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**Amor Vicit Omnia [ARC 2]**

*by* [veriante](http://archiveofourown.org/users/veriante)

**Summary**

Continuation of the Amor Vicit Omnia Project. Please do read Arc 1 for this to make sense. Re-write of Iron Man 2 and Thor.

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Excerpt:

"I know it's none of my business and you can tell me to stop if you want to, but I am curious. What happened between the two of you?" Pepper asks carefully. Stephen looks away from her. He visibly steels himself and gathers himself before he answers.

"There were... certain things about myself that I had not disclosed to Anthony. When I did, I hurt him and broke his trust in me." Stephen informs her and well that's certainly a surprise.

"So you fucked up." Pepper can't help that her voice sounds a little cold as she says that.

~~~
Can a relationship really be built with such big secrets as... magic and fate of the universe between them? Can Tony really love someone that he isn't quite sure if he even nows? Can Stephen deal with the heartache of knowing that his lover is dying?

Guess we'll find out!

~~~

Please do pay attention to the A/N for trigger warnings. And um by now you should already know. Lots of graphic sexual content. Be advised.

Notes

Thank you so much for your love and support for Arc 1 and welcome back to Arc 2.

Bit of a slower upload timetable for this one (mostly because the Arc hasn't been finished up before I decided I was happy enough with the first 10 chapters to start posting. It is mostly written and I have gotten through the gauntlet of the first 10 chapters to know that they are what I'm sticking with, but until the full story is completed and I am FULLY satisfied that the story flows well, the updates will be more or less a chapter every day or so.

Please do continue to comment to let me know how you think the work is going. Encouragement and motivations keep the chapters flowing! XD
Tony looks at the still damaged bits and pieces of his suit and sighs. He had meant to work on them during the week. He hadn't. Not because he couldn't. But because he had been too preoccupied and distracted to do so.

The week itself had been hectic.

It began with the Board Meeting that had literally dominated the news for the week and will probably continue to do so for a few more days or so before it calms the hell down.

The arrests were dramatic and well... public.

Once that was done, the Board Members, shaken but determined, reinstated Tony as the CEO of Stark Industries, which was well... duh. Then they had moved onto the matter of the StarkPhone, the HoloTable and StarkTablet as the new projects for the company as far as the public products were concerned.

It had actually gone swimmingly well. The R&D Boys and gals managed to deliver the final, mass-producible product on Friday, so they were working on sourcing all the bits and pieces required as well as setting up the factory lines. So that was another thing.

Then there was the matter of the full investigation launched into Stark Industries to make sure that there was no one else involved in the weapons smuggling problem and anything else that Tony had missed during his tenure as CEO.

On top of that, there was the whole Iron Man saga and dealing with the fallout of that too. The investigation into the conflict with Stane was there as well and it was honestly all bit of a nightmare.

Pepper was busy as fuck and so was the rest of the legal and PR teams. Both his personal ones and SI ones. They were working on branding and patenting the Iron Man suit as well as Iron Man persona itself as a legal entity.

Tony also made sure that the Maria Howard Foundation could be brought in to ensure that anyone affected by the incident with Stane could be looked after.

Then there was the announcement of Stane's death, the revelation of what he was involved in, the debriefing requests by several government agencies that he politely declined and other dramas. His legal team sent them his statements. That should shut them up for a bit.

All in all, it had meant that he had spent far longer than he would have liked in the suit and the tie combo and the public Tony Stark persona than he really liked over the week. He did only one tell-all interview and for now, all his participation in the media circus was over.

For at least a little while.

As he and Pepper and all the other wonderful people that worked for and with him in SI, had worked through all the dramas, Tony had been... thinking. A lot. About a lot of things.
Such as what to do now that he has announced to the world that he was Iron Man. Aside from the obvious thing of making sure that everyone involved stays safe.

Security was going to be a huge thing now. The interest in the suit was concerning. Tony plans to upgrade the workshop, security for both the mansion and the offices. Ensure that Pepper is going to be safe. Ensure that- yeah not going there yet.

Then there was the issue of the weapons and tracing them to the right locations to make sure that he can root out both the Ten Rings and also ensure that the weapons caches are destroyed.

He knows now that to involve Pepper into the process is a hard ask. The woman was busy enough trying to deal with all the legal, PR and SI dramas that she doesn't have the time and she needed to do all that work to ensure that Tony had the time to be able to do what he needs to do.

He needs another set of hands. No. That's not strictly true. Between him and JARVIS, Tony can get everything done. He knows that. But he doesn't want to. Now that he knows what it's like to work with someone? He doesn't want to do it alone.

Only one name comes to mind. Stephen fucking Strange. The name keeps popping up every time he tries to get something working in the suit and thinks that he can use some help.

But that's not the only thing that has kept Stephen in his mind. That day in the Penthouse Suite of the D'Arte Hotel in New York had been... both incredibly frustrating, terrifying and yet enlightening.

The man's beliefs were obvious. He believed that somehow Tony fucking Stark was fundamentally important to the survival of the universe. Which is ridiculous. But the man believes that and as a result, wants to protect him. Which is also... ridiculous.

But the belief does at least... reassure him a little when it comes to Stephen and his motivations. The doctor wasn't out to harm him at least. Even if his beliefs are delusional. But the thing is, Tony finds that difficult to believe.

Stephen Strange, a man he has spent virtually every weekend and more with over almost five months was too rational, too reasonable, too fucking smart to be taken in by a stupid end of the universe theory and... that brings up a whole other can of worms that Tony really doesn't want to think about.

But then Stephen wouldn't be the first person to be pulled into a giant conspiracy theory or the first intelligent person to fall into a cult. It even makes some twisted sort of sense to believe that Stephen could be the leader of a cult. He's certainly intelligent enough, charming enough and charismatic enough to do it.

But at least if the doctor believes that then he doubts that he would do something to hurt Tony. Then he remembers what he had told JARVIS on the night they first had sex. About how he never wanted to hurt Tony but that he couldn't guarantee it because that's not how life works.

That leads to Tony looking back on all of their interactions. The pattern was obvious. Stephen had never ever asked for anything in return for anything that he did. He never asked for a favour, money, sex... nothing. In fact, the doctor never initiated anything with Tony.

It had been Tony to first flirt with the doctor. Stephen gave back as good as he got, but he wasn't the one that started the flirting. Tony was the one to suggest the sexual relationship from the start. It was Tony that had all but pushed the man into sex the first time.

It had always been Tony to initiate all their sexual interactions. The doctor's desires were obvious, but it had always been Tony that had made decisions on their positions. To decide when to have sex.
Or whether they would have sex at all. Stephen had always participated and he had always enjoyed it, but he had never started it.

Not even the intimacies. Stephen never initiated a kiss with Tony. He had always accepted it and he had that soft look in his eyes when Tony initiated it, but Stephen didn't even touch him without being touched first.

