How… is he able to-“ Steve was definitely caught off guard. It hit him… that all their confrontation, the sparing, the training, the few missions the sorcerer had to get involve… Strange was holding back. Was it deliberate? Was it simply a kind gesture or was he intending to hide the extent of powers for some reason? Even this time, it didn't look as if he was trying all too hard.

“Do you always ask the obvious questions?” Loki retorted sharply.

Steve automatically glared, pulled from his thoughts.

“He is the Sorcerer Supreme,” the Asgardian stated simply. The god slowly walked towards the window once more, settling on the ledge, arms crossing casually. “After he had taken the title, there had been rumors of him being very keen on collecting relics across realms, hoarding power. I had originally come to earth during my time on the throne of Asgard to check for myself if it were true… and who this new Sorcerer Supreme was-“
Sam straightened up exchanging a sideward glance with the Captain before turning towards Loki once more, “So you met him before now?”

Loki gave a dismissive shrug. “While I had been very curious… perhaps a bit concerned… still am… I may have been a bit sidetracked at the time which forced me to abandon my original plan.”

There were more frowns that greeted him but the god, not very keen on elaborating, continued smoothly. “But more interestingly, it appears the doctor originally did not have any interest in becoming the Sorcerer Supreme. Rejected the title even... quite content with a simple job of being one of the Midgardian Sanctum keepers…”

Then he stared directly at the Captain, almost expectantly.

Steve frowned even deeper, his mind going a mile a minute. “…So why did he suddenly become the Sorcerer Supreme?”

A smirk spread on the Asgardian’s lips. “Good,” he said a great deal of faux pleasantness. “Finally you are asking the right questions.”

It happens fast. It only takes seconds for Stephen to conjure a portal, rushing around the metro general in search of Christine… and Tony.

He has a guess at least, automatically bolting to the best room in the hospital. Pepper must be holding the reins if Tony was in critical condition and she would not have settled for anything less.

The former surgeon expects to run into James or Pepper… or even Happy. Expects the uncomfortable question that undoubtedly would have ensued. Or perhaps the rest of the Avengers… perhaps Rogers.

Under normal circumstances, he would have dreaded the possibility. Wouldn’t even know how to approach the situation let alone plan for it. But at the moment, none of that mattered. He would take it. Whatever thrown at him… if he could just see Tony one last time. If he could be allowed at his bedside… if Tony was to… die…
He can most likely... at least convince Pepper to see reason. Beg her to just let him see Tony... plead with her to just allow him couple seconds...

But there was only Christine. Christine, who looked so ashamed to meet his eyes. Eyes swollen from tears, fingernail marks on her cheeks where she must have clutched too hard probably to cover her sobs. He doesn’t linger too long on her, however, hastily entering the large room she had been facing.

Stephen couldn’t help the sudden, shaky inhale that followed, hardly even recognizing that it came from himself.

Tony was laid on the hospital bed, unmoving, unconscious. Several machines were connected to him, beeping. There was a dark bruise around his right eye, although that one appeared to have existed for days. The rest of the body that was visible was littered with endless amounts of fresh marks and stitches. Then there was... the heavy bandaging over his chest.

He hardly hears Christine, her words barely computing with him. It all sounded so distant.

“...he just appeared at the hospital... couple of hours ago...No one knows how-”

“...Pepper is here but she’s away at the moment... The Colonel is also in critical condition... spinal injury...”

“...Tony... hypothermia... internal bleeding... broken ribs...”

“...We did everything we can but...”

“Who,” he manages to say. His whole body was shaking with rage quite unlike anything he felt before.

Christine pales, stiffening horribly. But her eyes dart towards the corner of the room... to a shield... one of red, white, and blue.
For a second, his mind tried to walk away and hold on at the same time. But the next, he finds himself over Tony’s limp form, carefully tugging away at one of the bandages, one over his chest.

A harsh bruise settled in at the center, over where the arc reactor once been, over his heart. A thick line made from the impact of a rounded object.

Stephen couldn’t stop… staring… He wants to scream, wants to cry out in pain that he feels to his very bones. He wants to scream but he cannot find the air. Just grasping for it desperately, hopelessly.

His knees give, gravity sinking him to the floor. Christine rushes to catch him before he falls completely. She holds him tightly as he sobs.

“I’m sorry… I’m so sorry, Stephen-“

He made a point to make his footsteps heard as he approached. Although the door was left completely open, Stephen still knocked when he reached it.

“May I come in?”

Harley shot up from the bed. It appeared as if the teen had been laying down staring at the ceiling. Unlike Peter’s usually messy room, this one was rather tidy.

“Hi… yeah… sure-…” His voice soon trailed off, eyes slightly wide, as if not really knowing what to do next.

Stephen had a soft smile on his lips as he took a step forward, leaning against the wall. “You didn’t come down for dinner.”

Harley visibly swallowed, glancing away quickly as if there was something interesting that caught his attention at the far side of the room. “Wasn’t really hungry. A lot to go over before starting at Stark Industries this week…”
“I see…” Stephen kept his eyes on him, noting all the signs of nervousness that the teen was displaying. “…Harley-“

“I’m sorry,” the kid blurted out, still not looking at the sorcerer. “I’m… I’m really sorry. I just… I wasn’t thinking… No… I kind of was… I just, didn’t think enough. I didn’t know you would-“

“Hey-” Stephen tried to interject, making a great deal of effort to keep his voice even and calm. “It’s alright. I’m fine. We’re all fine.“

But the teen went on as if he didn’t hear. “I would love to… claim I had some good reasoning, good intention… some elaborate plan like Tony or… but I didn’t. Sure, it pissed me off you two were just getting so much heat from the press… Everyone kept thinking Tony was the one at fault for… If they just knew what really happened, I thought they would stop saying all the crap about how Rogers is the victim…” He ruffled his hair roughly, taking a deep breath in. “Peter was so upset-…But really though… I... I did it impulsively. I was just so mad. Next thing I knew, I just… I’ve just been getting so… mad…”

“…So back to Tony, huh? No more dad?” Stephen said almost teasingly. Harley finally looked up, meeting his gaze. “Pity, he really likes being called dad.”

Various emotions seem to flash across the teen’s eyes, none lingering for too long. But there was an underlining sadness with each one. “I figured… he wouldn’t… want to hear that from me right now,” he said in a mumble. “They took you away because of me. I wouldn’t be surprised if he wanted nothing to do with me-“

That made his smile falter in an instant, the usual seriousness reaching his tone. “Hey, none of that. Tony loves you. I’m sure he told you-“

Tony would have. Stephen doesn’t doubt that. Even under extreme duress, Tony would still worry for those he calls his… especially his kids. Tony would have made sure that both Harley and Peter knew he was not blaming them. But of course, like father like son… like Wong mentioned, the same ridiculous self-blame and reluctance to believe there are those who will care for them, love them despite all the mistakes and faults.

“He did. He had to say that. He was just… trying to be nice-“ Harley then let out a scoff. “… probably just regretted even having me here in the first place-“
“He’s never going to regret having you in his life. …He’s never going to abandon you. He’s not going to hate you just because you made a mistake-”

There was a tense moment of silence as the teen kept his gaze lowered to the floor. Stephen shifted his weight on the spot, a bit unsure of what to do next.

“Do you hate me?” It sounded indifferent, very even, despite the previous indication.

The sorcerer let out a small huff, a smirk playing on his lips. “Do you care?”

But after another pause, “…Yes.”

Stephen blinked, letting his mind wrap around that answer. The smirk soon faded as he stepped a little forward, kneeling slowly next to the bed till they were eye level.

“No. Of course, I don’t hate you. And I don’t regret any of it. I’d do it again if it meant you all are safe.”

It was a little unnerving the way Harley stared back at him. He had a piercing gaze that almost reminds him of himself in the mirror. One that looked as if it was always studying, always analyzing, every detail of every situation. A thought occurs to Stephen that he’s very much glad he actually meant his words just then. Part of him fears he actually may not have the chops to lie to this kid.

“Why?” The usual abrasiveness was slowly finding itself back into the blonde’s voice. Followed by the haughtiness the teen generally carried himself with. As irritating as Stephen found it at times, he feels glad for it at the moment. “Because we’re going to be some sort of family since you’re marrying Ton- …dad?”

Stephen let out a small sigh, ignoring the other’s dismissive sarcasm.

“No,” he replied smoothly. He almost shocks himself at the sincerity behind those words. “But I would like for us to be… someday. Family, I mean. But only when you are ready… and if you want to.” Then he allows himself to smile. “And maybe… someday you’ll call me dad not out of
panic, out of some guilt… but because you mean it.”

Harley hesitated but eventually clears his throat, loudly. Although the reply that followed was just barely audible.

“…I did… mean it.”

And silence fell between them. One where neither party seemed at all in a hurry to ruin.

Stephen eventually stood to his feet before settling himself to sit on the bed next to the teen. Harley only glanced briefly before letting himself relax. The two just sat, side-by-side, for another minute or two. A rare calmness in the air.

“When did it start?” He didn’t look over at the kid, just stared at the opposite wall. “The anger?”

There was a long pause before the teen spoke. “... We were supposed to have dinner. But he never showed up. I knew he’s very busy… always been busy. He canceled sometimes but never just… not show up. Eventually, I… saw him at the hospital. Stubborn enough to do some digging and just... showed up. ...He was in a coma. It was after Siberia… I never… felt that much anger before. I thought he was going to die. I couldn't stand the idea that... they almost took him away from me. We were already joking back then about... he was playing dad. I was finally... happy. ...God, I just… I wanted them burned.”

There was a clear edge to those words. Even without looking, Stephen clearly hears the gritting of teeth.

“Harley…” He spoke slowly. “You need to control it. That rage… it will do you no favors if you cannot control it. Learn to focus it, learn to shape it to what you need it to be. Let it be a driving force and not your enemy.”

Stephen tried to catch the other’s gaze but the teen seemed eager to keep his sights on everywhere but at him. “Hey, look at me.”

And he does.
“If it’s hard to do it for yourself, at the very least… do it for him. If… something happens to you… if you were taken from him… Tony- it’ll break his heart.”

Another pause. “…Is that what you did?”

Stephen hesitates. Wonders for a moment if he should lie. But…

“…Yes.”

“Get out of my way!”

“What is going on?!”

It took five minutes. Just five minutes of severe mental breakdown before his mind berated him how now is not the time. He was being selfish. It doesn’t matter what he feels, not right now. Right now, he needed to try. Try something, anything. There must be something that could be done to save Tony’s life.

Stephen chucks aside yet another line books, not bothering to mind the shocked anger that was being displayed on Wong’s face.

“Stephen!”

“HE’S DYING!”

There was a chilling silence as the two stared at each other, both fuming for completely different line of reason. But something seemed to dawn on Wong’s face after a moment, his expression turning into one of sympathy.

“I should have… I could have- I…. I can’t… can’t lose him,” he turned right back around, flipping through trying to locate a book of healing spell he had seen not long ago. “Not like this!... Not when I haven’t…” He fumbled, dropping the book, his hands shaking more than usual. “I didn’t
even explain— I was a coward and he will die not knowing that I…”

That I loved him. That I still love him.

He tries to pick it back up, failing miserably. He can hardly see through the tears that started to blind him, his fingers not working as he needs them to.

But a hand grabs the book. A hand that wasn’t his own. The other reaches for Stephen’s shoulder, giving a firm squeeze.

“I already know the spells you are looking for,” Wong said evenly. “Let’s go.”

“You look well.”

Tony rolls his eyes, not bothering to turn around to face a certain God of Mischief.

“That’s because my fiancé patched me up already,” he said bitterly as he waved his hand absentmindedly, the nanotech around legs retreating back. “He was being a helpful wizard, unlike someone—”

Loki let out a scoff, though a distinct smile remained on his face as he approached, eventually leaning his weight back onto one of the worktable.

Tony raised an eyebrow at the smug look the other was giving him. “You couldn’t give me more of a warning? Seriously? Dragons?? Was that REALLY necessary? You couldn’t have picked something smaller? I don’t know- a bunny? A turtle? A wolf? ...fucking drama queen—”

“Oh you do not want to see what our wolves look like,” came the nonchalant reply. “I had thought you said you didn’t care for the details as long as you got your precious sorcerer back.” But then he catches the look Tony was giving him. “Oh do not sulk. It worked out perfectly. I got my pardon, you got your sorcerer returned, the director is under control—”
There was definitely air of arrogance in the way he spoke, the familiar smirk playing on his lips. “…I finally satisfied my curiosity about your sorcerer and now your Midgardian organizations is thoroughly frightened enough to not cross him any time soon… and in turn, you. I believe a fine outcome for a day’s work.”

Tony glares before turning away, casually throwing one or two tools he was using into a box at the corner. “Remind me to never let trust you with my life again-“

“You would rather trust your former teammates? Ones who abandoned you? …What did you call them? Rogues?”

That makes the billionaire freeze for a split second. “Current teammates. They were pardoned and part of the Avengers again.” He sighed before turning back around to meet the other’s scrutinizing gaze. “You know that. And after today you’re part of that too, Reindeer Games… sort of.”

“It simply took me by surprise that’s all. When Thor told me you took them back-“

“I didn’t take them back. The UN did-“

“Having them live in your home once more…“

“It’s just living accomadations. The world needs them. The world needs the Avengers-“

“You even went far as to relinquish the leadership title… then there are the whispers of your retirement-“

“New obligation. I have a family to take care of now. They come first.”

Silence washed over them, both keeping eye contact as if waiting for each other’s next move.

Loki eventually gave him a smile. An odd sort of smile that Tony often couldn’t tell fully what it meant. Still can’t. “Hm …Well… you seemed to have changed quite a bit since the last we spoke. Change of heart, Anthony?”
“I’ve heard you allowed the Captain to return to his former leadership upon rejoining your little band of heroes—“

He let out a sigh, running a hand through his already messy hair. “The world needs Captain America,” he stated matter-of-factly.

“No, Anthony.” For a split second, Loki gave him a look, one that sharply contrasts with his behaviors till now, serious and foreboding. “The world needed you... the world needs you. You could have had it all. Especially after your stand against the Mad Titan…” Then his tone fell back to being light, playful. He paced around the workspace, absentmindedly peering at the many blueprints, tools, and random machinery.

“Thor told me of the final battle. What you did at the near cost of your own life I might add. You saved humanity from extinction and returned all those who were lost.” He glanced towards the billionaire, a smirk stretching across his lips as he gave a faux serious look. “…Man of Iron, the Great Savior… Warrior of Midgard. Your fame had reached quite far you know. Across many realms. Thor had quite the fun boasting about you, I might add. ...The power you could have had. …You have the heart of a conqueror-”

“And the arrogance of a king.” Tony interrupts harshly, his eyes cold.

But he quickly turned his attention to the opposite wall as he cleared his throat. “…I would have screwed up… eventually. Power and me? …At some point, I would have risked everything I have now.”

“I’m simply asking if this is what you really wanted…” Loki took a step closer, then another. “This… simple family life. The domestic bliss… because last we spoke-“

“You told me he was dead!” That came out louder than he expected, harsher, filled with an emotion that could not properly be placed. Tony blinked as their eyes met, trying to level his breathing, rein back his sudden flashes of anger.

“You can’t…” he went on a little evenly, lower in tone. “…hold me to what I said I wanted, what I thought I wanted… when I believed he was dead. At the time, I had nothing else to lose! Now I
have everything to lose!”

Loki crossed the distance quickly, soon there were face to face. The god’s impressive height nearly overshadowing the other's smaller frame in comparison. He didn’t raise his voice but he might as well have. There was a clear bite to them that Tony is all too familiar with.

“I had very much believed he was dead, Anthony. I used every method at my disposal to try and locate Stephen Strange. Admittedly, most were magic. If I was told he was a sorcerer—“

“Well I didn’t know at the time either!” Tony shouts back.

But Loki went on, “What was I to think when the simple Midgardian, former healer you asked me to seek was nowhere to be found by magic? I truly believed he was gone. I assure you I did not lie—“

“I know!” Then he swallowed, hard. Tony turned away abruptly once more, walking couple steps away. “…Fuck… okay, I know… I’m just… I’ve been stressed. Haven’t been sleeping—“

He took a couple of deep breathes, trying to find reason. “Look, Lolo…” he started slowly, cautiously, as if he was testing his own voice. “This… this is my second chance. He’s… back. He… always was what I wanted… and now he’s everything I didn’t even know I needed.” Eventually he spun back around, meeting the other’s intense gaze. “I have two amazing kids who doesn’t hate me and a fiancé who is perfect with them…” Tony makes an attempt at being playful, trying to turn his mood, his tone, back to being light. “…maybe I’ll go get a cat or something next… really test out the boundary of how far I can push my luck. How much happiness I can wrestle out from the world before it chooses to fuck me over—“

Loki shakes his head slightly, giving a huff of a laugh. It made a small smile play on Tony’s lips.

“…The point is, I’m happy. Sure there are issues here and there but to me, it’s perfect. They are perfect. I’m not going to ruin it by seeking some selfish self-validation, some crusade for revenge out of pride or some ego boost.”

“People change, right? What we want can change…? And if I have to choose between some power grab and this perfect family I never even dreamed I deserve but somehow got out of some sheer dumb luck? …I can’t. I just… They are it for me.”
There was a short pause as the god gives him a look. “What you deserve… is everything. You could have had _everything._”

Tony threw his hand up before letting them fall to his side. “Maybe. Maybe I could have… But I chose happiness… I chose the boring, the safe. …I chose love… like some naïve character in some ridiculous romantic comedy. I couldn’t risk this. I just couldn’t. …Power? Revenge? That ruins people. I couldn’t let it… ruin this. We can’t… have it all, Lokes. No one ever can. People try over and over again but that’s just arrogance talking. How they are going to be different when no! It isn’t. …And if that’s the case… I choose this. I _want this._”

The other let out a short sigh, leaning once again heavily onto the metal surface, arms crossing. But he didn’t seem…upset by the new development, no indication of any negative feeling, no judgment. Just slow acceptance.

“So… you would let SHIELD have the power that should be rightfully yours and leave the rogues unscathed after all they’ve done?”

Tony glanced away for a brief period before turning back up. “If that’s what it takes for me to keep this? Then yeah.”

Silence washed over them as both just stared. Then, after another minute, a smile. “Well. I hope you are happy then, Anthony Stark.”

Then Loki straightened up. “And I believe I rectified my mistake,” he said lightly, half-heartedly. “I returned your boy toy to you this time… successfully. I kept my word.”

Tony let out a warm laugh. “Yeah. Yeah, you did.”

The god raised an eyebrow. “I still have not gotten that drink you promised.”

The billionaire shook his head, amused. “Want to head upstairs?” Tony motioned vaguely to the elevator.

Loki leisurely strode over, till they were only a couple of feet apart. “Perhaps another time still.”
Tony gave him a questioning stare, confused at the sudden whispering.

“I’m sure he has priority.”

That made Tony turn hastily around, his eyes immediately landing on Stephen who was leaning against the other wall. *Shit.*


The Asgardian raises an eyebrow, his expression serious. But Tony clearly sees the twinkle of mischief behind those piercing emerald gaze. “Oh do not worry, my little mortal. I have a plan.”

His eyes automatically widen. “…Oh, no no, please don’t have a plan-”

And he definitely doesn’t like the smirk that followed.

“Goodnight, Anthony.”

Tony opened his mouth but Loki was already gone.

“Shit-” he mutters as his eyes closed in a grimace.

Headache. He feels a headache. *I am fucking too old for this.*- But another silent prayer and he turned.

“Hey, babe-“ he said a bit too cheerfully, a wide smile plastered on his face.

...Stephen really didn’t look too happy, did he?
It had been a draining night. Possibly the hardest twelve hours of Stephen’s life. But with their combined efforts, Tony's condition miraculously became stable.

Wong appeared too smug as their eyes met, both of them not caring they were unceremoniously sitting on the floor, leaning against god knows what. Christine was already fast asleep in the far corner with the cloak over her.

They hadn’t moved Tony out yet, too afraid there would be another episode.

Christine had managed to convince Pepper, once the CEO returned, that the hospital was planning an experimental procedure. Trusting the familiar doctor enough and running out of options, she agreed rather easily. Since then they barricaded themselves into one of the operating room, secured it with magic, away from any prying eyes as they figured out to save Tony’s life.

This was the first breather they had since it all started. The first time they were honestly felt sure that Tony would live. Stephen never was more grateful in his life. Maybe he’ll even clean up after the library without Wong’s continuous nagging at him to.

“So… it was really the Captain…”

That snapped him from his musings, his mood turning rather sour.

He had been piecing together information from various sources. Christine had told him what she knew. About some issues the Avengers were having since Sokovia incident. She didn’t know for sure or in detail but it looked as if Tony and the Captain seemed to be having some disagreement last time she ran into them… But she honestly never imagined it would end this badly.

She also, eventually, confided in him some of her thoughts on the matter. Ones she was reluctant to say since there was no proof, just her opinion and observation.

How the last time she was called to help patch up the Avengers, shortly after the Sokovia battle, Tony seemed… reserved. That was the word she had used. Reserved. One word Stephen had hard time placing with Tony.
She told him how Tony didn’t talk as abrasively as before. He acted still like Tony; he seemed still overall happy, joked and bantered with the team as before… but less of the unapologetic confidence, more careful.

She wasn’t sure if she was imagining it but she felt as though Tony was talking less. And as soon as the Captain was around, the brunette seemed to be taking cues from him. She didn’t think it was on purpose from either party but appeared almost subconscious. As if it was some sort of side effect from Tony being too keen, too fixated on Steve’s mood… going along with things, trying extra hard to please the other… as one would if they are trying to earn forgiveness.

“What are you going to do?”

“Why? Do you think me impulsive? Don’t fret, I won’t cause you trouble if that’s what you are worried about.”

Wong gave him an unimpressed look. “Because I know you. You’re not going to let this go. You are probably plotting a murder right now-”

“Or seven.”

Wong scoffed. “Well… tell me when you need to bury the bodies-“

Stephen let out a huff of laughter. “Oh, so you do care-“

“No, just don’t trust you’ll do it properly,” came the flat reply. “And it’ll be very inconvenient for me if you get caught or do something stupid.”

They let out a short, quiet laugh before turning away.

And silence fell between them.

Stephen wondered himself what he was going to do now. Should he stay? Be here when Tony awoke. Clearly it seemed that Steve Rogers was no longer in the picture anymore. On the run, it seemed like with the other rogues.
Stephen could... take advantage of this opportunity. Seize the chance. Tony undoubtedly would be heartbroken over this whole ordeal... and he, Stephen, can help him through the difficult time. Perhaps first as friends, if needed, and hopefully...

...How tacky, he thought grudgingly. And how distasteful he's thinking about this now.

But did he honestly care if it just meant some glimmer of possibility that he could have Tony back? Morals and principles be damned... if he could simply have Tony back in his arms...

“So... what do you want?”

“I don’t know.”

“Really?”

Stephen let out a sigh. “...I....” he turned towards Tony who still lay on the operating table. It hurt. It physically hurt to see him in such a way. At times his brain was still having a hard time accepting what he was seeing as the reality.

“...I want this to never... happen again. I want to make sure this never... I never want to see him taken from me again.”

He swallowed before turning to meet the other’s gaze.

“I want... power. I want the power to move the world and shake them to their foundation. I want the power to tear anyone, the planet, the realm, the heavens... that will dare to take him away from me. I want... the power to protect him, to be able to stand by his side, completely... as equals... in every way. To be able to dream his dreams and sweat his nightmares... What I want... is to make sure no one... no fate... can ever stand between us again.”

There was a pause in which Stephen didn’t look away, couldn’t look away. He expected... something, some distaste, disgust, in Wong’s expression. Words that told him off about his arrogance, his foolishness... but none came.
After another minute of posing silence, the bookkeeper spoke. “Want to know what I would do?” he said as he turned his gaze to the opposite wall.

Stephen regarded the other questioningly. His mouth felt suddenly dry.

“I would become the Sorcerer Supreme.”

Tony always knew when Stephen was unhappy. …Well… it wasn’t as if the doctor ever made it exactly subtle.

A trait, if truth be told, that the billionaire still found rather amusing, endearing in fact.

It was no secret that Stephen always been quite reserved. Never showed much personal emotion, always kept complete control of his manners, actions, words. The doctor could lie through his teeth about his private thoughts and feelings, put an elaborate act that convinced anyone into believing exactly what Stephen Strange wanted them to believe.

To everyone… except Tony.

Stephen had always been extremely, oddly, emotional around the brunette. Couldn’t hide it. As if there was too much of it to be able to cap it, seal it, to lock it away. It always crept to the surface, seeped into his words and actions, no matter how much effort he put into suppressing them. The doctor often found himself already acting on his moods, displaying them openly, before he could even comprehend that he had. There was no logical explanation to it all. It was just something he could not help.

And so, it was rather obvious to Tony that today, right now, Stephen was unhappy.

Stephen remained silent the whole way back to their floor, then to their bedroom. Once the door was locked, the sorcerer undressed, leisurely heading to the bathroom. Soon, Tony distinctly heard the sounds of the bathtub being filled.
Tony didn’t think the sorcerer seemed angry per se. He definitely knew when Stephen was angry. No, he seemed more… unhappy. But quite frankly, he’d rather take angry over seeing the other so… down.

The door to the bathroom remained unlocked however. A good sign. It wasn’t a blunt rejection of his presence. Not a clear “leave me alone”. Tony can work with that.

“Hey…” Tony knelt behind the large tub, sitting on his heels. He was soon sliding his hand over the Stephen’s shoulder, adding a decent amount of pressure to his palms, the tips of his fingers, as he slowly dragged them over towards the doctor’s chest, then a little downwards.

“And what are you doing?” Stephen turned slightly, half-heartedly, still lounging in the hot waters. There was a strain to his voice though he wasn’t stopping the other.

A sly smirk played on Tony’s lips, a contrast to the innocent, doe-eyed look he was giving. “Checking to see if you are hurt anywhere... that was quite a fight. I was there-“

“And because you were there, you would know… I had it under control. More than, I might add-“

Tony noted the little harshness of that statement, a bit of stress. But it only made his own sweeter, making sure to lower his tone as he dragged his lips over the back of Stephen’s neck. “Oh, yes you did, babe. You were amazing.”

The sorcerer, in turn, shifts his gaze forward once more, lowering his head slightly to give the other more access.

“You were definitely showing off near the end, I can tell. Was it for me? Please say it’s for me. I love it when you do the whole I’m the baddest bitch in town thing-“

“Tony-“ It was low, a warning.

But the brunette didn’t bother to heed it. He let out a sigh, a huff that he definitely knew sounded more suggestive than it should. His hands were still roaming freely across Stephen’s chest, pausing here and there to slowly trace a scar or two. “I couldn’t take my eyes off you. It took everything for me to not just kneel for you there and…”
There was sudden, very subtle stiffening that makes Tony pause as well.

“Wrong sorcerer.“

Wrong what? … oh, the kneeling—… Loki? Is that what this is about?

Tony definitely expected Stephen to not be overjoyed with their new resident in the compound. As he mentioned to Loki earlier, the doctor was never fond of new faces in what he considered to be his territory. But he hadn’t been lashing out, didn’t blow up when it was mentioned, so Tony assumed maybe it wasn’t as big of deal as he thought it was going to be. Although… maybe this was something else entirely than being wary of the new.

Wrong sorcerer… Is that what this is about? Another sorcerer being in the residence? He was no longer the only sorcerer in the Avengers? But Stephen never really was wholeheartedly tied to the Avengers, not really, not invested in it as Tony was and is. And he seemed to get along with all the other sorcerers like Wong.

So was it just Loki? Tony supposed technically the god, was still an outsider to the doctor, not part of Stephen’s inner circle of sorcerers from Kamar-Taj. And if it isn’t about the Avengers, maybe it was something more personal. Loki’s now presence in their lives… a family Stephen considers now his.

Well, Stephen never really liked being second. Tony definitely knew that. His fiancé always had a competitive streak like none he has seen before. He would not settle for anything but the best, to be first. Being second was equivalent to that of being a failure.

It was a trait, Tony loved about the man. He loved the fire, the drive, the passion.

Tony smiled, quietly to himself as he pressed a firm kiss on the nape of the other’s neck. “What other sorcerer?“ he said in a playful tone. “You’re insulting me, doc. Thinking about someone else when I’m right here. I’m right here only thinking about you. No one else matters… no one else compares to you…“ Tony speaks softly onto the flesh, enjoying the way the other man lightly shivers at the puff of air grazing his skin.

There was a quiet scoff but Tony still waits.
And then the resigned, “…Keep going.”

Stephen wanted to cling to his annoyance a little longer. He doesn’t fully understand why. He just does. But Tony always makes it tempting to just go along. To let go. Hard to stay irritated when the person that holds all your happiness is showering you with just the right attention.

The doctor definitely feels Tony smirking, however, the plush lips still lingering on his shoulder now. He rolls his eyes, though not like Tony can see that.

“I can feel you when you’re near. Did you know that? There is this… distinct feeling I just… feel in my bones… when you are nearby. It just doesn’t compare to anything else. Then I catch you staring… I love it when I catch you staring at me… staring with those beautiful eyes… so cold… and so warm at the same time… or is that just for me?”

Stephen swallows, turning slightly away though not as if it mattered much or helped already having his back turned to the other. He can feel the rising heat to his cheeks, tries to play it off in his head as the effects of the water temperature and certainly not due to the compliments he’s basking in.

“It’s simply adorable how emotional you are at times, babe. I know you hate it because it shows some… lack of self-control or some bullshit like that… but I get to see you. I love how you can’t help but show me you… how you really feel, how you really am… It’s… I get to see… you… and I love what I see. I can’t stop obsessing about you.”

“I always think about you. Even when you are not here I just can’t stop thinking about you. I want you constantly. I want every part of you. The ones that you love, the ones you are proud of… the ones you don’t like, ones you refuse to give to anyone else. I want your heart. I’m going to take it… because you already stole mine.”

Tony doesn’t remember moving from his spot, but he must have at some point while trying to catch a glimpse of Stephen’s face. He finds himself leaning heavily on the side of the tub, extending as far as he can to try to meet the sorcerer’s eyes. His right hand over Stephen’s heart.

But not for long.

There was a second of silence as they just stared, eyes locked, heated. Tony’s smile widening
realizing the change in those icy blue-green eyes. There was less of the dullness, less of the gloom.

“Come here.” The roughness in that tone, the abrasiveness, was all the warning the genius got before a harsh tug.

Tony first let out a surprised yelp, a mortified scream as he hit the water with a splash. He definitely feels the weight of his clothes dragging him down. He manages to regain balance however, eventually settling on the other’s lap. His warm laugh mixing with Stephen’s perfectly.

“Oh, okay,” he tried to say between giggles. There was a fond smile on his lips as he tried to lightly push away. “At least let me get undressed-“

But Stephen already was holding onto his middle too tightly, his head leaning against Tony’s chest.

The brunette tried to tug away once more with a soft chuckle, but the sorcerer’s grip only tightened, his arms wrapping around more tightly, more securely. Stephen admits he never craved attention till he tasted Tony’s. He enjoyed them, thrived in them, but never craved, never needed. He didn’t understand the very essence of craving till Tony.

Stephen nuzzles against the other man’s warmth, breathing in deeply.

“You don’t get to leave me.” That comes out odd. Very even, calm, but odd. Stephen doesn’t even recognize it himself the sheer desperation it holds.

But Tony does. He definitely does. He ran his fingers through Stephen’s hair, swallowing hard. “I’m always with you. I never left you. Never will.”

There was moment of silence as Tony stayed still, watching the top of Stephen’s head that still rested against him. Second past, then another, he wonders if he should say something but then…

“Tony… I…” He took a deep breath, “I’ve been back… to New York… long before Thano’s attack…“

Tony swallowed. Subconsciously, his jaws clenched.“…I… yeah, I assumed that already…”
It was a thought he always put on the backburner. He didn’t want to think about. He didn’t want to amuse the rabbit hole that would surely be his imagination should he start mulling over why Stephen waited till their paths crossed. Perhaps… he never intended to contact him if it wasn’t for Thanos. The idea left a bitter taste in his mouth no matter the happiness he feels now about their current relationship.

“No… Tony… I’ve been back… for years. I… I’ve only been gone from New York for several months after… the accident.”

Stephen finally lifted his head, looking up, eyes finally locking with the whiskey brown gaze. “… When… I came back…”

And he talks. And talks.

Of running into Christine during Kaecilius attack. Accepting the job as the Master of New York Sanctum shortly after. About the many times he stood at Tony’s doorstep only to turn around... like a coward. Watching from afar as Tony built the Avengers… and his new relationship with the Captain. About Christine’s insistence still. The charity gala…

At first, the sorcerer struggled to find his voice, grasping at thoughts to make sense… but the more he spoke, the words fell more freely…

Drip.

Drip.

Drip.

For Tony, it was as if everything zeroed in. The sound of the water drops gradually falling from the edges of the tub… those bottomless blue-green eyes… the agonizing words that were being spoken.

Tony hears nothing and everything at the same time.
Each word, each syllable being uttered by the other man cutting ever so slowly into his mind. It was a dull type of pain. One that was so awful that you can hardly feel at all. One that your mind shut off to just so you can bear the torture of it.

But none reflected in his expression. His face remaining impossibly blank as the excruciating dread, slowly but surely, washed over him.

Then silence. Actual silence.

And the waiting. The expecting…

Tony abruptly stood. The water splashing over as he roughly stepped over the marble ridge.

A hand that failed to grip his wrist in time…

“TONY!”

“So what do you want us to do?”

“I don’t want her here,” he snapped.

“Stephen,” Christine said softly, trying to console him. “She… she has the right to be here- Until Tony wakes up and bars her from the hospital, Natasha-“

“I do not care!” He hissed angrily. If it wasn’t for the continuous stress that accumulated in the past days, he may have felt bad for losing his temper on her. But once again, Christine seemed to have simply understood, giving him a sympathetic look rather than resentment.

“Stephen, hey, hey- calm down. Why are you so upset over this? You used to like her -“
He ignored her questions.

After realizing that Tony never revoked any of his clearance to his personal stuff, Stephen had taken the liberty to look through the feeds that were continuously being backed up to Tony’s private server, feeds that recorded from the Iron Man armor. Of course, he doesn’t know for sure what exactly happened, he still would have to do more digging, but Natasha clearly let Rogers and the Winter Soldier go at the end.

Sure, there could be some logical explanation but he couldn’t help but to be infuriated by the idea that if she just didn’t let them go, Tony would not have had to follow them on his own. And if Tony didn’t follow them...

Then there was the petty resentment. How she had convinced him to leave after the accident. Of course, he had asked her to be the voice of reason should a situation like that ever occurred… In the end, he couldn’t blame her for that.

But… this whole ordeal… perhaps if he had just… been here, still been with Tony… Would Rogers still have been in the picture? No, Tony loved him, Stephen knew that… But the rate he was going, pushing Tony away back then, after the loss of his career… they may have still fell apart. Perhaps Tony would have had an affair still with the Captain… or maybe… just maybe…

He was having difficult time being completely rational. But seeing someone you love on their potential deathbed, nearly losing them, will do that to you.

“I don’t want her here. I don’t want her near him. I do not want her on this floor, in this hospital, anywhere within the five-mile radius! You ask me what I want? This is what I want!”

She let out an exasperated sigh. “Well this would be easier if you are willing to talk to Pepper, let her know you are here and what’s actually been going on-”

Stephen turned away sharply. For a moment, he considers it. Yes, the quickest way to sort this out is if he just came clean to Pepper, who holds authority when Tony is incapacitated. Explain to her where he had been the past years, why he is a sorcerer. She would certainly be outraged at first, she would hate that they had blatantly lied to her the past several days. But she always had been the reasonable one, would most likely let him explain… it probably would also help that he played a huge role in keeping Tony alive.
But what if she kicked him out as well. Refused to let him near Tony… The small flicker of fear was enough to have him halt that train of thought.

“There has to be some other way,” he said sternly, staring at Christine directly in the eyes, pleading.

Christine turned her gaze for a brief moment, biting her lips. “I…” she sighed heavily. “Tony never took you off as the medical proxy… actually he never took you off from any… position as the decision-maker should he be… unable to. I can file a restraining order against Natasha on your behalf… and I’ll… try to have the paperwork sealed so no one else would see…”

“Do it.”

She paused but soon nodded, resigned.

“So… when are you leaving again?”

He doesn’t look at her, simply pulls a chair by Tony’s bed, sitting down while softly caressing the other’s cheeks.

“In two days,” Stephen replies eventually. He doesn’t particularly want to leave Tony like this but…

He now had a plan to develop, to carry out. And should he want become the next Sorcerer Supreme, and soon, he needed to get going without any more stalling.

“You sure… you don’t want to see him wake up before you go?”

“I can’t… I’m afraid I won’t leave.”

She gave him a sad smile before turning away.
But just as she was about to leave the room, something caught his attention. He stood to his feet, walking over to a table far end of the room. “When did this get here?”

Christine stopped, peering over at what the other was motioning to. There were roses, a dozen… and a parcel addressed to Tony Stark. He waved a hand over it, muttering a spell, checking the content without having to open it. …A letter… a burner phone…

“I… am not sure-“

Stephen stared at it for another minute, expression cold. He eventually reaches for the flowers, stroking it. Soon the petals combust, burning slowly as ashes fall in their wake.

“Stephen! What-?” Christine stepped forward in a hurry, slightly taken aback.

But the sorcerer simply strode over back to his seat by Tony’s side once more.

“Tony hates roses.”

Steve gets no warning other than the look of confusion from some of his teammates, the loud exclaim from Sam.

Soon there were gasps, shouts, as a fist makes contact.

The next second both Tony and Steve fell to the floor with a harsh thud, a tangled mess, Tony on top of him. Steve doesn’t fight, once realizing who had attacked him he only tries to block the hits, scratches, any other impact Tony seemed keen on delivering. He’s in too much of a shock, yelling at the other to stop with a bewildered expression.

“TONY!” Natasha rushed over but she was too far away, opposite side of the training room.

Bucky shoved Clint and Sam forward and the two hurries to restrain Tony and Bucky himself tries to pull Steve away.
Clint managed to get a firm hold around the billionaire, dragging him away with considerable force. “TONY! STOP! STOP! TALK IT OUT NOT-“

Tony screamed, shouted, but none are really comprehensible, just noises of pain. It almost made Clint let go, thinking he may have hurt the brunette somehow. But then, he noticed the tears.

Tony was wet from head to toe, clothes dripping water everywhere. But the shine in his eyes, the red around the rim… those were definitely tears.

He almost succeeds to dislodge himself off from both Natasha and Clint, but soon there was also Bruce…

“Tony! Tony, come on! Calm down!”

Thor quickly stepped in-between the group that gathered around Tony and Steve who were being pulled away by Sam and Bucky, just in case. Loki stood back at a good distance but eyes fixed on the still struggling genius. All of them have come down after hearing an alert from the commotion.

Tony fights them with an impressive amount of force, doesn’t make it easy but he is still unable to throw all of them off. Then his gaze locks with Steve’s once more.

“YOU TAKE EVERYTHING FROM ME!”

That makes everyone freeze, a total silence washing over the room.

“YOU! YOU RUIN EVERYTHING!…just… Y-you- if you just didn’t-…“

He stops, suddenly the strength disappearing. His knees giving in. Both Natasha and Clint has enough sense not to let go just yet but helps lower the man slowly to the floor.

No one even exchanges a glance with each other, couldn’t tear their eyes away from Tony who looked so… broken… in ways they have never seen before.
“I-it’s… your fucking…. your fault-“

His voice is but a whisper, sobs and cries in-between making them almost interpretable.

And Tony knows… those words were lies. He knows, he is not making sense. Yes, the Cap had done many things … but this… this was his fault.

He made the decision to stop waiting. He stopped believing Stephen would come back. He allowed someone else into his heart, into his life, and caused the love of his life to cruelly watch. And even if he didn't know, claim he really did not know... and he didn't... it doesn't hurt any less. It doesn't stop him from resenting... himself.

Tony could feel his mind grasping for purchase, the heat that rises from the inside, tearing at him, suffocating him. It was rage, sorrow, grief, regret, all at once. He couldn’t make sense of up from down.

He just wanted someone to blame… for the lost years, his long-suffering. He just needed someone to hate. Desperately needed it to not be his fault yet again. But it was.

In the end, he can only hate himself. He screwed up… again. He failed, again.

“Tony!”

Stephen…

Stephen rushed over. Roughly pushing away the others away from the brunette who now knelt on the floor, shaking with sobs.

They all gave him a confused stare, trying to discern this odd situation, to make sense of it all. Tony, soaking through his clothes, in an utter wreck on the floor… and Stephen, who appeared just as disheveled, as if all he did was half-hearted through on shirt and pants, hair still damp…
But the voice seemed to snap some sense in Tony. He turns towards the doctor, taking in one shaky inhalе. “…S-stephen…” his voice was terribly rough, uneven.

The sorcerer stopped caring who was there still, his attention focusing only on Tony. He wraps his arms around the smaller man, quickly pulling him into a tight embrace, softly repeating continuous words of every comfort the doctor could think of. He soon feels Tony clinging to him, clawing at the shirt. The doctor runs his fingers through the chestnut hair, trying to soothe the cries.

Stephen doesn’t heed it at the moment, but his mind was screaming at him, his body on guard. He doesn’t like this. He hardly trusts most of them in the room. He doesn’t want them near Tony… not when he was like this. But he can’t do much at the moment, he couldn’t risk letting Tony go. What was more important right now was for Tony to be all right. If anyone even so much as approach, however, he fears he may snap their neck without restraint.

“Remove yourselves!”