Stephen had known.

All the times that Stephen had been distracted or had looked at him with a look that Tony couldn't understand, a look so concentrated and focused as if he was trying to memorise every second of it all...

Stephen had known.

Their last encounter before Stane, in particular, is one that doesn't leave Tony's mind. Stephen had been desperate. Begging him to take him. Begging for the contact. Despite knowing that he'd been fucked raw and needed time to recover. He remembers their kiss. The heat that had travelled through him.

It almost makes sense. A twisted sort of sense, but it makes... sense.

Then Tony remembers the gym. The moments before that when Stephen had all but offered himself up to be hurt. And Tony had hurt him. Stephen had given himself completely and utterly over to Tony. And Tony had hurt him. Fuck.

He understands now though why Stephen had done that.

If Stephen had initiated everything, if he had been the one to start the relationship, Tony would be looking back at it now thinking that the man had manipulated him.

He hadn't.

Stephen hadn't been the one to contact him first. He hadn't called him. He hadn't asked to work on the suit. He hadn't asked to work on JARVIS. He hadn't suggested that they sleep together. It had all been Tony.

The realisation hits hard.

It also... makes him think a lot more about himself and his feelings and his thoughts when it comes to one Stephen seriously fucking Strange.

'Because I love you', the doctor had said.

Despite how angry and how upset he had been, or perhaps because of it, the words cried out with desperation deep within the doctor's voice had hit him like a punch.

It made a certain kind of sense. Tony had been frozen with surprise. Unable to respond. Despite the fact that Pepper and Clea had both told him that Stephen had loved him, he hadn't understood. Hadn't... realised that they hadn't just been saying empty words.

He remembers doubting the words. He remembers questioning why Stephen would hide so much of himself, essentially lie about who he was if he did indeed love Tony as he declared. But Stephen hadn't been able to answer. The only response he had been able to give was because he had to.
But Tony had left that conversation by leaving behind the phone that he had given to the doctor some months back on the bed next to him.

‘I need time to think. This isn't done. But I need time to think’, Tony had muttered after some time because he did need the time to think. Because he needed the distance to do it.

He hadn't closed the door on the doctor and ended everything because... Tony couldn't. Didn't want to. Because if Tony was being honest with himself, he cared about Stephen. More than he was willing to admit and when they were apart, he missed the doctor far, far more than he was willing to admit even to himself.

Which honestly left Tony with a problem.

"J, have you had any contact from Dr Strange?" Tony asks the AI. The doctor hasn't contacted him. Tony had left the conversation, the suite and the doctor behind with the promise to contact him when he was ready to deal with the doctor again. He hadn't expected the doctor to respect that.

"No Sir. Is... Is Dr Strange alright Sir?" The AI was fundamentally still a child and he doesn't understand human emotions very well yet. Or human behaviour for that matter. That's okay. That will take time and guidance. Which... Stephen had been providing.

"I don't know buddy." Tony tells him honestly. He doesn't. He hopes that the doctor has recovered from the injuries that he had taken from Tony and whatever he did to himself with the whole 'preventative measures', but he can't be sure.

"Sir, has something occurred between you and the doctor? I noticed that he has not attended the mansion per schedule." JARVIS's concern and his polite approach to the personal topic is something Stephen has taught him. Tony closes his eyes. He hysterically thinks that he feels like a parent explaining to a young child why their mother or father left. It's fucking ridiculous.

"We had... a disagreement." Tony informs the AI.

"Ah. Well, sir, I do believe that communication is fundamentally important in interpersonal relationships. Perhaps there has been a communication error between the two parties that can be amended with a phone call?" JARVIS's suggestion is both incredibly logical, sweet and most of all... tempting.

5 months of emotionally connecting with a human being, spending time with them, talking and laughing with them and having sex with them... do not disappear overnight. Yes, Tony might have lost some trust in the other man. Yes, Tony was frustrated and upset, but he cares for the other man and misses him too.

He just doesn't know how to fix it. He's not sure if he can forgive or forget. he's not sure how to interact with the man knowing that there are secrets that he simply can't understand.

Tony feels... lost.

He can't really talk about it with his friends either. Not without breaking the promise to Stephen. Besides all of that, Pepper is busy and so is Rhodey. Tony thinks and sighs.

"J, can you put in a call through to Michelle? Ask for a session next week." Tony asks.

"Of course Sir. I will make the call first thing Monday morning." The AI informs him and Tony sighs and looks back at the Iron Man suit in tatters.
Michelle is a good choice. It's a sane choice. He needs to figure out what he wants and what he needs. Tony almost feels like going out and getting someone to just fuck. Just to have mindless sex with.

But the moment that he thinks about actually doing that, he realises that he hasn't slept with anyone for five months but Stephen. That the moment he'd become fascinated with the doctor, all he'd done is masturbate to the thoughts of the man or had sex with him instead.

He hadn't even felt the desire to have sex with anyone else.

And for Tony fucking Stark? That was a fucking miracle in itself. Even when he'd been in previous relationships, with them moving in with him and him actually being in love as far as he believed it, when he'd seen an attractive person in real life or on the TV, Tony would always find himself at least somewhat sexually attracted to them.

Right now? All he wanted was Stephen fucking Strange laid out in bed in front of him.

Fuck.

Yeah. A chat with his therapist? Definitely warranted and definitely required. Until then, he needs a distraction. Tony lifts up the welder and turns it on. At least working on the suit might get him out of his own head for a bit.