Stephen doesn’t look, but at the corner of his eyes, he sees Loki nearly glowering at the rest. There were short outbursts but although offended, most of them had enough sense not to linger for long. Perhaps the shock. They do not hide their confusion, however, as they leave through the door.

After the rogues had gone, Loki started nudging the begrudging Thor, speaking fast in an ancient dialect. Although the elder seemed very much reluctant, soon Bruce helped to shove the blonde god along.

The door shuts behind them the next minute. Leaving Stephen and Tony alone in the large training room.

Stephen let out a sigh, his eyes falling closed for a brief period. Although a bit calmer, his hold did not loosen.

“I’m so sorry… I’m so sorry…” Tony continued to repeat softly.

And Stephen repeats... again... and again...“It wasn’t your fault… It wasn’t-“

*I’m sorry too.*
(to clarify: Stephen told him about what happened after his return / why he did not contact Tony sooner. He doesn't mention the accident or his suspicions about Natasha and SHIELD because he is still working out for sure what happened. Idk to me at least, at this point, Stephen would want to know things for certainty before acting? Then there are other reasons he mentioned by passing but won't go into full elaboration here lolol)

I will promise some happiness & funnies in the next chapter LOLOLOL ...I did accidentally keep writing scenes that tech ended up in the next chapter (which delayed this update) but hopefully, this means there will be another update soon :’) I just need to really just fill in the gaps and finish it out-

Also thank you so much for all the continued comments btw
Ugh the past two weeks especially, with everything going on, it really helped keeping my mood up and also not just completely slip out of this fandom so♡x3000

AND I am officially off to my vacation~ Las Vegas tripppppp
Not gonna lie, looking over my plans, I'm wondering if I'll just end up with more inspirations for this fandom lolololol
honestly? an impromptu chapter that got added in while I worked through some things
lol +excuse for smut

Tony and Stephen finally take a vacation away from all the craziness. A trip back to
Malibu where they spent their first night together all those years back. It's perfect.
...Except Tony can't get out of his head about his own morality, his aging appearance,
the whole nine yards of insecurity that comes with being engaged to someone much
younger AND has extended life span.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tony let out a loud moan, arching his back off the bed. For a moment, he tried to simultaneously
move away and grind up against the heat at the same time. He swallowed, soundly, gasping as he
stretched his hands up above his head, an attempt to find some type of purchase by gripping onto
the headboard.

Stephen smirked. And Tony definitely feels it against the sensitive flesh of his inner thigh. The hot
mouth slowly kissing and sucking at the delicate patches of skin as it traveled upward, leisurely but
purposefully.

God, what a way it was to wake up like this. The silk sheets cool against his skin, warm morning
sun easing in from the large windows, the sound of the roaring waves seeping in from the cracked
doorway to the terrace.

Tony was completely naked, stretched out on his back with Stephen, on his stomach, languidly
laying near his lower half. The doctor’s face was settled somewhere between his slightly parted
legs, mouthing and teasing at various areas around but always avoiding the hard erection. The
trembling hands firmly planted on Tony’s upper thighs, stilling them as Stephen had his way.

Tony almost couldn’t believe this was real. It must be one of his many wet dreams that involved
his fiancé. How funny it was that he had Stephen in his arms almost every night… and yet when
Tony slept, he couldn’t help all his dreams and fantasy to be ones of further wanting, further
craving. As if he didn’t already have the other man, as if it wasn’t enough to just simply have him
in the long hours he spent awake.
And the answer was no, it wasn’t enough. Truthfully, if asked, Tony would never say he had enough of Stephen Strange. He would always crave more.

The sorcerer nipped at the area where the right leg met the groin, chuckling as he felt Tony’s subtle buckling helplessly. He pressed a palm against the other’s hips, with enough pressure to prevent any more movement. Then, once he felt Tony relax a bit, trailed his hands gently upwards to the stomach, feeling the tight muscles convulsing underneath his fingers.

Eventually, Stephen shifts his gaze upward, meeting Tony’s glassy stare. The tip of his tongue unconsciously darted out, swiping across his bottom lips. And as he continued to peer into the large doe eyes, those dark fluttering lashes, the sorcerer felt the urge to claim, to devour every inch of the brunette currently in his grasp.

“Please…”

And finally the begging.

Stephen was beginning to get a little concerned if he lost his touch from how long Tony held out this time. But perhaps it was the nature of today. They had the time to indulge and maybe Tony simply enjoying the slow pace.

“…Stephen…”

Oh, how he loved his own name spoken in that tone, falling from those pretty lips with pure desperate need, honeyed with reverence and affection.

Stephen placed a final kiss to the soft skin of the other’s inner thigh. Making a show of it as he held Tony’s gaze. A sly smirk stretching across his lips as he angled his face just right, in a way the light would accentuate the high cheekbones. And slowly, Stephen lifted himself to his knees, watching as the billionaire’s expressive eyes followed him without fail, the pupils impossibly dark.

He soon draped himself over the smaller frame, settling between the spread legs. And as Stephen leaned forward, parting Tony’s knees further in the process, he definitely sees the excited expectance in the other.

“Oh I’m not going to fuck you, Tony,” he said in the smooth baritone. “Not this time. …Touch
yourself, darling. I want to see you pleasure yourself—"

Stephen smiled as he can visibly see the wheels turning in the genius’s pretty little head. Tony bit back a string of curses as he continued to stare at his lover’s very smug expression.

“Stephen—“ he started again with a frown. One of his hands reached for sorcerer’s upper arm, fingernails digging in, clawing in the desperation, the need he currently felt. “Come on- just—“

But soon Stephen’s own hand was over Tony’s, drawing it away from the arm and leading it towards the brunette’s cock. Tony gasped loudly at the contact, couldn’t help to thrust into his own hands before the embarrassment set it.

Their eyes were still fixed on one another, the intensity of it preventing either of them from straying.

“Get yourself off…” Stephen was leaning in, his tone drawn to a whisper as his lips grazed Tony’s left ear. “You know how much I like a good show.”

And with that, he leaned back, sitting on his heels. He suppressed the urge to laugh at the battle of emotions being displayed by his lover. Arousal, annoyance, desperation, frustration… the temptation.

But after another second or two, Tony wrapped his fingers around his shaft, giving it quick pumps up and down, biting at his lower lips to prevent the moans from escaping. It was firm, efficient stokes, a quick chase towards his orgasm.

Stephen’s icy gaze raked over the other’s body, noting all the twitch and spazzing of muscles before focusing once more on the moving hand. “Not in the mood anymore to savor this?”

Tony let out a shallow gasp as he trailed his thumb over the head of his cock. He all but ignores the sorcerer other than briefly fixing him with a glare. Then shortly after, turns his head away.

Stephen lightly tracing Tony’s now flushed cheeks with the pad of his thumb, a soft hum flowing from his lips.
The engineer grudgingly admits to himself he’s grateful his fiancé is not having one of those days where he is in a damn mood… all but insisting the billionaire to keep his eyes on him. Tony is unsure if he can do it at the moment without dying of embarrassment. Although there was something about this situation that was getting to him, making him flushed from the inside. The fact that he’s sprawled out, being on such open display, touching himself like some horny teenager, just for his lover’s amusement… Unconsciously, a sudden shot of trill went up his spine that he quickly curses at.

A series of open panting filled the air as Tony built up his rhythm, his free hand fisting up the soft sheets. He let his eyes fall closed, not wanting to think about the scrutinizing gaze of the sorcerer but…

“I love how you indulge me, honey…”

Tony buckled at the sheer roughness of those words, at that bottomless tone which held so much unrestrained hunger along with a hint of danger.

“Oh, do you like it too?” Stephen traced his hands down to the other’s calf then slowly back up, giving a possessive squeeze once he reached the hips. “Do you enjoy going against that pride of yours? Putting on such vulgar display, of this beautiful body… just because I asked? Just because I want to see you being indecent?”

Tony’s breathing hitched, his sights snapping to Stephen in an instant. There was a moment, a moment in which he feels himself at the edge, about to fall… But then there was a sharp squeeze the base of his cock, stopping him from cumming altogether.

“FUCK!” Tony screamed loudly, thrashing against the hold.

But Stephen moved with him, holding his grip till he was sure Tony’s orgasm faded away. A smirk as Tony shoots him a betrayed look.

And he simply went on, ignoring what had just happened. “…Humiliating yourself for my pleasure?” The sorcerer let out a small huff of laughter before shifting his weight. Diving in to capture the other’s lips and dragging the bottom lips in a playful bite before letting go. “You were always such a giver, Tony…”

“S-stephen…” Tony was trembling now, his whole body shaking with want. “I… I need-“
The doctor placed a second kiss, more passionate than the first, swallowing up the sweet pleading from Tony’s tongue, savoring it.

Gradually, Stephen’s planted his weight more firmly against Tony’s. His hips grinding down in a steadying circle, their cocks rubbing together at a steady pace as they moved together instinctively.

Tony doesn’t think he can cum from simply this, no matter how pleasant the friction felt, but…

“I love it, you know… How willing you are to meet my wants, my simple whims. It’s unsavory… just how much I enjoy that you simply yield when it comes to me… even against yourself. It makes me feel powerful… more so than any magic-“

The sorcerer’s trembling hands stilled on Tony’s hips, gripping tight enough to bruise.

The next second they both come undone with a sharp cry, buckling their hips against one another through the aftershock.

It takes another minute or so for them to simply calm down, catching their breath.

Stephen, eventually feeling the strain in his arms, carefully rolled himself over, all but collapsing next to Tony. When their eyes meet, they couldn’t help the soft laughter that resonated.

“Damn… ok…” Tony muttered, as if still reminiscing. “Where the hell did that come from-?”

“Ah well-“ Stephen smiled onto Tony’s shoulder, his arms wrapping around the other’s middle. “I may have heard you… last night. When you were… playing with yourself-“

He felt Tony freezing for half a second. But then the brunette shifts slightly towards him, a bit wide-eyed. “…oh…”

“I definitely don’t mind you needing time to yourself if you are in that mood but…” The sorcerer pulls Tony closer, nuzzling the crook of the brunette’s neck with a half-hearted smirk. “I definitely
won’t complain to watching-“

“I thought you were asleep… didn’t want to wake you just because I got horny-“

Stephen let out a short laugh. “And here I thought I was being polite and pretending not to notice.”

A light scoff, shaking of head and Tony stared at the other still with a definite fondness.

“Okay well… what now? …Breakfast? I might go tinker with some things afterward though.” He then craned his neck towards the large floor-to-ceiling window. Watching for a moment as the waves crashed against the rocks in a steady sequence.

Hearing that, Stephen groaned, further burying his face onto the smaller man’s shoulders. “…five minutes.”

“Really, babe? You were definitely enthusiastically up just a minute ago.”

“We have time, do we not?”

Yes, yes they did. They had all the time in the world.

There were no missions to be running off to, no meetings scheduled, no interruptions from a compound filled with people. Perhaps not forever but they did have time at the moment. At least today. At least tomorrow. At least till they decide to return to New York ready to face once more the reality of their life.

Tony languidly ran a finger against Stephen’s hand that was placed over his stomach, “I should at least give Pepper a call… see how Peter and Harley are doing…”

“They are fine. They are not helpless… they can handle us being away for a couple of days.”

“Yeah but-“
“Tony, we’ve just got here yesterday evening. We haven’t even been away for more than sixteen hours.”

The genius appeared for a moment as if he was going to argue. But then, let out a half-hearted sigh before a soft smile formed on his lips. “You’re right. And this… this is our vacation. Away from all the craziness. Just you, me… and the beach, the sun… some peace and quiet…”

Tony leaned in for a quick kiss, cherishing the rare, genuine, carefree smile that was left in its wake. “As much sex as we want without being interrupted…”

Stephen gave a sarcastic, “oh?” Giving a clear exaggerated guise of deep consideration. “Then we should definitely take advantage of this.”

“Yeah, we should get on that right away,” Tony replied without missing a beat. Just as seriously and just as sarcastic.

“Okay…” Without breaking eye contact, Stephen leaned further onto the bed. A smirk played on his lips. Suggestive, but there was no room for doubt. “So get on-”

A matching grin formed on Tony as he almost immediately jumped on top of the other, saddling him. Easy laughter filled the air, swallowed up occasionally by playful kisses.

It always amazed Tony just how much stamina Stephen had. Even with the notorious Playboy title, Tony had trouble keeping up with the man even years back. He wasn’t complaining, of course. The billionaire often benefited from Stephen’s insatiability. The sex was incredible. And the doctor was quite creative, very passionate when he just wanted it.

But lately, he had been thinking…

Tony had been working nonstop for much of the late morning. Stephen, not wanting to be of distraction, went for a walk on the trail that overlooked the oceans.
It had been quite a while since they returned to California. The pair hadn’t had much time for it. Tony even considered selling the land all together after the destruction of the first mansion during the crazy Killian debacle. It wasn’t as if they spent much time away from New York at that point anyway.

However, Stephen seemed rather attached to the property. Although no exact reason was ever given, the billionaire was half-convinced it might have something to do with the fact that it was where they spent their first night together. The doctor had always been incredibly sentimental behind that cold front.

But no matter. All it took was one half-hearted objection on the sell and Tony was already drawing up new plans for the rebuilding of the estate. Though, even after it’s completion, they had come to visit it only once… before…

Tony sat up straight, stretching his neck from side to side.

God, he really was feeling his age these days. There was once a time where days of hard work would barely faze him.

With a heavy sigh, his eyes roamed around the room absentmindedly. Not focusing on anything in particular till…

Then he saw it, his eyes landing on the shiny surface of the large cabinets nearby.

He peered over at the reflection, looking over himself. He ran his fingers through the messy hair, trying to manage it somehow. Then angled his face to each side just a bit, assessing. The billionaire definitely had to try hard to ignore the tugging of insecurity as he notes all the fine lines and wrinkles that adorned his face.

Tony let out a sigh, trying to get a hold of himself. It wasn’t news. He was getting old.

In truth, it often catches him off guard lately just how Stephen… still looked at him with the same heated gaze. Filled with desire, hunger, and so much love. Same gaze identical to the ones from over a decade ago.

Was it though? Was it still the same? Or was Tony just seeing what he wanted to see? Just
Tony used to wonder about this. About hitting fifties. He often wondered back then how Stephen would feel about him in the later years to come. Being younger than him by a handful of years and being so so pretty. Always too pretty.

He may have never admitted it out loud but Tony often assumed the successful surgeon would simply leave him. Replace him with a younger, prettier model. Or if he felt obligated to stick around, perhaps dabble in few affairs here or there. Take on some younger sidepiece that could satisfy some craving no longer being met due to being stuck with a much older man.

He shook his head, trying to wave the thought away. It hit a bit too close to home now. No longer seemed like some amusement, some worry for the distant future but one that was right at his doorstep.

He tried to tear his gaze away but couldn’t help but keep glancing back. Hands now fidgeting with a tool with a hint of anxiety.

Tony had briefly heard from Wong about Stephen’s extended life span as the Sorcerer Supreme and therefore slower physical aging. None of them were really sure how to factor in the time-stopping, rewinding, and all that into his age but appearance-wise, Stephen definitely looked no older than forty.

Years back, even before understanding the existence of real magic, if someone had told Tony that Stephen would keep his good looks for decades to come… he would have believed it, easily. Expected it even.

What he did not expect, however, was Stephen’s indifference… or so it seemed… to the fading of his, Tony’s, physical appeal.

Or was he just… hoping…

“Checking yourself out?”

The low baritone snapped him from his thoughts. Gaze snapping up to the reflection once more, just in time to see Stephen standing behind him, easily snaking his arms around his waist. Tony
smiled when he felt the soft lips on the nape of his neck.

“What are you thinking so deeply about?”

“I-…” The genius felt his brain short-circuited. He blinked rapidly for a moment, trying to grasp for something, anything. Then settled on not a lie but another train of thought that morning. “I was just thinking… if we go to town we may be a bit too easily recognized. And I just… wanted a quiet day… but out, you know? …fresh air-”

“I can portal us to a remote town?”

He let out a soft laughter. “…I hate to say this, babe, but… I’m Tony Stark.”

“I can cast an illusion spell…”

“Yeah… I guess…?”

There was a soft humming that left the Sorcerer’s lips. “Or… maybe something a little more fun-”

Hearing that, Tony’s expression turned to one of interest.

Stephen placed another quick kiss on the other’s jaw before raising his hand slightly. “May I?”

“…Sure?” The billionaire was certain however if it was anyone else other than Stephen, he would have had many more questions. And even then, he may have not agreed in the end.

Soon, one complicated gesture, muttering of a spell and Tony watched in fascination, as his own appearance seemed to de-age at a rapid rate.

The brunette blinked quickly, trying to completely comprehend the sight that was reflecting back to him. He took a step closer, running a finger uncertainly along his perfectly smooth skin.
He looked young. Even, sun-kissed complexion, wrinkles gone. Fuller darker hair, clean-shaven, which only accentuated his large, dark lashed eyes. If he had to put a label on it, Tony appeared as he did in his late twenties maybe early thirties, on rare days he shaved completely.

“Well, the goatee was too much of a giveaway paired with your eyes,” Stephen said behind him with a chuckle. “But if it bothers you I can…”

“No… no… I like this…” he replied, almost wistfully. “Temporary right? I mean… fun! … Damn… I almost forgot I looked this good-“

Stephen snorted before stepping closer, kissing him on the cheek. “You always look good.”

And Tony definitely noticed that tone shift. Subtle but one that paired so beautifully with that look the doctor was currently giving him. Oh, he was liking this already.

“No, but this-“ Tony vaguely motioned to his own face, facing the doctor with a smirk. “Come on, you have to admit, like this I can even rival you in terms of prettiness-“

The Sorcerer crossed his arms, letting out an amused huff.

“Maybe with like... glasses and right outfit? I would be hardly recognizable like this... What about you?”

There was a pause in which Stephen seemed to have shifted half his attention to the project Tony had been working on. “I’m not as notoriously recognizable as you. I’m sure out of the… elaborate robes and cloak, the street clothes alone would be a throw off. Maybe I’ll shave. You always said the facial hair made me appear quite different-“

Then motioning to a pair of glasses on the workspace. “…What’s this?”

“Oh! …That- …that is for Peter.”

“Peter?”
There was a short pause before Tony cleared his throat. He quickly darting about to save and clear away files on the many monitors.

“I don’t know… I mean, my time is up, you know? Yours won’t be for a long while considering… how you’ll live for… longer…”

The icy gaze soon locked onto Tony, frowning.

“But these kids… they are the future. And I think the world is in good hands, don’t you think?”

“Tony,” he started slowly. “…So what is this?”

“…Just… something… that may help Peter’s legacy. Stark Industries is Harley’s and Avengers…” Tony swallowed, shoving his hands into the pockets as he paced. “…Peter… is a hero. Born to be. …Better than me. He’s a leader. But without my arrogance, without the ego, the pride. He’s compassionate. After Thanos, people claimed how… Iron Man was… savior of mankind? Earth’s Greatest Defender? Some title of a great hero? And if… that’s the case… Peter… he is… the Iron Man the world deserves.”

The frown deepened as Stephen stepped closer, “Tony-“

But the other continued. His words coming out fast now. “I won’t always be here to protect him in this… path he’s on? We all know what that’s like. There will be times he inevitably would have to go through it alone. But… I just… want to maybe create something that will… at least make it a little easier for him. A little help… in case he needs it…”

There was a moment of silence as Tony refused to meet Stephen’s gaze, the brunette’s eyes determinately fixed onto one of the distant walls. The sorcerer wondered if he should press further but…

He licked his lips, taking in a deep breath to calm his own voice. “…So… what are you naming this?”

“…EDITH.”
Stephen smiled, tried to let out a short laugh to ease the odd tension. “Oh? Oddly normal for you.”

There was a short pause before Tony returned the smile. “Yeah…. Yeah, it is… isn’t it… So where to today?”

They spent much of the day thoroughly enjoying their rare freedom. Freedom from obligation, freedom from the press, freedom from the stress… the stares, the judgments…

Stephen seemed to have been correct in assuming he himself would not be recognized with minimal effort. Wearing dark jeans, a simple shirt, and cardigan, no one seemed to even bother giving the former surgeon a second glance. Other than the couple quick double takes and long stares from admirers.

Tony had been a tad bit concerned since it was not long ago where the footage from the recent fight against the dragons went vital. Number one watched online from what Peter and Harley had told them. The Sorcerer Supreme’s popularity indeed skyrocketed much to perhaps SHIELD’s dismay. For days straight there was not much to note about online discussions regarding the Avengers other than people gushing about the sorcerer.

Certainly, no one would recognize Tony currently, given he appeared about two to three decades younger than the age the public associated with Tony Stark. However, the genius had thought some would be able to pick out Stephen without any real changes to his looks other than attire.

Of course, it may have helped that they had been choosing to roam some of the more eccentric of places… such as the Arts District, Hollywood, Santa Monica - courtesy of simply, easily jumping from one place to another through magical portals. Considering the diversity, the colorfulness of the culture, and the sheer busyness of the areas they visited, hardly anyone gave them extended attention.

And Tony enjoyed every second of it.

They talked, joked, bantered. They wondered the streets they never had the time to leisurely roam, revisited places they once knew pointing out all that had changed. They went into old bookstores, visited the remote popup galleries, grabbed odd flavored ice cream that Tony was certain Stephen liked more than he let on.
It was so… delightful, liberating, being able to move about a crowd without the stares. Do whatever he wanted without the endless amount of eyes scrutinizing his every action. The billionaire even enjoyed being bumped into accidentally by strangers who did not see him in time.

The only attention fully on him at all times seemed to be that of Stephen’s.

And speaking of the sorcerer…

Stephen’s hand never seemed to leave him for long. Roaming his back, leading his arm, soft caresses to his neck, a slip just under his shirt. And as much as he was relishing the affection, Tony’s brain started to wonder if Stephen had ever been so tactile with him out in public.

Well… he supposed the doctor could also be enjoying the rare freedom from unwanted attention. After all, cities such as these, two “normal” men out in public displaying PDA were hardly a cause for alarm. Or…

Or his fiancé was liking this magically de-aged body a bit too much.

Tony contemplated briefly if he should feel annoyed by it all. Sad at the very least. Because this look… the way Stephen was currently staring right now with that stupid grin on his face… This. This was certainly the look Tony was used to seeing decades ago.

Perhaps, he really had been delusional in thinking Stephen did not care about the loss of his partner’s physical appeal.

Tony let out a soft scoff as he tried to turn his attention back to the soothing tune of couple street performers nearby.

Of course, Stephen would care. He was human. Sure, it wasn’t *everything* but it was natural, normal, to care about physical appearances. Humans were drawn to beauty and youth no matter how much they wished to deny it.

But understanding it, admitting it didn’t make this hurt any less. Or sedate the crawling of anxiety at the pit of his stomach.
“Something wrong?”

A hand pulled him carefully off to the side and away from the moving crowd. Tony followed along without a second thought.

The next moment, Stephen was leaning against the railing at the side of the walkway, drawing the billionaire towards him in an embrace. The doctor’s arms wrapped itself around Tony’s waist and almost instinctively, Tony’s hands fell onto the taller man’s shoulders.

“What’s on your mind?”

“Nothing important,” Tony replied all too casually. His mind quickly worked to form a decent diversion but seconds later… something else caught the brunette’s attention.

Stephen… with the backdrop of the roaring waves behind, the warm glow from the sunset kissing his skin, couple loose strands of hair moving with the gentle wind. And those piercing eyes. Always drawing Tony in, always too fast, too deep.

He blinked, leaning in a bit without really meaning to. Noticing it, the doctor let out a soft chuckle as he raised a hand, stroking the other’s cheek briefly before absentmindedly playing with the ropes on Tony’s hoodie.

Stephen looked absolutely breathtaking in this view. Physical beauty that rivaled his gorgeous mind, reflected his exquisite charm, matched so well with the graceful elegance. …It made his heart ache.

Tony let out the breath he didn’t know he was holding. “You. I’m thinking about you. …You’re beautiful.”

The sorcerer let out a soft laughter. “Oh, then it’s definitely important-”

“Ugh. Just kiss me-”
And he does, hard. Lips quickly sealing over Tony’s as one trembling hand slipped to the brunette’s hard jawline, then firmly at the back of his neck, guiding. Tony hummed, tasting the sweetness on Stephen’s tongue that lingered from the ice cream they just had.

When they parted for air, a grin was stretched on both of their lips.

“I think I just disappointed the girl that was staring at you,” Tony teased, subtly gesturing vaguely to his right.

“Brunette, boots, white blazer?”

Billionaire gave his fiancé a look, the smile completely gone in an instant.

Stephen laughed as he poked lightly at Tony’s nose, breaking the glare. Then, leaned in further, placing a kiss on the jawline before whispering. “I only noticed because her boyfriend… or date… keeps staring at you.”

Tony rolled his eyes.

“What ever should I do?” A spark of mischief lingered in that gaze. “Should I collar you? Property of Stephen Strange. Maybe people will know better then…”

He raised an eyebrow, though his tone was definitely playful. “I don’t know. Are you going to let me collar you?”

Stephen acted as if taken aback, though far from genuine.

“You know me, babe,” Tony went on easily. “Down for anything but I’m all about equality.”

But before Stephen can further tease on the matter there was ringing from the inside of Tony’s pocket.

It doesn’t take long before he fishes out his phone, giving a quick glance at the name before
answering with a frown. “Pep, what’s up?”

“Tony-?”

“Harley…?”

Stephen loosened his hold, letting Tony turn slightly away. Although it was clear the sorcerer suddenly became a bit tense, frowning as he continued to watch Tony’s expression for some indication.

“I… Ms. Potts… I- ….She thought it would… good if I called you…”

“Harley, what’s going on? Did something happen? Where are you? We can be there in-

“NO!… No, nothing like that.” Sound of throat clearing.

Tony paused for a moment, his mind spinning fast. “…Harley… Is it the board? Are they giving you a hard time?”

“No. …Well… kinda… but…” There was a loud ugh that Tony was definitely accustomed to hearing from the teen at this point. “It’s… not just them. There’s… a lot of talk. God… I… I also have been screwing up the little things and… I-I’m… I’m sorry…”

Tony frowned. “Why are you sorry? So you made mistakes, not a big deal-”

“I have to-… there are… expectation.”

“Since when the fuck did you care what other people thought? Fuck their expectations-”

There was a brief silence before, “…Your expectation.”
Tony blinked. It suddenly dawned on him… what this was about. He took a glance at Stephen who seemed to have put the pieces together as well. The hand that was still on the brunette’s waist gave a light squeeze as if in support.

“Harley…” He swallowed. His gaze darted about, to the continuous passing crowd, the ocean behind them, the sky that burned red, but without really seeing any of it. A soft sigh and then, “I want you to listen to this very carefully. I am going to tell you what I actually expect of you…”

…I expect you to be a decent human being. To try to do good for the world and those around you… but in your own way. I expect you to fail, I expect you to stumble. I expect you to have great adventures. …I expect you to have sex with the wrong people…”

Tony smiled as he heard Stephen let out an exasperated huff next to him.

…I expect you to have sex with the right people. I expect you to make mistakes, make amends. Take a leap, and make a splash. …And I expect you to unleash holy hell on anyone who ever tries to hold you down. …Because you don’t just work at Stark Industries now, Harley… You are a Stark.”

There was a long stillness that followed before the teen spoke.

“…”

“…Are you crying?”

“NO!…. fuck- I’m going to hang up now-“

He was cold, he was calculating. He never told me he loved me. He never even told me he liked me.

“Harley-“

“…Yeah?”
“…I’m… proud of you. And I love you. Always. No matter what.”

“……love you too… dad.”

Then there was a distinct click.

Tony frowned, huffing loudly as he turned back to Stephen. “…The little shit hung up on me.”

Stephen simply shook his head with a fond smile.

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Tony leaned heavily against the railing. Eyes fixed on the distance lights, ears half tuned to the roaring of the waves.

The pair returned back to the estate just a couple minutes ago. After late dinner at a lovely little restaurant they had noticed during their exploring. It was remote, quiet, intimate… a perfect end to the day. And now, Tony stood on the terrace connected to the master bedroom, nursing a glass of scotch he poured for himself just moment’s prior.

He tilted the cup to his lips, taking a small sip before lowering it just a bit. A distorted reflection stared back at him from the smooth crystal.

He hadn’t asked Stephen to lift the spell yet. The sorcerer dashed off for a shower soon as they returned and didn’t seem to think twice about it. And Tony… he kept his mouth shut on the topic.

If truth be told, it felt good. Passing by a mirror and seeing this young and youthful face being reflected back at him. And it definitely was an ego boost to have caught strangers staring at him a handful of times today, not because they knew who he was, but simply because he was attractive. He was even told multiple times by some random waitress or shopkeepers how beautiful his eyes were. Tony knew he was being a little vain at this point but he could indulge once in a while, right? When else will he get chances like this?
And the billionaire was fairly certain the spell did something far beyond the surface level appearance. He didn't feel the usual muscle pain or soreness he got accustomed to feeling as he left his twenties. He felt good, lively. There was newfound energy that was almost trilling.

He wasn’t ready to let it all go just yet.

And then… there was a small part of him… very small… maybe more… that liked the attention Stephen had been giving him today.

Everything about this… this younger skin he was wearing… made him feel confident. It felt amazing in ways he had forgotten, in ways he didn’t quite appreciate it when he actually had it decades ago. And Stephen being that enthralled with him today, it was a high like none before. It was delightfully satisfying. He was so ecstatic realizing now just how much Stephen must have been smitten with him during their younger days of dating.

But it was also bittersweet. Knowing he will never be able to draw Stephen in the same way again.

“You alright?”

Taking another large gulp, Tony turned around, seeing Stephen walking towards him in a simple nightshirt and pants, wet hair still, and a towel hanging over one shoulder.

Tony smiled softly the minute his eyes landed on the other. It was an almost involuntary reaction seeing the doctor.

The sorcerer let out a short sigh before closing the distance with a look of concern. “You seemed distracted since we got here… Today wasn’t up to your expectations?”

“No, no… Today was perfect.” He carefully placed the glass onto the ledge before wrapped his arms around Stephen’s neck, pulling them closer. “You make everything perfect.”

The doctor smiled before taking a half step back. “You seemed preoccupied.”

“I…” The corner of his lips twitched upwards for a second. “I mean… just a lot of time right now
to think, you know? No threat against the universe completely overwhelming my every thought? No meetings, no agendas, no stupid politics… My mind is finally taking advantage of the chance to wander… about things I put off thinking about…”

“Anything you want to share?”

There was a moment of pause as they simply stared at one another. Then Tony ran a hand through his windswept hair, ruffling it slightly.

“I just… I guess this wasn’t how I expected things to be… Not today. Again, today was amazing. Just… life in general.”

Stephen continued to watch him. He didn’t seem irritated or judging, just a bit concerned. “So what did you expect?”

“I don’t know?” Tony glanced away, not sure if he can continue such private thought while looking into the other’s eyes directly. “… Definitely not be marrying… now. When we are this old? I mean… even when I first proposed I was already pushing early forties. I guess I didn’t expect us to take this long in… getting here, having all this.”

A sad smile formed on the sorcerer’s lips as he gently stroked away a loose strand of hair.

“…I wish… I wish I met you earlier…” Tony went on after a brief pause. “Where were you all that time? The time we could have spent together…” His voice trailed off for a moment. Then the whiskey gaze turned back onto him. “You mentioned before… in other universes where we met earlier in life. I want that. I selfishly want… that.”

“Well,” Stephen stated evenly still. “Things would have been different if that were the case… And I love this. What we have now.”

“But we lost… so much time. Stephen, we… It’s not fair-“

And life wasn’t fair. They both knew that. Both of them knew that very well from thorough experience.
But it would be a lie to say Stephen didn’t also contemplate on this very subject every so often.

How the five years after the snap and before the final battle against Thanos… how the sorcerer selfishly wished they had switched places. For the simple reason that five years was nothing to him but for Tony, it was long years apart they will never get back. Every year, every hour, every minute, and every second… seemed so precious now.

“…I’m… I’m fifty-three, Stephen. … We both know… what? With luck and no freak accident… Which is rather unlikely in our line of work… Another… I don’t know? Twenty years if lucky factoring in all the shit I did to my body for years? And a good portion of that I may not be in the best health…”

“Tony…” he said warningly.

“I don’t… want to live long… if that’s the case. To be a burden, to not really be living anyways-“

“Tony.” It came out sharp, harsh. “Stop. Talking.” His hands were tightly gripping the ledge, knuckles turning white.

Noticing it, Tony automatically flinched. As if he could imagine, feel it himself the pain that must be radiating from Stephen’s injured hands.

Swallowing, Tony reached over, carefully taking the hands in his, trying to prevent the doctor from further hurting himself unintentionally.

“…I’m so sorry,” he said eventually, faintly.

Stephen blinked several times trying to register, “What?”

“I’m sorry… I was weak. I should have waited for you. I could make the excuse how… after all you said after the accident… but no…I-”

Stephen let out a heavy sigh. “I broke your heart. No one can blame you for moving on-“
“I should have known you would have come back… to me. If I just… waited then… we could have had…”

It comes to him in flashes. All that Stephen had said about staying away. Trying to give him a chance at happiness with Steve. …If he hadn’t been so weak, hadn’t given in to whatever temptation, didn’t cave into the loneliness… Perhaps he and Stephen could have made it work, salvaged what they had sooner. Perhaps Tony would have kept a clear head during the first Accords mess, with the situation with Barnes. Maybe the whole situation would not have played out the way it did without the unnecessary feelings from both parties.

And if the Avengers stayed together… perhaps when Thanos finally came, they would have won the first time… together.

Then they would not have lost another five years…

Or… maybe it would have all played the same. Or worse.

“Even if it was just another handful of years before… the war, before the snap. …What I wouldn’t give to just get one more second with you. When we were younger…“

A small smile played on Stephen’s lips. He could feel the burst of anger receding. “We weren’t all that young at the time, Tony. Well beyond our prime-“ he tried to say wistfully.

“Well,” The usual easiness was back in the genius’s voice. A grin forming on his lips as he gestured to his current state of self. “You should have seen me younger. I was damn pretty.”

Stephen let out a warm laughter as he placed both his hands on either side of the brunette’s face, leaning in for a kiss. “You are…”

And there it was again, that look Stephen was giving him. The smile faltered slightly from Tony’s face as it really clicked in his head, hit him harshly.

He really had been imagining that Stephen still looked at him in the same way he had in the past. Because this… this look of desperate desire, sheer want, unreserved craving… he doesn’t
remember seeing from Stephen in a long while. But here it was. As the sorcerer stared at his fake youthful face.

Damn, he had been an idiot… a delusional idiot.

But it was okay, right? Even if the reason Stephen seemed totally, completely hooked was due to this younger skin he currently wore… it was still a version of himself. Stephen still loved him. That, Tony, was quite certain of. The doctor may not find him as physically attractive as before but Tony could live with that, right…? At least it didn’t seem like the sorcerer was repulsed by his older body… just… not as appealing.

This was all simply an understandable reality. Time passes, beauty fades… At least Stephen still… loved him so… it was… okay.

Tony quickly downed the rest of the amber liquid before placing the cup down once more. Stephen raised an eyebrow but there was no time for words as Tony soon grabbed a hold of his hand, leading him inside to the bedroom, never breaking eye contact.

Never let it be said that Tony wasn’t an opportunist.

So what if he couldn’t enjoy this level of attention anymore, every day? Then he was going to take full advantage of it, right now, while it lasted.

Once at the foot of the bed, Stephen tried to grab a hold of him, reaching out as if trying to take the lead. But the next second, Tony gave a harsh shove onto the other’s chest, the sorcerer falling backward onto the bed unceremoniously.

There was a short second of shock, but amusement clearly written across Stephen’s face as he watched Tony climb on top of him, pushing him down with surprising force.

God, this body was amazing. Tony felt like he could do anything at that moment. The strength, the flexibility. It was adrenaline he hasn’t quite felt since he crossed his forties. And he was definitely going to take full advantage of this.

Stephen tried once more to touch him, draw the other down for a kiss but Tony shoved his shoulder back. Now the doctor peered at him in confusion.
Tony smirked as he trailed his palms down from the shoulder to the other’s wrists, dragging them up to above Stephen’s head. “Nuh-uh, babe… You want this tonight? My rules.”

Giving another squeeze to the wrist, a soft indication to keep them there, Tony let go. Then the cleaver fingers slipped underneath Stephen’s shirt, pulling them off quickly but not completely, eventually securing the fabric around the sorcerer’s wrists in a tight knot.

“You know I can get out of these,” Stephen said with a smirk.

But it soon faded as Tony leaned down, hovering just centimeters away but never touching. Without a second thought, Stephen impatiently tried to chase those lips but was pressed down again harshly.

“You won’t,” Tony stated simply, “You do that and I stop. And you don’t want that, do you, babe?”

Stephen narrowed his gaze. “What I want,” he replied almost matter-of-factly. “…is to be inside you.”

Oddly enough, Tony didn’t bother snapping back. He simply rolled his eyes before sitting on his heels.

Stephen watched, hardly blinking as Tony removed his own clothes, chucking them aside in leisure pace. He licked his lips, eyes shamelessly appraising over the billionaire’s naked form without reserve. Tony, on the other hand, acted as if he hadn’t noticed, as if he didn’t care. And if it wasn’t for that twitch at the corner of his lips, Stephen may have believed it.

Soon the brunette started to pull at Stephen’s pants. Then, while wrapping his hand around the other’s length, Tony finally met the piercing blue-green gaze. Challenging it with a wicked smirk of his own.

Cursing tumbled from his lips as Stephen buckled into the warm hand. “Tony- I… fuck- I want to touch you-“ It was more of a demand than asking.
In which, Tony merely scoffed at.

Although, it was true the doctor rarely cursed so freely. At this that was something. And the way Stephen’s eyes were fixed on him, that gaze that held so much heat and want… It made him feel… powerful.

Not wasting another second Tony slid his tongue along the underside of the other’s cock, once, before swallowing the whole thing in one go, the head hitting the back of his throat in split second.

Stephen let out a deep moan as he tossed a bit. Although, soon, firm hands were at the doctor’s hips, holding him in pace as Tony started bobbing up and down.

“Tony!” His voice came out rough, sharp. “I want to touch!”

That made the billionaire snap his eyes back up, pulling off with a wet pop. “No.”

Tony savored the look of confusion, impatience, but utter hunger that radiated from the other. He lowered his chin just a tad bit, peering from underneath the dark lashes in a way he definitely knew Stephen loved. The billionaire let out a soft snicker as he felt Stephen’s cock twitch in his hands. Feeling benevolent, he gave a couple of leisure strokes that were received with grateful moans.

But the other hand started rummaging for the lube, soon messily coating his fingers with a good amount. Tony let out an exaggerated groan as he slipped his hand behind him.

Stephen was completely fixated on the scene before him, watching with engrossed attention as Tony started prepping himself. He almost made a move as if to break through the restraint, fingers flexing, but stopped himself just at the last second. Although he let out an undignified huff of irritation after catching his breath. “Tony… let me help-“

“No.”

“For fucking sake-“

“I said no. You just get to watch.” Then with another smirk. “You like a good show right?”
“Damn you!”

That surprisingly sounded incredibly emotional. The frustration completely genuine.

Tony raised an eyebrow, snickering. “Damn… It’s been a while since you’ve been this riled up-“

Then there was that same insecurity that tugged from the dark corners of his mind… one that seemed to suggest why Stephen might be so into this right now.

But he shook it away hastily, not wanting to ruin the mood.

Tony tried to focus on the matter at hand. He bit back a moan as he shoved another finger inside himself, scissoring and pumping them in and out in an efficient manner. The billionaire definitely notes every hitch of breaths from Stephen, the darkening of his pupils, the raising of pulse as his fiancé simply observed.

“Enough!” Stephen snapped after another several minute. There was a definite growl in that tone, a threat, Tony is all too familiar with.

For a moment, it appeared as if Tony was actually going to listen. Pulling the fingers out from his entrance and reaching for the lube once more. He poured another generous amount onto his hands then spread it on Stephen’s hardened length. Tony’s eyes never left Stephen’s as he repositioned himself over the sorcerer’s hips.

But then, paused.

“Try again, babe.”

The sorcerer gave one haughty glare, jaws locked and cheeks flushed.

Tony smiled as he leaned in, once again pulling away just before Stephen could catch his lips.
“Come on, Stephen…” he said in a low tone, soothing and encouraging. “Ask nicely.”

A second passed, then another. There was complete silence, as Stephen seemed to be working up the words.


Such short phrases, such simple words, but there was gravity to each one in a way that takes Tony aback. The raw emotions behind them almost making his heart stop.

There was a unison groan and curses as Tony lowers himself down, sinking onto Stephen’s cock.

Tony threw his head back, moaning Stephen’s name as the thick length brushes up against his prostate. Then, slowly, he lowered himself till their chests were fully flushed up against one another, finally sealing the other’s lips with his own.

Stephen kisses back eagerly, desperately. All tongue and fervent moans. It felt almost contagious as Tony pulled away, gasping for air.

“So fucking tight…” Stephen muttered under his breath.

Tony huffed before starting to mouth up the sorcerer’s jawline, biting softly here and there. But most of his attention definitely was on Stephen hot inside him, thrusting up with earnest, filling him up in the best of ways.

“So feeling good?” Tony asked breathlessly while circling his hips at a steady pace.

Not long, he feels Stephen matching his movements, every once in awhile deliberately grinding directly onto the sweet spot that shots up electricity up Tony’s spine. They hold each other’s gaze, panting, as they get lost in the maddening pace.

“So good, Tony… I love how you feel around me- shit-…faster, baby-”
Tony steadies for a second before impaling himself onto the cock, fast and hard, biting back a moan and a grin stretching across his lips. “I… ah- …damn… I never thought about it before… but you’re so damn needy-“

He continues the pace but when he feels Stephen twitch inside him, he shoots the doctor a look. “…Don’t come until I tell you to.”

Stephen let out a huff, a smirk soon following. “Well, you’re bossy.”

Their lips met again in a heated kiss, Tony smiling through it. “And you love it,” he whispered, pulling back just enough for the words to form.

No verbal confirmation, but Tony just as well have as the sorcerer unconsciously buckles.

They continue for another minute or so. Soon neither can do much thinking other than chasing their pleasure. Moans and grunts filled the air as their movements turned more erratic by the second.

Eventually, feeling close, Tony wrapped a hand around his own cock, giving a couple of deliberate strokes. “Stephen… cum for me, babe… cum inside me-“

And he does. Stephen gasped, arches off the bed as he fills the other’s tight passage.

With that, Tony soon feels his own orgasm, crying out as he spills onto their stomachs. He feels his insides constrict, squeeze tightly around his lover’s cock, only milking out more of the hot seed that makes his body shudder.

Tony all but collapses on top of the sorcerer.

A long silence followed as each tried to make sense of up from down.

“We should clean up or we are going to regret it…” He heard Stephen say. The doctor managed to have already slipped out from the confines of his makeshift restraints. “Are you good?”
Tony let out a soft laughter as he tried to pull himself up a little. “Yep. Great-“

He ran a hand across his face then… he felt it. Facial hair that was all too familiar. His head snapped to the right, to the window that vaguely reflected his image.

“When… when did you…”

Stephen only peered at him questioningly.

Tony’s eyes snapped onto him at once. “When did you lift the spell?”

“…When I came to find you on the terrace.”

“Why?”

A questioning frown soon reached Stephen’s expression. “What do you mean why?”

“You… I thought-“ I thought you wanted… “

The continued seriousness in Tony’s tone had the sorcerer concerned. He soon lifted himself from the bed to a sitting position, his mind seeking desperately in figuring out why this was suddenly of importance.

But not understanding fully of the situation yet, he simply went on to saying what was on his mind. “…You… looked beautiful lost in thought out there… I just wanted to see you. The real you…”

Tony blinked quickly, trying to figure out an efficient way to convey all that he was feeling, all the questions he had. “…The way- …you were looking at me the whole day… since that spell. You had this look… as if you wanted so much…”

“I always want you,” Stephen stated matter-of-factly. As if it was the end to all arguments.
Tony looked taken aback. The gears turning rapidly. “…You were so… protective-“

That made Stephen laugh. “Since when was I not a bit possessive? I don’t like random people touching you so friendlily… I know better around people we know, people close to you like Pepper…”

But Tony continued to stare at the other, clearly struggling through some personal battle in his head.

It takes another couple more seconds but it soon hit Stephen what Tony was trying to imply. He let out a soft oh, as if in understanding.

“Tony… I-… You were definitely gorgeous when you were younger. I’ve seen pictures from Pepper and James. And I was smitten when we met all those years ago, when we had been both younger…” He reached out stroking the outline of Tony’s face.

“But you are gorgeous now. I love how you look now. You were beautiful ten years ago and you’re definitely breathtaking now. This is the real you. An embodiment of everything we been through together. The years of hardships, the struggles, the good times and the bad… decades of love we… built… together. …Everything pales in comparison…”

“So… how you looked… at me…today… and when we were… just now…”

His brows furrowed a bit, as if in what do you mean? “I always look at you this way.”

And Tony finally saw it.

Because Stephen was staring at him, right now, with that same gaze. That same look from just moments ago, the whole day, same from a decade back and every day since they reconnected. It never stopped.

God, he was such an idiot.

He ruffled his hair in frustration. “…Ok well, I felt so much younger too. So much more energy,
you know? Just a minute ago? I thought it was the spell-

“Maybe you’re not as old as you believe,” the other replied with a smile.

There was a brief pause but then Tony let out a warm laugh, shaking his head a bit. “Yeah... yeah... I guess not.”

It doesn’t take long for them to wash up. Taking a quick shower together, drying off half-heartedly before throwing on fresh clothes.

Stephen definitely noted the bounce in the genius’s steps, less tiredness around the eyes. It seemed that it finally sunk into the other his worry had been an unnecessary one.

It was a good look on him, to say the least. Tony appeared happy, at ease, all carefree laughter and confident touches. And that unreserved affection being displayed so openly in those large doe eyes… that always warmed Stephen’s heart.

At first, the sorcerer really could not really compute how Tony could have even thought of such a thing. Was it not clear just how captivated he still was with everything and anything pertaining to Tony? …But then again, he supposed insecurities were never completely logical or reasonable and he himself could not throw stones.

After all, once upon a time, it was his own insecurities that had him convinced Tony would choose the Captain over him. How Tony no longer loved him. How his life would be better if Stephen chose to stay far away...

In the end, the pair ended up back on the large terrace. Bundled up in thick comforters on one of the large outdoor couches. Tony was convinced it was dignified, had brought out extra pillows saying it was to make them comfortable, sleeping on a couch that was not meant to be a bed. Stephen, however, was quite convinced the whole setup ended up looking for like a glorified nest than anything else.

Tony soon settled, curling up against Stephen’s chest, staring up into the night sky, the roaring of the oceans white noise in the background. The sorcerer continued to run his fingers through Tony’s
chestnut hair, watching it slip through the digits.

“What are you thinking about?”

Tony let out a snort as he snuggled closer. “You ask that question a lot, doc. “

“Because I like that you always answer me when I ask.”

There was a brief pause before the answer came. “…Nothing… why would I be thinking about something?”

The sorcerer let out a playful scoff. “Oh please. You’re Tony Stark.”

Soft laughter resonated between them. Then, a peaceful silence.

“…Expectations…” Tony said after a long while. “And how when we let go of them, reality can exceed them.”

Chapter End Notes

So this was not originally going to be the next chapter so I apologize if it didn't deliver some of the topics I may have said or hinted would appear in this update...

This time of the year is always a bit difficult for me. In some ways, I think I was using some of the themes in this particular chapter as a bit of indirect processing method for some life things... Probably also why it took way too long to finish lol ...(how the f did this get so long???)

But hopefully, you guys enjoyed a bit of break from the more intense plotline and I'll try to make the next update soon :’)

comments and encouragements are appreciated esp because I’m having a bit of hard time writing lately OTL

Btw, TouchoftheWind has made this beautiful thing related to this fic that I just saw ♡ [BANNER] ty ty I appreciate it lots because I'm always amused by these type of magazine-style fanarts
Their vacation lasts for exactly 64 hours, 17 minutes, and 42 seconds.

Yes, Stephen had been counting. He was quite sure Tony had been too. But quite honestly… that was still at least a day more than he had expected.

He now owed Harley and Peter fifty dollars. Money the Sorcerer Supreme didn’t exactly have. How to explain to Tony he technically lost fiancé’s money while betting with their kids… But well, that was a problem for another day.

Although, Tony continuously emphasized everything was *their* money and it was simply Stephen stubbornly still considered it *Tony’s* money.

It was definitely nice while it lasted. He had a fantastic time having Tony to himself for days in the secluded estate. And they both knew it wasn’t going to be forever. Considering their luck, Stephen wouldn’t have been shocked if the world spontaneously combusted as soon as they arrived in California.

Plus, oddly enough… The words Stephen never thought would form for him in his lifetime: he missed their kids.

So in all fairness, he shouldn’t be upset.

But he was.

Perhaps not *upset* per se. Stephen didn’t even want to admit it was to that degree. Peeved, irked… displeased?

For the reason why they ended up returning was…
“So why exactly did we have to come back just because Loki went at it with the rogues?”

Tony stopped his pace, turning to flash his best smile, one that often held the connotation of *look I’m cute, doesn’t my cute face make you feel better?*

“Well… technically you didn’t have to come but… you know-,” Soon, Tony had his arms wrapped around Stephen’s neck, drawing them closer, peppering couple kisses along the other’s jawline.

Some of the SHIELD agents lingering the halls glanced subtly at the pair but the billionaire didn’t bother returning the attention. “I was thinking we were like… a package deal thing-“

Stephen rolled his eyes although his body relaxed to a degree. Tony let out a whispered laugh. The doctor hated to admit just how much better he always felt when Tony’s clever fingers carded through his hair.

“I thought Thor was his keeper.” The sorcerer tried to remain neutral, trying to sound casual, cool. “Why do you have to be involved in this? Surely they can handle this on their own. He is not your…” There was a short pause in which Stephen blinked a little too much, a little too fast, then, settled on a term. “…problem.” *And he better not be your anything else for that matter.* But he bites his tongue on the last bit.

“Stephen, babe-“ Tony let out a sigh, a small frown forming as he glanced away. “It’s just… He-…”

“Why did he even ask you to be here?”

“…Well… he didn’t… exactly-“

That made Stephen’s frown deepen, his voice turning dangerously low. “Is he forcing you-“

“What? …NO!”
There was an ominous silence only broken by the white noise of the passersby off in a distance.

Tony ran a hand roughly through his hair before letting them fall to his hips. “He’s… a friend. At this point, I can use a friend… you know?” He licked his lips, starting to make vague jesters in the air with a hand.

“If… we very VERY generalize the world into two groups, there’s… them. The golden boy. Thor… Cap… And then, there are people like… us.”

Stephen, arms crossed still, let out a sigh. Though for a moment, his expression softened just a bit as he glanced away.

“He doesn’t… have that many people in his corner. Seems like he never did. No one that really is… like him, you know? Not many who understands. Thor definitely doesn’t understand him… He loves his brother, sure, but doesn’t really get him-”

The sorcerer let out a scoff recalling their previous run-in at the sanctum. One that started with the two gods seeking Odin on Earth. “There’s an understatement of the century-“

Stephen still wondered why Loki did not yet try to get back at him, so to say for that incident. It was never even mentioned by the Asgardian. Or perhaps, the proud god wasn’t too keen on sharing how he was stuck falling for thirty minutes, unable to break the spell cast by the Sorcerer Supreme.

The corner of Tony’s lips twitched upward, a soft smile forming as the billionaire placed both hands on either side of the other’s upper arm, squeezing gently. “See, we get it- what that is like? …How lonely that can be? I don’t know what I would have done if I didn’t meet you.”

Their eyes met for a brief period but Stephen quickly glanced away. He was not pouting. Definitely not. …But he at least can… see the reason in this, he supposed. He definitely remembers the emptiness before Tony. The one he didn’t even realize existed because he hadn’t experienced much else.

“Honestly, for what it’s worth I think you might get along with him if you get to know him. You two definitely have some commonalities-“
Stephen snapped his attention back to his fiancé in an instant, eyes wide. “What.”

But before he can form the proper words the next words, Tony was already opening the door to their left.

Nope. He did not like the implication of that statement. His head was now formulating more and more new thoughts…

But he didn’t have time to dwell on them for as soon as the entrance was opened there were shouting.

“You are not even listening!” Sam Wilson…?

“Do you even take anything seriously at all?” That was definitely Roger’s stern voice.

“Oh no no. I’m listening. It simply takes a moment for me to process so much stupidity all at once-“ And there was the voice that already made Stephen’s head hurt. The bored, sarcastic, drawn-out voice that belonged to the god of mischief.

Soon followed by his brother’s exasperated, “LOKI!”

“Look, we can’t have him out in the field with us. There is already enough tension in this team without adding-“

“Some create their own storms but are outraged when it rains.”

Stephen eyed the group just in time to see Thor sigh, evidently have given up. His gaze lands next on Loki who was lounging quite arrogantly on a chair nearby. Then there were the rogues sitting or standing on the opposite side of the large conference table, looking a bit worse for wear. Many of them were sporting some type of bruises, cuts, scuffles, but nothing that suggests life-threatening.

Bruce and Rhodes were both standing a bit off to the side as if they wanted to be anywhere else but here. And Fury turned towards them with the usual harsh stare.
But what really caught Tony’s attention was another in the room. One they did not expect.

“Wait, wait hold up. You sent my son into a class five mission with them?!“

The billionaire’s voice cut through all their shouts, a finger waving dangerously at Fury’s direction. All heads turned immediately with various emotions.

Stephen, on the other hand, crossed the room at a quick pace, a hand tightly on Peter’s shoulder as he surveyed the teen over for any signs of injury.

“…T-to be fair… dad… I… sort of just… followed-“ Peter mumbled, though intent not directly facing Tony.

Tony’s gaze fell sharply onto the boy before turning to exchange a glance with Stephen. The edge of the cloak wraps around Peter and the sorcerer nudges him slightly away from the group and to somewhere behind where Tony stood.

Oh, the doctor can already see the train wreck this will be in the next couple of seconds. He almost felt bad for anyone who may have to confess they played a role in endangering Tony’s child.

“It’s fine, Tony…” Steve was glaring daggers at the god of mischief. “We had eyes on the kid-“

Stephen rolled his eyes. The idiot-…

“I wasn’t talking about Loki,” Tony snapped back. “By that, I meant you lot! Peter should not be put on a team mission with the bunch of you-“

At that, Steve appeared outright offended, standing to his feet, jaws locking and the distinct frown forming. “We- …Tony! We wouldn’t have let him get hurt!”

“Seriously, Stark?! You’re doubting us right now about keeping a kid safe?” Sam stepped forward in haste. “Look, I get why you may not like us still but you find us to be concerning and not the
notorious villain over there?"

“He has yet to give me a reason to be concerned.“

Clint let out a curse. “He led an army to invade Earth! And threw you out a window! How’s that for starters?“

Tony let out a short sigh, hands falling to his hips. “Coerced. We now know it was actually Thanos.“

“Are you seriously defending him? He’s a professional liar! We don’t even know how much truth is in that!”

“Tony,” Natasha said earnestly. Unlike the rest of them, her tone was calm, as if trying to reason with him. “If that was true, you don’t think at some point after the battle, at least back on Asgard, he would have mentioned to Thor he was being forced? He never even tried to explain himself. … We are just saying there is reasonable cause for suspicion-“

“Look, Stark, either he’s a spineless lowlife who rolled over and sacrificed an entire planet for his own hide or who willingly-“

Thor stepped forward quickly with unusual seriousness, “I suggest you tread very carefully.”

“You know,” Tony said coldly. “I would consider believing these judgments you all seem so sure of if it wasn’t for the fact just two weeks ago, you all were also so fucking sure I was the crazy one for holding onto the grudge with Cap over Siberia.”

An uncomfortable silence fell as both Clint and Sam swallowed back whatever words they were about to utter next.

But the next moment, Steve stood right in front of Tony. Much too close for Stephen’s liking.

The sudden shift of tension around the room was very apparent. Rhodes and Sam already hurried over to drag their own friend back, trying to create more space between the two parties. And
although letting themselves be pulled back a step or two, neither Steve nor Tony backed down, eyes fixed on each other still.

The Captain definitely was solely addressing Tony as he next spoke, voice low and barely above a whisper. “Why do you even trust him? What happened exactly that will make you forgive him over us-“

Tony glared right back. “It doesn’t concern you.”

Steve let out an exasperated sigh. “This again, Tony? After everything, we said we were not going to keep any more secrets that pertain to the team.” It actually sounded earnest, hurt.

But Stephen still stepped forward, about to cut in. But that only landed the Captain’s attention onto him.

Steve turned towards Tony once more. “And what about him? He has been in New York, hiding himself for god knows how many years, watching the Avengers, watching us-“

But Tony soon cut him off, “He already told me about that. He chose to stay away for-“ he let out a cruel laugh, his tone turning a very sarcastic turn. “OUR benefit. What a laugh, isn’t it?”

“Tony-“

In a flash, the smirk disappeared from the billionaire’s lips, his eyes turning dangerously cold. “Say something about him. I dare you.”

After another couple seconds of the standoff, Tony turned away for a quick second with a frustrated huff, then soon spun right back around. “…And we fucking went over all that! Or do you need another punch to your perfect teeth as a reminder?“

Steve stood his ground, staring back at Tony still with that same earnest gaze. “Are you sure that was the whole truth?“

Off a little to the side, Stephen gritted his teeth, trying to reframe from acting rashly out of anger.
He must have stepped a little forward because Tony quickly put a hand on Stephen’s wrist, pulling the doctor back a little to behind him.

But Tony’s eyes never left the Captain. “So what if he was keeping tabs on us? He has zero motives in actually wanting to harm any of us! …We are the Avengers, we had a very public life right after the invasion. He chose to stay away but hey, he’s human, he got curious big deal! He was already in New York because… uh well? Coincidence! The Sanctum is here!… And is it a crime to check the goddamn news??”

That made the sorcerer tense for a brief moment. Of course Tony would fill in the gaps of what Stephen didn’t outright say with logical excuses that would portray the doctor in a better light. Always giving Stephen the benefit of the doubt.

A pang of guilt formed within him that he tried to swallow for now.

Without meaning to, his sights fell on Natasha who was staring at him with barely noticeable cues of worry.

But neither Steve nor Tony saw that odd, uncomfortable exchange.

“And you!” Tony turned to Fury. “Stop your goddamn witch hunt against my fiancé. Yeah, he’s powerful enough to fear but doesn’t mean he’s going to turn against the Avengers or Earth. That would be turning against me. And that will never happen so-“

Steve abruptly took a step forward, eyes on Stephen now. “Why did you become Sorcerer Supreme?”

The room suddenly came to a halt, the gears turning visibly in everyone’s head, quite possibly for very different reasons.

“What?” Tony stared at the Captain, giving him a quizzical look before glancing briefly at Stephen.

“Do you know?” Steve asked now to Tony.
The engineer simply blinked, mouth shut and jaws locked. If there was any doubt, any hesitation going through the genius’s head, he did not show it.

Stephen was about to make a retort to try to change the subject, but a voice beat him to it.

“If you are so concerned about the truth, Captain, then how about you start with why exactly we all are here today.”

Steve turned his glare onto Loki who straightened from his chair. Tony simply looked towards him in questioning.

“He followed me,” Loki started evenly, the piercing emerald gaze fixed on Tony. “Your boy. It was originally was a minor class two… or so we all thought… And they needed someone with some magical capacity, just in case. I let Peter follow along when he asked… I’ve had Thor come along for the sole purpose to watch over him for precaution. Still, that is on me. But I assure you, it was fine till he-” he nudged slightly towards the Captain. “…started giving unreasonable orders and expecting all of us to blindly follow-“

There was an uproar that followed.

“That is not how that happened!”

“If you didn’t go off on your own-“

“Even your so-called best friend here questioned your judgment, you ignored him. Agent Romanoff deviated from your plan as well and yet you throw a tantrum only because I refused to heed your words! That ego of yours… Did the need to prove yourself, your need to be the leader overshadow all common sense-“

“That’s enough.” Finally, Fury rose from his seat, glaring at them in turn before letting out a heavy sigh. “All of you, work this out like adults. And whatever personal shit you have against one another that you can’t? Leave it at the door. Because you all most certainly will have to be in the field together very soon-“

“Is that wise?” Natasha stated evenly. Pushing her weight away from the corner wall she had been leaning on. “Maybe if we divide the team into smaller groups-“
“We can only do so much when there seems to be a growing laundry list of who each person can and cannot work with. And eventually, most likely soon, you all have to learn to work as a team. Especially from the information we found today.”

Tony crossed his arms, eyes narrowing at the director. “What information?”

“Tony…” Bruce let out a sigh as he pulled his glasses off. There was a grim expression as he spoke to the billionaire. “Someone… seems to be trying to recreate your time travel mechanism.”

Silence washed over them as both Tony and Stephen let the information sink in.

Then after a minute or so, Tony ran a hand over his face. “…shit.”

Stephen knew perfectly well what Loki had offered in trade for his own pardon. He had gotten a detailed rundown from Tony afterward of that plan. His fiancé insisted the doctor to not worry and for the most part, he didn’t. …But still, he couldn’t help but wonder.

What if Loki really was working with SHIELD for his own agenda? What if this continuous clash with the rogues was some ploy, some show, to further convince them, Tony and Stephen, to let their guard down. To collect information.

Well, that had most certainly been the mentality Stephen had walked in with since Loki took residence in the compound. But after a couple days of endless arguments, literal blow-ups at the Avengers grounds, Stephen had to admit… if this was some acting, it was definitely a convincing one.

The fact of the matter was, regardless of what plans SHIELD or Fury had of the situation, the rogues, as well as many other Avengers, definitely held a strong grudge against Loki. Perhaps, for few, one that even exceeded their distaste for the certain Sorcerer Supreme. And even if some were willing to explore the possibility that Loki may not be solely responsible for the invasion of 2012 … they still were far from trusting him.

Quite frankly, Stephen could not blame them. After all, there were many lives lost that day. And
logically speaking, Loki’s own personality and patterns hardly gave an impression of someone remorse.

All in all, those at the compound ended up naturally splitting into two distinct groups. The rogues on one and Loki, along with Banner and Thor, spending much of their time with Tony… and therefore, by default, Stephen and their sons.

There was that saying… enemy of my enemy is a friend.

But no.

Stephen still, stubbornly, did not consider Loki a friend. Definitely did not like him. And he certainly showed it.

Did the Sorcerer Supreme feel oddly satisfied watching Steve Rogers and the co. get bullied by Loki? Yes.

He was not a saint. He definitely admitted there was some contentment in watching them bicker, squirm… ending up at the infirmaries. And if he had to choose between the rogues or Loki to be around Tony? Grudgingly, Stephen admits he will choose Loki. Tony’s safety above his petty…

But, that did not mean he was happy with the situation. In fact, it was starting to really piss him off how frequent he had to run into the Asgardian sorcerer.

“…So I heard this the other day… The human body is roughly seventy percent water. …So we are basically just cucumbers with anxiety.”

“Uh- excuse you,” Tony waved a pen at Bruce. “With the amount of salt and alcohol that I consume? I’m more like an anxiety pickle.”

Stephen stood silently at the corner of the room, watching as two let out a short laugh as they continued their work.

He had just portaled into Tony’s lab but considering how the pair had their back to his direction
and thoroughly distracted, they appeared not to have noticed yet.

Of course, Bruce Banner, on the other hand, hardly ever bothered the Sorcerer. In comparison to other Avengers, Stephen was rather fond of the other doctor. Doctor Banner was smart, levelheaded, polite, and seemed to get along with Tony splendidly for the most part. His presence today was not even much of a shock. After all that had recently happened, Banner seemed rather keen on being around Tony from time to time and the pair had been trying to figure out how to deal with this potential recreation of time travel machine issue.

But with Banner, usually, a certain god of thunder not far behind… “I don’t understand- what does your intake of minerals and spirits have to do with distressed vegetables?”

Both Tony and Bruce looked up from their screens to Thor. A flat stare. After a short pause, Tony threw a glance at Bruce, who simply shrugged.

“So, seriously, Goldilocks?” Tony said incredulously, facing Thor once more. “Why do you insist on ruining all my jokes?”

Thor wore an innocent, blank expression.

Tony let out a scoff before saying dryly, “Knock knock-“

The god stared back at him questioningly, “Enter.”

The genius blinked, twice, before persevering onwards. “…An English man, Irish man, and French man standing together in a bar-“

“What a fine display of comradery!”

“…How do you confuse a blonde?”

“Is that a challenge?”
Bruce snickered, taking off his glasses to press a hand to his forehead with a grimace. But just as Tony opened his mouth yet again, another voice called from the other side of the room.

And with Thor, inevitably soon followed…

“Stark, do not bother. He’s playing dumb to get attention. We’ve had preserved vegetables on Asgard. And he certainly understands the basics of overdone Midgardian jests-”

Tony frowned as he stared at Loki who sat on the couch… his couch, Stephen’s brain quickly retorted… perhaps childishly… then back to Thor.

“What the actual fuck- Seriously, Point Break?”

Thor grinned, effortlessly dodging a crumpled up paper the genius aimed for to his head.

“Anthony! If you have a spare to entertain my attention-seeking brother, then you surely have a moment to assist me with these-“

“Alright, alright! …Full diva protocol- Got it, Princess.“

Tony raised his hands as if in mock surrender, quickly rushing to Loki, bending down to help the god lace-up what appeared to be knee-high boots. It was beautifully crafted. Pitch black leather, gold soles, intricate designs on the heels… very high quality, undoubtedly very expensive, and definitely a custom design.

Thor fixed his brother with a look. “Loki, be reasonable! Man of Iron is not your servant. You should be gracious he entertained your whim in gifting you th-“

But Tony was already waving a hand, “It’s fine- not a big deal…”

No, Stephen had no problem with Bruce Banner. He did not mind much of Thor either.

But as his gaze landed on Tony’s hand on Loki’s thighs, giving a light squeeze before standing
back up… as the billionaire gave an appreciative whistle with the short teasing, “looks good~“ in a manner Stephen is too used to being directed at him… as he noted the flicker of delight in the piercing green eye of the god…

Stephen's head tilted just a bit to the side, his eyes narrowing. And there was a sudden urge to punch something that was rather frequent as of late.

And he doesn’t even want to give another second of attention to those damn long legs. He definitely knows Tony has a thing for nice legs. Stephen really wants to reject the very notion of how well those boots fit, how expensive they look, how perfect they were on Loki, accentuating his long, elegant… unmarked, undamaged… unscarred… frames.

The whole scene in front of him reminded Stephen bitterly of the past. The days where he was still but a wealthy surgeon who cared too much about his appearance and indulged in all the luxuries the world had to offer. The luxuries Tony often insisted on gifting him because he liked seeing “pretty things on his pretty boyfriend”, as the billionaire often stated.

The past… that was certainly the past.

_Not a big deal_, Tony had said so dismissively to Thor. Oh no, it was a very big deal.

_It’s fine_, his fiancé had insisted. Stephen knew better. It’s definitely more than just _fine_.

His fiancé was _loving_ this. Tony loved spoiling those he favored. Thoroughly enjoyed prettying up people he found attractive. The billionaire got a kick out of it.

Something of which Stephen no longer provided many opportunities for. A side of Tony he no longer entertained. …That he knew.

In truth, Stephen never felt like he _needed_ Tony buying him expensive things, pampering him with luxuries. Of course, there were jokes in the past. He even _acted_ like a spoiled brat on occasions just for amusement and entertainment purposes. Threw extreme requests just to see if Tony would heed them. Stephen may have been conceited, definitely arrogant, but he wasn’t actually _that_ spoiled. It was a careful balance that whole topic.

But that was one of the things that greatly changed in their dynamic now. Stephen certainly didn’t
bother with material goods anymore and Tony seemed to have taken the hint in staying far away from the topic. He knew Tony missed it. Being able to gift him shiny things, dressing him up. And for Stephen, it wasn’t as if he missed the gifts… but sometimes he does miss the reaction that Tony gave with it.

But still, it was not something of huge importance to either of them. Not a deal-breaker. Stephen hardly thought about it in weeks...

Till now.

Because there was something about seeing this and being an outsider. About the attention, affection, adoration, admiration not being directed at him but another.

It’s not as if he wanted it. But that didn’t mean he wanted it given to someone else. It was not as if Stephen particularly wanted or needed to be spoiled … He just didn’t want Tony to be doing so with… others. Well, apart from the obvious: the kids, Pepper, James…

It made sense. …Right?

Before Stephen could get a hold of himself, he must have stepped forward, closer to the rest in the room. His displeasure seemed to have been clearly visible for it takes only a second for the look of surprise on Thor to turn to one of concern.

“Doctor Strange,” Thor greeted quickly in his usual good-natured tune. As if trying to shift the mood and have the attention fall on him rather than Loki. “Glad to see you’ve returned safely!”

“Ah, thank you,” he replied with a surprising evenness that didn’t quite match his current internal turmoil. “It had been but a minor squabble. Took longer than necessary quite honestly.”

The name instantly made Tony spin around. Seeing the other visibly light up at the sight of him made Stephen smile.

Stephen crossed the rest of the distance rather briskly. His arms soon wrapped around Tony. The other gave a warm smile and soft, “hey” before pulling the sorcerer down for a kiss. Stephen was all too happy to oblige. As their lips met, for a moment he couldn’t care less for the certain annoying presence not far away, or the piercing stare that he very much felt.
And if anyone noticed he held Tony for a bit too long, a little too tightly… Well, no one mentioned it.

It was fine, Stephen told himself.

So Tony had a new friend. A pretty, sorcerer friend. With everything that happened with the old team, Tony deserved some new friends who were actually attentive to his well-being. A little too attentive.

No, Stephen did not feel threatened. Tony thought the world of him. Everyone says so all the time. …No, he did not spend most of the day on the phone with Pepper and James, fishing subtly for confirmation on the topic… He simply… wanted to catch up with them.

Tony loves him. He had nothing to worry about. Or so he tells himself over and over… and over…

“Geesh, what did the ice cream ever do to you-“

Stephen grudgingly halts his stabbing. Drawing the spoonful of A Hunk of Hulk of Burning Fudge into his mouth. He doesn’t bother meeting the teen’s eyes as he snapped, “You wanted ice cream at 1 am in the morning and made me go steal it from Wong’s secret stash… So eat your ice cream.”

Harley continued to stare but soon continued to dig his way through his own tub of Captain Marvelous Mocha. There was an odd silence for another minute before…

“You know… I’ll be on your side, right?”

That made the sorcerer glance up, “My side?”

Harley paused for a moment, spinning a bit in the kitchen stool while fidgeting with the spoon. “If it ever came down to you and… you know… Loki-“
Stephen frowned but the teen was no longer looking at him, eyes fixed on the tub in front of him.

“I mean… Peter seems to get along with him but in the end, he likes you way more-… And I may not always act like it but I’m loyal as fuck-”

“He’s a friend, Harley,” he said sharply. The words came out a bit harsher than he meant it to. “Nothing else is going on. And Tony and I are fine. …Better than ever. Don’t make me traumatize you out by telling you exactly how good things are-“

The kid’s head snapped up in a grimace, “EW NO!”

And as their eyes met, a smile formed on both of their expressions, a soft laughter soon following.

“Brat,” Stephen said fondly as he went back to eating. He saw from the corner of his eyes Harley rolling his eyes.

He wasn’t sure if he really wanted to know but in the end, the curiosity got the better of him. “… Where the hell are you even getting this idea from anyways?”

“Well, judging by your defensive tone, this is not coming out of nowhere for you so I’m going to assume… thank god, you’re not blind… or stupid-”

Stephen raised an eyebrow at the teen.

Harley threw down his spoon, “Come on- Loki has been hanging around Tony every chance he can get whenever you are not here. He’s definitely trying to suck up to Peter and me. I admit he’s better at it than any of the rogues had been… Okay, fine… overall I don’t hate him as a person… god…? He’s sort of… the type I won’t mind being around… unlike, you know, some others in this compound. But of course I don’t want Tony to suddenly run off with-“

“Wait, what do you mean he’s around whenever I’m not?” Stephen can definitely feel his temper rising. Then it also hit him, “…Wha- …Peter is getting along with him?!”

He shouldn’t have been surprised that Harley didn’t appear unnerved by the sudden flash of the
sorcerer’s anger. The teen certainly knew how to hold his ground and was rarely intimidated. A trait, Stephen was starting to really appreciate.

The kid shrugged. “Exactly what I said. He’s often around on our floor… with Tony when you are not. And haven’t you noticed he sort of just… leaves whenever you come around? And Peter is Peter. Gets along with everyone. To be fair, I think Pete is… you know… doesn’t expect people to have bad intentions? Ulterior motive? Unless you give him a reason… Didn’t pick up on the… vibe… Think Loki is just being a good friend to Tony. Plus Loki likes to show off. It fascinates Pete. You know… cool magic-”

“I can do magic-“ Stephen blurted out without really meaning to.

Harley gave him a look as he stuck the spoon back into the ice cream. “Yeah but… you hold back on us. Magic should not be used in vain thing-“

“Well I can-“

For heaven’s sake, Stephen really hated how childish Loki was starting to make him become. The doctor pinched the bridge of his nose with a sigh. Yes, the annoying god was starting to really get to him. This whole ordeal was getting under his skin more than he would like to admit.

“Look, Harley,” he tried once more, his tone relatively even. Trying to sound reassuring, at least for the kid. He knew by now how the teen often downplayed his worry, hiding things that actually mattered to him behind arrogance and nonchalant. “You know Tony. He’s… just like that with his friends. Tactile, very friendly, teases constantly… It doesn’t mean… that.”

God, this was such an odd conversation to have with his… soon-to-be stepson. But, well, their lives had been always far from being normal, he supposed.

After another silent minute, Harley went on, “You know there is like… a bet going-“

He peered over at the teen with a look of exhaustion, “What?”

The other shrugged, “Well mostly the rogues… How long it would take for one of you to snap and kill the other. You and Loki. And who would win… It’s kind of obvious, you know? Your dislike for him-“
It was all Stephen could manage to simply give the teen a flat stare. He really doesn’t want to dissect through all this information running in his head.

But the lack of a proper response was making the teen fidget. “Please don’t tell me- you’re just going to play dumb and do nothing- I mean… yeah, Tony is-… He’s loyal… but…”

Stephen glared and Harley had enough sense to close his mouth with a snap.

At least, for another minute.

“Well…” Harley muttered eventually, “Tony seems to have a type now… tall, dark-haired, piercing eyes… intelligent, arrogant, moody…”

“No seriously! …You would think between the shiny golden locks and baby blue-eyed demi-god and my childhood hero I wouldn’t know where else to look during the Invasion but you should have seen Thor’s brother. Tall, dark, handsome. I offered him a drink actually—“

Stephen flinched at the memory.

Before the teen could dig his spoon back into the tub, Stephen snatched it away with another solid glare. Harley gave him a look of indignation, then a pout that all too reminded the sorcerer of the boy’s father.

The next second, the teen lunged for his ice cream but Stephen successfully pushed it further away. With a scowl, Stephen ate a vindictive spoonful of kid’s ice cream as the other gave him an undignified huff.

Harley slowly sat back straight, “…and mean,” he continued. Then with a neutral, innocent look that was all too fake, “…He’s a lot like you isn’t he?”

Stephen waved a threatening spoon at the kid. “That’s it. You’re done. Go to bed!”
That snapped something in Stephen.

He had enough.

If Loki wanted to take his spot in this family? In this team? In Tony’s life? The spot that was rightfully his in every sense of the word? Hell, the bitch did not know what was coming for him.

Stephen wanted a fight. Was ready for one. A chance to wipe the floors with that pretty, smug face…

But the chance never came.

In fact, once Stephen mentally declared war and therefore was looking for any excuse to lash out, it became oddly clear that… Loki, on the other hand, seemed to be going out of his way to perhaps refuse him the chance.

Frankly, there were often times Loki appeared as if he was outright avoiding Stephen whenever possible. Since Harley pointed it out, Stephen fully noticed just how often Loki excused himself when Stephen entered the same space.

Recently, Loki was quite often seen around Tony’s floor even without the company of Banner or Thor. When Tony was not around, most of the time he seemed simply chatting with Peter, Harley or both. Tony’s two sons seemed to be rather fascinated by the Asgardian.

The notion irritated Stephen more than he would like to acknowledge. He had seen that look in Peter before, that earnest excitement, the enthusiasm. It was once directed at the Sorcerer Supreme in the early stages of when he and Tony had gotten back together. And as for Harley… Since when did the elder teen so quickly warm up to a newcomer?

Stephen had caught Loki in such a scene a handful of times. Entertaining the two teens with some outrageous story or amusing them with splashy parlor tricks. And each time… as the two sorcerer’s eyes met, as the god evidently recognized Stephen’s displeasure… Loki quickly made an excuse before making himself scarce.
Perhaps he should feel grateful the Asgardian had at least the sense to not force Stephen to unnecessarily endure his company. But still, the god’s presence could not completely be avoided.

Considering how absorbed Tony and Banner can get in their work, it was often than not for all of them to have dinner together. Soon, Thor and Banner quickly had become somewhat of a common sight on Stephen and Tony’s floor… and with them, Loki.

Just a day ago, while working at the Sanctum, Stephen had gotten a text from Tony asking him to make sure to return early in the evening. Their regular monthly planned dinner with Pepper and Rhodey had suddenly become a small party with the addition of Banner, Thor, and Loki.

It had been an odd affair. Not completely bad one – just odd.

Pepper appeared quite wary of Loki initially but by the second glass of wine, Loki seemed to have charmed her thoroughly. And with her approval, James relaxed a bit as well. …Much to Stephen’s dismay.

Stephen contemplated briefly what that terrible thought said about him.

But the guilt was suddenly, abruptly, thrown out the window the moment he saw one of Loki’s hand fall so casually onto Tony’s shoulder. They appeared to have been joking, both laughing. Tony’s hand easily making it’s way onto Loki’s waist, trying to steady himself.

Even with damaged hands and with it, the excruciating pain, Stephen tightened his hold on the glass so hard to the point of it almost shattered. Eventually setting the cup down on the counter with a thud.

Then, a loud coughing from Rhodes. And luckily, Loki had enough sense to turn quickly towards their direction.

Stephen had been ready for some snide comment, some taunt from the Asgardian sorcerer. His hands balled into fists as he mentally ran through all the ways he can break a bone or two.

But a second, then two… and Loki simply called out to Thor at the opposite side of the room. Throwing out a half-hearted jab as he calmly stepped away from Tony and made his way towards his brother instead. Leaving Tony to look around in confusion. Until his sights landed on Stephen
and exchanged a glance with Rhodey. Stephen had refused to speak of it later that night when Tony tried to probe him of the matter. And eventually, the genius relented.

What was Loki playing at? The god went out of his way to antagonize the rogues left and right, on a daily basis, and yet never gave Stephen any opportunity to engage in a verbal battle let alone anything physical.

Or… was there more to this?

Was this some clever ploy as well? If he, Stephen, hit first without justification, it will make the doctor appear as the instigator… antagonistic. Perhaps Loki was hoping to seek Tony’s sympathy. Try to paint himself as a victim.

But for a brief moment, half a second that was barely noticeable, the god seemed… startled. Had that been a look of concern? As if suggesting he had not touched Tony so friendlily on purpose to provoke something.

Or… did he miss something obvious?

If truth be told, Stephen couldn’t get a definite read on Loki. As Doctor Banner often said bypassing, “god’s brain is a bag of cats”.

He mulled over all the events in his head several times, trying to sort out the riddle that was Loki of Asgard.

Even now… as he watched the situation at hand…

As much as Stephen hated to admit it, Fury had been right about one thing… they needed to leave their emotions at the door during missions. He certainly had. Making sure his personal distaste did not unintentionally get in between working with the rogues or Loki. But apparently the same could not be said for the rest of them it seemed.

It became almost of an all hands on deck situation when they received new intel that may lead to the group who were trying to recreate Tony’s time travel machine. But fully knowing it was not wise to put anyone obvious in charge, Fury called in T’Challa. With the Black Panther leading the team, things ran relatively smoothly in the beginning. Although, Stephen definitely saw the
exchanges of glare between Loki with most of the rogues, the snide comments, the hesitation before assisting.

Then the Captain just had to say, “Loki, go inside and deactivate-“

“Do not tell me what to do. You are not in charge and I do not take orders from you,” came the cold reply.

Stephen grimaced, running a gloved hand over his face trying to drown out the string of arguments that quickly followed. Tony was already rushing in to try and defuse the situation.

“Why don’t you actually think before you act or say something!”

“Oh, I do very much think before I act. So when I beat the shit out of you, as you Midgardians say, rest assured, I’ve thought through it, and am confident in my decision.”

Stephen let out a deep sigh. He was so goddamn tired. It had been a long day… a long week emotionally. He really had to wonder who he wanted more dead at that moment… Steve Rogers or Loki.

“ENOUGH!”

Most of them flinched, silence soon falling over them as all eyes turned to the Sorcerer Supreme. Some of the rogues seemed a little unnerved, quite possibly due to the incident with the dragons being too recent… But the satisfaction of it was short-lived considering his foul mood.

Stephen shot Loki a cold glare. “Just fucking go deactivate the sensors.”

And more silence.

Both Tony and Thor turned to the two sorcerers wide-eyed. They both appeared as if readying to jump in to restrain each party. Stephen was harshly reminded of what Harley had said a couple of days back about a certain bet.
He couldn’t really read Loki at that moment. His eyes were staring right back at him, stance straight, expression completely blank. However, Stephen was sure, this time… this will end with one of them bloodied on the floor.

But… no.

Loki simply turned away from the group, soon disappearing. There were seconds where they all wondered if the god simply left them… But then…

“The sensors are deactivated,” Natasha said looking up from a device.

No one spoke, most silently exchanging glances with each other before staring back at Stephen.

And Stephen… stood still. Eyes fixed on where Loki disappeared, wheels turning in his head…

What. The. Fuck.

Chapter End Notes

*Thor ruining Tony's joke thing was inspired by this tumblr post I found really funny last week

& Sorry for the long wait - It's honestly been pretty hard to write? Honestly, I almost deleted the whole fic twice in the recent week (various reasons 🙃) ahaha;;; ... Which thinking back now, would have been a shame because there are certain future scenes to this fic that I REALLY wanted to write and started on... I mean I already wrote their wedding vows (what)... But, luckily... all the BTS things came out this week from disney+ ...AND THEN, one of my favorite IronStrange artists did this art inspired by the prequel of this fic (shown below)... and I just ♡ ok let's try this again- **By the way, you definitely should check them out (@todo269) because they have SUCH great IronStrange content. All their art is always so intriguing and I'm always fascinated by the storylined ones**
“Am I available, Doc?”
“No.”

Inspired by the fic "definitely-not-boyfriend-not-really-friends-one-night-stand" by w_space
I love this series so much 😍 [link to Twitter post]

— T.D (@todo269) November 14, 2019
“You seem well. Did not expect you to be back on your feet so quickly-“

In an instant, hot white flash tore through the air, hitting and completely demolishing the opposite wall.