He doubts it, but it'll at least keep his hands busy.

~~~

**Thursday**

**29 October 2009**

The weather is getting cold and Clea hates it. She normally loves autumn, the changes it brings to the city is beautiful. But it's cold. Especially in New York City. The wind corridors created by the skyscrapers and lack of sunlight being able to move past the tall buildings just makes everything so much colder and she hates it.

She shudders against the cold gust of wind that goes through the street and pulls the coat tighter around herself.

"I hate this fucking weather." She bitches to her friend as she walks along towards the bar. It's one of her rare outings in the city away from the Order and her job and school.

Kathleen was visiting from out of state, considering moving to New York for a job and she'd asked to meet up and Clea had agreed. She needed a drink. Or ten. More likely ten. Stiff ones at that.

"You love autumn! What's gotten into you C?" Kathleen asks her, her warm Southern accent a pleasant change from the hard New York accents. Clea sighs.

So much.

All of it was named Stephen Strange. The problem was two-fold. When Stephen had returned from his conversation with Tony, he had been so drained and in so much pain that he had barely managed to portal through to the Sanctum and not even to his own bedroom.

He had collapsed as soon as he had come through and there had been frantic spells thrown left right
and centre to keep him stable and alive. That crisis was over and done with now and Stephen was physically mostly okay, but... emotionally?

Gods.

The man was a complete and utter wreck. Clea had to cancel all of their appointments for the last two weeks because he simply hadn't been able to work. He was still suffering from the injuries. They couldn't heal him from it all and for another, he was having severe difficulty focusing.

Yinn and Wong explained that it was the Connection. Thankfully, it wasn't a rejection, but Stephen was... for the lack of a better word, yearning for Tony Stark. Not just Connection wise, but as Stephen Strange the human male in love with Tony Stark. That was more problematic than any fucking magic bullshit they were dealing with.

Apparently.

"How much time you got?" Clea ends up asking her friend when she remembers that Katheleen had asked her a question. Kathleen raises an eyebrow at her, her warm green eyes filled with concern.

"For you girl? As long as you need. How about I buy you a nice Irish Coffee and we get talking?" Kathleen suggests and she doesn't pull them towards a bar, but towards one of those trendy cafes instead. The ones with quiet jazz music in the background, soft lighting and couches instead of chairs and tables.

Yeah. That'll work, she thinks.

She doesn't know what to do to help Stephen. She doesn't like being helpless like this. Since she had become a sorcerer, she hasn't really felt helpless. She had felt powerful. Capable. Now, she was in a situation where she was watching someone she loved suffer and there was nothing that she could do.

"So, tell me everything." Kathleen tells her once they have their mug of Irish coffee that is more Irish than coffee. This hadn't been the plan, but a bar is just too noisy to talk like this.

Clea takes a sip and thinks carefully before she speaks.

"Someone I care about a lot has a secret. A big one. A personal secret." She starts off with and Kathleen nods. She had always been a good listener.

"Let's call them A. So A met B and fell in love with B. The thing is, A hasn't told B their secret because they were worried about what B's reaction was going to be." Clea outlines and Kathleen frowns but nods.

"Obviously B found out and whilst B didn't outright reject them for the secret, they're kind of... on a break or is broken up or something. A isn't doing well. I don't know what to do." Clea finishes off and Kathleen raises an eyebrow.

"Okay so you're not A or B are you?" She asks and Clea shakes her head. She wishes. Actually no. That would be worse. She has no idea what she would do in Stephen's shoes.

"So A is a friend. Someone you care about and they're hurting and you don't know what to do to help them." Kathleen summarises neatly and Clea nods and sips at her coffee. It tastes delicious.

"Honestly girl? There isn't a lot you can do. I mean, it's other people's relationships hon and you got no place jumping in there trying to fix that. That's not up to you. It is for A and B to decide if their
relationship is worth saving and if it is, then they are the ones that need to do the talking." Kathleen tells her as if it is that simple. It is. Clea knew that.

"Yeah but Kath, it's... I can't just sit by and watch him suffer. I need to do something." Clea ends up saying because there just had to be something that she can do. She's a sorcerer. She's Clea fucking Strange for god sakes. Kathleen sighs.

"Honey, I know. That's because you're a good person with a good heart and you're my friend. Of course you care and of course, you want to do something. So be their friend. bring them here and feed them hot chocolate laced with vodka or something and let him know that he can talk to you if he needs or wants to. But relationships hon? You do not wanna get in the middle of that." She's right and Clea hates it. She sighs.

Clea can't remember just how many times she's picked up the phone to call Tony. How many times she had put the phone right back down again because even though he was putting Stephen through hell, she understood why.

"In the meantime, you talk to me and make yourself feel better and de-stressed so you can help your friend. You hear what I'm saying?" She does. She hates it but she does.

That is what she has been doing. Just being there for Stephen. Hurting because he is hurting and wanting it to stop. But she knew she couldn't ring up Tony and blame him. It wasn't his fault. If anyone was to truly blame for the pain that the two men were going through, it was the fucking universe and Clea doesn't have its number.

"So... if you were in B's shoes, how would you feel?" Clea does find herself asking. The problem is too close to home for her to think rationally about it.

As much as it is necessary, Clea... too is keeping secrets from those that she really ought to be honest with. Like her parents. Her friends. The random dates she goes on.

She remembers that her reaction to Stephen's withholding of information had been... easy acceptance. Shock and surprise yes, but easy acceptance, but that was because she understood. She shared the secret.

"Depends on the secret. But if it's a secret that could have effects on me and I didn't know about it but found out? Like wasn't told but... found out? I would be goddamned upset. Angry. Furious. That will go for a few days, I imagine. Then let's be honest. If I have feelings for A, and they are deep enough, then I'm going to end up forgiving them. I might not forget, but I will probably forgive them. But it depends on the person and the secret, I guess." Kathleen says easily enough.

The thing is, Clea isn't sure what Tony's feelings are for Stephen. She had thought that he had cared. But she wasn't sure how deeply. On top of that, she wasn't quite sure if Tony was even the forgiving type.

Plenty of Tonys throughout the universes forgave plenty of Steve Rogers' to work together to fight against Thanos. But that was an end of the universe situation. So was this, but Tony didn't know that. Clea sighs.

"Everyone has secrets. I have secrets. You have secrets. Some are bigger than others, but we all have secrets. Some we keep because we are worried about what others might think. Some, because they are necessary to protect other people. Some... because we don't even know they are secrets." Kath tells her and well, that's fair enough.
No one could ever know every little thing about another person. Not even Wong and Yinn knew everything about each other. They had decades of lives lived before they met. Every now and then, they found out secrets. They dealt with each one as they came along.

"So is this where you tell me that you're seeing someone?" Clea asks because she needs to change the topic. Kathleen giggles but shakes her head and the conversation moves on from there.

The conversation hasn't changed anything. But Clea does feel better. She hopes that when the time comes for sorcerers to come out into the public light, that Kathleen will remember this conversation and not resent her too much for the secret that she's had to keep from her.

Hopefully, she'll understand.

~~~

Thursday

29 October 2009

Pepper knows that something is up. She knows when Tony is upset and Tony is upset. Not to the extent that she feels like she needs to force him to sit down and tell her everything, but the fact that he'd set up an emergency meeting with Michelle and have spoken to her for three hours?

Yeah. Something is definitely wrong. But Tony won't tell her. That's fine. Sometimes people just need to work out their own problems and Tony is at least talking it out with a professional so that's fine.

But the session with Michelle doesn't seem to have solved everything because Tony is still... upset. Also, it's Thursday night and Stephen Strange isn't here and Tony has no plans to go to New York.

The thing is, she knows that Stephen is good for Tony. He has a grounding effect on the inventor and he also has... an odd ability to keep Tony's nightmares at bay.

Tony sleeps better. Eats better. Is just better when Stephen is around. When he isn't around, Tony misses him. And right now, Tony is missing him. Pepper can tell. She just doesn't know why Stephen isn't here.