Tony spun around fast to where he had just aimed almost blindly, eyes wide and peering around, on guard and repulsor glove raised. He tried to summon the rest of the armor but something was distinctly wrong. God he really needed to get the nanotech project going.

“FRIDAY?” He called out under his breath.

Silence.

Dread started to sink in, the sudden coldness washing over him, his heartbeat at his ears. He felt bare. Suddenly felt too exposed. For the first time, even being in his lab did not help soothe his anxiety.

For he knew that voice. He definitely recognized that voice. The voice of a dead man.

“Really Stark, if you wanted-“

But the god did not have a chance to finish that sentence as Tony swung his arm around with as much strength he could muster. Loki barely had enough time to jump back, creating a distance once more.

“Now hold on a minute, mortal-“ with an almost condescending laugh he raised both hands in front of him. “You are in no condition to go against me. Especially without that armor of yours-“
But Tony aimed another blast, although it missed yet again as the Asgardian threw his body weight to the ground. “SHUT UP!”

Loki let out a laugh, a smirk spreading wide, “Feisty little thing, aren’t you?”

Just as Loki stood once more, Tony rushed forward, aiming a punch with his armored hands. Blocked, but just barely. Then a kick, another punch. Blocked, blocked, blocked.

His mind was already shouting at him that this was suicide. The bit of self-preservation left in him telling him he should be running not fighting. What was he thinking? Did he really think he could take on an Asgardian without the Iron Man suit in hand-to-hand combat? Especially less than 48 hours of removing his last cast? The difference in their strength was already very clear in the way Loki seemed to be using little to no effort in blocking any of his blows.

But after several more minutes, however, the god seemed to be getting a bit irked. “Stark! Cease this nonsense! If I wanted you dead you would already be but a corpse on the floor!”

“I DON’T CARE!” A blast that yet again missed.

But that was the thing, wasn’t it. He really didn’t care. Tony was beyond angry. He had been since the Accords, fight amongst the Avengers, Rhodey’s injury... The truth of parents’ death... Nat’s departure... Since Steve left him.

What did he have to lose at this point?

This was perfect. Loki was the perfect target practice to take out his anger. He didn’t care why the god was here. How he was even alive...

Then there was a sudden shot of sheer pain that radiated from his abdomen. The wound still not fully healed from Siberia. Tony gasped for breath, losing balance quickly. And the Asgardian, seizing the chance, grabbed his arm in a stronghold, flipping him to the ground easily in a harsh thud.

Tony tried to twist out but Loki was already saddling him, pinning him there as he held both of Tony’s wrists in a tight grip, a knee pressing down on the chest.
“Listen to me, you stubborn mortal! I did not come here for a fight!”

He was at least pleased to see that Loki was fully agitated now, no longer wearing that annoying smirk.

And at the corner of his eyes, he saw…

Tony swallowed, trying to level out his breathing. Although, after a momentary glare, he let his body relax just a bit. As if sensing the other had given up, Loki let up as well.

“…Just fucking kill me already.”

Loki raised an eyebrow, letting out a huff of exasperation. “Why would I kill you now when I recently saved your life. A bit counterproductive don’t you think?”

Tony frowned, debating if he had heard correctly.

But just a the Asgardian opened his mouth once more, there was a loud CLUNK as the fire extinguisher cannon met skull with full force.

Tony grimaced slightly as the god’s body fell beside him unceremoniously.

Loki didn’t even see it coming.

The billionaire let out a sigh of relief, letting his body truly relax for a second before hurrying to his feet. He turned towards the Dum-E who was leaning over him, beeping wildly while still holding the thick metal cannon that was now heavily dented.

Tony patted the robot with a short laugh as he surveyed the god’s lifeless form. Simply knocked out cold he imagines.
“…Atta boy. That’ll teach him not to come fight us at our turf, huh?”

*Dum-E simply hummed happily while shifting its weight up and down, as if in nodding.*

“I swear, Stark, by the Norns I will murder him-“

“If you really wanted him dead, I would already have a corpse to clean.”

Loki let out a disgruntled huff although still following closely to the other, matching his pace. “If you do not do something about this-“

Tony opened a door to his right, peering into the library before closing it again. “You gave that up, remember?” he said nonchalantly as he continued walking down the hall, peering left and right as he went.

The sorcerer continued speaking fast, making wild gestures as he did so. “He talks on and on about mindlessly dull things! I do not care about the Midgardian magic box that gives him these… tarts-… or how symbols of written language can take on the appearance of a face. Or about how he’s a better leader than that Star-Lord! And I most certainly do not care to hear his newfound infatuation with Banner!”

Tony stepped into the elevator. The god soon striding in after him.

“Have you ever had the displeasure of witnessing my brother trying to court another?

“FRI, my floor.” The billionaire called out before glancing at the Asgardian who stood beside him.

“It’s… bewildering how incredibly dense he can be. It’s like watching mating rituals of apes…“ Loki grimaced, shuttering dramatically.

Tony had to admit it was oddly entertaining how distressed Loki sounded. “I’m guessing you already tried telling Thor you don’t want to be bothered?”
“Of course I have! Multiple times. I told him, I shouted, I tried to reason— …The stupid oaf does not
know how to function without an audience.” Loki let out a long sigh, pinching the bridge of his
nose with a grimace. “And I forgot that he snores… It was very difficult trying to restrain myself
from smothering him with a pillow this morning. Took a tremendous amount of self-control I
assure you—”

There was a short pause as Tony side-eyed him.

“…I’m going to kill him.”

“No, you’re not.”

“Oh yes, I most certainly will—“

“You said you weren’t going to do that anymore.”

“But then I was harshly reminded how frustratingly aggravating Thor can be!”

“You guys have the whole floor! No one else has the whole floor except for me and I have a whole
family of four. You sure you can’t just lock yourself into one of the other rooms? Stay on the
opposite sides of the level?”

Loki, took a half-step away to face directly at the other. “Stark, how many times must I say this?
I’m a prince. I’m used to having the whole palace wing to myself!”

Tony halfheartedly rolled his eyes, arms crossed as he gave the other a look.

But seeming to have switched tactics, the god was now giving him a pleading stare. “…He snores
VERY loudly!”

Tony shook his head, laughing under his breath. “Well… okay, why don’t you take any of the
guest rooms—“
The elevator opened and they stepped out. The brunette quickly surveyed the living room but seeing no one started down his hall, taking the time to knock and open each door, peering in.

Loki once again followed him closely. “Why would I do that? I’ll only have to move again once you finish my floor.”

Tony stopped. Making a face before turning around. “So I’m making you a whole floor now?” he said, although amusement was definitely underlining his tone now.

The god smiled brightly. All too innocent for Tony to truly believe it was anything but a sham. It was a game, with the end results already defined that they both knew. But that still did not mean the billionaire would make this easy on the other. A raised eyebrow and another couple seconds of the flat stare, Tony turned once more continuing quickly down the hall.

“Very well…” Loki darted after him. “…Another reason then! Do it for your precious sorcerer! Strange appeared rather displeased with the idea I’m here on your floor so often. Even you have mentioned the other day I can no longer take refuge here-“

Tony ruffled his hair with a soft sigh. “I didn’t say you couldn’t be here at all… just… you know-”

But the god continued swiftly. “Surely you want your betrothed to be happy. …And I urge you before you say anything else… consider the tremendous guilt you felt when you asked me to avoid coming here to this floor when you know how Thor can upset me so.”

The billionaire closed yet another empty room, frowning at the taller man with a look that suggested a clear really? Are we really going to go there?

“And! When you told me off about being too friendly… physically-“

Tony stared back at the Asgardian with an almost insulted look, mouth a gasp, eyes wide. So the other was pulling out all the stops today.

It was true, Tony had certainly felt a lot of guilt over the whole ordeal.
He had in the past given Loki a lot of leeway in terms of… well just about anything. After the rogues’ departure and before Stephen’s return Tony didn’t have anyone else to really prioritize or consider much.

And they were alike in that regard. Matched well. They both loved testing the confines of the social norm. Generally did not draw clear boundaries in friendships, used flirting on a regular basis almost as means of communication to those they favored… or simply when it was necessary. They constantly teased, bantered, physically affectionate with few they liked. Perhaps, partly because they both craved some time of intimacy, warmth… something that will elevate, even for a second, some of the loneliness they have collected within themselves over the years.

If he was being completely honest, Tony was also half-convinced, although he knew the god would never admit to it, Loki was near touch starved.

So, since beginning this unlikely friendship with the Asgardian, Tony never set up any sort of real restrictions. Allowing Loki to do whatever he pleased for the most part. He knew he soon treated the god almost with the same level of affection as he did with Pepper or Rhodey. Although it may have been a bit amplified due to the fact, unlike Pepper and Rhodey, Loki returned the exchange with enthusiasm…causing escalations.

But that all changed once Stephen was back into the picture. Of course, Tony knew it was coming. Knew the next time Loki returned, if it ever happened, he himself would no longer be single, unattached, can be completely uncaring to how their interaction could be perceived… Because now, there was Stephen.

And logics be damned. Even if the doctor were accepting wholeheartedly to the idea of him being so close to Pepper and Rhodey, Tony had an unexplainable feeling the same would not be said for Loki. After giving it some time to see if it can potentially be an idea his fiancé can ease into… then quickly realizing how increasingly distraught Stephen appeared to get with each passing day… Tony soon called it quits and started to redraw, redefine… well, more like actually draw and define for the first time… the boundaries with Loki.

Tony had tried to explain. And the Asgardian took it better than he had expected. Both of them never mentioned it. Understood and pretended it was not a big deal… something that was inevitable… But well, they knew it for what this was. Disregarding the pleasantries, stripping it down to its bone, that’s what it was, was it not? Tony was pushing Loki away, creating a distance for the first time.

And for that, although knowing it couldn’t be helped, Tony had felt significant guilt.
He was certain Loki knew. The proof in the situation now.

Knowing he struck gold, Loki went on, his voice turning more theatrical with each passing sentence. “I know for a fact you are very physically affectionate with both Lady Potts and Colonel Rhodes... And even Banner. But I have been singled out as usual, unfairly judged. And what have I done really? I have been nothing but offer you my sincere friendship. Been on my best behavior around your sorcerer. …And you’ve all but abandoned me, Anthony-“

Tony let out an undignified noise of offense. “No, I didn’t-”

“After all your declaration of how you’ll be by my side-“

“I still am!”

“After all we have been through together…”

“Oh for fuck’s sake! Stop it, you drama queen!“

There was a pause as they stayed eyes locked. Loki stood still, giving Tony an impassive gaze. Tony, arms crossed and eyebrow raised.

Then, after another minute…

“As you are very aware... I do not have many friendship…” Loki said almost wistfully. It was oddly fascinating and quite frightening how pitiful the god truly appeared just now. “If any, in fact. And yet, you deprived me of yours-“

The billionaire gave the other a very stunned look. Then, after collecting himself,“…Valkyrie might resent that.”

“No, she won’t.”
He let out a short sigh, relenting. “No… she won’t.”

Loki smirked, “She’s not overly sentimental.”

Tony rolled his eyes.

“But you are,” the god was almost gleeful.

The brunette let out a huff. “Wowww, you are not pulling back your punches today.”

At that, his expression did a 180, turning back one of stern displeasure. “I cannot share living
quarters with my brother any longer. I will kill him. Or I will kill myself. It’s a matter of life and
death, Stark!”

Tony let out a huff of laughter but eventually let out a sigh. “And what do I get for this?”

Loki smiled pleasantly, “My eternal gratitude and adoration.”

The engineer frowned, feigning agitation. “Hey! I thought I already had that.” But already started
back down the hall from the direction they came from, clearly still looking for something.

“…Stark, what are you even searching for?” The Asgardian was still hot at his tail but now
appearing more curious.

Back at the elevator, Tony let out a heavy sigh, peering around without really actually seeing
anything. “Stephen. …I-… He wasn’t here when I woke up and he’s rarely up before me.”

“Why did you not ask the building keeper? FRIDAY?”

Tony gave him a look, “Well… I didn’t think at first it was going to be this hard. …Baby girl, is
Stephen in the building anywhere?”
“I’m afraid not, boss.”

There was a short pause in which the billionaire distinctly feels Loki side-eyeing him wordlessly beside him. He cleared his throat, trying not to pace. “When was the last time he was here?”

“How long do you intend to ignore me?”

“I have nothing to say to you,” Tony spat out coldly, continuing to work on his monitor. He didn’t know what else to do at the moment and working always helped him think.
Loki watched him curiously. The calculating sharp gaze on him in the same manner it has been for the last three hours. “Oh? Then why not turn me in? Surely you cannot keep me here forever. Too much of a risk... given you are completely alone.”

He stilled his movement, just for a split second. Of course, the bastard knew. Loki must have somehow known he was alone in the compound. The rest of his team scattered... were they even a team anymore?

And the Asgardian was right. He should have alerted SHIELD by now. ...But after seeing his... former... teammates imprisoned at the raft. Knowing the fate that awaited those with powers turned over... Tony wasn’t so sure anyone deserved that. Given his own history with imprisonment, it was a hard pill to swallow.

Then there was an issue that, no matter what, Loki was still Thor’s brother. Perhaps he could find a way to reach the god of thunder somehow. Having Loki locked up in Asgard for some reason seemed a lot more compassionate option.

“Not even a single question? I had expected more of you. You used to be such a curious little thing.”

He tried not to think. Tried hard not to let his mind wander to millions of questions floating in his head.

“What’s the point,” he retorted, still defiantly not turning his gaze towards the god. “You have no reason to tell the truth.”

“Then give me a reason.”

There was a short pause in which Tony took a glance towards the god’s direction.


Tony threw down his digital pen. “Why are you doing this? Any of this?”
“Why haven’t you turned me in yet?”

They stared at one another, eyes locked.

Curiosity? Boredom perhaps?

What did he have to lose anyway? “Okay fine. Why are you here?”

“I was bored,” came the simple response. But as Tony raised an eyebrow at him Loki went on with a halfhearted eye roll. “Being the king, as it turns out, can be a quite dull job. Especially when you cannot be... yourself.”

They talk of how Loki faked his death. How Odin was weakened and was in desperate need of Odinsleep so it was not too hard displacing him. Afterward, he successfully posed as Odin and ended up at the seat of the throne. Considering how Thor wanted the freedom to play hero and left soon after the incident with the Dark Elves, it was not too hard of a pretense to spin for the rest of the kingdom. How he sent Sif to a mission to Earth, the last one who just may have figured out who he really was.

And it was fun for a good long while. This was what he wanted. Finally, he took the crown without remorse. And yet, after about a year or so, it had lost its novelty.

Tony was impressed. Impressed was quite literally not the appropriate emotion he should be feeling, he knew... but he was also quite done lately of the world telling him what was appropriate.

Then it was Loki’s turn to question. Tony had expected questions of importance, something of substance. But instead...

“Tell me about this one,” the Asgardian said nodding towards Dum-E who was still squeaking about nearby, picking up random tools before dropping them. “Did you create it?”

Tony had expected inquiries perhaps about SHIELD, Avengers, some top-secret matters that may give away a bit more into what Loki had planned. But no. The god continued to ask questions that were of little to no importance. At least, no importance that Tony could see that would relate to Loki. But he supposed, the Asgardian already mentioned how he had no desire to take over Earth anymore. Why would he want Earth when he already has Asgard at the palm of his hands?
It started with his robots, unimportant details about his childhood, his relationship with his parents, what it was like being the youngest to ever step into the campus of the prestigious MIT… What it was like being Iron Man… What he thought of Thor.

What was even odder was Loki didn’t seem to be prying too hard when Tony chose to glaze over details. He let things go when Tony gave the surface-level answers. Not at all bothered when couple times Tony simply shot back with a stern, “next question.” when he didn’t feel like answering a particular one.

Once or twice the mentions of Avengers came up. Being careful still, Tony chose to not answer. Even now, after all that happened, not wanting them in potential dangers. But again, Loki didn’t seem to mind, opting for questions pertaining to his preference on “Midgardian food”.

It was weird. Being heard.

Actually being heard. As if what he had to say was important. As if his opinion mattered.

There was a pattern Tony recognized after the first hour of this chat. Loki seemed to be orienting his inquiries around what Tony thought of a situation or topic, rather than what actually happened, the facts.

When was the last time it felt like this? Someone acting as if they were truly trying to understand him? As if what he was saying mattered.

And how selfish was he... giving away the secrets… risking intel? Even if Tony was being cautious, even if he still could not see how any of the information he was giving on his end really mattered, even if technically what Loki was giving him was much more substance of value… This was Loki and there was no certainty. All for just a bit of attention. Attention from an enemy no less. How pathetic was he?

“You said you saved me… What did you mean?”

Tony had his chair fully turned to Loki’s direction now. Their eyes fixed on each other.
“Hurts, doesn’t it? Betrayal. I suppose… at the very least your captain had the decency to stare at you in the eyes while doing so.”

He couldn’t speak for a moment. The words dying at his throat. His mind playing in flashes of Siberia. Steve’s clear blue gaze, the shield coming down…

“You were there.”

“I was.”

“Why?”

“For the record, that’s two questions you’ll be owing me later-“

“Just answer.”

The smirk faded from the god’s lips, a change of emotion Tony couldn’t quite figure out. “Like I said… I was bored. At first, I had just been keeping an eye on your little band of heroes from time to time out of curiosity. Then it turned into a sort of entertainment. I watched the fallout… as you turned on one another…”

Tony held his breath as he continued to listen.

“I did not expect… you to be left in the cold at the end.”

“…You-… They…they said I just… appeared at the hospital.” He recalled what Christine had told him when he awoke. He always just… assumed it was Steve.

And god, that… that hurt. So they just left him there… Would he have survived being left in the freezing temperature, no treatment for his injuries for god knows how long?

Tony closed his eyes, running a hand over his face, trying to control the shaking. After a moment he stood suddenly, the chair he had been sitting on getting knocked over in the process. Loki
doesn’t even flinch. Just simply watched him with those piercing emerald eyes.

Then there was a clattering as Loki seemed to have conjured up a device, tossing it somewhere off to the side. “The recordings from one of those Midgardian devices. Baron Zemo, was it? He seemed to have been recording the whole event. Possibly to keep as souvenir perhaps… But I’m sure he does not have any need for it anymore… It may be of use to you. The footage is quite condemning for your Captain and that companion of his.”

“…Why?” Tony started slowly, eyes now glued on the black box. “Why didn’t you leave me there?”

“I confess… I considered it. It was not my business after all.”

“And you couldn’t just… what? Heal me or something with magic? Just enough and go on your way? Give me a fighting chance in the cold and watch in amusement as I struggled to survive?”

A tight smile appeared on Loki’s lips that didn’t quite reach his eyes. “You appeared beyond what I could fix with my own magic. It was also beyond what I believed could be helped with Midgardian capabilities. But I had expected if I brought you to the infirmaries, the medics would be able to at least keep you alive till I returned. …I needed to retrieve something from Asgard that would have been of help.”

“And? …So is that why I’m alive?”

“Ah well… I may have done my part but by the time I returned you appeared well enough. Surprising, quite frankly. I did not even expect you to be on your feet this soon without sorcery of some kind. But well… I was wrong. You’re quite resilient.” A small smirk played on his lips as his sights land on Tony once more. “I confess, I’m glad you survived. You are by far the most entertaining of the Avengers.”

His head was spinning. He wasn’t even sure how he felt about this whole thing. Too many overlapping of emotions he couldn’t place.

“So what? I owe you now?” he said, admittedly, quite bitterly.

There was a pause in which the god just simply seemed to be observing him, assessing him. Tony
felt a bit uncomfortable under the gaze.

Then, after another minute or so, Loki continued. “There is a saying, Stark, if you save a life, you are responsible for that life.”

Tony still wore a frown, seeming unconvinced.

But after a long silence, after great amounts of debate in his own mind, he typed the key code to the monitor, deactivating the entrapment.

Loki raised an eyebrow at him although slowly standing to his feet.

“You’re letting me go?”

Tony picked up a tool, fidgeting with it in his hand. “...Well, I don’t... even know where Thor is or how to get ahold of him. And leaving Asgard without a ruler for long seems irresponsible.” Then adds as an afterthought, “But you’re still my prisoner. Just... come back.”

Loki let out a short laugh, stepping out from the barrier. There was a moment in which Tony took a half step back subtly, unconsciously, before he could stop himself. And Loki stops, watching him.

“Do you really expect me to return?”

“I don’t know.” His logic tells him no. But something, for some reason... tells him yes.

The god hummed, before stepping a bit away. “If you do run into Thor, I ask that you do not speak of this.”

Tony let out a scoff, “Because I owe you?”

But Loki turned, fixing him with a stare. “I repeat... I’m asking you, not telling you.”
The billionaire stood still, not sure what to say to that. When was the last time someone actually asked him to do something rather than telling him?

“If it makes you feel better,” the Asgardian went on with a grin. “Next time, how about that drink? …That you do owe me.”

And with that, he was gone.

Bored.

That’s what the god continuously repeated as his motivation for many things. And it was believable enough. Loki was curious by nature, needed constant mental stimulation.

But something told Tony that wasn’t it.

Because he himself did that as well. Often saying he was bored. …when what he truly meant was that he was lonely.

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Tony took a heavy sigh as he leaned further back on the sofa, a hand pressing down on his closed eyes in a grimace. Loki sat on the seat to his left, still staring at the billionaire, fidgeting with a fancy décor paperweight Tony already gave up in telling him not to throw around so carelessly.

“So you’re not going to go after him?”

Tony shot him a glare. “The thing about having a sorcerer for a fiancé is I have no fucking idea where he can be. He might not even be on this planet, this dimension! Even you couldn’t locate him all those years ago! If he doesn’t want to be found, it’s impossible to find him.”

Loki simply shrugged, as if not at all offended by the outburst.

The engineer took another deep breath, “…I’m trying.”
“I didn’t say you were not.”

“I’m fucking trying. To make him happy. To make this work-”

“You are.”

There was silence then…

 “…The only thing left I can do is-“

“To get rid of me,” Loki answers for him, too easily. His voice was even, calm. “Anthony… it is alright…”

Tony suddenly sat up straight, sights fixed on the god. “It’s not okay! … And what if I don’t want to. What if… this ends up like… me and Steve. I just keep giving things up, other relationships in my life, compromising till I have nothing left to give and he still leaves… and I’m going to be left with no one and-“

The god wore a tight smile. “You will not be alone. Not this time. You have your children, Lady Potts, Rhodes… my brother, Banner…” Then he paused, gaze still focused on the other. “And he is not the Captain. Even I can tell he’s far the opposite of Rogers.”

“It’s…” unreasonable. Tony wants to say. But he just couldn’t bring himself to say it. Because… No, he does get it. He really does for the most part. He even expected Stephen to lash out a bit at first in regards to Loki but what he did not expect was for his fiancé to be this upset over it. It was starting to become a bit illogical how exceptionally upset Stephen seemed in regards to Loki’s presence. “I… I just don’t get it.”

Loki cleared his throat, finally setting down the sphere paperweight back onto the coffee table. “…I do not think he’s capable of leaving you.”

Tony let out a scoff but the god paid it no heed.
“I’ve… been giving this some thought,” the Asgardian went on. “…At first, he just appeared to be an obsessive type. And he is quite obsessed with you. Reasonable, I had assumed originally, given what you told me of his personality, you two’s history, about his visits to different lives. It’s logical to assume he may have suffered through losing you more than once… And after your stance against Thanos… He’s afraid. And fear tends to make a man obsessive.”

“Yeah I get that,” Tony retorted with a grimace. “But it’s on extreme levels with you. And yes, as much as I hate to say it, yeah you are being singled out. I first thought it was because of the similarities or something but- …Look, Stephen is not… he’s very logical. Always have been. And this is not making sense-“

“What if he knew I was here?”

Tony's eyes snapped back onto the god. “What?”

“What if… he knew I was here. The first time. Before Thanos.”

The gears were turning. Tony tried to grasp for the words.

Loki sat up a little straighter, leaning in. “I… Stark, the wounds you suffered at Siberia… I was sure it was fatal. You could not have survived with only Midgardian means. But by the time I returned, you were well. Not fully healed but certainly fairing much better than what was humanly possible. I had thought perhaps you had one more trick up your sleeve but what if… It was not only I who saved your life.”

Tony tried to think. He hadn’t yet heard the full story from Stephen of their time apart. He didn’t really want to pressure him for the full story after their spectacular fight that one night in the lab. Always assumed he’ll hear the rest when Stephen was ready… And Stephen had been sharing bits and pieces here and there.

The last he heard… Stephen had told of how he got back to New York. How he reconnected with Christine. Going to the Metro General Charity Gala and seeing him with Steve. How he chose to stay away although running into them from time to time, observing from a distance.

That was… all before the Accords fiasco.
“Shit,” Tony muttered as he buried his face in his hands.

It was making sense now. Christine… Christine was at the Metro General the day Loki dropped him off there. Christine who would have most certainly alerted Stephen if she believed Tony was going to die. She had said he survived through experimental procedures but never spoke of exactly how.

It also… would explain why Stephen’s anger at Steve always seemed to be on extreme levels. Personal. Not simply because of his feeling for Tony but he must have… seen his state after Siberia. Went through the trauma of being at his near deathbed. After all, there was a difference between hearing of an event and experiencing it.

“Do you remember me saying how I felt magic around you that was not mine from time to time? We had worried it was the witch but…”

Tony sighed, staring back at the god once more. “It was him.”

Loki licked his lips, eyes darting around before focusing back on the other. “I… you nearly died. He must have kept a close eye on you after that. His obsession began far before the arrival of the Mad Titan. …And if he was watching then… he would have known I was here.”

Tony groaned. Damn, why didn’t he put this together sooner?

“…There were also words after Siberia of a new Sorcerer Supreme.”

“Why did you become the Sorcerer Supreme? …Do you know?”

Tony nearly jumped from his seat. “Oh for fuck’s sake. Are you telling me Steve was somehow on the right track of thought before me?!”

But the god let out an offended huff. “Me! Not the Captain. Me! …Of course, Rogers is not intelligent enough to put all the pieces together! I had nudged them of the riddle just to keep them occupied. …You hear things when you roam around the universe after major events such as the Great War. There were many talks of the Avengers on Midgard that stopped the Mad Titan. I was told by several accounts Strange had not been keen on becoming the next Sorcerer Supreme originally but something changed his mind quite suddenly. When I had dated it back, ironically, it
appeared it was soon after your debacle with the Captain, the events in Siberia. Can hardly be of a coincidence now that I know all parties involved. …And really, even if the rogues, SHIELD figured this out, hardly condemning information. All it would do possibly is set them on the edge to fear him more…”

Tony frowned, “Are you… telling me… he-“

“That is my guess,” Loki said simply. “He became the Sorcerer Supreme after seeing you one too many times taken from him.”

He slumped back onto the chair, staring at the ceiling. Why was this actually making sense? Of course, if Stephen had been in New York already, he would have been present for the fallout of the Avengers. If Tony had been left at the Metro General after Siberia, of course, Christine would have run to Stephen. And of course… if he saw the exact state he was in after that battle… He could only imagine his fiancé’s reaction to it.

And of course… if Stephen was present after Siberia… if he kept a closer watch afterward for obvious reasons… then he would have known Loki was back on Earth, too frequently at the compound.

Tony ran a hand over his face again, trying hard to not give in to the headache that was starting to form. He can already, on top of his head, distinctly think of a handful of ways Stephen could easily misunderstand he and Loki from around that time.

He had to admit, however, despite the panic that was slowly forming, there was also warmth spreading in his chest. He hadn’t even realized… The fact that the reason Stephen took on the title was because of him. Tony always assumed it was Stephen’s usual ambitious nature that drove him to be at the top of the magic realm.

“…Which would also explain his distinct displeasure when we ran into each other-”

He blinked, fast, turning his attention back to the god, “What?”

The Asgardian gave him a sigh before glancing away. “I ran into him. Twice. I promised you back then that I’ll find you your estranged doctor. But after all my usual methods proved to be unsuccessful I went to see if I could steal the Eye of Agamotto. See the past or futu- … oh don’t give me that look!”
Tony was all but gawking at him, mouth open, eyes impossibly wide. “Uh- I’m sorry,” he said very sarcastically, “How did you expect me to react?! How many fucking infinity stones have you stolen so far?!”

Loki let out a disgruntled ugh, rolling his eyes. “And this is why I did not tell you sooner.” But before Tony could voice further complaints, the god continued his story. “Again, there had been rumors of the new Sorcerer Supreme but nothing proven. I had thought at the time it would be rather easy to steal the relic from second rate Midgardian sorcerers… I had full intention of putting it back when I was done with it!”

But the billionaire was already giving him a look that spelled out did you really?

“Well, I failed regardless. Because of your boy toy, no doubt. I did not see his face, the one who stopped me. He cast powerful enough distortion spell that I could not break through. At the time I thought, well at least it confirmed one thing. There truly was a new Sorcerer Supreme.”

Tony let out a sigh. “And the second time?”

“AAfter Thor found out that I was not… Odin,” Loki was all but muttering now. “We came to Earth to search for our father. That time, I did see his face. Then it all made sense. The new Sorcerer Supreme was Anthony’s Stephen Strange.” He let out a snort of laughter before going on. “…Of course, I would not have been able to find him through magic… but before I could say anything… well…” His voice trailed off.

Tony cleared his throat when the pause became longer by the second. “…Do I want to know?”

Loki shot him a glare.

But before Tony, now thoroughly curious can press on the topic the door of the elevator opened. Both adults turned to see Peter and Harley coming into view.

“We’re back,” Peter called out happily.

“Both of you, wash up. I’ll get dinner ready.” Tony stood to his feet, making his way to the
kitchen.

Loki watched as the other go for another moment before setting his sights on the two boys.

“Either of you know where your father is?” he said evenly as he also stood, taking couple steps forward.

Both of them gave him a confused look, both staring at the direction where Tony had gone.

The god rolled his eyes, his arms crossing. “Your other father. Where’s the sorcerer?”

“Donno…uh-,” Peter side-eyed Harley but the elder teen kept his gaze fixed on the Asgardian, a frown slowly forming.

Loki let out a sigh. “Tony is looking for him. Or he will I’m sure shortly. Do either of you have a brilliant idea in locating him?”

A second, then two, then Harley let out a sigh ruffling his hair into a mess. “Yeah. I’ll… ask around.”

Loki does come back.

He appeared in Tony’s lab twice a week. Every Tuesday and Friday exactly at 9 pm.

Tony had initially kept track of each return, kept a meticulous note of what happened during each visit, every of Loki’s movement, what was talked about. As if there may have been clues hidden between the lines that told of some great secret.

But after the second week, he slowly stopped caring.
If Steve or Natasha had been there still… or even Clint… they would likely tell him he was being insane, reckless, irresponsible. But well, they were not here anymore were they?

Tony let Loki do most of the talking during their… sessions. The god certainly had interesting things to say, Tony had to admit. And he’s always been curious about Asgardian culture but Thor never had been that great at explaining… well, the finer topics Tony had been personally interested in. Loki, on the other hand, was pleasantly the opposite.

So he gladly listened to the other ramble on about Asgardian politics, some recent issues back on his homeland, a court member or two that had pissed him off.

And Tony had always been a fast learner. It also helped he had a knack for diplomacy, the strategical mind game, the complicated and delicate interweaving… human side… of politics. It was his wheelhouse. He could keep up with Loki’s complex assessment of each issue.

Several times, he voiced an option about a topic the god went on about. Once or twice even disagreeing with the other.

Tony half-expected Loki to storm off in those moments. Given all he knew of Loki from Thor’s stories. But each time, the other stayed. Appeared even pleased. Challenging him with his own reasoning and yet also clearly absorbing Tony’s viewpoint on the matter.

After the third week, an odd thought occurred to him.

For over a year Loki had put on an elaborate charade to keep the throne. Yes, it had gotten him the seat of the highest power of a very powerful realm. But what must have it been like? Pretending to be someone else for so long? Many months of keeping to himself, not being himself… not being understood or even being heard as himself.

Tony, never being one to be able to bite his tongue for long, asked of it one night. And after a long silence, Loki had given him a very simple response. “The gold of the throne appears lackluster now.”

Then there were also moments like these.

“Uh… what’s this?” Tony stared at the seemingly normal rock, a piece of steel, and a plank of
wood that suddenly appeared on his work desk.

Like clockwork, it was 9 o’clock and Loki was already making his way to the couch, throwing himself onto it as if this was his own room.

“It is the obvious, Stark. A rock, steel, wood. But from Asgard. It seems from your explanations, the matter on our realm is much denser than its equivalent counterpart on Midgard. Perhaps that’s why our weapons tend to be more durable. …For you to study should you want to.”

Tony blinked, his gaze fixed on the god not too far away. “…Thanks,” he called out.

Loki was not looking at him, however, intent on keeping his eyes on the ancient text he had brought with him. But Tony let out a soft laugh under his breath realizing those emerald eyes were not moving, not darting across the page, not actually reading.

Another thought occurred to him… Loki was not used to being thanked.

Or willingly given attention. Or being complimented. Or being told he was right.

It was oddly endearing. And after a while, Tony took many opportunities to be affectionate. It was not hard on his end he found… and weirdly satisfying seeing how awkwarded out the otherwise proud god became at simple kind words.

And Tony assumed Loki was also enjoying the attention in some ways. If the growing collection of Asgardian materials in his lab was of any indication.

Sometimes, he wonders if this was like a cat bringing back gifts to its owner. But… well… the things Loki brought were certainly far more useful, far more valuable than a dead mouse.

He definitely tried hard not to think about how he compared Loki, the murderous god who threw him out a window not many years back, to a stray cat.
“You could at least shower.”

Stephen let out a dramatic sigh, not moving from the couch he currently was laying on. He knew the mess he must appear to be at that moment. Unshaven, hair in a mess, huddled on the couch with the cloak wrapped tightly around him in a bundle. But he hardly cared. It was just Wong. Wong had seen him in a worse state.

The other continued to give him a flat stare, hand on his hips as he leered over at the Sorcerer Supreme. “You should be ashamed of the state you’re in. If any of the novices saw you like this-“

“And that is why I’m here and not at Kamar-Taj.”

Wong rolled his eyes. “Seriously? All it took was Thor’s younger brother to rattle you to this extent?”

“I’m fine!” the doctor snapped. “I… simply needed to get away. Clear my head. I’ll return later tonight.”

“Moping is more like it,” he muttered, pulling out a phone. "You used to hate being away from the compound when it could be helped. Didn't want Stark being alone with the rogues-"

Stephen let out a scoff. "Loki is there," he said quite bitterly, sarcastically. "He's a great guard dog. Very good deterrent for the rogues unnecessarily bothering Tony."

“Did you even tell Stark where you are?”

Silence. But that was as good of an answer as any.

There were sounds of electronic keys being pressed. That had Stephen raise his head, turning around slightly to see Wong typing away on a Stark phone. “When did you get a phone?” he asked with a frown.

But Wong didn’t even look up, “You have at most ten minutes.”
Stephen slowly pulled himself into a sitting position. “For what?”

“To clean yourself up. I’m sure your pride would not want to be seen in this state by Stark given the circumstances.” He put away the device back into his pocket. “Isn’t one of your worries right now being prettier than a god?”

The Sorcerer Supreme gave him a glare that all too clearly spelled out that he very much did not appreciate the last comment.

But the other, yet again, paid it no heed. “Rhodes was asking where you were at.”

“James? Why is he looking for me…?”

“No. Tony is looking for you.”

“But you just said-”

“Rhodes was asking where you are. Who was tasked to find you by Ms. Potts. Who was asked by Harley. Who was told by Loki. Who heard from Tony.”

“What?!” That definitely had Stephen’s full attention now, the frown settling in deeper. Then another thought occurred to him. “Wait why would James contact you?”

Wong was now gathering up couple of books from a nearby table. “We have a support group,” he replied casually.

“…Support group? For what?”

Wong flashed a smile that was all too sarcastic. “You and Stark’s idiocy.”

“Wha-“ He tried to speak, but words failed him. For another couple seconds, he simply stared at
the other sorcerer, mouth slightly open. Then after a while longer, shot up straight from the couch. “Oh for fuck’s sake! …I cannot believe you sold me out!”

“And I can’t believe you were stupid enough to steal my ice cream,” Wong retorted coolly as he started to walk away at a leisure pace. “I already deactivated the protection spell that prevents entering of the sanctum.”

“I-It was for Harley!”

But the bookkeeper can already hear the rustling of fabric, a sound of an opening portal, and more rushing noise from upstairs where the bathroom is located in.

He chuckled, shaking his head.

Then, there was a distinct sound of a familiar whoosh above the building. He barely had a chance to look up before the double doors at the opposite end were thrown open revealing the red and gold armor.

Tony stepped quickly in, the doors shutting close behind him. The nanoparticles slowly moving back into the housing unit.

“Upstairs,” Wong said simply as he regarded Tony’s questioning gaze. “Might want to give him a minute. We both know how vain he can be.” Around you. He wanted to say but decided not to at the last minute.

The billionaire flashed a smile, “I owe you.” He was already crossing the room in a hurry, making his way up the grand stairs. “That new TV? A lifetime supply of ice cream? Beyonce VIP ticket?”

“All of the above!” Wong called out.

Tony was already near the top of the stairs when he turned around, quickly flashing a thumbs up before sprinting away.
Wong turned around as he felt the shift of energy that was all too familiar. “I didn’t expect you back for another two days. You know you really cannot be slacking off on your duties now that you’re the new Sorcerer Supreme.”

Stephen stepped out from the portal, the sparks of gold flickering away behind him. “Something triggered the protection spell at the Avengers compound.”

Slowly, Wong sat down the book he was holding with a frown.

“Magic that is not my own.”

“The witch?”

“No,” Stephen made his way towards the window, leaning against it heavily. He turned his gaze to the outside, the bustling of the city, although without really fully seeing it. “And I made certain of it. Maximoff is definitely still in Wakanda with the rest of them…”

“There was nothing that seemed out of the ordinary with Stark recently,” Wong said, his arms crossing. “He just appeared on the news this morning. Does Stark know any other magic wielders?”

Stephen stayed silent for another moment, trying to think. It takes every amount of self-control to not go barging into the compound. But he knew. He knew he couldn’t be rash about this.

He let out a sigh, his teeth grinding for a split second. “It doesn’t feel like the magic here. ...It’s distinctly different.”

Tony finds Stephen in his bathroom, dressed in only a loose trouser, hair freshly washed and wet, leaning against the sink. The doctor was close to the mirror, the shaking hands trying to guide the razor as the cloak watched closely next to him. Tony imagines the cloak to be feeling the same as he does currently, nervous, worried. Stephen seemed as if he was rushing a bit…
“Ah,” Stephen hissed as he nicks himself.

Tony took a step forward automatically, grimacing.

That catches the sorcerer’s attention, those glacial gaze falling onto the other in an instant. There was a moment in which both of them are lost for words, silently trying to gauge each other as their eyes locked. What to say, who should even speak first.

Then, after a moment, the cloak shoves Stephen forward closer to Tony. The doctor turned around, giving the red fabric a glare. But all it did was shrug before flying away out of the room.

Tony let out a huff, smiling softly. “…Want help with that, babe?”

He wondered if Stephen will tell him no. The fear of it making his mouth suddenly dry. How unreasonably disappointed he may feel if the other rejects him in that moment.

Often, in any other case, the uncertainty, the fear of it, would be enough for Tony to not even try. But he had to. He always felt the need to when it came to Stephen. For some reason that he could not fully explain, Stephen was always worth the risk of getting hurt.

“I…” Then the sorcerer swallowed, hard. “…Yes. …Please.”

Tony let out the breath he was holding, stepping forward and taking the razor from Stephen’s trembling hand. He pulled himself up to sitting on the sink. Little elevation would help, given their difference in height.

The corner of the doctor’s lips twitched upward.

“Shut it,” Tony muttered softly, although there was hardly any bite to his words.

He soon wrapped his legs around Stephen’s hips, drawing him closer. Then, placed a firm hand on the other’s chin as he slowly, carefully dragged along the razor with the other hand in steady strokes. Stephen’s hands find themselves on either side of Tony, on the countertop, leaning his weight slightly.
Stephen’s eyes lingered on the other, although the billionaire was too fixated on the blade to meet the other’s gaze. From the close distance, he mentally traced every inch of Tony’s face features, a warm smile unconsciously forming as he did so.

Tony appeared uncharacteristically serious right then. All his attention singled into one act. Focused and careful. But Stephen supposed Tony always did worry too much for potentially hurting him. He knew that. Of course, he knew that.

A thought that… felt rather satirical at that moment.

“You know… I can… help… with other things too… if you just let me.”

That snapped Stephen back from his musing, eyes turning quickly onto the other. For a split second, Tony turned his gaze to meet his, before once again, focusing on the shaving.

The sorcerer simply stood still, silent, unsure what exactly to say.

“If… something bothers you,” Tony swallowed, then tried to smile. “If you need confirmation… or…if you need… reassurance or… something. I can… help. If you just let me.”

“I…” But the words die at his throat.

A silence fell for another minute or so. And Tony, done with his work, turned the knob of the sink, rinsed the razor in the running water. After another quick glance, Stephen took a step to the side, rinsing his face. Once done, he took the towel Tony offered him, patting his face dry.

“Were you there? When I was dying? After Siberia?”

Stephen froze, his movements coming to a sudden halt as he turned towards Tony once more.

Tony let out a small huff. “I’m guessing you lingered around a bit after then too…”
After another heartbeat, Tony reached out, grabbing ahold of Stephen’s hands, pulling him back closer. “I can’t… imagine what it must have been like… for you. If I had to watch you nearly die over and over again from the sideline… silently… I don’t know what I would do.”