But without Tony opening up first, she doesn't quite know how to ask why Stephen is missing. The doctor could be busy. That's fair enough. Or with all the work that Tony has had to put into SI, he thought he couldn't get the time to spend with Stephen.

If that is the case...

"Tony, if you want, I can sort out the press releases for the Starkphone and Iron Man sorted over the weekend. I can adjust the schedule if you want to spend some time with Stephen." She tells him because by gods he can use a break and by gods, Stephen could probably use seeing Tony after seeing the nightmare on the news.

Tony doesn't respond.

In fact, it is some time spent in awkward silence before Tony does respond.

"No now Pepper. I don't want to talk about Stephen right now." He says and his voice is so tense and upset that Pepper knows not to push it. But she does make a note for herself to do something about this.
Because she wants Tony happy and if Stephen Strange has done something or something is going on between them that is making Tony unhappy...

Well then.

Pepper Potts can be terrifying. If needs be, then she would show Dr Stephen Vincent Strange just how terrifying she could be.

Pepper loves giving the shovel talk.

~~~
Tony might not be so sure about seeing Stephen again but of course, the Universe has its ways of forcing his hand. Or is it JARVIS?

Either way, Tony doesn't need to trust someone to work with them. The sexual tension might kill him, but Tony can restrain himself. Can't he?

Chapter Notes

Oh wow.

Um... okay. So this ARC is getting a lot of responses very quickly and thank you so much for the support! So I really do hope you read the first story because this is going to be so hard to understand otherwise.

I do apologise for the slightly late posting (by about 8 hours or so)... I basically had to re-write the chapter because I was really unhappy with how the emotions were working in this chapter.

I'm actually up to the fun parts of the story now in ARC 2 so I got a little excited with that.

All of your lovely comments and the kudos really keep me motivated and excited. I know you lovely lot of people keep telling me that everything is fine but I can't help but be critical of the story, the characters and the writing itself. Insecurities is just a part of who I am lol

So please let me know what you think, what you feel and if there are any discrepancies and problems. Suggestions are good too! (especially if there is like a sex scene you totally want/need to see... I can always use more ideas XD)

<3

Wednesday

4 November 2009

He never knew what it had meant to 'live in hell' until now.

Every fucking day is a struggle. A fight to survive. It hurts to breathe. It hurts to do absolutely anything. He could deal with it if it was physical pain. It isn't. But the thing that makes it worse, that absolutely makes it the fucking worst is the fact that everyone knows.

Wong tries to distract him. To get him to go out to Hong Kong to eat some foods that he knows
Stephen likes. Yinn tries to get him to meditate with her, to calm down and to focus. Clea... tries to get him drunk.

Stephen knows that they care. That they are doing their best to try to help him because they know that he isn't doing well. They keep asking with every little kind gesture whether he is doing okay. He isn't.

And he *hates* it.

As pathetic as he feels about and thinks about it, he is *not* doing okay and he knows it. He misses Tony. His soul cries out for the man's company. For their connection and contact and... he *can't*. He *can't* deal with it. He craves the genius like a drug and he needs a hit. Any hit. The sound of his voice, the feel of Tony's lips. His touch. His very fucking presence. Just another minute. Another second.

Fuck!

He *knows* the man is angry, hurt and betrayed and he can't. He can't just... fix it. He can't tell him everything. Tony understands enough of his motivations, but the ball is in Tony's court now. Stephen owes him at least that. Tony asked for time and space. Stephen has to give him that at the very least. He doesn't even contact JARVIS for that reason.

Instead, he throws himself into his work. He even takes clinic hours at the local free health clinic to help out with the influx of cold and flu patients. He actually goes to board meetings at the D'Arte Corporation. He even takes some Disciples through their lessons.

Anything to stop himself from picking up that phone. Anything to stop himself from going to the mansion just to- he can't. He burns with the yearning and the desire to just see Tony and he... *can't*.

He lives in the memories.

The phone that Tony gave back to him is both a blessing and a curse. It is something physical that Stephen can hold onto and carry with him to remind himself of Tony and their time together. But it is also something that gives him hope and... it makes it all the more difficult to... forget.

JARVIS sends him messages regularly. Letting him know that Tony is okay. He wonders if Tony himself is aware of those messages. He hopes that he is. That is another source of comfort and hope that he wishes he didn't have. He waits for each message with abated breath. The relief that goes through him with each confirmation that Tony is okay is... all that he has left.

The Cup sings to him daily, reminding him that there are ways through which he can watch Tony. See for himself how the genius is doing. He doesn't. He can't. If he did, if he gave in once, he would never be able to stop.

Almost all the physical signs of the injuries are gone now and even that, he wants to hold onto. It was a physical reminder of their connection, their history together. It's morbid and pathetic and he hates himself for it, but the pain had felt better than the nothing he feels now.

He is distracted. Stephen can barely focus enough to do basic spells on top of those that he runs at all times to keep the Sanctums and the Kamar-Taj strong. He meditates every chance he gets to try to centre himself, to focus. It doesn't work. He feels frayed around the edges. Fragile. Vulnerable... Broken.

He can't sleep. The only way he can is to be... exhausted. When he falls into bed, utterly exhausted and sleep takes over, the gives into it gladly, knowing that the Time Stone will at least bring him
images of Tonys. But they hurt more than they heal. Seeing the Tonys love others is a physical blow. Seeing other Tonys die rips his heart and soul into shreds each night.

He wakes up with screams and tears and he can't breathe, can't live until he gets the message from JARVIS confirming that Tony is okay. That he is alive and well.

The soft warm care that the others show doesn't help. Not right now. Which is why he finds himself aimlessly walking through the night New York streets. It's cold and he is bundled up in a black winter coat, warm trousers, his usual sneakers traded in for winter ankle boots and he is comfortable enough with his sweater and woollen scarf that the walk is mostly comfortable.

The cold night air suits his mood well.

He listens to the crowd bustling past him as he walks and the city that never sleeps is so vibrant despite the late hour and the cold. In a city of millions and millions of people, Stephen feels alone.

At least until he notices that someone is following him. He sighs.

It's not one of the others. He can't sense magic. Sometimes one of the others shadows him when he goes out for walks like this, their need to protect the Sorcerer Supreme outweighing the practical knowledge that he will be just fine on his own.

It's at that point that Stephen decides that he should go back to the Sanctum because he honestly doesn't feel like dealing with idiots. It wouldn't be the first time or the last time someone tries to mug him.

But as he gets closer and closer to the darkened streets near the Sanctum, the footsteps draw in closer. As he is nearing the Sanctum, they close the gap completely. Oh, Stephen thinks. Not a mugging then. The street is too exposed for a mugger to approach.

"Dr Strange." A male voice calls out to him. Words carefully enunciated. A strong, attention-grabbing call of the name without it being too aggressive. Stephen sighs and turns because it would be suspicious if he doesn't. He puts a surprised look on his face and observes the two men that are standing two to three feet away from him.

Black suits, black winter coats, black shoes, black ties and a white shirt. Shady government organisation to boot. Better dressed than the typical FBI at least. SHIELD then.

"That's me. How can I help?" He puts on a pleasant facade on his face and looks at them curiously.

One of the men step closer and as they do, Stephen can see the weapons strapped to their shoulders. A move designed to show just that to him. A power move. Great.

"Dr Strange, I am Agent Smith and this is Agent Collins from the Strategic Homeland Intervention, Enforcement and Logistic Division, more commonly known as SHIELD." The man says as he shows off a badge. Stephen blinks at them.

The thing is, he knows that he has been on SHIELD's radar for some time. Diaz, one of the Disciples, has been working at SHIELD. For some time had alerted them to the interest, but hadn't been able to get into the files to ascertain exactly what SHIELD's intentions were.

It wasn't just Stephen that was under scrutiny. Several of the other members that had a more public life before their magical one came under interest from SHIELD because of their slow ageing.

In Stephen's case, his photographs were matched to his 'father's photographs and due to the similarities, accuracy of 99.8% in accordance to the facial recognition program they used, he had
They had expected that and they had been fielding off the SHIELD agents thus far, but they had known that a confrontation was going to come sooner or later. He supposed it was sooner.

Stephen really should have kept better tabs on SHIELD. But there had been so many other things to think about, things to keep tabs on that they’d slipped.

Shit.

"Oh and what would a government agency want with me?" Stephen asks as if he as no idea and technically, he doesn’t know. That's what worries him. He knows that SHIELD has an interest in dealing with the superhumans, the Mutants and anything that isn't... 'normal' in the world. He knows he falls very much into the umbrella of not normal but what did SHIELD actually want from him?

He plays up his arrogance and his aloof nature some but the cold tone in his voice is wholly real. Stephen doesn't have a high opinion of SHIELD and their HYDRA infestation problem as well as their manipulative techniques. He also... just doesn't like strangers.

"Well Dr Strange, there are some abnormalities that we detected from your records that we wanted to discuss with you." Collins? Or is it Smith? One of them tells him. He raises an eyebrow.

"Why does SHIELD have any records on me, to begin with? Am I a suspect in an investigation of some sorts?" Stephen asks, keeping his tone nice and mild, with a raised eyebrow. This was another one of the reasons he didn't like SHIELD.

Large, unsolicited, unauthorised collection of private data without public knowledge in order to 'deal with threats' before they become 'threats'. It was a fucking bullshit excuse they used to turn the United States into a surveillance state.

"Not exactly Dr Strange, but we would like you to come with us and maybe we can discuss-" Yeah no, Stephen was thinking as the man was speaking, but before he can even say that, the phone rings. Which surprises him. It is late enough at night that he shouldn't be getting any phone calls. Still, Stephen knows it's his phone and grabs it out.

It's not ringing.

Well. Stephen doesn't show it, but as he goes into his jacket pocket to grab the phone that is ringing, He feels his heart beat faster and faster. It is Tony's phone. The one that he carried like a security blanket and kept charged just in case. He hadn't expected that phone to ring.

Stephen answers.

"Why are you talking to SHIELD agents Stephen?" Tony's voice sounds annoyed and he speaks before Stephen even has the chance to say anything into the phone.

The mix of emotions that goes through Stephen from just hearing Tony's voice is enough to render all possible responses he can give to the man moot. He feels relief, pain, sorrow, yearning and need go through him sharp like a knife.

"Anthony." He breathes out. It's the best he can manage. There is a short pause on the other end before he can hear Tony sighing.

"You do know that SHIELD mostly cleans up mutants and superhuman messes, right? And now apparently my messes? Why are you talking to them Stephen?" Tony asks with a sigh. Stephen
doesn't quite know how to respond. Tony's tone is confusing. So is the fact that he is calling. How does he even know that-

Stephen sees a slight movement in the camera from the corner of his eyes. The NYPD surveillance network. Oh.

"I was unaware the situation was quite so advanced." Stephen says quietly into the phone. He isn't quite sure if he wants the two SHIELD agents to know who he is talking to. He knows that Tony will get the message quickly enough. Besides, he's just glad that he can keep his own voice mostly... calm through that.

"Yeah well JARVIS's been keeping tabs on you. You need to get out of there Stephen. Those men aren't after a friendly chat. Even if they are, you don't know how long it's going to stay friendly for." Tony informs him quite seriously. Stephen knows. SHIELD had three approaches when it came to dealing with Mutants and the superhumans. Lock them up to turn them into SHIELD assets, monitor them or kill them.

None of the options was very appealing.

He looks up at the nearest security camera and hopes he doesn't look too apprehensive as he looks at the two shady government men. He hasn't quite processed the fact that JARVIS, the mild-mannered and still young JARVIS had gained himself access to the NYPD surveillance network to keep an eye on him. Yeah. Because he doubts that it had been Tony's idea. He's definitely going to need some time to process that.

But later. For now, he has SHIELD agents to deal with.

"I do apologise gentlemen, but it looks like I won't be available for a chat. I have a medical emergency to deal with." Stephen informs them and they look like they are debating the situation. Stephen returns to the phone call as if he just doesn't care about them.

"JARVIS panicked when he recognised the SHIELD agents. They are keeping tabs on me and I imagine that they might want to talk to you because of me... or something else. I don't know. Either way, it's not worth taking the risk. Stay on the phone and go somewhere they can't follow you, Stephen." Tony advises him and Stephen nods to both himself and the camera.

"Dr Strange, we would really like for you to hang up the phone and come with us." Collins says and they step in a little closer as if they are thinking of making Stephen do exactly that. No. Stephen raises an eyebrow at them and pretends to cover up the microphone on his phone.

"Gentlemen, unless you have a warrant, that is not going to happen. As I have informed you, I have a patient to see. Now, if you really need to speak to me, I suggest you get in touch with my legal team." Stephen informs them with a note of finality and walks towards the road and picks up the first cab that comes down the road. Luckily, he is in New York. Cabs are easy to find.

From the back mirror, he can see the two men jumping into a car of their own. They were serious then, he thinks. Damn. They had been trying to contact him via phone over the last couple of weeks and he knew that they were watching his practice, but he hadn't realised just how far they were willing to go.

"Just drive for now please." Stephen tells the cabbie. He doesn't want to lead them back to the Sanctum. The Sanctum had enough protections that it would be impossible for them to follow him all the way there, but he isn't quite sure if he wants Tony and JARVIS to know either.
"It's your money man." The cabbie comments with a shrug and drives. It's good enough. Stephen is well dressed enough that he isn't too worried about the fare. Stephen pulls the phone closer to his ear.

"I- Anthony I'm-" Stephen isn't even sure what he is trying to say. He can deal with the SHIELD issue. He can deal with the rush of adrenaline and the situation itself. But the emotions that come with being in contact with Tony? The anxiety, the fear and yet the absolute elation? That is more difficult to handle.

Tony interrupts him.

"Go to the D'Arte. Your staff won't let them through right? Get into a chopper and fly over here... or do what you need to do to get here. We need to talk." Tony informs him and Stephen closes his eyes and thinks for a moment before he nods to himself. Decision made.

"I can be there in twenty minutes. Will... that be acceptable?" Stephen asks carefully and there is a tense pause on the other end. Stephen holds his breath.

"Just get here Stephen. Make everything seem legit but just get here." Tony's voice sounds tense and terse, but the confirmation is all Stephen needs.

"I will." Tony hangs up once the confirmation is given. Stephen sighs.

"D'Arte Hotel Central Park please." Stephen tells the driver and is grateful to find that his hands aren't shaking badly. He manages to send the text messages to organise the transport to fly to the locations though he won't be on it. All of the transport team that they deal with are members of the Order. They know how to make it seem like Stephen was on the flights.

Stephen also sends a message to Clea. She's the one that is always guaranteed to have her phone nearby and it is always a good idea to let her know where he is going. Once that is done, Stephen finally relaxes into the seat a little.

Despite the rather concerning nature of SHIELD and the possible danger, Stephen can't help but feel a little warm and... better for knowing that perhaps Tony cared just enough for him to at least make sure he doesn't end up in a deep dark hole somewhere with SHIELD agents.

It means something... right?

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**Wednesday**

4 November 2009

"Sir... I do apologise. I realise now that perhaps it was not respectful of the doctor's privacy for me to keep tabs on him through the NYPD surveillance network." JARVIS tells him after Tony explains the concept of privacy and the importance of not violating it. Especially when it comes to other people.

Tony realises that it is super hypocritical of him to even have the discussion with the AI considering the fact that he'd instructed the AI to do it plenty of times and he gets the distinct impression that the AI is confused by that.

It probably doesn't help that the AI is struggling to understand the desires to protect someone versus the desire to protect their privacy. It's an issue Tony himself struggles with. Which is why the AI might be even more confused.
But this is the first time that Tony really has had to stop and consider the example he is setting for JARVIS and well. That is a pleasant surprise. He isn't really happy with what JARVIS had done without his knowledge. But...