He ran his fingers through Stephen’s still damp hair, letting it slip between his fingers. “I don’t… understand fully what you are going through. But I want to.” He tried to smile, tried to keep his voice calm and reassuring. “Someone told me once… the loneliest feeling in the world is not being understood. ...And I agree.”

They remained still. Seconds passed, then a minute. Eyes locked and their breathing soon becoming synced.

Then Stephen closed his eyes, tilting his head down briefly before looking back up into the warm whiskey gaze.

He took a deep breath and…

Chapter End Notes

Just wanted to quickly say thanks to everyone who showed me a lot of support recently :___; ♡
...and everyone who took the time to comment on the last chapter and esp those who continued to send me very kind regards. It really means a lot - really.

It really did get me through a really bad phase of wanting to give up on everything that I felt recently;; I honestly am feeling a whole lot better now. Felt pretty good writing this chapter - that feeling of "fun" that I used to feel but was missing for some time.

So again, thank you ♡ and hope you enjoyed this chapter!

& Happy holiday season! The time of the year that I love and hate LOL I still haven’t made up my mind if I want to do a holiday time themed chapter or addition but maybe?? Not sure what I’ll do it on yet either lololol
woops... it's been a while, hasn't it?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Am I enough for you?”

He didn’t mean to say that as his opening statement. He really didn’t. But Stephen’s mind jumped five whole steps and skipped directly to the climax before he could even catch his breath. *Stupid stupid stupid!* His mind chided as his eyes closed shut in a grimace.

And as for Tony… He was thoroughly perplexed. “What?”

“Am I…” the sorcerer repeated after a deep inhale. His fingers gripped tightly onto the counter once more, head bowed, his gaze downcast. “…going to be enough for you.”

It really should not have taken him more than a second to answer. But Tony was so stunned by the question itself he needed a moment to wrap his head around it. “…Stephen… you’re-… more than enough. Always have been.”

The other let out a snort before he could stop himself.

Tony frowned, offended at his fiancé disbelief. “What-?”

“We both know I was not enough back then,” Stephen retorted sharply. His words were coming out fast, too fast. His heart pounding at the ribcage. “You were Tony Fucking Stark! Even in the very beginning, I was far… *lesser-“

*What the actual fuck?* Tony nearly exclaimed that out loud.
But Stephen was already going onwards, his voice turning harsher by the second.

“…Then you were Iron Man. You were a goddamn, real-life superhero. As if the difference between our status, reputation, money… everything wasn’t already so blatantly obvious! All I could do was… what? Cheer you on from the sidelines? I couldn’t be there… I couldn’t be out there with you. Not truly. I couldn’t help you, couldn’t protect you… in any way. I had to just sit around and hope that you’ll come back… alive… Do you know how many times I prayed during those days? I didn’t even believe there is some higher power out there! But that is how helpless I felt. Begged to something that I didn’t even believe existed! Because there was nothing else to do. There would be nothing… absolutely nothing I could have done to—…” He took a short intake a breath, his gaze turning to the side, to the door. “The difference between you and I were getting greater with each passing day and you acted as if it didn’t matter—“

“It didn’t matter! At least not to me—,” Tony cut in but unable to find the rest of his words. “… Stephen I… it didn’t matter to me! It truly did not matter to me that you… you know… didn’t have powers or whatever.”

That was the truth. Tony always thought of them as equals. He remembers very often thinking how impressed he was that Stephen could keep up with him in every way. Sometimes surprising him, surpassing him, giving a run for his money at every turn.

He was so grateful he finally found his match. A partner. They both excelled in their fields, both brilliant minds of the generation. Both incredibly adventurous, bold, uncompromising… But that was clearly not how Stephen perceived it.

Now that he thought of it, Stephen often spoke about it these days. Tony definitely remembers a handful of occasions the sorcerer commenting about wanting to be by his side… in every way. But it didn’t register to the billionaire exactly what was tied to such a simple statement. What clearly was going through in Stephen’s head that was far more complex, far more emotional, than simply wanting to be by his side. How it was tied to a deeply rooted issue or insecurity that seemed to have been festering for years.

Guilt started to form from the dark corners of his mind. A chilling sense of dread starting to take hold.

Did he say something to Stephen in the past that played a role in this? Had he, Tony, suggested something that could have been perceived as…

Was he too fixated in the Avengers that he became neglectful? Was he not attentive enough,
“I… I would not have asked you to marry me back then if I didn’t see us as partners…” Tony said slowly, emphasizing each word. “We were going to get married, Stephen! I know you. You wouldn’t have even thought of tying yourself to something if it even made you feel… inferior or whatever. You must have fucking thought… similar in some ways because you said yes!”

“I was delusional,” Stephen said harshly, bitterly. But the anger appeared to be more directed at himself than at Tony. “I was so... eager with the thought of having you I wasn’t fully thinking. I ignored it! I mean- really what would I have even offered you back then?”

Once he started, Stephen found it difficult to stop. His thoughts getting ahead of him before he could try to regain his composure, his rationality. He almost wished he could cut off his tongue at that moment. The still sensible side of him screaming at him to shut his mouth before things became unsalvageable.

What was he trying to even accomplish? What did he expect Tony to do after truly laying out every one of his insecurities? How can he expect anything else than... for Tony to walk away?

After discovering exactly how pathetic he truly was. What he was actually thinking, what he truly felt, Tony’s image of him... the image that always seemed so much better, so much more attractive, so much more appealing than the reality... it would be shattered.

The image that Stephen, at some point in his life, came to value as more important than his own reflection in the mirror.

“...What would I have been back then to you?” he went on in a whisper. “Other than some... trophy husband you kept- Some pretty thing you amused yourself with when you had time to spare from your trilling life as a hero. ...I would have soon gotten older and lost what kept little of your interest still! What little I had to offer- ...Or perhaps even far before then because... that damn accident-...” He let out a laugh, a cold, harsh laugh. His gaze flickered down to his hands, glaring at the ugly scars. “No career. No money. Ruined reputation. ...Crippled... horribly scarred... Pathetically dependent on you. Constantly holding you back... How long from then would it have taken you to realize I’m not giving you what you need? That I’m not enough!”

“Is... is that why you left? Is that how you actually felt that... made you leave?”
Tony could visibly see the sorcerer trembling, evidently overwhelmed with emotions that were not at all used to being entertaining. Ones that were kept in a tight leash for years, suppressed, carefully checked.

He couldn’t help it. His composure shattering as he reached for Stephen’s shoulder, holding on in a firm grip. “…Okay, Stephen. Stephen, babe, listen to me.”

He waited, chasing the other’s gaze till he had it. And god, it pained him to see the redness at the rim, the light shine of tears that were now subtly visible in those pale gray-blue eyes. “You were more than enough for me. Back then… in the beginning, before the accident, after the accident, and now. More. Than. Enough. …Always. Far more than what I could have ever hoped or dreamed of. There was not a second where I doubted that you were enough! Don’t you dare think otherwise. Don’t you dare, Stephen, because I will not have it.”

Tony let out a shaky sigh, not able to take his eyes off the other even for an instant.

His insides always flipped horribly whenever Stephen even lightly tried to self deprecate himself. But this. This was far worse than any passing by comment or offhanded joke. And the pain of it was greater than should anyone have gotten a knife, drove it straight into his own heart, and twisted it.

After a brief pause, he let out a sigh before adding half-heartedly, “And really... you do realize out of the two of us I’m not the one who has an extended lifespan and youth-“

There was an odd silence before…

“Now I do,” Stephen said, evenly. It sounded frighteningly normal compared to how distressed he appeared just moments prior.

Tony could only stare at the other for a while longer, the gears turning, his heart pounding. “…Did you… This whole thing… becoming a sorcerer… becoming the Sorcerer Supreme… wanting power... is it… is it all… because of me?”

Stephen spun around fast, twisting out of Tony’s grip, turning his back towards the other as he paced.
Tony could only watch, the hands falling to his sides once more.

Yes, he joked about it. Even Loki recently made a speculation of it with very solid reasoning to back it up. And yet, Tony still doubted. Thought, of course, surely, he couldn’t have been the whole reason or even the majority of the driving force for Stephen. He was not *that* arrogant as to believe…

But… it seemed to have truly been the case.

“Stephen… you… you didn’t *have* to do this… any of this—“

But the doctor turned instantly to face him again, eyes heated as he leaned closer to where Tony stood. “How could I have come back to you otherwise? If not anything else, how could I have possibly come back, stay by your side fully knowing I would have gotten you killed!“

That made Tony frown. “What? Who said—“

“I would have been a weakness to you. A cripple who you would have had to worry about constantly. Who you had to protect! My very presence in your life would have threatened your safety. And you would have sacrificed yourself to protect me. A nobody… when the whole damn universe needed you—“

“You… y-you are not—“ Something in Tony snapped, thread coming apart at the seams. The next words coming out nearly in shouts. “You weren’t just anybody to me. YOU WERE MY EVERYTHING!“

Tony found his heart at his throat, barely able to contain his own emotions now. He lowered his gaze, running both hands through his hair. The next time he manages to meet Stephen’s eyes, he raised both his arms up before letting them fall to his side in an exasperated huff.

“Okay—okay… You know what? …You’re right. I would have thrown down my life for you. Always would have. Still would. Wouldn’t hesitate for a damn second if it were a question of your life or mine. Well, you just said it yourself. …So can’t you at least believe that you were that important to me? Even if these… thoughts, doubts were clouding your judgment, didn’t you know at the back of your mind that you were important? That you were *enough*?! That you were everything I *needed* and *wanted*? That you still are!”
Stephen stared back, motionless. Tony was briefly pleased, relieved by the slight hesitation that flash across the icy gaze.

But eventually, the sorcerer swallowed before muttering, “…or out of obligation.”

“For god’s sake!” Tony screamed into his hand.

A silence fell between them as they both leaned against the opposite wall, as if trying to finally catch their breathing and calm the built-up adrenaline.

It was a long while before either of them could turn to face each other again.

“Okay… Stephen… honey…” Tony crossed the room slowly, lightly squeezing at the doctor’s shoulder before sliding his hands down.

Slowly, although not meeting his eyes still, the sorcerer uncrossed his arms, letting Tony pull his hands, holding them in a firm but gentle hold.

“…You’re going to have to walk me through this. When did this thing… become… like this… to this extent? Because… because I don’t think- …I don’t remember you being this… upset about it back then. Before you left.” He swallowed, hard. “Sure, I can tell you were not happy I was out there being Iron Man while you only watched. I knew it wore you down every time I was in danger. I knew you felt… powerless to do anything. And you definitely didn’t like that.”

Tony let out a huff, feeling a bit relieved seeing Stephen’s lip twitch upward momentarily. He tried to compose his own anxiety, trying to even his tone and voice.

“And for the record, you did a lot… but maybe not in a way you wanted? To the extent you wanted? And look… I knew you felt you had to… try so hard for us to be equals. I always thought we were but- okay… yea I-… I get that-…” He let out a sigh. “It may not be how you felt…I definitely knew that the whole idea was important to you. That I can understand. …But none of it… Stephen, I didn’t… know it was this bad… This… Look at you. This has been eating away at you for god knows how long. Was I blind? Was I stupid? Did I say something or do something that made you-…” Was this my fault? He wants to say.

“No,” came the firm reply. Stephen can see Tony still carefully watching him for any indication he
was lying to save feelings. The sorcerer let out a heavy sigh, half-heartedly rolling his eyes. “No. You’re… right. It wasn’t as bad back then. Possibly just normal level of… insecurity everyone has that haunts them once in a while…”

Tony bit his lips, “…so was it… the accident? That exasperated this…”

That would have been the most logical explanation. And perhaps maybe it was the catalyst for everything that happened since then. After all, it was the day he lost so much. Everything Stephen believed defined who he was, his self-worth. And with it, lost the part of him that kept these insecurities at bay.

However, if the doctor was being honest, that was not when things truly started spiraling out of control.

He wondered if he should lie. Take the easier, reasonable excuse Tony was offering him. Save face at least in this. For the truth was beyond humiliating to admit. But…

“No.”

“…Then… when? …Why?”

“…Rogers,” he said quietly after a long pause. “…When I saw you… with Rogers. And it occurred to me… I had… never been enough. Never would have been enough.

Tony looked as if he wanted to argue but Stephen didn’t give him the chance. He wanted to get it over with. Finish the explanation before he died of embarrassment.

“He was… the First Avenger. THE Captain America. I saw how… effortlessly he could be by your side without being seen as … your passing amusement. He didn’t have to fight for a spot by your side. Everyone assumed it was his rightful place. At the time, it was like-… it finally clicked to me what I was lacking. You needed… more. It made… Tony I fought… I struggled, to give you so little in comparison to what he could give you without hardly trying. I-… it was like the world was rubbing it in my face. What I had been lacking all this time. Even before the accident. At my best back then, it was still not enough. I was not a hero, not a good man, not… someone with the means to give you a true partnership. Couldn’t… be in the front lines with you, protect you, help you defend everything that mattered to you. I couldn’t be what you needed-“
“I needed you.”

Stephen paused, whatever next words dying at his throat as he saw the look of utter anguish that appeared in Tony’s eyes.

Tony blinked, fast, before tearing his gaze away. His fingers only tightened around Stephen’s hands.

He thought back to all the times he drank away his emotions, trying and failing to drown out the emptiness that Stephen had left him with upon his departure. How desperately he wanted someone to just understand him. To see him. As Stephen had… and still does.

How he clung to the Avengers, his teammates, to elevate even for a second the torture he felt clawing at his bones.

How desperately he pleaded with Steve to stay when he knew it was already over.

“I just… needed you. I needed Stephen Strange. Not the top neurosurgeon, not the Sorcerer Supreme. I needed… you. …I still need just you. You… you were always more than enough.”

A second passed, then another. Tony wasn’t sure what was going on in his fiancé’s head but the silence, the flat stare, was almost overwhelming.

But then, there was a sharp pull. Tony barely had any time to register before the sorcerer’s lips were on his. He sighed into the kiss. Finally feeling a bit of relief. Kissing back just as feverishly, desperately as Stephen was currently. Tony put a hand over the trembling ones on his cheek, squeezing it.

They parted after a couple of seconds, catching their breath but forehead still touching.

“I’m sorry,” Stephen whispered as he broke eye contact eventually. He soon leaned his head against Tony’s shoulder, arms wrapping firmly around the brunette.

He wasn’t sure what he was apologizing for. Sorry for his stupid decision to leave? Sorry for these
ridiculous insecurities? Perhaps for displaying them in such a pathetic manner… For not being the strong, confident man he usually projected that Tony loved. For desperately needing so much reassurance? For not having more faith in Tony’s love for him… Because he knew… he did… and yet… sometimes…

For having doubts maybe…

Or… all of the above.

“You must… be… disgusted… by this-“

Tony frowned at that. Is that why the other never mentioned any of this? Covered, masked it with simple jealousy or possessiveness? Because Stephen thought he would be appalled by it if he found out what the doctor really was thinking? God, how deep did this exactly go?

“What are you apologizing for,” Tony said calmly as he ran one hand through Stephen’s hair, the other still securely on the other’s back. “There’s nothing you need to be sorry for.” He let out a soft sigh. “And no. No, I’m not. I’m only upset because I think it’s hurting you. You… went through a lot, babe. Dealing with… my need to be the hero, the accident, all the weight of being… the Sorcerer Supreme. …Having… to watch…” the words burned. "me and Cap. Then that whole experiencing over 14 million future… and everything that came with it. I-… I should have realized sooner that… you’re not doing well. …If anyone should apologize-“

“No.”

He felt Stephen’s hands clutching harder at the back of his neck.

“Ste-“

“No. Don’t. It’s… not your fault. …Besides. I promised you back at Wakanda that I would handle this. That I would stop running away and fix my issues. …And it seems all I did was… fail yet again.”

“You’re such a perfectionist,” Tony let out a huff. “Stephen, this is-… If you let me know back then how big of a problem this was. How far it exactly went-… Babe, these things don’t just go away easily. Look just… talk to me. Next time you have doubts just talk to me. I’m your partner,
Stephen. I want to help. I think I can help."

Stephen took a deep breath, comforting scent of Tony’s cologne hitting him fully as he did so. He couldn’t help but bury his nose deeper into the crook of the other’s neck. “…okay.”

There was a short pause before Tony adds, “You know I’m good at it. I love any chance to talk you up.” He took the chance to tenderly lift Stephen’s face from where it was settled, leaning to kiss the jawline softly. “I can be very good at making you feel good.”

After searching the other's eyes, Stephen smiled softly, hesitantly. “Yeah... you do.”

“Hey everyone… needs assurance once in awhile. So if you feel like… you need some, just let me know. Or you know… You feel like you want some attention? I don’t know. All I’m saying is, I’ll be more than happy to indulge-”

“I always want your attention,” Stephen blurted out under his breath. Although, his lips pursed just as quickly.

“I’m always happy to give it,” Tony smirked. Clear fondness visibly lining his expression. “I love you. I mean that. I love you, Stephen. Always have and always will.”

He paused for a brief period before going on with a sigh. “And don’t worry about Cap. Seriously. That chapter is over. Like I said the other day, we are trying to… you know, patch things up. To being on civil terms, being functional teammates but… Well, let’s face it, we’ll be lucky to even be at friend level. …He’s definitely not better than you. Come on, he nearly killed me. And from what I heard, you seemed to have saved me.”

“I… I know.”

“Do you?” Tony waited until he caught Stephen’s gaze. “…You sure?”

“Yes,” the sorcerer replied, more firmly than before. “Perhaps not when I came back to New York… when this all stems from… but I know I’m better than him now.”

Tony let out a snort, smirking. “Oh no, please. Do continue. I love it when you’re being a cocky
Stephen rolled his eyes but a smile formed none-the-less. “I would never… I would never lay a finger on you. …Other than that time you wanted me to-“

The billionaire raised his eyebrows, giving the other a look. “That was fun. We should do that again sometime-“

They laughed. Stephen shaking his head for a short while before their eyes met once more.

“I… the day he left you at Siberia… Fuck- …this is going to sound terrible-“ Stephen lowered his gaze. “I never… I never wanted you hurt, Tony. I was so scared you would die. I wish none of that happened but… a small… part of me was glad that he-… It was such a sure confirmation that he was not… good for you. That I was better.”

Tony swallowed. “I… I think I understand what you are getting at.”

“And after becoming the Sorcerer Supreme… well, I figured now I can be better than him in every way.”

“Stephen… You do understand even if you didn’t, even if you didn’t have powers, you would have been more than enough. I would have chose you regardless.”

The corner of his lips twitched upward. “…Well, I did think couple times, even back then… he was a bit vanilla for you…”

Tony rolled his eyes, though a hint of exasperated amusement was clearly written behind the honeyed gaze.

“Bit of a boy scout. Dull personality really...” the doctor’s tone was starting to take on a sarcastic flare. “Too predictable. Definitely can’t keep up with your brilliant mind-“

“Hey now, be nice,” Tony said, but definitely not at all trying too hard.
“Is it not the truth? … He sees the world as back and white. Too steadfast in his beliefs without realizing the complexity there is to life… to your life.” A smirk played on Stephen’s lips as he leaned in a bit. “He never could fully understand you as I can, could he? Be able to completely take you apart and appreciate each and every beautiful side of you. Stimulate that gorgeous mind of yours. To fully grasp your wit and intelligence. Challenge it when you need it.”

Tony raised an eyebrow, “So you do know.”

“I do,” Stephen gave him a smile, sincere. “Or at least I did eventually. …And that’s why I didn’t mention it at first. The only aspect he can… one-up me became voided the moment I became the Sorcerer Supreme. …That’s why I had thought these feelings… it was not a big problem anymore…” Then his gaze flicked to the floor once more.

“So what chang-“ He asked with a small frown. But it didn’t take long for his mind to catch up, the next word coming out in a whisper. “…Loki.”

The sorcerer didn’t look up. “…So still not enough…”

“Stephen-“

“I know. I know…” He swallowed, sighing. “I get it… but… I can’t help but think…. I selfishly just would feel better when I knew I was the only one giving you that type of attention… that you couldn’t get it from anyone else. Not from Rogers, not from the rogues, not even from Pepper and James…”

“What are you-“

“And he’s better than me isn’t he,” Stephen said softly. “Somehow… I’m at the best I can be now… and he’s… better.” He took a deep inhale, flinching as if the very thought was hurting him. “We’re… similar. You said it yourself. He’s intelligent. Bold, strong-willed, charming, witty… everything you like, everything you need. He understands you. Can keep up with you. Fit into your life so easily. He’s… a sorcerer too… but without the restrictions I try to heed. He’s… pretty… without the scars. He’s powerful… without all the emotional baggage… He’s not so… pathetically needy- …needing constant reassurance like I apparently do-”

Tony quickly opened his mouth, “Ok hold on. You do realize Loki’s catastrophic emotional
“baggage is basically the reason we even became friends.” Then he raised both hands, cupping the sorcerer’s face. The pad of the callused thumbs gently outlining the sharp cheekbones. “Also… Stephen, he’s not you. There is no comparison thing going on here. And I’m not…. So you guys have some similarities. I thought, great! As in, maybe that means two can get along eventually? … But I can never replace you if that’s what you’re thinking. There is no better version of Stephen Strange that I’m looking for. Nor am I looking for the whole... something better. Even if I was, that’s just so ridiculously impossible because you’re the best there is and I already have you.”

Silence fell for a moment as they simply stared at once another.

Stephen’s mouth felt suddenly dry, grasping for words he suddenly couldn’t recall. After a long while, he let out a huff of laughter, shaking his head slightly as he set lowered his gaze. “How do you… always know what to exactly say?”

“For you?” Tony replied with a small smile. “…Instinct I guess.” He paused for a brief moment before going on teasingly. “…And trust me, he’s plenty needy… oh, don’t give me that look.”

Stephen appeared as if giving him an offended stare.

“Seriously, babe? As if you didn’t just use that as some type of argument for why you think he was better-“

The doctor simply rolled his eyes.

And Tony scoffed. “You just said how being less needy is a good thing and now you want to be the needier one? …So competitive-”

“I suppose now that I think about it, it’s probably an appealing trait for you,” the sorcerer retorted quickly, a smirk starting to form. “You like needy. You find needy appealing. Your damn hero complex.”

“Well don’t worry, honey. You are the most neediest person I know.”

Stephen gave him a look.
“…for my attention anyways.” Then said under his breath, “most people don’t care for my attention.”

The sorcerer frowned. But Tony went on without realizing it.

“But that’s fine. More for you I suppose.” A smirk played on his lips as the billionaire’s gaze landed directly on his fiancé once more. “And you wear needy very well. You make it attractive and so enticing.”

Stephen gave an exasperated huff, although soon he was mirroring Tony’s smile unconsciously.

“…Hey but… if you… if you still can’t handle Loki and I being friends… if it’s too hard for you I can-“

“No,” he replied hastily. “It’s… you don’t… you don’t deserve that. I want you to have friends, Tony. It’s not that I don’t want that… It’s not that I don’t understand… that…”

Tony cleared his throat. “For what it’s worth… I think he really was trying to… you know… win you over? …You know… he tries to stay out of your way. He knows you are not particularly fond of him so he avoids, gives you space when he can. He doesn’t pick a fight with you… even listened to you that one time. He actually only volunteered to go on that mission with the rogues because they were trying to call you back. He was trying to give us more time on our vacation… even though it didn’t end that way-“

Stephen pursed his lips, blinking quickly. “…Was that what he was doing?”

“…What did you think he was doing…?”

The sorcerer let out a sigh, running a hand over his hair that was now fully dry during their long talk. “Let’s… move this to the bed. All this… emotions are a bit… draining.”

Tony smirked. “Your small bed here?”

“You’re spoiled,” the other replied flatly. "Not everyone can afford your tens and thousand dollar
“Nope,” Tony said quickly, “not complaining. Love your smaller bed. We have no choice but to snuggle.”

“Well, move then,” Stephen let out a laugh, giving the other a light shove towards the door that led out of the bathroom and into the bedroom. “…Then you can…” He licked his lips, coaxing the rest of the words out from his throat. “…tell me more about Loki and… I’ll make more of an effort to… be civil with him-“

“Really?” Tony perked up.

Good lord, it was so obvious when Tony was attached to others. It was endearing and at the same time, made the familiar insecurities in Stephen flare subconsciously. Although, this time, rationality followed quickly as he tried to focus on the comforting words Tony had said not too long ago.

“Yes,” he said with a soft smile. “…But don’t even think about leaving my arms while you do so.”

Stephen finally manages to locate Loki hanging out on the terrace, furthest away from the building. The Asgardian was dressed down in simple black long sleeve and dark jeans, laying on one of the large couch set up, seeming to be staring up to the stars.

“Why are you out here?” he called out. Stephen tried his best to sound casual, neutral, as possible, though he couldn’t bite back the bit of harshness in his tone.

But the god didn’t seem offended… yet again. Simply drawing himself upright to a sitting position.

Stephen had to wonder, again, if this whole thing was some type of game, some taunt. The whole don’t react, act like nothing bothers you, to have the upper hand. He, Stephen, himself has used that method countless times. After all, it annoyed the rogues and Rogers greatly during the earlier months every time Stephen chose to not react, act bored, as if they were not worth his breath.
But Tony seemed quite convinced it was not.

He tried to remind himself of Tony’s words as he did his best to suppress the annoyance that plagued his mind.

“Have you tried rooming with Thor?” Loki replied casually.

Stephen blinked, frowning slightly. He wasn’t sure what exactly happened during that decision but for some reason, Loki was staying with Thor instead of a guest room. Which, if he had to be honest, wasn’t unreasonable since…

“…Thor has a whole floor.”

Loki gave him a look before giving a dramatic ugh. “A whole floor is not enough to get away from his racket,” he muttered staring out into the open. “Besides, as I kept repeating to your betrothed, I’m a prince. I’m used to having the whole palace wing to myself.”

Stephen raised an eyebrow, arms crossing.

Arrogant.

That was the first word that popped into his mind.

But… it had been quite clear for a while now who exactly Loki reminded him of…

Himself.

Goddammit.

Himself back during his younger days. The top-earning neurosurgeon with a god complex. Too smart for his own good, proud, quick-tempered, sharp-tongued.
Bored… bored out of his mind all the damn time. Always looking for the next fix of entertainment, amusement, *trill*. Few moments that will allow him to feel something, anything.

Was that why Loki was attracted to Tony? Seeming to shadow him so frequently? …After all, Stephen had all those years back. Like a moth drawn to a fire.

Stephen cleared his throat. “…Tony seems to think… you are trying to win me over.”

There was a pause. The doctor was expecting some sort of denial, a laugh, a scoff, some speech about how egotistical it was that a mere mortal would say such a thing to a god. But none came.

“…Is it working?” It was so casual, so neutral. There was not even a hint of embarrassment or any other emotion for that matter.

That caught him a bit off guard, the frown setting in deeper. “Why?”

Loki rolled his eyes, his head falling back to lean further into the cushions. “Well… why have you not run me out yet?”

Stephen stayed silent, unsure of how to respond.

Loki lazily turned his head towards him, giving him a look. “You are clearly a possessive man. I’m treading on your territory. You have a look that screams murder every time I become even just a step closer to Stark than you. …You could have easily thrown a tantrum. How you wanted me gone. Gave some reason… even a poorly formed one. Still, he would, undoubtedly, do whatever he can to please you. …Perhaps that’s one reason. Stark had implied that should I want to continue this… friendship with him… it must pass your approval. Well, he at least implied he will not jeopardize his relationship with you. I got the hint.”

“So it’s for Tony.” A small spec of his brain still screamed a flash of irritation.

He supposed he was never good at sharing. Always put up a fight. Worse, when it appeared that the opposition in question seemed like a direct competitor, after a similar role in Tony’s life. “Pretending to play nice. An ulterior motive.”
“I’m not much different than you,” he replied coolly.

“Meaning?”

“When you wanted to be back in his good graces, when you wanted to remain in his life upon your return, what had you done?”

Stephen didn’t answer… though he knew. He quickly tried to patch things up with Pepper and Rhodes. Then he tried to win Peter over… eventually Harley. Knew he had to should he wanted to stay.

As if knowing he wasn’t getting an actual response, Loki continued. “There is not much in the world that I find entertaining enough. Something catches my interest once in a century… if I am lucky. I enjoy his company. His world is… interesting. I would like to keep it for longer. It’s rare. He’s…”

“Special,” Stephen answers for him. He walks over slowly, taking a seat on the other end of the large couch.

Loki regarded him for another moment before adding wistfully, “And I did not mind your presence. Another sorcerer… There were not many in Asgard. The norm is… Thor. Thought it pleasant actually…”

The next words got caught in his throat. Stephen suddenly became a bit unsure what to say, getting a bit lost in his own thoughts.

He supposed, disregarding his misgivings and outburst of jealousy, there had been couple pleasant times the last couple days.

As it was pointed out, they were alike… in many regards. A similar point of view. With shared interests and… hatred, resentment for the rogues that… could not be shared in quite the same way with Tony. Tony who couldn’t help but to still have some attachments, affections for them that unfortunately lingered from the past.

Oddly, there had been times where the doctor felt… at ease. He was not alone in making sure Tony was safe. There was another pair of eyes.
A god, powerful in his own right. Another sorcerer, as irritating notion that had been originally, who seemed willing to make sure Tony was safe and well, both mentally and physically. Who also seemed to have the rare intelligence, similar outlook of life, required to fully understand the odd complexity that was Tony Stark.

The last Stephen was called to the sanctum on an emergency, he admitted, he was far less anxious about leaving.

"But I will keep in mind to... not take too much of his time."

That snapped Stephen’s attention back to reality. "Well," he said, almost as if trying to reason. "...You are around him quite often."

Loki was no longer looking at him, gaze fixed somewhere off into the distance. "I had underestimated how insane Thor can make me when living under one roof." Then realizing the look the other sorcerer was giving him, he rolled his eyes. "Do not fret. I'm not plotting to actually kill my brother. Or wreck havoc in your precious Midgard due to it. ...We are on better terms. Significantly. He has become... much more tolerable. But he is still... Thor. And I..." There was a short pause. "...Sometimes I just need to vent out my... qualms about my brother."

Stephen raised an eyebrow. "And it has to be to Tony?"

"Who else do I have?"

The simplicity of that, how matter-of-fact Loki made it sound, caught the doctor off guard. And yet, it was true. What other answer was he expecting? It was a question that didn't even need to be asked.

But the god went on easily. “I had expected you to try and kill me-“

“What?” he retorted. He couldn’t help but feel offended.

“It certainly appeared as if you would at one point or another,” Loki stated flatly. “Well? …Why didn’t you?”
Stephen continued to stare for a couple more seconds before coming up with an honest answer. “Because everyone was expecting me to.” So he didn’t want to.

He remembers the look the rogues were giving him. How considering all the mess he had gotten in with them, especially Rogers, they had quite literally expected him to go at it full-on with Loki. Understandable assumption really.

The god let out a low, short laugh. “… That’s reason two.” He was wearing his usual smirk as he peered at the Sorcerer Supreme. “Same as I. I do not like doing what’s expected. It's boring.”

Stephen let out a huff, a smirk now playing on his lips.

The silence stretched for a long while before either of them spoke. Surprisingly, not an uncomfortable one.

“…So you told him.”

Loki didn’t miss a beat, “Of how you saved him?”

“…I’m told it was not only I that day.”

The Asgardian turned his gaze slightly to his side, meeting the piercing blue.

Thank you. The words that Stephen couldn’t quite bring himself up to say still. Although, something told the doctor that the other already seem to know.

Stephen considered him for another moment before setting his gaze to the darkened sky once more. “What else have you told him?”

“What is there to tell?”
"I think you know more than you let on."

Loki stayed quiet.

But it wasn’t as if he was expecting a response to that. He let out a small sigh before proceeding. "How long have you known?"

"About you being the Sorcerer Supreme? I admit I didn’t know till my brother and I ended up in your sanctum. Of how obsessed to are in Stark’s well being enough to stalk him for years from the shadow? Quite frankly I didn’t exactly have much spare time to put everything together till after the Great War. …Or perhaps are we speaking of the reason for your departure after your unfortunate…” Loki took a not so subtle glance toward Stephen’s hand. “…accident.”

“…Did you tell him?” His voice was still even, flat. But a sudden coldness settled in the icy gaze.

The god didn’t back down, didn’t look away. “…No. …But why haven’t you.” It wasn’t much of a question but didn't seem much like a judgment either.

Stephen swallowed, his gaze lowering for a split second. “…I plan to. Soon.”

There was a pause in which neither spoke. Then after a long while…

“What do you need?"

He let out a small scoff under his breath. "Why would it matter to you?"

The Asgardian hummed softly. "I'm a god. I like to entertain once in a while when I'm in the mood. Or perhaps... I'm bored..."

The doctor smiled, though he hardly reached his eyes. And it disappeared as soon as it formed. “…For this all to have never happened.”

Loki rolled his eyes. “You and Stark…” he muttered with an exasperated huff. “…Always saying
what you want when asked what you need.” He waited till Stephen turned to him once more before repeating, “What is it that you need.”

A second. Then two. “…I need to know exactly why they did it. If it truly was for Tony’s benefit …or something else.”

“…And?”

“…And how… involved she was.”

"It matters to you still?"

No response.

“You suspect Romanoff to have caused the accident itself?”

Stephen scoffed. “Does it really sound so far-fetched?”

Loki gave no reaction.

A second later, Stephen simply continued, “…I need to know… all the facts. What exactly I’m walking into.”

The Asgardian let out a long sigh. “…I’ll get you your answers.”

He gave the god a look, one that suggested disbelief. But Loki simply gave a quiet ugh but didn’t bother to give any reassurance.

Stephen stared for another couple seconds. Then a thought occurred to him. “So… what did Tony say when you asked?”
Loki turned back to him, an eyebrow raised.

“You suggested you asked him before. What did he say he needed?”

A short pause then, “…You.” A hint of a smirk tugged at the corner of his lips. “He said he needed to know you were safe.”

Stephen couldn’t help the small smile that formed. And after giving him a knowing look, Loki turned away once more, sinking comfortably once more into the seat.

A complete stillness washed over them once more. Neither in much hurry to ruin the peace and quiet that was so rare these days. But after a few long minutes, Stephen swallowed, hard.

"If... you need... to talk to someone... If Tony isn't around..." His voice trailed off, suddenly feeling a bit awkward.

Loki’s eyes were soon on him again. The doctor half-heartedly wondered if a tease was on its way. But the god's expression was completely blank. The emerald eyes just simply staring at him.

But before Stephen could say much else, a warm body soon fell onto his lap.

Tony had jumped over from the back of the couch, finding himself a seat between them leaning heavily onto Stephen with a grin. The billionaire quickly kicked off his shoes, drawing his feet up, his left lightly nudging at Loki’s thigh. The god gave an offended glare but Stephen definitely noted how the Asgardian didn’t move away or did much else in retaliation.

“See, told you, you two will get along if you just tried-“ Tony said cheerfully as he settled in Stephen’s arm, snuggling close as it was physically possible. He popped couple dried blueberries into his mouth from the small pouch he had been carrying before nodding towards the Asgardian. “Your room is done by the way. Finished programming everything just now.”

It was almost hilarious to see the genuine relief that washed over Loki’s face. He let out a dramatic sigh of relief. “Thank Valhalla-“
Stephen scoffed loudly. “Seriously? All because he can’t share a whole floor his brother couple days longer? You don’t even fold the laundry this quickly when I ask-“

Loki flashed one of his best smiles, the mischief clearly twinkling in those piercing emerald eyes. “Because I’m pretty,” he said matter-of-factly.

The Sorcerer Supreme frowned. “What does that have to do with-“

“Must you ask? Certainly, you know how superficial Stark can be… Loves spoiling pretty things,” there was a certain playfulness underlining his tone. “I’m sure you had your heydays of it, sorcerer. Bat your eyelashes and he would bend over backward to please you-“

*Did this bitch just-* Stephen had a look of pure indignation. If it had not been for Tony’s weight still on him he may have lunged at the god.

“I am pretty!” He retorted without a second thought. *Tony always says so-* Oh how grateful he was the second part remained silent.

But it only takes a split second for his mind to start screaming how ridiculous and idiotic even just the first part sounded. He grimaced visibly. The doctor could already tell this was not going to be one of his finest moments.

Loki’s smirk only widened. “I’m prettier.”

Stephen merely stared back, mouth a gasp, halfway between exasperated and peeved. All dignity abandoned in the next second.

He knew this was petty. Definitely petty and absurd. Loki wanted this sort of rise out of him, wanted this type of ridiculous banter. Obviously getting a kick out of it. Most likely enjoying immensely the rare reaction he was getting from the otherwise calm and composed doctor.

But then it occurred to Stephen one person was ominously silent…

He soon glared at his fiancé who seemed rather interested in his packet of blueberries. “Don’t think
I didn’t notice your silence on this matter,” he hissed.

Tony made the mistake of looking up, meeting Stephen’s eyes. He froze.

Stephen’s eyes widened comically before narrowing. “You agree-?!“

At the corner of his sight, he could see the pure delight forming on Loki’s expression as his smirk became impossibly wide.

Tony appeared quite horrified, clearing his throat hastily. “Babe-“

“Don’t you dare-“ Stephen snapped.

“Nono I didn’t mean it like that!” Tony was trying to turn so he was more facing the other. “I mean- ok he’s pretty. You have to give him that. He’s a god- come on-! But you are like… more handsome. A different type of attractive…you know? Like more mature, elegant, type of attractive, which I find incredibly sexy- You’re definitely like a fine wine-“

“You’re sleeping on the couch,” Stephen cuts in flatly. Though he had to admit, there was not much bite in that threat.

“OH COME ON! What for?!“

“For not defending my honor!”

Tony was giving the other an exasperated stare. “Really?? REALLY?!“

“Then I’ll take him. He can sleep with me,” Loki replied gleefully.

The glare that Stephen shoots him was pure gold. But Loki looked impossibly thrilled.
Tony, on the other hand, kicked the Asgardian hard. Although, Loki continued laughing, seeming all too pleased by the little turmoil he caused the billionaire and his sorcerer.

But as the couple went on to bicker some more, Loki casually reached for the blueberries in the packet Tony was still holding loosely. Till a hand quickly slapped his.

Loki gave one very insulted stare. And Tony glared right back. They held each other’s gaze for another minute, neither backing down. Then the god quickly turned to Stephen giving him a flat stare.

“Fuck him.”


Loki let out an exaggerated *ugh* as he leaned back on the couch once more, arms crossed. “He’s so much more petulant when he hasn’t been fucked properly-” he said almost nonchalantly.

“Hey! Watch it, Lolo-” Tony shouts back, exasperated.

But the Asgardian rolled his eyes. “I dealt with you when you were not getting any more months. It was torture, Anthony.”

“And what? You're such a ray of walking sunshine?? You know what? Stay with Thor for another week!”

That seemed to finally raise a serious tone from the god. “You wouldn’t dare, Anthony Stark-“

“Watch me, Reindeer game!”

“If you believe yourself to know pain now, wait till I-“

At that point, Stephen sat quietly as the two’s threats became more exasperating by the minute. He had to admit, it was rather odd but amusing seeing the two of them so friendly, borderline flirting
one moment, and becoming completely hostile the next… then back and forth as if it was easy as flipping on and off a light switch. He tilted his head towards the side just a bit. Entertaining a thought that they reminded him of two hissy kittens.

He still had an arm around Tony’s waist protectively. Tightened visibly at some points in the conversation. But Stephen had to admit, he wasn’t completely… unnerved… by Loki’s presence or the whole situation as he had been initially. Felt at least comfortable enough to not hold onto every word the two were saying, not try and desperately read between the lines.

Felt as if it was all right to simply lean his head on Tony’s shoulder and relax.

Stephen never liked sharing… always put up a fight.

But fight he did… and what he found was maybe… just maybe… this wasn’t so bad.

He can share… just a bit. Only a bit though.

Loud voices could be heard as soon as Rhodes entered the meeting room. It was hardly anything odd at this point. In fact, today seemed to be mild in comparison to some of the other arguments he walked in on.

Tony and Steve were at the further end of the large room. They seemed to be in a heated conversation although luckily, it definitely did not seem personal. A simple disagreement as to how to approach the next mission. While both naturally were passionate in their viewpoints as always, the pair seemed mostly calm when talking about them.

Rhodes let out a sigh of relief. He had heard from Tony a couple of days back there was some progress made to his situation with the rogues but frankly, he didn’t want to believe it till he saw it himself. Still, the Colonel watched for a moment longer, carefully eyeing his best friend for any signs of distress. Finding none, however, he turned away trying to find a seat.

Only, what his sights landed on next surprised him more than Tony and Steve being somewhat civil.
He blinked quickly as he stared at Stephen and Loki sitting side by side.

But neither party paid him much attention. Their piercing gaze blatantly set to the other side of the room in Tony and Steve’s direction.

Rhodes didn’t appear to be the only one confused, however. From a bit further away many others like Sam and Clint were eyeing the two sorcerers subtly.

Not wanting to make a scene, Rhodes slowly pulled the chair next to Stephen, taking a seat.

“Hey,” soon said a familiar voice behind him.

Rhodes turned, giving a quick smile as Bruce sat down at his other side, Thor soon following. But before he could say any greeting, a comment made both men freeze.

“Have you ever plotted a whole murder in your head and how you might get away with it?”

Rhodes and Bruce spun around, fast, staring at Loki. Although, the god acted as if he didn’t even notice their reaction, sights still on Tony and Cap. The question was said so calm, so nonchalant compared to the actual meaning of it that had both Rhodes and Bruce frowning.

Bruce quickly turned to give Thor a look but the elder Asgardian simply waved it off as if it was nothing.