Having said that, he is almost grateful that JARVIS had done that.

Oh. It had been a fucking rude awakening. No doubt about that. The first time JARVIS had quietly threw onto the screen the image of Stephen walking through the streets of New York, he had wondered if it was some sort of manipulation technique by the doctor or by JARVIS himself to try to get Tony to stop being an idiot and just contact him.

But when he'd seen what was happening on the screen and JARVIS had identified the two men that had been following Stephen? Yeah. Well. That changed a lot of things.

The thing was, SHIELD had been approaching his friends. They tried their way with Pepper, who shut them down immediately. It helps that when Tony is in the mansion, Happy is with her. When Tony is out of the mansion, they are usually together. But SHIELD has approached her.

They approached Rhodey too. That didn't go down too well because Rhodey was the first to always say no to all requests to gain access to Tony.

They went for subtlety with Rhodey and Pepper mostly, but it had been obvious enough that SHIELD was trying to use them to gain access to Iron Man suit and to Tony. SHIELD really didn't know his friends very well.

SHIELD wasn't the first government or private organisation to try to approach those that were close to him to gain access to his tech. Both Pepper and Rhodey was used to it. In fact, both of them got quite lucrative offers all the time.

But they never swayed. Tony doubted they ever would. Also, they knew their shit. If they were less confident and knew less about how the government and legal system worked though, SHIELD might have been able to manipulate them into doing things for them.

It is so easy for the government to dupe people that don't know their own rights and the government's rights. Tony is lucky that Pepper, Rhodey, Happy and even Eliza and Finn know well enough. Because SHIELD tried.

Which Tony resents.

He knows that there are SHIELD agents watching him. They can't get onto the grounds of the mansion and they have approached Eliza and Finn, who have contacted him immediately following the incident. SHIELD was either really bad at their approach, or Tony liked to believe that he had done well preparing his friends.

He hadn't taken precautions with Stephen.

The thing is, he isn't sure if Stephen was a target because of him or because of himself. Either way, it was bad news. And if Tony hadn't been so preoccupied with his thoughts about the man and... avoidance of him, he would have known to at least warn the doctor.

The moment he had realised that SHIELD was trying to get Stephen to go with them, Tony had called him. He couldn't just sit and watch. Not when Stephen was actually in danger. SHIELD had ways of making Mutants and superhumans disappear.

Yeah no.
The concern he feels for the other man is genuine and so is the care that he feels. It pales in comparison to his worries about his own emotions and his mistrust.

But as soon as he asks Stephen to come to LA and do it in whatever fashion he needs to... Tony feels the flutter in his stomach as the panic concerning the doctor's safety fades and a new panic and dread rises.

"Sir, Dr Strange has arrived at the D'Arte. The SHIELD agents are being turned around." JARVIS informs him. Tony does not breathe a sigh of relief. He doesn't.

He does.

Then the panic hits him about Stephen actually coming to the mansion. He doesn't know what to say. He doesn't know what he is going to do. The flash of panic hits him hard and he tries to remember his conversation with Michelle.

Be honest with himself.

That had been the one takeaway from the 3 hour long session with the therapist. Tony had to be honest about what he wanted, what he felt and what he needed. With everything, really, but in particular with Stephen.

Tony tries to think.

It doesn't work. For a while, Tony tries to distract himself. That doesn't work either. Instead, he goes to the bedroom and takes a shower and changes his clothes. Halfway through that, JARVIS chirps up.

"Sir, Dr Strange has sent you a text message that I do not understand. He... will be at the mansion in five minutes. Will that be acceptable? I do not understand how that is possible when the helicopter has just left the D'Arte Hotel to head to New York Private Airport." The AI's confusion is shared. Tony sighs.

"It's- the doc isn't normal JARVIS. Just tell him okay and open the door for him when he gets here. If he chooses to use a door." Tony isn't scared. Surprisingly. The time away from the doctor has at least given him some time to... not quite normalise what the doctor can do, but at least accept that the doc probably isn't going to hurt him.

He has also spent a lot of time looking into Mutants, how they work and the code they operate under. SHIELD really did have their work cut out for them if that is what they have to deal with all the time. It does take him a few days to remember that at the end of the day, Mutants were human too. Despite what they can do and like all humans, there were some bad eggs.

Stephen doesn't seem like a bad egg.

Before Tony is really ready, Stephen's arrival is announced. Tony has to take several deep breathes and ready himself a little before he manages to make his way up the stairs to see Stephen standing in his living room, seemingly uncomfortable despite knowing the mansion like the back of his hand.

Tony tries not to let the man's beauty distract him. He is dressed in heavy winter gear that Tony hadn't seen before. It never gets as cold as it does in New York in LA. The doctor looks pensive and the dark colourings bring out the greys in his eyes. He looks so very stunningly attractive. Fuck.

"What did they want with you?" Tony asks as soon as he sees the other man because he doesn't want to think about the way that Stephen's eyes light upon seeing him or the way that they immediately
gained a hint of deep sorrow and regret.

"They didn't say. Something about abnormalities in my records and wanting me to speak to them." Stephen informs him. Greetings weren't really their thing so it doesn't feel awkward. Tony nods and heads to the bar.

"Drink?" Tony offers because he certainly needs one. Pepper lifted his drinking ban and he really needs a stiff drink to deal with Stephen being so close again. Because he can't touch. He can't.

"Please." Stephen says with a sigh and Tony realises only then that the man... looks exhausted. Unwell. Not like before, but definitely run down more than anything else. Tony stamps down on his desire to ask if he is okay. Tony turns to focus on pouring the drinks instead.

He throws in the frozen metal cubes Eliza had gotten some time ago into the whisky glass and pours a healthy serving for both of them. He doesn't hand Stephen the glass, but leads him towards the balcony instead. Where JARVIS does not have microphones. Stephen follows.

He also notices that the doctor's pale scarred hands are shaking and puts the glass onto the porch table instead of handing it to him and settles in a chair. Stephen sits where Tony had put the glass. He doesn't reach for it.

"JARVIS is confused by how you managed to get here. I don't know how to explain it to him." Tony informs him and Stephen nods slowly. He does reach for the glass though, mostly, Tony assumes, as a means of delaying the conversation.

"I will speak to him after, if you... don't mind." Stephen suggests and his voice is... almost timid. Tony doesn't like that. But he is happy enough with the suggestion. He nods.

The awkwardness is there and so is the tension. But Tony notices that the tension on Stephen's side is greater than for him, which is a surprise. Stephen looks like he is ready for Tony to lash out. He... looks like a man about to be handed a death sentence.


This is why he doesn't do relationships. It's easier with just one night stands. No emotional attachments. He wishes he doesn't care about Stephen and what he is going through. But he does.

"I've been... busy." Making himself busy, Tony wagers. Tony himself, has genuinely been busy. It was hard work to bring SI back from the brink of disaster and it was ongoing work. But on the nights when the work was done, he had spent more time thinking than working.

Then there were the times he spent talking to Pepper and Michelle. Those conversations enlightened him somewhat.

If nothing else, Tony knew that he did still trust Stephen. Because, yes, there were things that he didn't know about Stephen and yes, those things that he didn't know were terrifying, the doctor has done nothing to actually try to hurt him or to betray him.

In fact... everything Stephen had done so far has been... to help Tony in some way. To offer Tony his help, his assistance and himself. Basically.

Also, Michelle had reminded him that everyone had secrets and no one could ever tell someone, romantic partner or otherwise, everything about themselves and their lives.
In a way, there was a great deal about Tony himself that he hasn't shared with Stephen. Things that he just couldn't. Yes, Stephen's secret was big and it was difficult to both understand and deal with but at the end of the day... it didn't completely change who Stephen was. Tony had been surprised by that realisation at least.

"You haven't contacted JARVIS." Tony comments. When he had given the man the phone back, that had been permission. Apparently, Stephen hadn't believed that or known that.

"I... thought that if you wanted to cut all contact, it would be easier if I weren't to contact him." Stephen informs him and well. That's a perspective he hadn't considered. Tony nods slowly.