It at least made Rhodes feel better that Stephen, who the comment actually had been for apparently, was giving the god a stare that suggested he was insulted.

Loki, upon realizing, lazily turned his head to meet Stephen’s gaze. Then, wordlessly, nodded his head slightly towards Steve.

Stephen blinked, once, then considered towards the Captain’s direction. A second of pause… before a hum, as if in agreement.
Without another word, both sorcerers leaned back casually as they were before, arms crossed, getting comfortable again in their own chair as they continued to watch Tony and Steve.

Rhodes stared at the two.

Bruce scooted his chair further away.

Chapter End Notes

Ahaha;; sorry this was mostly written like 2 weeks ago and then took a bit of a break away from the fandom for most of the month so never got edited till now;;

Comments & encouragements are appreciated because I have A LOT of work for the next update :’)

Hope everyone has been having a nice holiday season so far ♥
Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

So I recently came across couple ironstrange fic rec posts that named this fic - Thank youuuuu - really. Never thought anything I write will ever be on one of those-

I wasn't sure if it was awkward to say on that post or the platform I saw it in (or it may be a platform I'm still completely lost in lol) so thought I would mention it here ;__;♡...

...& hope that they see;;;

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Loki, I am simply saying-“

“Saying what exactly. That I should stop bothering your friends? Because that is what you truly want to say, is it not?”

Stephen looked around hesitantly as the elevator door opened, taking a moment before stepping out. Judging by the argument that greeted him, he was already regretting that he offered to go retrieve Loki when the Asgardian sorcerer did not appear at the promised time. He, Tony, and Loki had made plans to go out for dinner that night. Something about Thai food due to some inside story between his fiancé and Loki that he has yet to hear.

“That is not what I said, brother!”

Thor’s booming voice was loud and clear even though Stephen was quite sure the two gods were down the hall somewhere in the main room.

“Loki… they are a pair. You are an outsider. I understand you are eager for… acceptance… but you need to give them space. Your persistent presence is what had Stark’s sorcerer upset in the first place-“

“I was invited! But I’m sure the very thought did not even cross your mind. Of course, if I joined them it was because I forced them-“
“You do not understand boundaries well brother. You do as you please without a care for others if it benefits you.”

There was a harsh laugh. “I’m getting a lecture of boundaries? From you? Do you honestly not realize how ironic this is!”

As Stephen turned the corner, the two brothers came into view. Just in time to see Loki taking a couple of quick steps towards Thor, anger basically radiating from him.

“You are upset because for once in your life you are not, out of the two of us, a clear favorite. This isn’t about you acting on their behalf, for their benefit. This isn’t about you watching out for me. Drop this pretense of some caring brother act.”

“I do care Loki! How many times must I prove that!”

“…This is about you. Like always. You cannot stand the fact that some of your precious friends prefer my company over yours!”

Thor let out an exasperated huff. “That is not-“

“Say it,” Loki snapped harshly, “You’re just angry you were not invited.”

“NO! That is absurd!”

“Say it.”

“Loki-“

“SAY IT!”

Stephen let out a sigh before stepping forward, clearing his throat very loudly. The two turned their heads immediately.
“Tony asked me to fetch you,” he said in an even tone to Loki, his expression carefully blank. Then after a moment, he turned to Thor. “If you would like, I’m sure Tony wouldn’t mind you joining us as well.”

Loki crossed his arms, looking away as he took several steps back. Thor quickly turned to watch his brother, opening his mouth but soon closed it again. Then, the elder was running a hand through his hair, a sheepish glance towards Stephen’s direction before darting his gaze to the floor. “No… I… had plans… But thank you, Doctor Strange. And I apologize for holding up my brother-”

With the usual good-natured smile and a pat to his shoulder, Thor quickly walked past him, heading for the elevator.

Silence fell as Stephen stood still, carefully surveying the other sorcerer who now stood leaning against a wall. Another couple more seconds and there was the familiar ding of the elevator closing.

“We should go,” he said finally. “I’ll portal us there but considering the mission early tomorrow might be a good idea to be back soon if possible.”

Loki let out a soft sigh before nodding. Soon starting slowly down the hall. Stephen followed. The next minute they entered the elevator, the door closing behind them.

Stephen took a sideward glance, “You alright?”

“Yes.” At least he was no longer fuming, the voice calm once more. If anything the god sounded a bit tired.

“…You sure?”

There was a pause before Loki sighed. “…He believes my very existence revolves around him. … The Mighty Thor, always the center of attention, always the beloved hero of our tale. …If you ask him, my brother would claim my very first word spoken as a child was ‘Dor’”
Stephen turned to him with a small frown.

A smirk played on the thin lips. “Apparently I was too young to properly say ‘Thor’. Of course, I would like to believe I meant ‘door’ as in, there is the door right there, please fuck off.”

Stephen let out a huff. “You’ve been hanging around Tony too much,” he said with a smirk. “All the cursing. That’s the first symptom. Then it’s the craving for overly bitter coffee and associating it with happiness—“

“Well… I do enjoy his coffee,” the other replied lightly.


A short laugh filled the small space. Both leaning back against the cool metal of the lift.

Then, after another minute, “…If you would like me to talk to Thor… if it is caused by my… earlier behavior—”

“No.” came the quick reply. Then the usual sarcastic playfulness was back in the god’s tone. “But if you feel pity… why not let me finally take a glimpse at the collection of relics at your Sanctum.”

Stephen fixed him with a sudden serious look. “…I’m taking count before and after.”

Loki smirked back.

Then the doors opened, both stepping off quickly.

“Oh, and as I mentioned to Stark earlier today, I had told Fury some rumors I’ve heard pertaining to you. Still, part of my deal as you know.”

“…What rumors?”
“Do you really have a third eye?”

Stephen didn’t bother with a reply, simply walking down the hall at a quick pace that had the god sprinting to catch up.

“So you told him I was dead?”

“What was I to think? You were nowhere to be found.”

Stephen gave an exasperated huff, not bothering to turn to face the other.

The pair was walking fast down the darkened corridor, nearly side-by-side, taking long strides as their heels clicked loudly in their wake. Perhaps they should be more focused on the mission at hand but considering the task at the moment was almost child’s play for the two of them, the two sorcerers started to partake in other topics of the past.

“You act as if I would have wanted to tell him such a news,” Loki said with a dramatic eye roll. “I assure you, overly distraught Stark is far from being fun to handle—“

Then, he felt it. A surge of energy. Stephen shoved Loki back while conjuring a shield, successfully deflecting the burst of light aimed for them. Not even a second later, a knife whizzed by from behind him, hitting the attacker dead on.

Stephen let his hand fall to his hips. Watching as Loki strode over, pulling the intricate blade from the body that now lay on the floor.

“We’re trying to avoid killing.”

Loki shrugged, ignoring the comment. He kicked at the gun-like weapon the attacker had used. “Not usual Midgardian weapon, is it?”

The other walked over, giving the weapon a look over as well. “…So… was he upset?”
The god scoffed, “Of course he was upset. Threw a spectacular tantrum.”

“…And what did you say?”

“Stop being a little bitch.”

There was a short pause. Loki was wearing a smirk as if holding back a laugh.

“You’re serious-”

The Asgardian gave a light hum.

Stephen stared at him, giving him a look, then after another second, let out a chuckle shaking his head.

“…You two know we’re also on this com line right?” It was definitely Rogers, heard over the earpiece both sorcerers had been wearing.

“SHUT UP,” they snapped harshly in unison.

But before any further arguments could be made, there were a large amount of footsteps headed towards their way.

“I played defense last time.” Stephen stepped forward quickly, the bright gold of the mandalas glowing in his raised hands. “It’s your turn to play backup.”

Loki simply rolled his eyes. Although he didn’t argue.

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Steve flinched back, visibly, a hand automatically reaching for the earpiece to take it off for a moment.

To his left, Sam was smirking. “You really don’t learn do you?”

“I just wish they keep personal conversation to themselves,” he said with a huff.

Sam and Bucky gave him a look but neither made further comments. Steve took a sideward glance at them. They both knew, of course. He sometimes wished his two friends didn’t.

Steve had reached a point where he had no choice but to accept Tony and Strange’s relationship…and engagement…as reality. He didn’t like it but he accepted it. Although, he really did not need it to be rubbed in his face everywhere he went. …As if all he had been… all he and Tony had been…was just a stepping-stone.

Cap let out a small sigh before turning to face the rest of them. “They’ll be at the control room soon. Get ready to head in. We have ten minutes to secure the premises starting from the north end. Thor, Tony, Banner are going to head straight to the main room where they theoretically have the time travel machine.”

“Let’s just hope this doesn’t end up being another bust,” Clint said as he gave his bow another test pull.

Bucky simply gave Steve a pat on the shoulder, a quick sympathetic smile before walking off towards the door.

“So they are getting along, huh,” Sam whispered as he briefly pressed the mute button on his intercom. “Am I the only one completely weirded out by that?”

He glanced around and although all seemed to have some type of opinion on it, thoughts visibly dancing in their eyes, most just shrugged or went about in their last-minute preparation.

Sam eventually turned towards the two former SHIELD agents, “Seriously? You two don’t have something to say about it?” Then specifically towards Natasha, a small smirk playing on his lips, “Come on, you must have an opinion-“
The redhead gave another shrug before turning on her heels, walking towards the door as well. Sam watched her go with a small frown, slightly confused about the sudden cold shoulder.

He nodded towards Clint, smile disappearing in an instant. “What’s gotten into her?”

“Leave her be,” the archer said with a tight smile. But realizing the other was still staring at him, eventually glanced upwards from fidgeting with one of his arrows. It appeared as if he was debating his next words.

After another moment, Clint muted his com too, “Loki didn’t replace Strange in Tony’s life. Loki basically replaced Nat in both Strange and Tony’s life. …Well, not completely the same thing but… basically.” Then he let out a short sigh. “Leave her be… Unless you want to be murdered in your sleep-“

Sam stared towards Natasha’s direction, then back at Clint, considering the words. He had heard little of how the redhead had been close to Stark and Strange years back. But he personally had not seen their dynamic and by the time he had joined the Avengers, Strange had already disappeared. But he hadn’t realized…

“Huh…” he mused under his breath.

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“Oh, and I will be needing Stark tomorrow.”

“No,” Stephen said flatly while he aimed a shot of lightning at a group of soldiers firing at them. “Tony and I already have plans.”

“The same plans as every night this week I imagine,” Loki replied with a dramatic eye roll. “Why not give his backside a break. Everyone can see he cannot sit proper-“

“WE CAN STILL HEAR YOU!” yelled Clint’s voice from the intercom.
And again, the two sorcerers gave a quick, “SHUT UP” before easily returning to their own conversation.

 Conjuring a shield, Stephen turned towards Loki, “And no. As a matter of fact, we have plans with Christine. I would like to have lunch with my best friend and for my fiancé to be there-“

“But it’s my day,” the Asgardian replied as if it was matter-of-fact.

Stephen raised an eyebrow at that. “Your day?”

“In your Midgardian terms, Tuesdays and Fridays and every other weekend.”

“What?”

“Joint custody. …Or so I’m told.”

Stephen frowned, giving the other an exasperated look. “This is not what joint custody is.”

“Is it not?”

“AHHHH!”

Both of them turned around sharply, just in time to see Tony land on the ground. The Iron Man was armor covered in what appears to be black goo, immobilizing him. It appeared dense, sticky, ballooning, growing in volume, that quickly held him heavily to the floor. He must have triggered some sort of trap meant to deter further advancement towards the large double doors at the far end of the room.

Stephen subtly grimaced. There was an odor coming from the goo he was not particularly fond of.

“…I retrieved him last time,” said Loki flatly. “It’s your turn.”
The doctor let out a huff. “You wanted him.”

The god smirked, “Well I am not the one wedding him.”

Stephen let out a soft *tsk*. He couldn’t argue with that could he?

“I SWEAR, ONE OF YOU FUCKING HELP ME OR I’M KICKING BOTH OF YOUR SORRY ASSES!”

Then there was a loud, “LOKI!!!!” from the opposite side. Thor seemed to have ended up on a similar predicament.

Stephen gave the other a flat look. “…Well, he’s not my brother.”

The smirk was wiped off completely as Loki let out a distinct *ugh*.

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All things considered, the mission had run quite smoothly. Soon, they have successfully taken over the whole facility that housed the recreation of their time machine. S.H.I.E.L.D was on their way, but in the meantime the Avengers took upon themselves to look around, trying to get a feel of what exactly had been these people’s intentions.

All of them were inside an enormous hall, underground, dimly lit. Voices and footsteps echoed. The large circular time machine was situated at the center of the room surrounded by many monitors and systems. It appeared very similar to the one they had built in order to defeat Thanos but with minor differences that only Tony and Bruce noticed.

“Please tell me this is not Hydra again,” said Sam as he flipped through many of the reports that littered around. “How many times do we have to crush them? I swear they are like cockroaches-“

“Doesn’t seem like it,” replied Natasha, typing away on the main monitor.
Clint stood not far behind her, hands still on the bow and arrow, looking around cautiously.

“So what were they doing with this?”

“I mean… come on… a real-life time machine? Time travel. Proven that it could work and not some theory? It opens doors-“

“The possibilities are practically endless. Who wouldn’t want this?“

“Hey, we should just be glad we got to this before they had a chance to do… whatever they were planning with it.”

Tony grimaced as he stepped closer to the device, a hand soon on the cold surface of the metal. He swallowed, hard.

“It isn’t your fault.”

He turned around sharply, facing the quiet, calm voice of Bruce. The doctor was giving him a sympathetic look.

“Yeah… sure,” he said offhandedly. He tried to smile but failed miserably. At the corner of his eyes, Tony can see Stephen and Loki standing couple yards away, watching him uneasily.

“I helped you build it,” Bruce went on evenly. “We needed it. If we didn’t back then… there was no other way. All the lives it brought back, Tony. Half of the universe-“

“I know,” he muttered. “I… I know. …But we can’t let anyone else have this. This… this is dangerous.”

Bruce nodded. “So how far did they get? Is it fully functional?”

“Not sure. But we need to make sure it is completely useless.”
“Well… pretty sure you and I can take it apart. Make sure its scrap metal even before SHIELD gets here-”

“Keep your eyes open,” Stephen muttered under his breath.

Only Loki seemed to have heard him, however, giving him a sideward glance. “So you feel it too… is it some type of magic-“

"Not sure... maybe-"

Suddenly, there was a sound that resonated, echoed around the concrete walls. It started out quiet, soft hummin sound coming from the machine, then louder and louder. The device seemed to be activating on its own.

“Guys-“

“Did you touch something?”

“No! … Tony and I didn’t even start-“

Stephen’s heart plummeted, every muscle in his body tensing up all at once.

He and Loki exchanged a look. Both of them can feel the surge of energy. They both needed to act. Now.

There were distinctly two separate groups. The rogues were further away to their left, Thor and Bruce nearby but mostly together. Tony, who had been at the center of the platform, was already heading towards Loki and Stephen’s direction.

If they were fast enough…
“Shit-”

“EVERYONE TAKE COVER!”

“STEPHEN!”

It happened in a matter of seconds. One moment a blinding white light.

Stephen darted forward grabbing Tony just in time before conjuring a large shield. But even then, he felt the force of the energy pushing them back.

Then, next… nothing.

Stephen managed one deep breath before the jolt of panic. He whipped around, his hand gripping tighter at Tony’s warm body. He couldn’t help it. Even as his eyes were seeing Tony, the other appeared alright, Stephen couldn’t let go just yet… had to squeeze harder to make sure it was the reality.

Eventually, the doctor let out a sigh of relief. However...

Tony wasn’t looking at him. He was looking over his shoulder, eyes wide and mouth slightly open.

He really didn’t want to, but slowly, Stephen straightened himself up, turning around… becoming face to face with Loki, who stood not too far away.

With a grimace, he surveyed around hastily. They were alone. Rogues, Thor, Bruce, nowhere in sight.

“…YOU WERE SUPPOSED TO SHIELD THEM!”

The god’s momentary horrified expression was replaced by one of irritation. “And why would that be the case?” Loki snapped. “I was protecting Stark.” Then he gestured to where the rogues had formerly been. “Rogues…” then to Tony who was still standing slightly behind his fiancé. “Stark.”
“Because I obviously would have shielded him!” Stephen retorted in indignation. He blinked hard and fast, trying to make sense of the situation, to properly reason. “…And your brother was there with them!”

Loki crossed his arms, “And that’s supposed to be my motivation? As if I would pass on any chance to be rid of Thor even for the time being.”

Stephen stared at him, now lost for words. Behind him, he could hear Tony muttering a curse.

The Asgardian cleared his throat, pacing, throwing the two of them uneasy glances. “…I… I’m sure they are in one piece… Was probably thrown into another time… It simply matters of finding them.”

Tony ran a hand over his face roughly. The level of stress that suddenly came over him, millions of thoughts racing to get ahead.

“What…? What happened?”

“What are we?”

Steve shook his head, trying to clear his vision. Then he was hit with a sudden coldness, the smell, the distant sounds of the city that was all too familiar.

“We’re... in New York…”

The snow crunched underneath his boots as he paced slowly. He tried to do a quick headcount. Sam, Bucky, Natasha, Clint, Thor, Bruce… The only ones who appeared missing were Loki, Strange, and Tony. But considering their placement right before the flash, it could very well be the case that one of the two sorcerers shielded the three of them somehow.
All of them were looking around cautiously, taking it all in, trying to find some hint as to what actually happened. They appeared to be in one of the more remote alleyway. Thankfully, it appeared to be very early in the morning, just after daybreak. And with the mountain of snow that piled the streets, perhaps most were not keen on being out and about.

Considering they didn’t exactly blend in easily, this was a godsend. Until they knew what exactly how they got here, or if this really was the real New York, it wouldn’t be wise to attract attention.

But the answer to that particular question came rather quickly.

“…Hey… Cap?”

His head snapped towards the far end of the alleyway. Clint seemed to be staring upward.

“What?” He started to walk at a quick pace. Sam and Bucky following close behind.

Then they see it. The Stark Tower.

The. STARK. Tower.

“…Oh god.”

“Guys-“

They all turned in unison. Natasha was heading towards their direction, holding up a newspaper that she appeared to have retrieved from somewhere. Her expression appeared rather calm considering…

December 18, 2011

There were cursing. Many pacing.
Steve took out his communicator to SHIELD. It was blacked out. Of course, none of their devices would be working.

Where was he in December of 2011? He had just been found frozen in ice. SHIELD managed to bring him back from a comatose state. There were at least a couple weeks of them keeping him in that fake 1940s facilities but he figured out it was all pretense by... October. Then he took a short leave from the city to somewhere upstate. The Retreat cabin, as suggested by Fury. He needed the quiet...

Next to him, Natasha was doing something very similar. Running over her own timeline.

“So what now?” Sam said hesitantly.

Clint ruffled his hair in frustration. “Well... if we can figure out how to contact SHIELD? SHIELD was still around-” he turned to Natasha. “Where were we in 2011. If we accidentally run into our past selves-“

“Mission. Brussels.” Yes, she had been away on a mission with Clint. They had met on the 17th little outside the city border of Brussels in Belgium.

“Perhaps…” Thor said finally, “Perhaps we should find Man of Iron. He figured out how to time travel once…”

“He… wouldn’t know us,” Sam said as he looked around at the group. “Well, not me anyway. And not Barnes. …Although that might be a good thing right now…”

“He wouldn’t know any of us yet,” muttered Steve. But then his eyes landed us Natasha.

Natasha. Tony would still know her.

The redhead let out a small sigh. As if understanding Steve’s line of thoughts. She definitely remembers 2011. They were not completely on good terms yet but not in a bad one either. They had some good runs. Although deep down, even as Tony understood, he was still not fond of the notion she had to take much of Stephen’s time.
But Tony… Tony of this timeline would at least have the means to contact SHIELD.

“Clothes first,” She said after a long pause. “We can’t be attracting so much attention. Then we need to find Tony. Tony would know how to get in touch with SHIELD. Will know today’s code.”

“Well,” Bruce let out a long sigh, “if anyone can help us get back to 2024, it would be Tony.”

“So Stark Tower? Stark Industries?”

Clint, who seemed to have darted over to a nearby payphone a minute prior, was sprinting back. “I tried both. Said I was SHIELD. The fate of the world all that crap. But they are saying they don’t know where Tony is.”

Natasha stared at him for another second, a memory that slipped her thoughts sinking in as her gaze fell to the newspaper still in her hands. “…Of course,” she muttered as she closed her eyes for a brief moment. It seemed more to herself than at the team.

“Nat?”

The next second she was already walking down the alley at a quick pace. The rest of them hurrying to catch up.

Steve frowned, “Do you know where he is?”

“It’s Sunday.”

“What?”

“It’s Sunday,” she said a little louder. A definite sigh followed.
“He’s… frantic.”

“And you’re not pleased.”

Stephen turned to Loki with a glare. “He’s working himself to death. It was world war three just to get him to eat. Of course, I’m not pleased.”

Between the two sorcerers, it was not an impossible task relocating all of the mechanical parts that dealt with the time machine to the Avengers compound. It was currently laid out exactly as it had been in that underground hall but in one of the large training halls.

They, of course, had received an angry call from Ross and Fury as to where they had all gone along with a potential reality threatening device. When SHIELD arrived, the area was completely emptied by the trio. But once Tony had explained how, other than he Loki, and Stephen, the rest of the Avengers present that day may have been thrown into another timeline… Well… Stephen wondered if they had truly given Ross a heart attack.

Since then, Tony had been pouring all his energy into figuring out how to get the time travel machine to work again. Meanwhile, Stephen tried without much success yet, in figuring out how to pinpoint where exactly they could have gone in terms of both location and date.

“Well…” Loki went on in a near whisper, glancing carefully towards Tony’s direction. Although it was quite obvious the engineer was far from actually listening, too engrossed in the task at hand. “…If you just tell him exactly why you had left… perhaps he would not be so eager to bring them back-”

He gave Loki an exasperated look. Although it seemed as though the god was far from being intimidated by his displeasure anymore.

“…Something tells me your lack of answers of the past is not the only thing keeping you from speaking to him of what really happened.”

That made Stephen swallow as he looked away. His gaze fell onto Tony’s back. A long silence followed but eventually he let out a sigh.
“…Because,” he said almost in a whisper. “…I’m selfish. I’m not… ready… to share him with the rest of the world.”

There was a pause before Loki replied, “Is that the path we are on still?”

Stephen stayed quiet.

“…Well, have you foreseen this?”

“No,” he replied reluctantly. “…But the future is a lot more complicated than that. It is impossible to have seen everything, every detail. But it does not mean-”

Loki cut him off quickly, “But then there is a chance… a chance that the future you saw… what we saw… has already been diverted. How can you be so sure-”

“You act as if you do not want it to happen.”

It was Loki’s turn to look exasperated. “Of course I wish for it to happen. I simply want to make sure of it.”

“You two okay there?”

Both of them jumped, although recovering fairly swiftly. They were so absorbed in the conversation they did not see Tony had turned his attention to them. The billionaire was now giving them a quizzical look.

“What’s wrong?”

“I…” Loki started hesitantly.

Stephen gritted his teeth, lowering his gaze.
After a hasty sideward glance, the god cleared his throat, taking a step forward. “I… do apologize for what happened.” He turned from Tony to Stephen, then back. It wasn’t a lie. In fact, this was what he originally came to say. It just happens that it would conveniently divert the attention from their current conversation topic.

“…If it matters at all… what I said before… it wasn’t quite the truth. It wasn’t that I purposely let them- get thrown into some…” his voice trailed off for a moment. “…I only said all that out of frustration. Probably more at myself.”

Tony was already stepping away from the machine towards them. “Hey… it’s okay. Mistakes happen. We’ll get them back. Like you said most likely they are fine just… matter of finding them-”

There was a pause, but as if trying to lighten the situation a bit, “Why not we just leave them there?”

Both Tony and Stephen let out a huff of laughter.

“Hey now-“ Tony said in mock anger. “Bad kitty-“

Loki shot him a glare, his tone turning much more sarcastic. “Well is it not peaceful without them here? I’m having the time of my life-”

Stephen shook his head, letting out a low laugh.

“Fine…” the god let out a sigh. “Well… I will ask around to see what can be done. Surely this could not have been the first time in this universe someone had accidentally time traveled.”

Tony shook his head with a chuckle, turning around once more to the monitor as he called out some direction for FRIDAY to assist.

He waited another minute then turned towards the Sorcerer Supreme. “I’m heading to SHIELD first…” he said in a low tone. “…If anything, the chaos of this situation is the best opportunity to search while being unnoticed. I’ll head to other realms soon afterward and seek the help of other magic users-“
Stephen gave a short nod. And as Loki disappeared, he sighed as he threw the current book he was holding aside, picking up another one.

None of them asked questions after awhile. It seemed as though Natasha was lost in her own thoughts for the most bit to entertain their confusion. Clint, who seemed less concerned than the rest also appeared tight-lipped, brushing off their queries or shrugging them off.

They first ended up at a nearby storage facility. Most of them didn’t know why exactly they were there till the two former SHIELD agents opened a pod at the far end on the basement floor. “For a rainy day,” Clint had told them as they peered around to many crates of extra spare clothes and other basic supplies.

It didn’t take long before they changed into regular clothing that they found fit. Their Avengers outfit and gear being put into large bags that could be carried along without suspicion.

Then without much downtime, Natasha was hurrying them out and on route to Upper East Side. Soon, the group arrived in what appeared to be a fancy apartment complex.

“Seriously?” Sam muttered quietly as they watched Natasha from a distance. She was greeting a very stern looking doorman who appeared to already know her. “How many of these did Stark own? Was a whole tower not enough?” But he appeared more amused than anything else.

Steve looked around the lobby uneasily. It was… nice. Very clean, well kept, almost eerily… perfect. Mostly modern in style with few elegant flares. For someone like him, it felt more like something out of a movie or a magazine spread than something… real. A lobby that he associated with a five-star hotel that he didn’t even dare set foot into till he met Tony.

But for some reason, something felt off. He couldn’t explain it but this didn’t seem like Tony’s style in things. But he did suppose, this was before they had even met. And time does change a person.

It didn’t take long before Natasha to usher them into the direction of the elevator, all of them filing in quickly.
“All of you, stay quiet. Let me handle this,” she said finally. “He’s… going to be difficult—“

Sam frowned slightly, “I mean, sure, he doesn’t know us but… we all got along fine when we first met… All the shit with the Accords didn’t even happen yet… or everything that happened recently… so doubt he’d be hostile right?”

“This is Stark,” added Thor with a pleasant smile. “He liked us very much since day one—“ Then he gave a sarcastic glance towards the Captain. “…well most of us.”

Steve glared back, his arms crossed. Although the Asgardian seemed completely unfazed, staring right back in amusement.

“All I don’t think Tony is going to be the problem…”

At that, they all turned questioningly to Clint. Though, before they could press for the archer to elaborate the elevator door opened and Natasha sprinted out.

The rest followed quickly.

There was only one door at the end of the short hall, so a penthouse, Steve guessed. He watched silently as Natasha rang the doorbell. She looked oddly stiff, although it was masked pretty well.

“Who is it?” said a voice from the other side of the door.

Steve frowned slightly. That was not Tony. But the voice sounded awfully familiar…

“Me,” Natasha called out evenly. “Open up—“

There was a low groan that could be heard and… something in his head clicked.

Steve’s eyes widened, he barely had the time to look to his left. Bucky had a similar expression, the color draining from his face as he put two and two together.
The door opened just enough to reveal…

“Oh god,” Sam muttered.

Clint let out a short laugh as he turned away from them shaking his head.

Almost out of impulse, Steve lowered his head, a hand rising subtly to hide his face. Though next second he realized how stupid it all was. The other wouldn’t even know who he was yet.

“It’s Sunday,” said Stephen who was half leaning on the doorframe, giving Natasha an unimpressed look.

The sorcerer… well, Steve supposed definitely not a sorcerer at the moment… seemed different. He definitely can tell this was the same Stephen Strange. The piercing icy gaze, high cheekbones, dark hair with silver streak… but something about him was very… well, different. And he was sure it was not just that the doctor was clean-shaven and looked about ten years younger than how the Captain remembers him to be.

Natasha let out a sigh, “Strange- listen…”

A light smirk played on his lips, “Last name basis was so last month, Natalia-” Although he was definitely not opening the door any wider.

"Natalia?” muttered Sam but Clint elbowed him to silence.

She raised an eyebrow, “You’re not going to let me in?”

“If not Sundays,” Stephen retorted quickly, almost nonchalant. Then, without a pause, “Did you change your hair?”

“This is important-“
“Love the gradient. Looks good. Is it for the new mission? Shouldn’t you have been long gone?” There was a playful edge in the doctor’s tone that had Steve frowning further. He never heard Strange out of the stern, serious voice. This version of the sorcerer felt much more… young, lively, and definitely more… lighthearted.

“I need Tony.”

“No.”

“Stephen-“

As if watching a ping pong game, the rest of their heads turned from Natasha to Stephen, then back and forth.

“No. It’s Sunday. He doesn’t work on Sundays. You guys get him from 8 to 5 and every damn time there is an, quote and quote, emergency. So unless the world is ending, we agreed, Sunday is my day.”

“It is an emergency. The world is very much in danger if we don’t get-“

The doctor gave a short, dramatic ugh. “My evening is in danger.”

“It’s… morning…” Bucky muttered. Although the super-soldier pursed his lips just as quickly. As if he accidentally spoke and now regretting drawing the attention.

Stephen, as if finally realizing there were many others present, peered at each of them quickly with a blank expression before rolling his eyes, “Really? Haven’t you watched the Incredibles?”

“Stephen… please. This is important. Very important. We need Tony.”

“Who are they?” he nodded towards the group.

They all froze suddenly.
Natasha cleared her throat. Darting her gaze to her feet before meeting his eyes once more. “His teammates… our… teammates… from the future.”

Silence fell.

“Stephen…” the redhead said in a soft tone. “…stay calm.”

“I am calm,” he snapped. But the smirk had finally disappeared, his expression turning cold for a moment.

After a couple more seconds, however, Stephen let out a heavy sigh before opening the door further. He turned to Natasha, fixing her with a look, “When my boyfriend drops dead from stress? I’m blaming you.”

[This event / storyline of time travel will be continued in it's sunday]

Chapter End Notes

Ahaaha... if anyone remembers me asking preference on the time travel situation in like... chapter 14? ...yea it took really long time to deliver LOL.

I'm still at a debate if I want to completely split this plotline off to a side fic tho. If I do it'll probably be a lot shorter chapters, perhaps more frequent updates, mostly humor... except maybe the finale of it.
You can find the branched off fic here -> it's sunday

& as always, thank you for bearing with me and continuing to read this story. I was reminded recently it's been MONTHS since I started this story and yea it has been a fucking long one so... thank you ;__;♡
Chapter 23

Chapter Notes

Next few chapters are gonna hit Spider Man: Homecoming & Far From Home.

A look into Tony’s spiral after the Civil War.
Steve is the one who left. ...But why is his mind continuing to tread back to Stephen and their breakup from years ago?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

[Earth, September 2016]

“Hey Happy! Um, here’s my report for tonight. I stopped a grand... theft bicycle. Couldn’t find the owner so I just left a note... Uh... I helped this lost... old Dominican lady. She was really nice and bought me a churro. So I just... um... feel like I could be doing more, you know? ...Just curious when the next mission is going to be. So, yea... just call me back. Tell Mr. Stark I said hi. ...It’s Peter. Parker.”

Loki halted his steps. The sharp gaze following Tony as he stood in front of the main monitor, back turned.

Seeming to not realize the god’s presence yet, Tony silently pressed a button on the projected keyboard. The voice message replaying in an instant.

“...So I just... um... feel like I could be doing more, you know? ...Just curious when the next mission is going to be. So, yea... just call me back. Tell Mr. Stark I said hi...”

The billionaire shifted his weight then, his face ever so slightly turning to one side. Loki noted the hint of a smile that tugged at the corner of the other’s lips.

“...It’s Peter. Parker.”
“Why do you keep this boy at arm's length?”

Tony spun around abruptly. His eyes widened for a quick second. A momentary tension, a habit, the constant fear at the back of his mind that he will never be rid of.

But just as quickly, the usual smirk replaced the distress. “You’re early today, princess. I was just thinking of ordering food- …said you were curious about Indian food, right?”

Loki rolled his eyes as he finished crossing the floor at a leisure pace. As Tony gave his AI direction of food order, the god simply sat on the worktable the engineer was working off of.

It had become a habit, ordering various take-outs in the late evenings. Right after Loki mentioned his interest in Midgardian delicacies. How after centuries of it, food in Asgard had become rather dull for him. They favored meat, rather simple in flavors and unimaginative when it came to spices. It never helped he cared little for red meats, liked strong flavors, and developed a fondness for more diverse vegetables and seafood.

Of course, the god had every intention of eventually coaxing Tony into… indulge him in terms of this matter. Knew it would be very easy to get the other onboard. The mortal clearly had a people-pleasing streak that, at first glance, clashed horribly with the cockiness and arrogance he held himself with.

But what Loki didn’t expect was with each meal, each day that past… how much care Tony took in making sure to remember the god’s preference. Loki honestly couldn’t remember the last time someone willingly remembered what he had said or wanted even just the day before.

At first, the Asgardian admits, his self-serving nature was pleased. Silently delighting in how easy it would be for him to manipulate the situation to serve his own interest. To persuade Stark to his whims.

But… ever so slowly… the thought started to bother him.

“Is he yours?” he presses on. The emerald gaze still fixed on Tony’s movements, his expressions. “…Thor never mentioned you have a child-“

“…What…?” Then the brunette let out a short laugh. “Uh- …No. …No. He’s not my kid… Just a
kid... I know...

Loki hummed. “Are you responsible for him?”

“Uh... yeah. ...Yeah... kind of.”

“...When was the last you saw him?”

There was a short pause. But eventually Tony cleared his throat, although deliberately not meeting his gaze. The engineer typed away at his keyboard, eyes glued to the screen. “…The day at the airport I guess. Dropped him off home before... Siberia.”

“...And you’re satisfied with simply getting updates from your man and listening to these recordings?”

“...It’s... he’s safer that way.”

“Do you not trust him to be capable?”

“I trust him. ...It’s me I don’t trust.”

Loki didn’t speak. Simply continued to stare.

“Just remember I won’t be here next Friday.”

Loki lazily turned his head to the side, still sprawled out on the couch on the far end of the workshop. “Are you standing me up?”

Tony let out a huff. “The things you are picking up from too much soaps.”
But the other’s piercing stare lingered, almost as a glare, demanding answers still. As if saying, *what can possibly be more important than me?*

The brunette shook his head with a chuckle. “I have to be at an annual gala. I’ve already been hiding from the public long enough… You know, shake hands, pretend I care, mingle and act like I don’t hate most of their guts—”

“Why must you go if you hate it so?”

“Well… You’re a prince. Didn’t you have some fancy events in Asgard you had to attend even if you didn’t want to?”

That certainly shut Loki up. He gave a light *hm* before turning to his book once more.

Something told Tony he should continue the conversation for some reason. The mood suddenly felt cold.

If there is one thing he learned in the recent months of this odd friendship, it’s that Loki’s mood can be quite volatile. “But yeah… just a heads up… You know… don’t come here and blame me if you don’t see me or something—”

The other didn’t respond. Was he actually sulking?

“…Come on, sunshine,” the billionaire called out, trying to keep his voice light. “I don’t want to go either but I have to. I’d say you could tag along… Pep is still in France and Rhodey is…” He swallowed, his subconscious not wanting to finish that sentence and choosing to skip it entirely. “…Trust me. I’d rather be hanging with you too. You’re a lot more fun company than that stupid crowd. But… you know… cameras and you’ll be recognized. …You can come the next day? I’ll be here.”

Silence.

Tony ruffling his own hair, his eyes darting around before landing on the god once more. “…Are you not going to say anything?”
No response still.

He cleared his throat after another moment. His hands fidgeting with a tool before setting it down. “Do... do you want ice cream?”

“Yes.”

Loki soon learned that there is another child in the picture. But this one appeared to be one without powers.

The Asgardian sorcerer had once walked in on a video chat Tony was having with a teenage boy with messy dark blonde hair and attitude and boldness that reminded Loki of the billionaire himself. He seemed to be walking him through some complicated Midgardian science even Loki had a hard time fully following.

He stayed off to the side, away from view. Silently surveying the interaction.

Tony doesn’t have the same softness with this one as Peter. He is instead tougher. Pushed the kid, challenged him, bantered as if he was an equal.

Although Loki was still quite sure, underneath it all, Tony would crumble at the first sign of tears from the boy.

And the teen, Harley, definitely knew that. That Loki was certain of.

As time passed, he would often hear Tony calling the child a brat. Both to Harley directly and when referencing him in some stories to the god. He regularly exclaimed exasperation about the boy’s habits in which the kid would just shrug or have a smart comeback ready.

But despite all the complaints, when Harley doesn’t answer back to his text for a day or two... or three, Loki would catch Tony checking his phone more often than normal.
“Mr. Stark are you alone tonight?”

“Is it true Captain Rogers left you to be with an old flame?”

“Mr. Stark is your relationship with Captain America really over?”

“What’s your opinion on the government declaring your old teammates and lover as fugitives—“

“Look at you- running away from attention for once.”

A flare of irritation quickly rose to his throat at the voice. He really didn’t want to do this right now. If it wasn’t for the fact he desperately needed to start doing some damage control after the Accord mess, he would have skipped this gala tonight just as he done with every other social function for the past couple of months.

Tony tried hard not to show the outright distaste as he attempted moved past Justin Hammer. But the other quickly shifted so he was blocking the way, that annoying smirk plastered onto this grimy face.

“What do you want,” he spat out coldly.

“Woah, someone is in a mood,” Justin replied easily. “What’s the rush? It’s not like you have anyone waiting anymore.”

The camera flashed around them continuously. Tony mildly wondered if people around them could hear the conversation.

Don’t cause a scene. Don’t cause a scene.

“Heard about your perfect relationship going to hell by the way. It’s such a pity… I honestly was
shocked and impressed you landed yourself America’s golden boy…”

Tony’s fingers flexed in the inside of his suit pocket.

“Wasn’t shocked about his leaving though… We all knew it wasn’t going to last right? I mean- … You’re not stupid. You’re supposed to be a genius. You must have known-”

Tony tried to steady his breathing. Trying not to let his mind wander.

Trying not to see those clear baby blue eyes that sparkled with fondness at his jokes. The golden locks that were always a mess in the morning. How they slipped through his fingers as they kissed. That honest smile, the warm laugh… the touch…

... The clever long fingers… that ended up marked by horrid scars.

“God, why must you be so stupid. What part of this do you not understand? I. Don’t. Want. You.”

“Oh! How rude of me. This is Cole-“

Before Tony registered completely, another had joined them. An unfamiliar face to the engineer. The younger man stood a little taller than Justin. Short, jet-black hair, large dark eyes. He smiled at Tony, although seeming a bit nervous at all the attention.

“Cole Harwell. My boyfriend,” Justin went on, the smirk widening. “…Are you seriously here alone, Anthony? I remember the days people were lining up to be your date. Even if it was just for the evening… But- oh of course. How time changes- You turned forty-six this year, right?”

That was it. It struck a nerve in ways he didn’t even realize will. Tony opened his mouth to make a retort…

When a firm hand settled onto the back of his lower waist.

Given everything that happened recently, Tony was shocked he did not flinch. But something felt
oddly familiar.

“Sorry, love. I must have lost you in the crowd. They can’t get enough of you, can they?’

That smooth, deep tone, a distinct accent. Tony turned his gaze hastily, eyes settling on the newcomer. He hated to admit it but it took him longer than it should to connect the dots.

Loki?

Yes, it had to be Loki. The long frame, high cheekbone, sharp smile, soft almond-shaped eyes that always contrasted so severely with the piercing gaze.

Except. His eyes were not the distinct emerald green… but more muted in color, almost gray. His hair was also short, dark blonde, which definitely threw Tony in for a loop, loosely combed back. The god was not in his usual black leather either. But instead in an immaculately fitted midnight blue suit with just enough accents and flares to grab attention while still remaining classy.

He briefly wondered, however, if it weren’t for the close proximity, the voice, would he have recognized the Asgardian.

“Ah—…sorry about that, hun,” Tony eventually said with a grin. After the initial shock, he found it not at all hard playing along. “This is—…”

“You know I have no interest in unnecessary introductions, Anthony.”

Tony hid his laugh in a half-hearted cough as Justin’s expression turned sour in an instant.

And Loki brazenly ignored it. “Shall we head in?” His hand slowly pressed harder, pulling their bodies closer, just enough for him to lean over to whisper in Tony’s ears. Although, the way the god was far from being quiet, the perfect angling of their intimate display, the engineer could tell it was meant very much for a show. Meant for an audience. “The sooner we get in the sooner I can persuade you to leave. I had far better plans in mind for the evening I’m sure you’ll thoroughly enjoy in more ways than one—”
Tony smirked, trying to suppress a laugh. Although, he was sure only Loki knew at the moment the true reason for his glee. He couldn’t help but notice how Cole couldn’t keep his eyes off of Loki. The way Justin, after gawking at the Asgardian himself, glared at his boyfriend. The irritation clear.

They headed in without so much as a backward glance. Made it into a corner by the door before they locked eyes. Both bursting into quiet laughter.

The smile didn’t falter even as Tony found his voice once more. “So… what is this? Got bored of being King of Asgard and decided to play James Bond?”

“I have no idea who you are referring to-“ Loki replied in an easy tune. “But I do hope you mean that as a compliment.”