If there is one thing that he is certain about when it comes to Stephen Strange... it is that the other man *does* care about him. Whatever that means.

"He worried about you doc. To the extent he decided to use the backdoor to the NYPD surveillance system to track you when you were moving about the city. Without telling me." Tony's voice sounds dry even to himself. And amused. And surprised. Because he still is.

This is the first real, true act that neither of them had approved or programmed into JARVIS that he had taken out of his own accord. It wasn't... ideal, but he had acted with the need to ensure that Stephen was well and safe.

That was better than acting with malicious intent or for some other need. It showed that what they had hoped for the AI, independence and awareness was possible. It also meant that JARVIS's fundamental primary directives were functioning quite well.

"I- That is amazing. I hadn't realised that JARVIS had come so far. But also... concerning." Stephen says quietly and Tony scoffs.

"Yeah. I'm blaming your bad parenting on that. I talked to him about privacy and violation of it etc, but I think that's your job. So you get to run through all of the concepts, legalities and ethics behind all of that with him." That's his way of telling Stephen that it is okay to talk to JARVIS. He hopes the man understands.

From the way that Stephen is looking at him with surprise in his eyes and hesitation, he understands. Just not sure about it. Hesitant. Tony sighs.

He doesn't like this Stephen Strange. He misses the confident, elegant, gorgeous man with that sharp and brilliant mind that had absolutely blown him out of the water and made him care. He wants that Stephen back. He's just not sure whether he can handle that Stephen and just... how to go about getting that man back.

"Look. Like I told you, I'm not sure if I trust you right now. But I've worked with people I don't trust. I'm not sure if I've forgiven you for what you hid from me and all the questions you still haven't answered. But for now, I do know that I like working with you and I'm pretty sure that the SHIELD thing is my fault. So I'm going to suggest something." Tony tells him with the best business tone of voice that he can manage.

Stephen looks... both devastated and hopeful. The raw emotions are difficult to deal with. Tony is honest enough with himself to admit that he doesn't know how to deal with the doctor's emotions. Or what he feels in return for them. it wouldn't be the first time.

But the decision is at least, easy to make. As long as he doesn't look too far into why he is making the decision, that is.
"Give me a sec." Tony says and goes back inside. He grabs the tablet he'd left on the living room table and also grabs the bottle of whisky because he needs it and Stephen is through his glass almost. He walks back and watches as Stephen's shaking hand returns the glass onto the table. Empty.

This is the first time he'd seen the doctor drink hard liquor.

"Refill?" Tony asks but the doctor shakes his head. Tony refills his own glass and sets the tablet down in front of the doctor instead. Stephen doesn't reach for it, but looks at Tony a little worriedly for a moment.

"Did... have you been running regular checks with the ultra- I'm- I'm sorry. I have no right to-" Stephen's concern is obvious as is his own uncertainties. Tony sighs.

"I did. JARVIS won't let me work until I do that every week. It's fine. The shrapnel hasn't moved. Well one of them did a little, but since then it's settled. So yeah. Read that." Tony tells him and points to the tablet. He doesn't want to think about the sheer relief in Stephen's eyes at the news that he is fine.

Stephen unlocks it and when he starts to read it, he looks up, confusion obvious.

"Anth- Dr Stark, what is this?" Tony rolls his eyes.

"Fuck Stephen. Anthony is fine. Like I said. I don't know what to do about you yet, but it doesn't mean that the last five months just disappears. I wish it did. But it doesn't." Tony's voice is filled with his frustration against himself and against Stephen. The other man flinches at the tone, but he does listen and his eyes are filled with a complex set of emotions.

Tony isn't sure if anyone can fake that. Can hold that much emotion in their eyes when they don't feel anything for someone. Actors can, but at the same time, they often say that when they really want it to be real, they let themselves fall in love or believe strongly that they are the character that they are playing.

So either Stephen was an Academy Award-winning actor, or he really felt those emotions. Tony wishes that he didn't see that. Or know that. Or understand that.

"I am so sorry Anthony. I- There isn't anything I can say or do to fix or change what happened. I wish- I hurt you and that was the last thing that I ever wanted to do." Stephen's voice is so filled with regret that Tony has to accept it for what it is. He sighs.

"I know. Now read the damned contract Stephen." Tony tells him but his voice is softer. Gentler. Stephen nods and reads.

Pepper had been confused about the contract, but she had drawn it up for Tony without protest. It was something that he had decided was necessary after his chat with Michelle, but he hadn't been certain he would actually be using it.

Till half an hour ago, he hadn't been sure if he wanted to ever see Stephen again. But here they were. Because of course SHIELD just had to mess with his fucking life.

But he doesn't regret it. He doesn't regret intervening because yeah, he might not be sure about what he wants and he might not be sure about how he feels, but he knows he would have regretted it if he hadn't.

That much, he does know.
"This is a contract to work as a researcher for Stark Industries." Stephen says with confusion clear on his face and in his voice. Tony sighs.

"You've been working without a contract. It seemed unfair. I'm also going to be paying for your work. Like I said, I don't know whether I trust you right now, but I don't have to trust you fully to work with you. So this is what I can offer right now." Tony says because he wants more. He hates that he wants more despite everything else, but he does.

But this is safer.

Treating Stephen like a co-worker is something he can do. He can work with that. But if he goes back into the sexual relationship, Tony knows that it is going to be full of conflict.

He isn't angry with Dr Stephen Vincent Strange, the man that has helped to program JARVIS and helped him program his suit.

He is angry at Stephen, the man he slept with and shared intimacies with. That's who he felt betrayed by.

The distinction is artificial, but it helps him to deal with the situation. It's the best he can do for the time being. Stephen nods slowly.

"If this is what you want and you are sure about it, I would be honoured." Stephen says softly. Tony gives him a nod. Stephen signs the contract.

It's not a standard researcher contract. There are heavy NDA clauses thrown in there, especially concerning the Iron Man suit and the Iron Man activities. But there are protections for him too.

Like the fact that there are no set hours that Stephen has to commit to. To rule out possible issues with Stephen's relationship with D'Arte. There are other protections too. One of them is what Tony knows he's going to have to put into effect pretty quickly.

"I'm going to be asking Pepper to organise for you to be in a press conference with me as soon as possible. We're going to launch the biometric sensor and get you in the public's eye." Tony informs him and Stephen catches on pretty quickly.

"You want to increase the public's awareness of me to ensure that SHIELD can't get to me as easily." Stephen says and Tony nods. The man's intuitive intelligence is attractive as always.

Being this close to him after all the intimacies they have shared without kissing the man or touching him is odd and the temptation is significant.

"Public attention is protection from shady government organisations Stephen. We're going to use that. You're going to make sure you have a set schedule. Divide your time between New York and Los Angeles. Make it so that if you are missing for even a few hours, people will know." Tony tells him carefully.

Honestly, he has a feeling that if Stephen didn't want it, no one would actually be able to hold the man prisoner against his will. But if he wanted to hide who he was, what he was, then public awareness and living his life in the public light a little was going to be... necessary.

"You might also want to make it known publicly that you're D'Arte Corporation's owner and heir apparent." Tony suggests because social elites draw public attention.

D'Arte Corporation like Stark Industries was a family-owned corporation, which at the scale the
company was... is surprising. But Stephen's relationship to Anderson is a well-kept secret, though the company itself was aware of who the company would be going to.

Which given that Stephen is a stepson and has a different name, is somewhat surprising as well. Still, it's not like Stark Industries, where the family name is right there in the company's name. At least. Stephen nods in agreement.

"I'll get Anderson to make the announcement." Stephen informs him and Tony sighs.

The next part is what he had been worrying about the most.

"I have work I need your help with. I need you to help me with tracking down my weapons so I can focus on the suit." Stephen doesn't look too surprised. He nods slowly instead.

"Of course. When would you like me to start?" Stephen asks and Tony finishes his drink. It's now or never. Right?

"Now."