“Very,” Tony said giving the other an exaggerated look over, up and down. “That suit–“

“Glad you like it. Because it was a gift from you.”

The brunette raised an eyebrow.

“Well… it wasn’t as if I had Midgardian currencies and you did encourage me to be less dubious in my means of accomplishing a task-“

Tony chuckled, shaking his head. “Well… looks like I have good taste. Come on then. Let me get a better look. Give me a turn-“

A wide grin stretched across the god’s lips as he took a half-step back, arms raised and palms up, giving a mocking turn.

Tony let out another warm laugh before whistling.

“I take it you are entertained.”
The billionaire let out a huff. “More than. …Also, this is so trippy. You look like you… but not. But pretty sure I may have not recognized you unless I had some, you know… hints. So you can change your form? That’s quite a party trick.” Then he paused for a brief moment. “…I didn’t expect you today. I did tell you I’d be busy tonight, right?”

“Yes. But you also mentioned in passing I can tag along if I can find a way not to be recognized.”

“Don’t know why anyone would willingly come to these things.“

The god hummed softly, “Ah well… as you said… it is rather dull being Odin. I honestly would welcome any chance of taking on a new role. Plus…” He offered an arm with a smirk. “I’d rather be hanging with you too.”

Tony threw his head back in another laugh, taking the offered arm and letting himself be led further inside.

This felt nice. He felt calm, content. Something he hadn’t had the luxury of feeling in awhile. A friend by his side.

But at the corner of his eyes… the silhouette of the other… if he squinted…

This felt awfully familiar.

The tall, lean frame. The impeccable suit that emphasized all the right places. Clever eyes that held so much intelligence and mischief. The long legs that strode confidently into a room as if he owned the place. The manner that demanded attention.

Not Steve… Even with the blonde hair not…

“Is something wrong?”

That snapped Tony’s attention back to reality. Away from the memory that he had thought he buried a long time ago. One that felt like another lifetime.
Loki was now staring at him in a way that suggested a rare concern. It probably meant he had on an expression that merited an alarm.

Tony quickly schooled his face. “Nothing. My mind wandered for a second.”

The other was carefully watching him.

“…You… just you remind me of… someone. But it’s nothing.”

After another short silence, Loki miraculously lets it go. That was the thing about the god that Tony had to appreciate. Loki always knew when to push and when to let things slide.

“…Alright.” Then there was a newfound glint in the other’s sharp gaze. As if set sights on the next pray. “How about let’s have some fun with that annoying acquaintance of yours-“

............

Loki had imagined all sorts of creative ways to make Hammer’s night miserable. Tony seemed awfully entertained as he continued to whisper offhanded remarks or some ploy of some embarrassing scenarios he can curse upon the poor mortal.

But oddly enough, Justin’s evening seemed to be turning for the worse all on its own.

At some point, the man tripped over nothing, ending up headfirst into a table of appetizers. Both Loki and Tony stared for a moment in shock. Though eventually, Tony turned towards him.

“…I swear that was not me,” Loki replied in sincerity. And it was the truth. He hadn't done anything.

He also had nothing to do with Justin ending up stuck in the restroom because his clothes had suddenly disappeared. Tony apparently had gone to the restroom towards the end of the night only to discover the Hammer Industries CEO hiding in one of the stall begging for assistance. It had
taken Tony an extra long time to fetch someone for Justin because he had been laughing so hard.

…And Loki certainly did not have anything to do with how his own chair seeming to constantly be getting pulled away if he tried to sit any closer to Tony. The god admits he may have embarrassingly ended up on the floor the first time if it hadn’t been for his quick reflexes.

It was odd, to say the least. But perhaps it was karma. At least for Hammer. As for his own perplexing situation throughout the evening… Loki eventually amused half-heartedly at some point if perhaps a nasty spirit had been haunting the building. But why did it hate him?

“So will you forgive him? For the sake of the children?”

The god had long since stopped heeding to Tony’s rebuttals about how no, they were not actually his kids. Clearly Tony had already been adopted as the father and the billionaire was just stupid to acknowledge it yet.

Tony gave him a quizzical stare, trying to swallow down the large spoonful of Thai curry he had just stuffed into his mouth. “Forgive who?” he asked as he passed the container of food to the opposite side of the kitchen counter.

The god took it, picking at it with his own utensils. “Your Captain,” he said in a neutral tone.

“What? You think I should or something?” that definitely sounded a bit defensive, bitter. The other still reacted very poorly whenever the subject of Steve Rogers or any of the rogues came up.

“No,” he replied back calmly, giving a flat stare that clearly stated you should know better. “But humans tend to do foolish things for the sake of their children.”

Tony continued to stare at the Asgardian awhile longer. Putting the two and two together. “…If they are going to be anyone’s kid, they are MY kids. Not his,” he snapped.

Loki raised an eyebrow, although he silently continued eating.
The other rolled his eyes. “…Steve never met them. …Well other than Peter at the airport fight… Harley never. …Harley knew of Cap and my… relationship but… yeah…”

“I see,” he said curtly as he lowered his gaze back to the food.

A short pause followed. Tony’s gaze never leaving.

“Is there something you want to say?”

Loki stared back up, calculating. “How long did you say you and the Captain had been together?”

“Little under two years.”

“And you claim your relationship with the Captain had been serious. Two years seems sufficient enough for you Midgardians to be introducing your partners to your kids. Is it not an important step?”

A heavy silence fell between them.

“Even I now know of their existence after a couple months in your presence. Why didn’t Rogers?” Unless you hid the fact. But the last part, he chose not to say.

Loki always prided himself in being able to pick apart another’s mind, know what they are thinking, what they must be feeling, intending… yet there were times he felt stumped at the puzzle that was Tony Stark. As if the final piece was withheld from him.

“Maybe… maybe I knew it was not going to last.” His voice carried an easiness that was oddly eerie. “…They all leave eventually.”

Tony knew the game Loki was playing. He knew because he was the same in some regard. Need
to pick apart a person like an equation. Need to figure them out, what makes them tick. Need answers.

Maybe he should feel unnerved. Especially since unlike many others, he knew if Loki applied himself, he surely would complete the puzzle that depicted his miserable life.

But well, Tony was almost confident by now Loki didn’t mean harm. Just very curious. And the truth of the matter was… Maybe… just maybe… he wanted someone to figure it all out. Maybe then, he wouldn’t feel so… alone.

Maybe he just needed someone to get how he was truly feeling.

So maybe… he forgot to put away that old photo on purpose.

But what Tony really did not expect was for the situation to take this turn. A very terrible turn.

The day Loki finally stumbled upon the final clue. The final tidbit that possibly could make everything much more sense… it was clear the god had not been intentionally seeking it.

“Heyyyy you’re early, Lolo!” Tony stepped out of the elevator in a hurried pace. He had rushed down when FRIDAY had informed him Loki was already at the workshop. “Listen, there is this great Italian place I haven’t been to in a while, I was thinking maybe we can…”

The next words died at his throat.

He knew it was Loki. Tony knew because he had a front-row seat in all the god can do with his shapeshifting ability for the past week.

After realizing how fascinated the brunette was, Loki had indulged him in many demonstrations. It was also very handy in that they were no longer stuck to spending all their time at the barricaded workshop of the compound. They could go wherever they pleased as long as Loki masqueraded as a random date and Tony simply pretended to be on some rebound binge after Steve’s departure. Both Pepper and Rhody, even SHIELD, never questioned the dozens of photographs that ended up on the Internet. Tony also got a good laugh at Loki’s quite entertaining impression of Thor.
But this particular form… he had never expected to see.

He never expected to see those glacial eyes again. Not in this lifetime.

Loki had turned towards him with a smirk, the photograph still in his hand. A photograph that Tony had found earlier at the back corner of a drawer. One of him and Stephen, the backdrop of Malibu sunset. Before Avengers. Before New York. Before the god-awful accident. Before everything got complicated.

They looked so happy.

He believed they were happy.

“I haven’t been happy for a while. I’m tired of all the dramatics and your need to play the hero… it’s not fun anymore, Tony.”

The Asgardian widened his stance a little. Allowing the billionaire to get a better look at his current appearance. The form he had decided to mimic. The skin of Stephen Strange.

“So who is he?”

Tony could tell Loki did not mean anything by it. His voice was light, almost whimsical. It was just a curiosity Loki happened to have indulged in on a whim. He probably didn’t even realize the gravity of the question. What information he had unexpectedly trodden on.

But something inside Tony snapped. His mind crowded with thoughts and feelings he could not define even if he were given thousands of words to explain.

He wanted to look away. Needed to pry his gaze away from that smile. But he couldn’t. This was probably the only time he would ever see that smile again. The beautiful icy blue gaze staring at him with any hint a keen to fondness.

He felt sick.
“Get out.”

It was barely a whisper. Tony hated how that sounded. How desperate it was, laced with agony and so so weak.

And the guilt settled in as Loki’s smile turned into a frown.

“Anthony… what?”

The god took a step forward, concerned. It would have been better if he had just simply turned his appearance back to his own. Tony wished he could explain. Say something. But he couldn’t.

Tony stepped back, visibly tensing. If Loki stepped any closer in that form, he feared he may grab on and never let go. Even if he knew it was all lies. This wasn't Stephen. Not real. But...

That seemed to have set the other into a panic, sudden seriousness in his tone. “Stark-“

“I SAID GET OUT!”

Loki flinched, as if the words burned him. His eyes becoming wide in utter shock.

But it made Tony wince as well. He knew he shouldn’t have yelled. He didn’t want to do this to Loki, the remorse of it clawing at him in an instant. Yet, he couldn’t stop himself.

And the look of pain on “Stephen’s” face. That was something he never settled well with him.

It hurt. Twice as much. It felt like he was hurting two people he cares about in one go.

The next second, Loki was gone.
When Loki arrived back in Asgard, he made sure he was alone in the King’s private chambers. He swiftly uttered a spell that secured the door. Not really wanting to play the part of Odin at the moment.

He tried to calm his nerves, trying to repress the rising anger. He walked over to the large center table. Leaning against it heavily.

For once, the silence did not soothe his foul mood.

Who did the mortal think he was raising his voice at him? He should have snapped Stark’s neck for daring to…

But he wouldn’t, would he?

After all, it wasn’t as if he was actually angry for Tony yelling at him…

Although, for once, Loki wasn’t even particularly sure what he did wrong. But he must have done something to earn such contempt. Tony never yelled at him before. No matter what commotion he caused in the workshop, the attitude he behaved with that always drove Thor mad, and all the improper words that he knew he shouldn’t voice out loud… Tony… never looked at him with such disdain.

He always screwed up eventually. So he’s told.

Loki gripped tightly at the side. The next second, flinging it upwards. The desk toppled, landing on the marble flooring in a reverberating thud. All the contents fell, lying in a heap, much of it shattered or broken.

He took a couple of breaths, in and out, staring at the ruin in front of him with some twisted satisfaction.

Then a shiny glimmer caught his eyes.
A decorative paperweight that now had a crack.

But the reflection was not of himself.

Right. He had not bothered to change back from the appearance of Stark’s… whatever this man was.

A friend? Comrade? …No. Thor would have mentioned him if he was someone associated with the Avengers. He also doesn’t remember seeing this man’s face in Barton’s memories. Certainly did not remember seeing him during the invasion.

“…They all leave eventually.”

A past lover?

If so, must be before the Captain.

But whoever this man was. He seems to rattle Stark in ways even mention of the Captain could not.

Without meaning to, Loki stared at the image for a long while. The icy blue gaze that stared back was almost unsettling.

“Time, baby-girl?”

“10:47 AM, boss.”

He rubbed his eyes as flung his glasses to the side. So he ended up working nonstop through the night.
Tony tried to ignore the nervousness that kept knocking at his mind. Loki didn’t show up again the night before. He supposed that was… expected.

The billionaire turned towards the roll of parchment Loki had left weeks back. It was after he continuously voiced how there was no way to contact the god even if it was just to give him a heads up he had been called away. Something about how all he had to do was write a message on it and it’ll reach the other.

Tony had never felt the need to use it until now. But what would he even say?

He let out a sigh, ruffling his already messy hair in frustration. Apologies were never his forte. Always feared the rejection that came with it.

“Why do you keep this boy at arms length?”

But there was another he should also speak to. Stop running away from and...

“FRI? Call Peter.”

It’s been a while since he personally checked on the kid. He heard the other day of his save at the Washington Monument. It was a good one too.

“Mr. Peter. Got a sec?”

“Uh… I’m actually at school.”

“Nice work in D.C.”

“Okay…” The kid sounded nervous. But well, since when did Peter not sound a little jumpy he supposed.

Tony cleared his throat. “My dad never really gave me a lot of support… And I’m just trying to break the cycle of shame…”
“Uh… I’m kind of in the middle of something right now—“

“Don’t cut me off when I’m complimenting you. Anyways, great things are about to—“

Then he hears it. A horn blare. It awfully sounded like…

“What was that?” he snapped, straightening up from his seat a little.

“Uh… I’m at band practice.”

Damn, someone really needed to teach the kid how to lie better.

Tony narrowed his eyes. “That’s odd. Happy told me you quit band six weeks ago. What’s up?”

Why was this triggering a red flag in his brain? …What day was it…? Wasn’t he informed that the FBI raid for Chitauri technology weapon drop was happening… today… at the Staten Ferry…

“I gotta go. Uh- end call!”

“HEY!”

But too late. Peter must have hung up on him. The little shit. He was supposed to be the good kid out of the two.

Tony stood up fast from his seat, the chair knocking over. *Fuck fuck fuck*-

“FRI, get my suit ready!”

Then he paused for a second, pacing slightly. What was more important? His pride? His
embarrassment? Or Peter’s guaranteed safety? He reached for a pen, writing quick and messy on the parchment paper.

*SOS* Need help

*Peter is in danger*

*Staten Island Ferry*

Chapter End Notes

No Stephen? There was a hint of Stephen somewhere in this chapter. Anyone figured it out?

Don't worry there will be more of him in the next chapter lolololol

Ah btw... The events of the rogue's time travel adventure will be split off into a side fic. So I don't have to stop this plotline while going into that... Wanted to hit off few events before the rogues return-

>>> it's sunday <<<

^ I'm definitely hoping to update this one more frequently in shorter chapters for the time being. Although depending on level of interest, I may decide to cut down a lot of it and make it super simple or not;;;;;

& remember, kudos & comment makes the fic world go around lololololol
hello - sorry it's been literally a month since I last updated;;; I just realized that the other day-

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Good morning, Mrs. Sunshine.”

Tony strode into the room with a bright smile, soon approaching the couch Stephen had been lounging in. He bent down, giving the other a quick kiss before settling next to him.

Stephen gave his fiancé a look over. Noting with discomfort the dark circles that were now very prominent underneath Tony’s eyes. The brunette was giving a convincing act. However, there were definite signs of fatigue.

He sighed as he wrapped an arm around Tony’s waist, pulling the other closer.

“Good morning, beautiful,” he replied softly, trying to smile himself. The sorcerer tried to bite his tongue. He really did, but, “…You haven’t slept.”

“Call me Mr. Sunshine, dammit.” Tony snapped, pouting now.

Stephen gave him an amused stare, chuckling under his breath. “Well, technically the wedding is not till months away. But considering how behind we are on planning… as Pepper and Christine keep reminding me… may not happen at all it seems like.” He paused briefly, smiling as Tony dramatically rolled his eyes. “…And again. You haven’t slept.”

“Well, there’s been… a lot of things going on. But we’ll be fine,” came the easy reply. Tony pressed his back against Stephen’s side, leaning his head back onto the doctor’s shoulder. “I’m playing chicken with Pepper. Trust me, she’ll snap first and end up doing all the boring part for us.”
“We haven’t even gotten rings.”

Tony grimaced. Feeling the sudden pang of guilt.

It wasn’t that either of them was ignorant of the fast-approaching date of their wedding. It has officially gotten to a point where Pepper insisted, every chance she got, how some of these arrangements had to have been made weeks ago. Telling them off about how behind they were.

And it certainly wasn’t that Tony has forgotten they have yet to even acquire the rings itself. But considering all that transpired recently, and now that they were missing a good portion of the Avengers team to god knows where- they couldn’t exactly spare the time to be sorting through color palettes or cakes.

But Stephen didn’t seem to dwell on the whole ordeal, choosing to focus on a more important topic. At least for him anyway. “But again, back to my main point. You haven’t slept. Again.”

It was already the third day that Tony refused sleep in favor of working on the time machine. Trying to get it back to running again, as well as, to figure out where exactly had their team members ended up in. Stephen could honestly say at this point he only got a glimpse at Tony in the mornings, like now, when the billionaire came up to see the kids off and few times he went down to the lab to check on the other.

“What are they doing?”

Ignored again.

Stephen let out a disgruntled huff. Didn’t even bother turning to the direction Tony was now staring.

He could guess.

Further away in the kitchen area, the part that was not hidden by the dividing wall, were Harley, Peter, and Loki running around peering in every cabinet, every drawer, digging through every space…
He cleared his throat, “Nothing. Tony-“

“Doesn’t seem like nothing. Peter looks upset,” Tony went on before fixing his gaze onto Stephen once more. “As a parent, I’ve accepted you can’t run from your problems. They will find you. And they will demand fruit snacks.”

“…Chocolate cake.”

“What?”

“Not fruit snacks. …Chocolate cake.” Stephen had a flat expression, although no longer meeting Tony’s eyes. “Loki is currently… helping Peter and Harley look for the chocolate cake,” he muttered. “…that he, himself… uh… ate last night.”

Tony raised an eyebrow. “And you’re letting this go on…?”

“…I may have been tricked to eating a bite of it.”

The billionaire was now giving him a wide-eyed stare.

“I didn’t know it was Peter and Harley’s!” Stephen hissed. Then as Tony’s expression did not change, “…God of lies!”

“So… he made you an accomplice… unknowingly. So now you can’t even tell on him. …Wow. Clever,” A small smirk played on his lips as Tony shook his head. Then he made a motion as if to stand. “…Well, I’m telling them.”

“No!” Stephen hastily grabbed him, pulling him back down to the couch.

Tony frowned, eyeing him in question.

“I… I don’t… want them to hate me.”
He let out a huff. “Seriously? You think they’ll hate you over a fucking cake?”

And it was Stephen’s turn to frown, giving his fiancé a stern look that clearly spelled out exasperation. “You withheld sex for a week just because I ate the last donut that one time! Considering they are not your biological children they are awfully like you. They are very vindictive over sweets.”

Tony simply blinked at the sudden seriousness. It was oddly frightening and all the while hilarious given the actual topic of the issue.

Stephen tightened his grip on the brunette’s wrist. His voice low and serious, “I am soon going to be your husband! As you said, we are partners. So help me, Anthony Stark, or I swear I will-“

“Okay, okay! Geesh- I’ll take care of this.”

It took another second and a pleading look before Stephen actually let go. Tony had to try very hard to hold back his laugh at the genuine worry that was etched on the sorcerer’s expression.

Then, the billionaire stood to his feet, walking at a quick pace towards the kitchen area. “Peter, Harley, you both are going to be late. I’ll get you more cake later.”

“I swear, I left it here!” Peter said, though seeming to have finally given up.

Harley let out another annoyed huff. “I’m just irritated I can’t find it!”

“Perhaps it will eventually turn up,” Loki said sympathetically.

Tony shot him a glare. But the god simply stared right back, looking rather innocent while still wearing a very believable expression of concern.

*You seriously have no shame.* Tony tried to convey silently, rolling his eyes dramatically. He definitely catches a hint of a smirk on Loki’s lips.
Giving another short sigh, Tony shoo-ed out the teens. “Now! Both of you. Out! Happy is probably waiting downstairs.”

“Dad?” Peter said as he rummaged through his backpack. He pulled out a couple of sheets of paper. “There are papers I need you to sign. It’s for the Venice trip.”

“Right.” Tony took them and reached for a pen from his pocket.

He quickly spun Peter around by the shoulder, using the teen’s back as a flat surface. The kid didn’t even utter a complaint as Tony placed the forms to his back, signing his name onto the appropriate lines. “When was that again?”

“In a week.”

“So right after school ends. Do we need to get you anything for it? Did you pick up your passport?”

“No, I think I already got everything. And I’m picking up the passport tomorrow.” Peter turned around once he felt the papers being taken away.

Tony was holding out the signed forms. Peter took it then placed it safely into his bag.

“That’s my boy.” He gave Peter’s hair a light ruffle before continuing to push both him and Harley towards the elevator.

But just as they were about to step in, Tony turned around, mouthing back at Loki and Stephen, “Seriously???”

At least Stephen had the decency to look apologetic.

Loki simply appeared rather pleased. Clearly all too thrilled he got away with a crime.
“Boss, an incoming call from Mr. Laufeyson-“

“What?”

Before Tony could say much else, a familiar deep voice could be heard, “Will you please tell your servant to refer me as just Loki.”

He usually would be retorting back how FRIDAY was not a servant. But today, other matters took precedence.

“…You’re… you’re here-“ It wasn’t a question directed at the god. More rather, a statement to himself. As if to convince himself.

“I’m already at the ship you mentioned. I have eyes on your child…”

“You-… I... I thought-”

There was a short pause. Tony couldn’t find his next words and Loki was uncharacteristically quiet.

“…You thought I would not come.”

“…Loki-…”

“We can deal with that later.”

“Yeah…,” he replied in almost a mutter, swallowing hard. “Yeah- okay. Just make sure Peter is safe. I’m maybe 10 minutes out. …How are you calling me anyway?”

“Magic. I…”
Tony waited another couple of seconds. Though when the Asgardian continued to remain quiet, he grew concerned. “…What?”

“…Seems we got trouble.”

“Out with it.”

Stephen glanced upwards from his book, meeting the piercing emerald eyes that were staring straight at him. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“You’ve been distracted,” Loki stated as he threw aside another book, moving onto the next one.

They had been at this for most of the afternoon. Looking up various location spells that could perhaps be altered to pinpoint which timeline their teammates ended up in. Mostly Stephen. Loki lingered around, half-heartedly “helping”.

“Why are you even here today?” Stephen let out an annoyed huff, gaze turning back to the ancient texts, actually reading this time. “Were you not supposed to be seeking help from other realm’s magic users in regards to our predicament? …Or searching through SHIELD for-“

But Loki cut him off swiftly. “I’m taking a break,” he said in a bored tone.

The other sorcerer rolled his eyes. Although going on in a mutter, “At least someone knows to take breaks…”

The god raised an eyebrow, “Is this what it’s about?”

“What is?”

“Your unreasonably foul mood as of late.”
“More than half of the Avengers team got thrown into god knows where. I’m sure that merits a foul mood-“

“And yet, that is not why you are this… upset. You’ve been literally radiating anger. You should keep your residual magic in better check-”

Stephen shot him a glare that had the god shutting up in an instant. At least, for the moment.

But after a deep breath, in and out, the doctor turned his sights away. “…He’s not sleeping. Barely eating. …I just… want him to take breaks. …Tony’s not… he can’t keep doing this. Not anymore at… his age. He can’t just keep working himself to death every goddamn time the Avengers-…” His voice trailed off. He bit his lips letting out a disgruntled tsk.

A pause before the Loki replied. An answer the god surely knew would not please the other. “…It’s the Avengers-“

“They are not worth his health.” It came out in a rush, harsh in tone. For a split second, Stephen appeared shocked that he allowed himself to say it out loud.

Loki, however, stood still. Simply peering at the other unfazed.

Eventually, Stephen let out a long sigh. “Why are you this calm?” he said, now back in his usual composure. “Should you not be more worried about your brother?”

The Asgardian shrugged, “I’m sure he’s fine. Thor is very difficult to get rid of permanently. Believe me, I’ve tried.”

A smirk playing on those thin lips had the other sorcerer laughing, shaking his head slightly.

“By the way… I’ve heard you had quite fascinating snakes at your lovely Sanctum. Could you invite Thor to visit upon his return? He loves snakes-“
“We don’t even have them back yet and you’re already plotting how to get rid of him next?!”

Loki had managed to keep himself successfully hidden thus far while secretly aiding the spiderling. Casually knocked out a criminal or two, deflecting away a stray bullet or blast aimed at the teen. But then...

“Loki! What the hell is going on?”

“One of their devices went off. The ship is sinking. How far are you?”

“Maybe two minutes. Loki… there are thousands on that ferry.”

He took a deep breath, shutting his eyes closed, coming to a decision. “…I’m grabbing your child and getting him out of here.”

“Loki!”

“If it’s between your child or nameless faces, no matter how many-…” The god already darted out from the shadows, walking at a swift pace towards the direction he had last seen the teen. “…I’m not asking for your approval, Stark. It’s my decision. It’d be blood on my hands and not yours. I’m getting him out of here-“

“… Peter-… Peter’s not going to forgive himself if-“

“He would be alive!”

Tony was speaking very fast now. Something about just giving him another minute.

But Loki’s attention was elsewhere...
He came to a sudden halt, holding his breath. A shiver unconsciously went down his spine as he felt a sudden surge of unfamiliar energy.

Magic?

The Asgardian turned his gaze to the flooring of the ship, They should be sinking by now and yet… The water was holding. Something was holding back the water from flooding the vessel.

“Lokes? LOKI- Loki, listen. Just listen to me. I’ll be there in one minute just keep your eye on Peter and-“

He definitely was not listening now.

There was a sound of heavy fabric fluttering in the wind. Loki turned around in an instant, getting a glimpse of crimson red at the corner of his sights-

He ran towards it but the next second, there was a familiar whoosh of the Iron Man armor announcing Tony’s arrival finally. Briefly, the god cast his sights upwards.

Naturally, Tony directly headed for the teen.

Peter seemed to have been trying, although a bit unsuccessfully, in the end, to hold the two halves of the Ferry together with webs and sheer strength. But it was fine now. Tony appeared to have it handled, swiftly getting to work, mending the ferry together.

And the magic was gone. Loki couldn’t feel it anymore.

He peered around the surroundings again, eyes darting about.

“…What are you?”
He tried. He honestly did.

He tried to remind his brain over and over again how it’s not unreasonable for Tony to be acting this way. He tried to reason with himself, logically speaking, a good portion of the main Avengers team gone was a huge threat to the Earth’s safety.

Still, Stephen didn’t like it. He definitely did not like how Tony overworked himself day and night. Barely eating, barely sleeping, barely speaking over a sentence to him, *his fiancé*, unless Stephen initiated… barely spent time with their kids…

Oh Vishani, he became one of those spouses.

Stephen let out a heavy sigh, rubbing over his eyes roughly.

Honestly, he tried. He really really did. He bit his tongue… for the most part. Tried to be the supportive, understanding partner. Did what he can to help, aid in figuring out a solution.

But the truth of the matter was, what he truly wanted… was for Tony to just… quit.

And technically speaking, he thought grudgingly, Tony was *supposed* to have been halfway out the door by now from the Avenger, working on that retirement. Needless to say, that plan was being delayed further and further.

So at the very least, Tony could quit this obsessive search. Not forever. Just for at least for a day or so. Get proper rest before continuing. That was a reasonable request, wasn’t it?

Because Stephen knew. Yes, he definitely knew, the importance of getting the Avengers back from wherever, whenever they may have ended up in… Even the rogues. But…

Perhaps, he should give it another day before starting this… battle. See if tonight, Tony would voluntarily get some rest.

But who was he kidding? Tony would most certainly never do that. That was just his wishful thinking.
Stephen rolled his eyes before angrily pushing the button of the elevator. He didn’t trust himself to not unnecessarily snap at FRIDAY if he gave verbal instruction. He even left the cloak with Harley and Peter, feeling bad for continuously subjecting the sentient relic to his mood swings as of late.

*Keep calm.* He reminded himself as he took another deep breath in. *You know it is not his fault.* Don’t make it seem like it’s his fault. Don’t take your anger out on him-

But that did not mean he was going to play nice. Not anymore. He was done being passive.

Tony didn’t even turn as Stephen approached. Although, quite frankly, he had expected that.

And as soon as the sorcerer was close enough, he wrapped his arms around Tony’s middle in a tight hold, pressing his chest onto the shorter man’s back.

“Come to bed,” he said, placing a lingering kiss on the nape of the other’s neck. “I miss holding you. I miss this.”

Almost immediately, Tony leaned back against Stephen with a soft chuckle. And that was all the sorcerer needed to proceed.

He started to trail one of his hands lower, firmly running it down all the way to the brunette’s upper thigh before feeling it back up slowly. Soon, the slightly trembling fingers nudged away the dark tank top, tracing the skin at the beltline, the dip of the hips…

Tony threw his head back in a shaky sigh. Taking the chance, Stephen leaned forward, nibbling lightly at the pressure points along the other’s neck, trailing kisses down to the shoulder.

“…F-fuck… Stephen… I-”

Stephen told himself from the beginning, he would allow this for three days. Three days for Tony to do whatever he deemed fitting in the wake of their teammates’ disappearance thanks to the time machine.
Now? On the fourth day? All bets were off.

“Come with me. Come to bed,” he whispered just behind Tony’s ears.

Their bodies were fully flushed now. Stephen rolled his hips, shamelessly grinding onto the small of Tony’s back. He felt Tony shudder, breathe hitching.

“… I miss you.”

Perhaps it was the pure sincerity in that tone, the evident pleading that had the billionaire hesitate. But even so, eventually…

Tony let out a sigh. Biting his lips he forced himself to turn around, pushing Stephen away just enough for them to face each other properly. “…Babe- …I just… I just need to work on this for a bit longer-“

There was an ominous pause, silence in which Stephen simply stared back, expressionless.

Then he gritted his teeth, gaze falling. “…Just a bit?’

“One more idea and I’ll come right up-…“

“You said that two nights ago,” Stephen snapped. “…You’ve been saying that every time I come down here.”

Tony shut his mouth closed. Though he didn’t turn away, eyes still fixed on the sorcerer, the guilt prominent behind the whiskey gaze.

They stood completely still for another minute. Neither in a hurry to start the inevitable at this point.

“I know…,” Tony said calmly, evenly. “I know you don’t like them. …I know you want them gone-“
Stephen sighed, hanging his head low briefly before setting his sights back up. “…I understand the importance of getting them back. Tony, I understand why you’re working so hard but I… I just want-… I need you to take breaks.”

The corner of the brunette’s lips twitched as he nervously shifted his weight from one foot to the other. One of Stephen’s hands was still on Tony’s hips, and it squeezed lightly.

“…I don’t actively wish them harm,” he said earnestly.

The billionaire blinked. Once, twice, then glanced away, “You sure about that?”

“… Tony,” Stephen said with another heavy sigh. “They are-… Avengers are yours. However, I feel about them personally… as long as they are kept checked. As long as they don’t harm you, I’m not going to do anything to them.”

“Because you’ll always protect what’s mine.”

“…Yes.”

“What does that really mean?” Tony crossed his arms, tapping his foot and refusing to meet the other’s eyes now. “I’ve learned the hard way there is always some background meaning to the little things you end up repeating. …It seems like you’re… trying to convince yourself.”

No response. But Tony wasn’t sure if he had expected one. Giving it another half a minute, the billionaire continued onward.

“…Bruce and Thor are with them. At least you like them-“

The sorcerer took a step back, throwing his arms up before letting it fall to his sides once more. “It isn’t that I don’t understand the importance of finding them, getting them back.”

“Then why-“
“BECAUSE THEY ARE NOT AS IMPORTANT AS YOU!”

That came out before Stephen could stop himself, could swallow the words, the anger.

Tony appeared taken aback but thankfully, not unnerved. Stephen let out a shaking exhale, both trying to calm himself and in relief that Tony didn’t look… fearful. But the guilt washed over him none-the-less.

“…They are not…” he tried again in the usual calm tone. It was barely above a whisper, a bit defeated in manner. “…They are not worth… you. Not to me.”

Tony had on a slight frown. The brunette took a step forward, opening his mouth to speak.

But Stephen quickly continued, talking a bit faster. “…They are not worth your health, your sanity, your happiness, or even if it’s simply your passing mood. …If you ask me to choose between getting them back and you? I will let them burn.”

“Stephen…” Tony’s hands settled on either side of his face. Brushing away the stray strands of silver streaks. “…We are the Avengers. The world needs-“

The sorcerer grabbed hold of Tony’s wrist. Stopping them from the gentleness he was no longer in the mood for. But he forgets to let go.

“If it is between you or the Avengers,” he said harshly. “This world. Even this entire fucking universe… I will choose you.”

Neither moved. The silence washing over them as they remained grounded where they stood. But then…

“Stephen,” Tony’s voice was even. Composed but, “Stephen, you’re hurting me.”

That snapped his attention.
Stephen let go immediately, flinching away as if the touch burned him.

He shouldn’t have been able to grip so hard. Not with his damaged hands. At least not enough to bruise. And yet, Tony’s wrist, where it was held just a second ago, were starting to darken…

He must have channeled magic somehow. Loki’s earlier warning started to flood his mind and along with it, tremendous shame.

“I’m…” it came out shaky, uncertain. “…I’m sorry- Tony, I’m…”

“Hey, hey- Stephen-“ Tony was already crossing the distance once more. “Babe, look at me. It’s okay.”

“I-I’m so sorry-“

“It’s fine! It’s hardly-… You didn’t mean it. I know you didn’t-“

“I’ll… I’ll heal it- just…” Then he lost his words. Suddenly unsure… What if he does more damage unconsciously? He wouldn’t, would he…?

But Tony must have already been following his line of thoughts.

The next, they were on the floor. Stephen found himself sitting somehow with Tony kneeling in front of him, holding him tightly. He doesn’t remember how they got here. Doesn’t remember when he lowered himself to the ground.

But Stephen doesn’t even bother trying to figure it out anymore. Closing his eyes, the sorcerer leaned into the crook of Tony’s neck.

Tony was still talking, repeating how it’s okay while stroking Stephen’s hair, pressing soothing circles on his shoulder blades.
“Please… just… come to bed,” he said in a whisper. “…J-just… four hours.”

Tony swallowed, hard. “…Yeah. Okay. …Yeah, let’s go.”

“Previously on Peter Screws the Pooch: I tell you to stay away from this. Instead, you hacked a multimillion-dollar suit so you could sneak behind my back doing the one thing I told you not to do.”

“…Is everyone okay?”

“No thanks to you.”

“No thanks to me? …Those weapons were out there and I tried to tell you about it! But you didn’t listen. None of this would’ve happened if you just listened to me!”

Loki simply watched as Peter jumped off from the ledge he had been sitting on, approaching the Iron Man armor at a brisk pace, clearly angered.

“If you cared… you’d actually be here-“ the teen spat bitterly.

Then the armor opened and Tony stepped out. Peter nearly jumped out of his skin, eyes becoming impossibly wide as he stepped back one step at a time.

The god leaned against the cement wall that led to the staircase down from the rooftop. He had already cast a simple illusion spell that would hide his presence although he was sure Tony probably knew he was watching.

“I did listen, kid. Who do you think called the FBI, huh? Do you know that I was the only one who believed in you? Everyone else said I was crazy to recruit a fourteen-year-old kid-“

“I’m fifteen…”
The spiderling sounded rather small now. For a moment Loki felt almost pity for the teen as he cowered away.

“"No, this is where you zip it, all right? The adult is talking... What if somebody had died tonight? Different story, right? ‘Cause that’s on you.”

Loki raised an eyebrow at the unusual coldness in that tone. The way the billionaire stood perfectly straight, expression rigid, voice dangerously low, most probably would assume he was angry.

“"...And if you died, I feel like that’s on me. I don’t need that on my conscience.”

The god let out a huff. Ah... and there it was... the true reason as to what had caused the mortal to become this frazzled. Because that’s what it was. Tony was frazzled. And scared.

“"...Yes, sir.”

“"Yes?”

“I... I’m sorry-""

“Sorry doesn’t cut it.”

“I... I-I understand. I just... I just wanted to... be like you...”

“And I want you to be better. ...Okay. It’s not working out. I’m going to need the suit back.”

“For...for how long?”

“"Forever.”
Peter shook his head, backing up further with a shocked expression.

But Tony remained firm, relentless. “Yeah. Yeah. That’s how it works.”

“No…nonono. Please! Please-“

“Let’s have it-“

“You don’t understand. Please- …This is all I have. I’m nothing without this suit!”

“If you’re nothing without this suit, then you shouldn’t have it. Okay? …God, I sound like my dad…”

“…I don’t have any other clothes…”

“Okay, we’ll sort that out. …Wait for me on the second floor.”

Peter doesn’t say another word. He appeared a little dazed, perhaps still in disbelief as to what had just happened. Eventually, however, the teen starts towards the door.

Loki waited until the door shuts close with a loud thud, Peter completely out of sight and earshot. Then he lifts the spell, walking forward towards Tony in several long strides. “That was harsh.”

The brunette refused to meet his eyes. He was looking away to the roofs of the surrounding buildings, although hardly with actual interest.

“Stark…”

“He could have died.”
The god took a step closer. They were at arm's length. “Stark…”

“If he died… for fucking sake…” his voice broke. Tony swallowed hard, taking a couple deep breathes in and out. “…It’s my fault- I shouldn’t have let him anywhere near me. I could have gotten him killed- …I wouldn’t … I would never forgive myself if-“

“Tony.” He kept his voice firm, loud enough to cut through the loudness of Tony’s mind. “Anthony, look at me.”

Loki grabbed the brunette’s shoulder in a firm hold, turning him around so they were fully face-to-face. His other hand soon settled on the back of Tony’s neck, forcing eye contact.

“He’s fine. Your kid is safe. You did not lose him. …You are not going to lose him. Do you hear me? You will not lose him. I swear to you that.”

Tony let out a shaky exhale, jaws clenched and still trembling from time to time. But he doesn’t look away, the large honeyed eyes now fixed on the emerald green. It takes a while for the billionaire to fully collect himself but eventually, there seemed to be a shift in his thoughts.

“…I’m… I shouldn’t have yelled at you… that day-“

Loki let out a huff, “It’s alright. But I expect an explanation later.”

“…You came. …You still came.”

With a short sigh, Loki stepped back just a little, giving the shorter man back his personal space. “…Of course, I did.”

“…Thanks.”

Silence fell between them that lasted for almost a minute. They both set their sights elsewhere, both lost in their own personal thoughts. Then eventually, Loki turned his attention back to Tony.
“Attend to your child first,” the god said. “Then we can—... I brought that Asgardian liquor you wanted to try-”

Tony let out a snort of a laugh. “You’re really not good at apologies.“

Loki smirked, “Neither are you.”

.........

“Well, Loki doesn’t seem to be here to cause Stark harm …”

Stephen remained quiet, the piercing gaze still glued to the pair at a distance.

“Don’t jump to unnecessary conclusions …” Wong went on evenly. Although, he doesn’t miss just how tightly Stephen was holding onto the railing, the knuckles turning almost white. Considering the damage from the crash, it must be painful.

“So… Stark has a kid…”

“I already checked. He’s not Tony’s biological child.”

“Of course you did,” Wong muttered, making the other sorcerer glare. “…Would it have mattered? If he was Tony’s real kid? …Technically, the boy is fifteen. So even if he was Tony’s biological child, it would have been before you two even met....”

It took a long while before Stephen answered. To be honest he had been avoiding thinking too deeply into this whole situation for a while now. All the implications, what it could mean for the future… if there was one between them… ever… somehow.

“Biological or not… He’s Tony’s. …I’m keeping an eye on him.” And he had been already.

Without even being blood-related, this child, Peter Parker was a lot like Tony himself. Getting into all sorts of trouble, constantly getting in harm’s way. Stephen really had to wonder at some point
how on earth they were so alike.

“But they are not related by blood,” he went on with a short sigh. “Tony constantly corrects people when they imply he’s the boy’s father.”

“Loki seems to think so.”

Stephen ignored it. Instead, he spun around sharply, turning on his heels. “You mentioned a novice noticed odd energy last month in the city.”

“At the retirement home…?” Wong replied with a frown. “You agreed with me it probably was a mistake-“

“Loki is here on Earth. It can hardly be of coincidence. And if he is up to something, I’m sending him back to his domain.”

Wong let out a sigh, the frown settling in further as he crossed his arms. “Now you’re just looking for an excuse to get him away from Stark. You’re petty.”

Stephen silently watched as Tony rose from the bed. Soon sitting on the edge as he peered around.

Then, as if on cue, the cloak fluttered over, handing Tony a spare shirt. The brunette took it with a smile, stroking the cloak lightly along its collar before slipping on the offered garment.

For a moment there, however, the relic appeared as if it was holding onto the shirt, not completely willing to give it to Tony. Even though it mostly wanted to be helpful, still giving it up in the end.

The sorcerer wondered if he imagines the whole thing. Perhaps he was projecting. Or the cloak was reading his mood, mimicking his thoughts somehow.

Peter and Harley would still be asleep. It was still before daybreak. Stephen could already see how this will play out. Tony would go down, work on the time machine, he’ll come back up at seven
AM to see his kids off, then disappear once more to the workshop.

“…Do you think you’ll be working on things till late?” He tried to keep his tone in check, tried at least to be aware how it may sound.

And still, Tony froze. “Stephen…”

“It’s not…” he interjected quickly. Stephen quickly pushed himself up to a sitting position. “…It’s not that. …I just wanted to know if you would join us for dinner …It’s the last Sunday before Peter goes off to his trip and… They ask about you. When you don’t come up to eat for multiple days in a row. …They miss you.”

When Tony finally turned to face him, the pure guilt evident behind the teary gaze, for a moment, Stephen wished he hadn’t said anything at all.

His mouth felt dry, the words left a bitter taste.

“Tony… I’m… I swear I’m not trying to guilt you into-…”

“I know,” Tony replied. It was quiet, uncharacteristically so. “…I know.”

Then after a second or two, Tony climbed fully onto the bed once more. A smile played on his lips. It wasn’t the unabashed, over trilled, grin Stephen loved seeing but it was a smile none-the-less.

“And you’re right. Saving the world is important but so are the kids. And you.” Tony draped himself over the sorcerer, situating himself on Stephen’s lap. “You guys are my priority. …I’ll try. I really will try. Dinner at six? They really should try to eat at a proper hour. It’s not healthy to be eating a full dinner at eleven at night. …Oh, I definitely know you’ve been letting them get away with all sorts of things. Including ice cream at two AM.”

Stephen gave an exaggerated stunned expression, a hand naturally falling onto the back of Tony’s waist. “How’d you know?”

And Tony returns playful stare, “I always know.”
Soft laughter filled the air. It was nice, soothing and pleasant. Soon, Tony wrapped his arms around Stephen’s neck, leaning in for a quick kiss.

“You know,” he said with a smirk as he pulled away. “I always imagined you’d be the stricter one in parenting honestly. You’re a big softy you know that?”

Stephen rolled his eyes dramatically.

Then it got quiet.

Stephen wasn’t sure exactly what was coming but something surely was. Usually Tony would lean in, resting his head on his shoulder. At the moment the brunette seemed unwilling, favoring eye contact.

“…Hey… about what you said yesterday…”

Stephen glanced away.

But that didn’t stop Tony. “…You know, about how you’d… choose me. Even if it’s between me and this universe…” A pause and a sigh. “For people like us, that… that can honestly be a realistic scenario. I mean, I guess it already happened once.”

Unconsciously, Stephen tightened his hold on Tony’s waist.

“…I get it. I get the sentiment. I sure hell won’t give you up either. Not sure if… if I can even if it meant thousands dying instead. But… can you just… promise me something?”

Silence fell for a good long while. Stephen wasn’t sure he really wanted to ask. No, he knew he didn’t. But…

“What?”
The next he looked, Tony was staring at him with complete sincerity. There was love, sadness, desperation…

“…If it… if it ever was between me or… the kids…”

“Tony, don’t…”

“Promise me you’ll choose them.”

Stephen swallowed. Tried to get up, push Tony off but the other barely budged. A hand settled on his upper arm in a firm hold.

“…Please. Promise me you’ll choose them. If… if that happens, promise me you’ll let me go.”

He could feel his heart quickening, pulsing of his blood at his ears. Anger was quickly rising to his throat. Not at Tony… but what the words suggest. Unreasonably he felt angry. Angry that the world, the universe, the fate themselves would even dare…

He gritted his teeth. “…Would you?” Stephen said eventually in a low tone. “…If it ever came down to me or the kids. …If someone said you’ll have to make that choice, what would you do?”

And as their eyes met, it felt like staring at a mirror.

“…I… I would die trying to save all three of you.”

“So how can you expect any less from me.”
There MAY be one more chapter before the rest of the Avengers returns-

As usual, comments that anyone is still reading is greatly appreciated :___;

I know it’s starting to approach that one year mark since I started this;; thanks to those who stuck around - really. I swear I’ll try to end this story soon LOLOLOL;;;
Chapter Notes

I guess it was about time I updated lololololol
...sorry world/ real life problems were very unforgiving-

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Guilt.

Guilt was something Loki always dealt with quite well.

After all, he never saw the world as just black and white. He accepted it was not a necessity to be liked by all. And of course, unlike Thor, his self-identity, self-worth had never solely been defined in being moral or good.

So whenever guilt came knocking at his doorstep, he justified them away. Had a particular talent for it. He could just about always give logical reasoning as to why something he’d done was necessary or why he shouldn’t even feel the guilt at all in the first place, remind himself how useless and unnecessary of a burden it was, and soon enough… he could accept that it happened and move forward.

Yes, he always dealt with them very well.

So when one particular nasty guilt didn’t leave him. Not only did it remain in his thoughts for far longer than it should, but became even more pestering with each passing day…

It was odd really. In fact, it was one of the few times in his life the Asgardian can honestly say it wasn’t even his fault. Nor did he actually do anything wrong even by society's standards. So why was it that-

“Wong said you were looking for me. Haven’t I warned you you were not allowed here without supervision? ...I’m sure you understand considering… everything.”
Loki spun on his heels, his eyes immediately landing on the Midgardian sorcerer who just entered the room.

A book was in Stephen’s hand, one that still remained open. But for once, the god was not even remotely interested as to the details of the content.

“Strange-“

The other finally looked up, a subtle glint of amusement behind the stormy gaze. “Wong is going around re-counting all the relics. I have a strong urge to hide something-“ he began with a chuckle. But… the words came to an abrupt halt.

It may have had to do with the look on Loki’s face.

“I…” He pursed his lips for a brief moment. “…I must confess something. You most likely won’t be pleased-”

“…Did you seriously take something?” Stephen gave a dramatic eye roll, snapping his book shut before magicking it away. With a short sigh, he rushed forward with an outstretched hand. “Hand it over before Wong catches you-“

“No,” he snapped quickly, shooting a half-hearted glare. Although, he couldn’t help but cast his gaze away soon after. “I… I needed to-"

*For the love of* …How did most mortals- …how did Stark deal with such detestable emotion for years back then. Especially when years were so much of a significant timespan for a mortal than it was for him. This was excruciating-

“…I need to explain… something that happened years ago.” Loki paused momentarily, pacing slightly in place. “Because if it-… eventually causes…”

That was the thing, wasn’t it? In fact, he honestly wasn’t sure if this truly was guilt. Perhaps it wasn’t. Perhaps it was more selfish in motivation. It wasn’t really guilt for the said past actions but more fear of the issue it can hypothetically create now. Because for once, he was unsure he wanted to simply live with the consequences should it affect-
“I already know.”

The statement cut him off from whatever train of thought Loki was having.

A second. Then two.

He blinked, now directly staring at the other sorcerer with a careful blank stare.

Stephen sighed, repeating slowly once more, “I. Already. Know.”

A frown soon formed as Loki quirked his head just slightly to one side.

Loki had many predictions in his head of this day. Prepared himself for the hundreds of possible reactions he could receive from the Midgardian sorcerer. The calm, *I already know*, however… wasn’t one of them.

___________________________________________________________

“It was me.”

*How long have they been here? On this cold, hard… floor.*

*Floor.*

*They were both lying flat on the floor, weren’t they?*

*Well, at the very least, Tony can still remember how they got here. That was saying something. See? Everything was fine. He got it handled. He still had his mind firmly in place. Perfectly-*

*Peter’s ferry debacle. Nearly having a heart attack over the boy’s safety… The tremendous guilt*
that followed in realizing perhaps he should have never allowed the teen into his life... He was such a terrible influence. In one way or another, he would corrupt Peter’s life too. What was he even thinking? Or worse... Peter could-


And Loki brought that crazy Asgardian liquor that made him feel lightheaded after a sip. A sip was literally all Loki allowed before taking it away. Just a sip to satisfy his “mortal curiosity” that the god said in the most condescending tone possible... and saying the rest was for the god himself so he doesn’t get left out on the blissful buzz while Tony indulged in his private stash of high-end scotch.

So here they ended up.

Both of them, shit faced drunk...

On the floor of his workshop...

Wallowing in self-pity.

“It was me,” Tony repeated, slower this time, emphasis on each word. “…I can blame Wanda for getting in my head... some PTSD shit...” A deep breath in, and out, feeling his lungs stretch, the dull pressure of it. “How I thought... it was really for some greater good. But in the end... It was me. I. Built. Ultron. ...I built a fucking murder-bot.”

“You didn’t know,” came the calm response from next to him.

There was a laugh.

It took a moment for Tony to realize it was actually his. But it was distant, cold, and eerily empty.

“It was not your intention. You were trying to save humanity from the fear I’ve brought to your world.”
The brunette expected such a reply to be honest. The right response that comes out of pity.

Tony licked his lips, tasting the imaginary bitterness on his tongue. Was he saying this to purposely earn pity? To play the victim, to have someone tell him the obvious words of comfort, to lay out the pavement so to fool yet another sympathetic bystander in his life into believing he was somehow innocent. As if Pepper and Rhodey were not enough now he was dragging Loki into his bullshit?

What a scum he was. Somehow, he managed to manipulate one of the few friends he had left into giving him undeserved sympathy. Somehow, he managed to fool the god of chaos into forcing kindness. Or perhaps he really was that pitiful.

But when Tony snapped his head to the side, meeting the emerald green, he realized... the Asgardian seemed to have expected his reaction as well. Even the ones unsaid.

Loki was giving him a look. A look that Tony knew all too well now.

And suddenly... he felt the need squash the assured confidence in the other. The odd, unexplainable faith in which the god seemed to be regarding him with.

“The road to hell was paved in good intention,” Tony snapped. “My good intention doesn’t mean crap if it ends up killing hundreds of innocent civilians.”

Loki let out a soft scoff. Slowly, turning his gaze away, fixating emptily on the ceiling above once more.

For a moment, Tony regretted his word choice. After all... if he was right about some of his guesses... But not knowing how to fix it right then, he let the silence carry. Eventually looking away as well.

It was another several minutes before he opened his mouth again. “I thought... eventually... maybe... they would forgive me. I thought... they had... he had... forgiven me...” He vaguely wondered if he really was that drunk, the despised admittance flowing out so easily. “177. That’s how many I’ve killed. 177 because I built Ultron.”
“…Cap… Steve… He wasn’t… wrong either about the Accord. He had a point. Oversight… we would be banking on the assumption that they are good, moral. And what if they weren’t? Someone corrupt having that much control over the Avengers. We just had Hydra running SHIELD. God, the power… And even if, for some luck they weren’t… The politics. Lost of independence. Constantly waiting for approval…” Tony let out a shaky sigh. “And he was just trying to help his best friend. …I would have probably done the same thing if it were, you know, Rhodey or something. And who knows… I may have…I mean- …I really want to. So maybe, I would have really killed Barnes-“

“No, you wouldn’t have.”

“He thought so. Believed I would react badly. …And he was right. I did. But I was so mad that he-... didn’t tell me. More than knowing my parents were murdered I was so- ...pissed that he didn’t… trust me. But then again, I guess it makes sense. …I think- Steve… never forgave me. …Never-… really trusted me again. Because… how could he? I killed 177 people right under his nose so how could I blame him for- ...Barnes was brainwashed by Hydra when he’s done anything wrong. Actually no free will of his own. What excuse did I have?”

“The little witch."

“Wanda just amplified what was already there. Also, Steve was right then too. She’s just a fucking kid. I can’t just justify what I did using her-“

“But you still justify your Captain’s action using your past transgression?”

“…I-… I had a lifetime of mistakes. I should have known better by now. They... gave me enough chances already and-”

“Anthony…” It was much firmer this time. Low, almost threatening. A warning.

But at the moment, Tony found he couldn’t really care. “You know, even your brother was pretty pissed with me too…“

At that, Loki shot him a glare, raising himself up from the floor suddenly. “They are not saints. Not your captain and certainly not Thor. 177 is nothing compared to the damage my brother has caused over the millennia. …And it is nothing compared to the trails of bodies I left.”
“…Y-yeah…” Tony said after clearing his throat. “Thor mentioned that… how he made mistakes-“

The god laughed, cold and devoid of any warmth. “Mistake doesn’t begin to cover what he’s done. But for time’s sake let’s just focus on the last in his list of transgressions. Did he ever tell you why he was banished to your realm? He became arrogant enough to try to annihilate a whole nation. With his own hands, he would have taken thousands of lives.”

“Well…” Tony tried to prop himself up as well, reaching for the glass that he left next to him, taking another large swig. “He thought he was protecting Asgard, right?”

“And that is my point.”

When the brunette turned his attention back to the god, the other was fixing him with an intense stare. One that always served as a reminder that while amicable now, this was the same Asgardian who could throw him out of the window of a skyscraper without breaking a sweat.

“They are the golden boys. They are automatically given the benefit of the doubt. They make mistakes but it will never be branded as a character defect. Their morals, their souls will never be called into question.”

“Maybe… it is because they are actually good.”

“It is double standards,” Loki snapped back instantly. “How many must suffer for those like them to learn. For that’s what we define it, is it not? A learning experience for them to fully reach their potential we all know they are capable of being... Growth.” The god’s voice was starting to take on a more dramatic tone. A sarcastic approach Tony was well familiar with.

“We commit the same act and it’s a direct reflection of who we are. One we cannot ever change. Branding that will haunt us for the rest of our lives. One we constantly have to apologize for and prove we deserve their forgiveness. …What I am saying is that the crimes I committed are not much different from Thor’s and you have not made choices much different from that of your Captain’s.”

“When it’s them, they are being strong-willed, willing to stand up for what they believe in. When it’s those like us, it’s that we’re being stubborn, unable to acknowledge when we are wrong. Because we are inevitably wrong. Because they are always right. It’s a standard even you
Tony frowned slightly, although didn’t bother to even interject at this point. He wasn’t even sure if he could interrupt even if he wanted to.

“You seem to be under the impression you deserve what you got. That you must have been wrong and he was right. And so this was all because you made the first mistake. Sure, you act upset, wounded by his betrayal and abandonment … but in the end, you still believe you deserved it. If the good Captain acted with poor morals it is because you must have caused him to. Whatever your Captain did, even leaving you for dead, can somehow be overlooked or at least reasoned out because you haven’t been forgiven for your transgression. The guilt is clouding your judgment into believing that your mistake somehow erases theirs.”

“The sooner you realize the game is rigged. Realize that you will be constantly chasing the approval that you will never fully achieve, that just because you did wrong does not excuse them of their crimes… The sooner you can stop holding yourself in contempt and move forward. Move forward and live. Stop waiting for permission.”

“…So… We’re all flawed,” Tony muttered. “We all fucked up in our own way. … We’re all not so different then.”

“No. …Perhaps the greatest difference between you and your Captain… is that he believes himself to be more of a hero than he actually is. You… you are more of a hero than you allow yourself to believe.”

“I… That’s not true.”

A small smile tugged at the corner of the god’s lips. His voice becoming uncharacteristically soft. “I believe it is.”

Tony swallowed. A thought tugging at the corner of his mind. “…What about you then?”

Loki stared at him in questioning.

“You more of a hero than you believe yourself to be?”
“No.” The answer came out harsh, cold and absolute.

Tony couldn’t help but smile. “...Well... I believe it.”

He half expected Loki to argue. Or at the very least voice is an annoyance or tell him he was being an idiot. But silence stretched between them and the Asgardian simply stared at him. As if too stunned to speak.

That was new.

Then, slowly, Tony’s mind drifted elsewhere.

Back to one that he thought that haunted him constantly for the last months. One that he was either too embarrassed or too scared to utter.

He doesn’t know why it’s important. Logics told him it shouldn’t matter. Not anymore. He wished he could say fuck it and stop caring about them all. Like in one of those romantic comedies where the ex leaves and you can coolly say good ridden. But this was life. This was real. You can’t just logic away emotional response.

It came out soft, shaky. Just barely above a whisper. “…He... They... were never going to forgive me, were they?”

And surely, this time, Loki would laugh at him. But...

“Then you must learn to forgive yourself.”

Tony stared for a long while. Staring straight at the sharp gaze that held so much mixture of contradicting emotions.

A part of him wanted to look away and at the same time, found he couldn’t. Couldn’t help but keep taking another glance, another search, hoping that this time, he’ll see something different...
something more clear and simple.

A mirror. It finally hit him why it always felt familiar and yet a bit unsettling when he stared directly at Loki's eyes.

It reminded him of when he stared at the mirror.

The next words came out before Tony could stop himself. “…Is that what you did?”

Nothing.

Loki did nothing. No reaction, no reply, nothing. But that was as good of an answer as any.

Tony quickly pushed himself completely off the floor, drawing himself into a sitting position facing the Asgardian directly. The god simply watched him, still mostly sprawled on the concrete, but suddenly feigning boredom. Tony had to try hard to stop himself from rolling his eyes. Loki had more defense mechanism reactions than even he.

“So I have this… theory,” he said, tipping his glass to drain the last of the amber liquid. “You and your world domination shit show 2012? …It wasn’t you. You didn’t want it. It wasn’t your show. …It was an SOS.”

Lazily, ever so slowly, Loki shifted till he was propped up against his elbow. Nothing in his expression indicated the brunette was even on right track but nothing told him he was off the rails either.

So he continued.

“There is someone, something out there... more powerful than you. You knew you couldn’t stop it on your own. You’re smart. You’re not Thor. You won’t go headfirst into a fight you know there is no chance of winning. When you hit, you make it count. You were already thinking long term. ...So you figured out a way to bring a portion of the army... I saw it. I saw what was out there beyond the portal you opened. What we fought wasn’t even half of it. You wanted us to get a taste of what was out there. You hoped that by leading part of the army here to Earth, we... or at least Thor, would stop you. You wanted to fail. The point was to fail. ...You were giving us a warning.”
The god was no longer looking at him. Fixated on the far corner behind him as if it was the new fascinating thing.

“Your eyes… it green. Bright emerald. It dulls sometimes… slightly changes in color depending on your mood but since we’ve been doing this… I never saw it- …I didn’t really think about it till you ended up here at my workshop again. …When you threw me out of the tower window during the invasion? It was ice blue. Just like Barton’s when he was under mind control. I rolled back the security footage and Nat’s report…”

“…But why wouldn’t you say anything? After Hulk smashed you… and I’m guessing that’s what did it, snapped you back out from the influence of that creepy stone… Yeah… Thor can be an asshole sometimes but you know he would have listened if you just tried… He’s so desperate for your redemption that he would have at least listened… Why take the punishment for a whole invasion-?”

“So you blamed yourself. Even when there wasn’t anything you could have done back then… You had no chance of stopping a whole fucking alien army alone… Even when you did the best you could… you still… blamed yourself.”

He paused. Taking a moment to meet the other’s gaze as it was finally offered.

“Is this what it’s about? You feel like you can… sympathize with me? That’s why you saved me in Siberia?”

The god kept his mouth defiantly shut, just regarding him with a blank stare. Suddenly, Tony had an urge to aim lower, harder, get a reaction of some kind.

“No. It’s not pity. …It’s not sympathy. There needs to be underline selfishness. …Bored. That’s what you said. …You know what I think? You weren’t bored. Watching the Avengers was for boredom. Watching me… You wanted a friend. You wanted someone who you thought maybe can understand. Really understand. Someone who gets it without you having to spell everything out. … You wanted to know you weren’t alone in the world-“

“Thor-“ Loki cut in abruptly. “…Once I was imprisoned in Asgard he would come by daily to talk.” Finally, he drew himself up to sitting, taking a long sigh as he did so.
“…Annoying me with the narratives of his life as usual… He spoke quite often of you. Of what he heard, what you’ve told him… Of your issues with your father… of your kidnapping… how you’ve cheated death so many times with your intelligence and stubbornness. …How you became Man of Iron. …How many always doubted you, how often you seem to dance on the fine lines of human morals… and yet, at the end of the day, you are still a hero in your own right. How you defied the expectations of others, the assumptions, the role the world tried to put you in… How you turned your life around. …He said you reminded him of me. Of what I could be. …He was probably trying to give me hope that I could change.”

“I’m sure he realized that was the only times I truly listened to his words… when he spoke of you.” The god muttered with a huff. “He’s much more perceptive than he lets on, my brother.”

“But he doesn’t know… fully about the invasion?”

“No,” Loki replied flatly. “Thor is not an idiot but… He has his limits.”

Tony hesitated for a moment although soon continuing onwards. “So I’m the first to figure it out?” A smirk started to form, his tone taking on a more playful turn. “Do I get a prize?”

The god let out an exasperated scoff, “Would you like one?”

“I think I deserve one,” Tony said with a grin.

A pause and then, “How about a favor.”

Tony pretended briefly as if he was considering before shrugging half-heartedly. “A favor from a god? …That sounds useful. I’ll take it.”

“Such insolence…”

There was a bite to the word, though the brunette definitely doesn’t miss the hint of laughter.

“…I ought to cut your tongue.”
“No you won’t,” he retorted without even a second of hesitation. “You love me. Can’t even deny it, you basically just admitted it just now-” He made a vague motion with his hands. “…with everything you said-“

“You arrogant little thing.” And the god laughed. A laugh that sounded genuine, real.

It was a good look on him. The shoulders less tense, smile that was wasn’t so forced, the gaze that held an honest fondness.

It was warm.

No, that was the room. Why was it suddenly so warm? …Right. He really shouldn’t have downed that last bit of the scotch.

“…Stark. Are you alright?”

Tony blinked, fast. Loki was closer now, a hand on his left shoulder, wearing a look of concern. And…

Before he knew it, he leaned in.

And just as their lips met…

He panicked.

And Loki pulled back.

They both stared at each other, eyes a bit wide.

“…Tony.” The hand on Tony’s shoulder was a bit firmer now, holding him away, grounding him. “…What are you doing?” It was phrased as a question but honestly, it wasn’t. Not really.
Tony swallowed, hard. The shock of what he had just done enough for him to somehow crash land back to rationality.

“I… shouldn’t have…” He stuttered quickly. Trying to get all the words out before he screwed up yet another friendship that he valued. “Damn… I’m… I’m sorry. I’m so sorry- …I just… I shouldn’t have-“

“You need to sleep it off.” Loki didn’t sound angry at least. “You’re tired and intoxicated.”

“I…”

But the god was already forcing him upright, half carrying him and leading him to the elevator.

“Water. And you’re going to bed. …Anthony, calm down!”

“…Yeah- Y-yeah, okay… Shit-”

SHIT.

Larry.

He needed to find Tony. He needed to find Stark and figure out what the actual fuck was-

Loki strode into the workshop in a hurried pace. Eyes darting about everywhere till it landed on their residential billionaire. For a moment, there was relief. Because Tony... Tony can fix this. Tony can fix anything-

The brunette was sitting, cross-legged on one of the wheeled chairs by the main monitor. But next to him, however…
The Asgardian spun right back around, trying to make another break for it before…

“LOKI!”

Ugh.

“Come on, Lolo. Looks like we all need to talk-“

He shut his eyes closed, for a brief moment letting his face contort into a grimace. He took one deep breath in and out, then slowly, turned back around to face the two mortals.

Tony, as expected, was giving him a sympathetic smile. One that Loki took the time to return with a sharp glare of his own. Although, far gone were the days the mortal seemed intimidated with any hostility the god showed.

Stephen on the other hand, stood calmly leaned against the table next to the brunette. Wearing an amused smirk. Loki never felt more of an urge to throw something quite honestly.

Still, with another heavy sigh, he started taking a couple of long strides forward towards the pair.

“Okay… I probably should have…uh- told you I already talked to Stephen about it…” Tony started calmly. “…I mean you two didn’t exactly have a great start so I figured I shouldn’t risk it by leaving it longer than it should… And look, it actually is fine. It’s not like anything really happened… and we-” he gestured between him and his fiancé. “Weren’t even together at the time.”

“Is it really?” He tried to bite back some of the sarcasm. He really did. Although, quite unsuccessfully.

The doctor let out a loud huff. “Stop worrying. It is not as if either of you did anything wrong-“

“I know I didn’t.”
Now Stephen appeared a bit perplexed, an eyebrow raised.

“You are incredibly petty,” Loki replied dryly. As if it were the answer to all things.

“…He’s got a point,” Tony muttered right away, not looking up.

“And you’ve already proven you can be unreasonable towards me when you are jealous.”

Tony shrugged. “…Point number two.”

The doctor glared.

“You hated me.”

“I don’t hate you now!” Stephen rolled his eyes, arms crossing as he straightened himself.

“Oh so you admit it- finally!” Loki retorted quickly. His voice becoming quite dramatic. “And after all your insistence that it was simple distrust-“

“Oh for fuck’s sake-“

“I just would like some notice,” the god went on flatly. “…if my days are numbered. You know, just out of courtesy considering apart from this, I believe I have been a good friend to you recently-“

“I’m not going to murder you! I cannot be upset at you or Tony over what happened years ago while I was not even in the picture-“

Loki raised an eyebrow. “Oh, and how’s that reasoning working out for the Captain?”

Stephen glared. “I fault Rogers for nearly killing Tony, not… hate…” that last word sounded a bit
forced. Definitely forced. “…him because they dated. …And that was far more than just a mere kiss-”

Now both Loki and Tony were giving the other an unimpressed look.

Stephen gave a dramatic ugh. “Okay! Fine. Maybe I still hate Rogers a bit for that too-“

The god then glanced to his left, only to realize the billionaire was carefully turned away, appearing to be suddenly very guilty.

“You didn’t do anything wrong,” he retorted without much thought. It was an impulsive habit at this point.

Noticing as well, however, Stephen let out a long sigh, pinching the bridge of his nose. “We went over that too. I don’t blame you for-“

“I know you’re not blaming me!” Tony snapped. “I know I didn’t do anything wrong. But you’re not happy over it. You have the right to still not be happy over it! Just as I can… still feel… bad… for you not being happy over it-“

What a mess.

Loki sighed as silence fell amongst them.

His eyes occasionally darting back and forth between Tony and Stephen.

Although, the doctor’s gaze eventually met his.

“I’m not mad at you!” he exclaimed again.

The Asgardian simply stared, pulling a face that clearly indicated his disbelief.
Stephen threw his arms up halfway before letting them drop to his side. Obviously frustrated at the whole situation. “What? Are you seriously only going to believe me if I even the table?”

“Quite possibly. Just give me a courtesy ten minutes head start.”

Yes, Stephen looked thoroughly exasperated now. Giving him the usual look of why the hell are you all doing this to me that Loki had gotten rather accustomed to in the recent weeks.

Tony on the other hand, suddenly had his face buried in his palms, seemingly holding back a laughter. “Told you-”

Loki almost took the time to question it but-

He felt a sharp pull by the collar shifting his attention quite suddenly.

Strange stood mere inch apart from him now. The piercing gray eyes up so close the god can finally see every detail that Tony went on about in one of his long-winded, love-struck monologues.

Of course, it only took another half-second for Loki to piece together what this was leading to. His mind always worked incredibly fast, and considering he knew Tony and his sorcerer a bit too well now…

He knew he could probably take a step back now and Strange surely would let him. That part was obvious.

The god scoffed at the thought. Let him. As if he couldn’t just force the other sorcerer to let go if he truly wanted to. Considering the difference in their pure physical strength it would be almost laughably easy. And if he was in the mood to be cruel, not as if those injured fingers had much strength to hold-

But he remained still.

A bit too curious if the other would follow through perhaps. But he didn’t wonder for long.
Another second and a pair of lips were on his.

And the same curiosity, of course, made him steal a glance at Stark.

“So,” Stephen said as he stepped back. “We’re even.”

Loki blinked, twice. “…I suppose.” Then went on coolly, “Stop drooling, Stark.”

A definite smirk was playing on the billionaire’s lips. “Why? I bet that’s half the fun for you. And I don’t think your ego can take me not fawning over this-“

Loki let out a harsh scoff.

Stephen simply rolled his eyes. Although he was already crossing back the few distance to where Tony still sat, leaning down to leave a quick kiss on the cheek. “Well, I’m going to go start dinner…” And with that, started towards the elevator at a leisure pace.

But once a bit away, he turned around, a sly smile clearly evident. “Oh and I was right-,” he said, evidently to Tony. Then, nodded to the Asgardian’s direction with a smirk. “It seems I don’t have anything to worry about-“

Tony burst out laughing. Most likely due to the utterly offended look that came over Loki’s face.

Without thinking twice, the god aimed a dagger at Stephen’s direction. The doctor simply portaled it away, giving one last thoroughly pleased grin before disappearing.

By the norns… Loki really had to wonder now why he felt this friendship with the two mortal was worth this starting this much trouble when he woke up this morning.

Never. Again.

With a final sigh and another glare at the brunette still in the room, Loki thought to walk away himself when…
“Hey, Lolo. …I won’t be mad. I really won’t.” Tony was now fidgeting with one of his tool, the playful grin still plastered on his face. “Do you have a little crush on my fiancé?”

He gave a dramatic *ugh*. Grimacing as he ran a hand over his face. He had half a mind to walk away from the conversation then and there. He did, however, make the mistake of saying, “Not you too-”

And automatically, Tony’s expression turned to one of intense curiosity. No, Tony wasn’t going to let this go any time soon. Better to just answer now and get it over with.

“Banner,” Loki answered flatly. “…Although he believes I’m infatuated with you. Not your sorcerer.”

And of course Tony would blurt out, “Who wouldn’t have a thing for me?”

The god didn’t even bother. He was too tired for this. He spun around sharply, making quick strides towards the elevator.

“THAT WASN’T A NO!”

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*When Loki dropped in the next day to check-in, it was unsurprising to find the billionaire thoroughly hungover. Tony appeared hunched over on the kitchen island staring into his coffee as if it held some universal truth. It was almost comedic.*

“Stark…”

*The brunette’s head snapped up immediately. “Hey…”*  

*The simple greeting sounded odd. Odd being devoid of all enthusiastic joke or one of many ridiculous nicknames.*
But before the god could make a remark on it, the billionaire already opened his mouth.

“Look, I’m… I’m really sorry. I shouldn’t have done that last night,” Tony said hurriedly. Then he bit his lips for a moment, running a hand roughly over his face. “Jesus Christ- how much more pathetic can I get-“

Loki shook his head, taking few long steps closer. “Tony…”

Though the brunette seemed far from stopping in his rant. He was waving his hand now in wild jesters, expression scrunched in a frown. “…Kissed you just because you were a little nice to me- What am I going to do? Kiss every fucking person that’s nice to me just because I’m a little lonely-?”

“I would have you know,” the other cut in firmly. “I have a lot going for me than being nice. ... Traits that would be a lot more believable as, admittedly, that is the first time anyone ever stated that as a reason for kissing me.”

Tony blinked, staring at the god for another moment.

Then, soon, let out a laugh.

A smirk danced on Loki’s lips as he leaned against the kitchen counter.

“Thank you…” Tony eventually muttered. “…for you know... stopping me. …And telling Friday to wake me up. Pepper would have killed me if I ditched AM conference call with the FBI about what happened with the kid and the ferry...“

Loki let out a short hum in agreement. Soon, taking a seat on the stool opposite.

But the tenseness didn’t disappear.

“Anthony, it honestly... is fine,” he repeated. “I don’t think... less of you. And I’m not angered.”
“It would be okay…” Tony cleared his throat, eyes fixating on the opposite corner of the wall. “…if... you know... you’re uncomfortable or...”

“I am not.”

“...How are you being so cool about this? Isn’t it normal to not be okay with it? For things to get awkward?”

Loki raised an eyebrow. “Are we not above social norms? Normal is overrated.” He paused for a brief second, a smile dancing on the thin lips. “…This doesn’t have to change anything. It doesn’t have to be the end our friendship, I assure you.”

“So... are we really okay?”

“Yes.”

And after another long pause, Tony smiled.

Loki stood staring at the other still. Eyes tracing every detail of the frown, the flicker of the gaze, twitch at the corner of the lips. Carefully considering, pondering. “I still expect an explanation... for that night you threw me out and what I also assume also partly responsible for yesterday.”

There was quick stiffening of the shoulder. Very obvious tension as his fingers flexed over the coffee mug.

“...I remind you of him,” the god continued evenly. “It may be in small form but I remind you of him. ...The man in the photograph. The one I shaped into that night.”

“He’s just an ex.”

“You miss him.”

“It’s been years.”
“And yet he still haunts you. Perhaps more so than even the Captain. ...Somehow… this is all about him.”

The hazel eyes finally snapped onto him. But there was anger now... and pain. So much pain. The same expression from that night at the workshop. And Loki knew what came next.

“What do you need?”

That stopped Tony’s shouts before it even started. Now the mortal appeared confused as his mouth closed to a shut.

“What do you need?” the god repeated, slowly, emphasis with each word.

Tony swallowed, hard, eyes unable to leave the emerald green now. “I need... for him to have never left.”

To his annoyance Loki let out a scoff.

But he wasn’t given a chance to express it as the Asgardian went on sharply, “That’s what you want, Stark. Not what you need. Unrealistic, naive want that is stupid, impractical, unhelpful. And you are not stupid. So I ask again...What. Do. You. Need.”

His mind was racing, heart pounding at his ears.

“You get one favor, Tony. Make it count.”

“I...” He licked his lips. A steady breath, in and out. “I need to know he’s alive. I need... to know he’s safe.”

“That smells amazing.”
Tony hurried passed behind him, only stopping briefly to squeeze lightly at his fiancé’s shoulders. He already opened the oven halfway by the time Stephen reached over to press the off button.

“Am I getting the extra chicken?” Tony asked giving one of his trademark puppy dog eyes.

Stephen gave him a quick kiss on the cheek before moving on to collect the utensils from the cabinet. “No. That’s for Peter.”

“Lame-“

But the sorcerer simply rolled his eyes. As if he didn’t always catch Tony forgoing his portion in hopes of feeding Peter more any chance he got.

“And stop babying them-“ with that Tony took the pile of dishes from Stephen’s trembling hands, shouting over his shoulders, “… PETER! HARLEY! Help Stephen set up for dinner please!”

“I can manage a few plates… Or the cloak-“

“Cloakie can take the salad then,” he said brightly.

As if on cue, the cloak swept by. Taking ahold of the large bowl before flying towards the dining table. The next second the two teens hurried in as well, Tony handing each of them food and utensils to carry over.

“Thank you,” Tony called out after them.

But both teens seemed too engrossed in their own conversation to do more than nod. They had been deep into conversation all evening. About Peter’s trip to Venice this week, a girl at school named MJ whom Peter had a crush on. Harley appeared to be having fun dancing the line of teasing the younger and trying to give some very sarcastic, perhaps ill, advice.

Stephen stood watching them for another minute. Chatting, laughing loudly as they slowly set the
table with half attention, the cloak flying by after them straightening everything out. The smell of the roast completely filled the air now. The calm night sky visible through the large panoramic window. It was warm, comfortable. It was nice...

Oh… definitely nice.

Stephen snapped his attention back just as Tony wrapped his arms around his neck, drawing him down, kissing him fully on the lips. Smiling, his hands naturally fell onto the shorter man’s hips, pressing their body closer.

Even after breaking away, they stood there for a while longer, basking in the contentment.

“I’m glad you’re here…” Stephen said eventually, however. A soft smile still lingered his lips, his voice low and hushed. “…They need you.”

Tony smiled back. It was honest and so open. “I know…” he replied, absentmindedly brushing away the couple loose strands of hair that fell to the other’s face. “I’m glad I’m here too. And you were right. It’s important to make time. …But, you know, they are in good hands with you. I fully believe that.”

But the carefree smile faltered as the sorcerer downcasted his sights.

Tony frowned, glanced quickly at the dinner table. It was situated descent away from where they were. And the teen still seemed thoroughly distracted to pay attention.

“…Babe… what is this about?” he asked quietly.

Stephen, however, sighed, taking a half step back, leaning against the kitchen counter. “…I’m not…” he started after a pause. “…I’m not… naturally good with kids-“

He really didn’t want to admit that part. Hated admitting that part. Ironic thing was that he used to admit it openly all the time. During his days of saying he didn’t want kids anyway. But now… it was so hard to admit.
It didn’t matter back then. It didn’t sound like a deal-breaker back then…

But without realizing any of that, Tony soon let out a laugh. “You’re doing fine! They love you—“

And before he could get a grip on the situation, guilt overtook him. “They say they like you better,” Stephen muttered at a fast pace.

The brunette simply blinked, twice, his expression curious and somewhat amused now.

“Whenver I try to—... stop them from staying up too late or do something reckless or... even fucking eat properly—“ he pinched the bridge of his nose, grimacing. “...They say they like you better.”

And Tony... chuckled. Actually chuckled—till he realized the serious look Stephen was wearing.

“...Ohhh, wait...” The smile faltered just as it appeared. “...You’re... oh, you’re actually serious... You’re hurt by that—“

Stephen rolled his eyes, waving a hand half-heartedly. Trying to keep the situation from becoming too tense without really knowing how. “...It feels like I’m failing them. I’m failing you. They just want you and I can’t-...There is nothing I can do to even step in for you- Even if it’s just for a couple of days...“

But before the sorcerer could go any further, hands settled on each of Stephen’s shoulders.

“Okay first of all...” Tony said firmly. Then let out a short scoff. “...I know Peter can’t ever say something like that without crying from guilt so I’m going to assume you mean Harley. ...AND... that little shit says that to me all the time. When I tell him off his go-to retort is how he likes you better.”

Silence... Then...

“...Oh...”
A smirk was already forming again. “He’s a moody teenager. They do that. …And he’s a smartass. Instinctively knows where to hit that hurts.”

Stephen let out a huff, letting the words fully sink in. “Well… I guess I fell for it-“ Then in an oddly impressed tone. “…the kid is smart…”

“What did you expect? He’s our kid. Gonna just get smarter so buckle up. Attention sharp-” the brunette said almost sarcastically. Then after a brief pause, “…Is that seriously why you have been letting them get away with so much shit-“

“Shut up.”

“…Is that why we’re getting a hamster?”

For a moment, Stephen simply stood still, biting the inside of his cheek. His fingers tapping rapidly against the countertop.

“Peter told me you promised him a hamster,” Tony added.

“…I negotiated down from a dragon.”

“Of course, you did babe,” the other replied with a smile, giving him a mock sincere look. “I’m very proud of you.”

Stephen glared.

“I’m also,” Tony bit his lips, trying to hold back a laugh. "...proud of you for how you dealt with the thing that happened with Loki-“

This time, the sorcerer rolled his eyes.
“Really! …I’m honestly impressed actually. How cool you’ve been about this whole thing-“

“Well… got to learn at some point I suppose. ...And this really would have been one of those cases where it would be extremely unreasonable to be so upset.”

"Never stopped you before-"

With another glare, Stephen simply went onwards, ignoring the little snipe. "...I suppose it did help that he never caused you harm. The opposite really. …I am more… intolerant of Rogers because of-…” he voice trailed off.

Tony smiled. Tiptoeing to kiss the other on the cheeks. “I know.”

“And… perhaps unreasonably, it has become easier to handle because he is a friend- ...oddly enough I... believe Loki won’t-…”

“Cross you?”

“…Yes.”

“Yeah well,” there was laughter underlining the tone as the billionaire shook his head slightly. “That much is for certain. It was actually sort of cute how he was freaking out just because he thought you'd be mad at him-“

Stephen let out a snort, although there was definitely a smile tugging at the corner of his lips. “…I kind of felt bad-“

Tony gave him a look. “You were enjoying it.”

“…Maybe a bit-”

But the next moment, his fiance's attention turned to somewhere behind him. “Hey, did you eat? You going to join us?”
The sorcerer turned around, watching as Loki took several long strides towards them. It appeared the god was back to his usual self. All but walking into a room as if he owned the place.

“No, I’m on my way out. Emergency call from Valkyrie. Since Thor is absent, I must fill in. …I just came to let you both know. I’ll be back mid-day tomorrow if you need assistance with the time machine.”

“Ah okay. Be safe, Lo.” And with a wave, Tony headed towards the dining table. “Harley! I told you not to touch that!”

Stephen grimaced, not even turning his gaze in that direction. He wasn’t sure he wanted to find out what it was about now…

“Strange-“ That snapped his attention back from the straying thought.

The doctor sighed, “I swear if you apologize one more time, I actually will be angry-“

“No. I’m done what that.” he retorted pulling a face. "You and Stark are insufferable. I don’t know why I ever bothered.”

Stephen chuckled, shaking his head lightly.

Loki half-hearted rolled his eyes. A smile dancing at the corner of his lips.

Although, soon enough, his expression turned completely serious. Then after taking a quick glance towards Tony’s direction, “…It’s about your accident…”

There was a moment in which both stood completely still. But eventually, Stephen strode to the further end of the room, casually towards the elevator. Knowing full well, Loki followed silently till they were definitely out of earshot.

 “…Romanov was not involved,” the god said in a low tone. “At least not causing the accident. That
really had been Hydra. I made sure of the information. Well—… they were the members of Hydra within SHIELD…"

Stephen frowned. “…Well? Then why did you make it sound so grim?”

The other let out a huff.

A subtle shifting in his gaze that already told Stephen, whatever came next, couldn’t be anything good. Something that would even make the usually brash god become uncomfortable in repeating…

“…It is the why after. Why Fury wanted you gone-”

That made Stephen scoff. “…I already assumed they might be behind that, I told you. I was a mere distraction to Tony. A civilian getting in the way. Fury surely wanted me out of the way in hopes of Tony being with Rogers. He may have even thought that would seal his loyalty to the Avengers, keep him in line and dedicate everything… I already guessed all that-“

But Loki was staring at him in that eerily impassive look.

“…What?”

“…It… It was not even for some…” The god sighed, turning his sights downwards momentarily. “…happily ever after for Stark and the Captain. Or all the potential benefits they saw from the possibility… At least... not all-”

“Then what?”

“…How much do you know about project TAHITI?”

Chapter End Notes
Not really a cliff hanger because... Remember Chapter 11? LOL I know... it's been a while - but we're going back to the problem.

**Don’t worry, I’m not changing my mind that this WILL be an IronStrange fic and that will be the end pairing no matter what.**

But personally, from my perspective at least... There are times where a kiss is just that, a kiss. Sometimes, even sex can mean nothing and that is okay. Not every encounter or “the moment” has to lead into a definite romance and relationship itself (platonic or otherwise) between two people doesn’t have to fit into one of the several neat box society defined as “normal” or “healthy”. ...idk i think that's what makes life, people, interactions interesting LOL

Oh ye! I was so happy for the 2,400 kudos couple weeks back only to have it drop completely after AO3 did the whole wipe out double kudo thing LOLOLOL ...but today it's back to 2,400 which I'm so happy abouttttt Thank you, everyone, who continued to read this! ;___;

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Works inspired by this: [definitions of indefinable things banner](#) by TouchoftheWind

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