~~~
Killing me Softly...

Chapter Summary

In an ideal world, everything will just go back to normal. Unfortunately, Tony and Stephen aren't living in an ideal world. In the real world, pain and anguish linger. And so it does in theirs. How will they handle it?

Chapter Notes

Honestly, writing is like giving birth to a baby. Only it comes out a little bit at a time. Fortunately, unlike a baby, I can change things as things go along.

So I had been up to chapter 20 in ARC 2. Unfortunately, it wasn't working. So with a new brilliant idea (?!), I have started re-writing the thing from Chapter 14 but hopefully, there is enough stuff in the chapters that no longer work for me to get it back to 20 quickly. Everything is fleshed out in my head. It's just so hard to make it work in actual words !!!

But hey. That's what happens when you decide to completely re-writte the MCU, make massive changes to it and SOMEHOW try to make it make sense... right?

Anyways, please do keep commenting, encouraging me and supporting me through this massive journey because I really can't do it alone. And yes, I am one of those people that constantly refresh the page to see if there are new comments. Every time I see one, I read it, get second wind and merrily write for a bit before I repeat the process XD

I do reply to every single comment and will continue to do so... so please keep throwing ideas my way, criticisms and support! <3

Friday

6 November 2009

The sudden quiet of the green room compared to the relatively crazy media frenzy just outside is almost jarring. Pepper closes the door behind herself and looks around until she finds the man she'd been looking for.

Dr Stephen Strange.

When her eyes do find him, she is breathless for a moment. She'd seen him before, of course, and she had known objectively that he was an attractive man, but him standing sideways to her, looking out of the windows?

He is impossibly beautiful.
The dark grey suit with the black shirt is cut just perfectly to accentuate his shoulders and the slimline of his body. The delicate silver chain from the collar clips that he wears instead of a tie adds to the elegance and youthful appeal and draws attention to his slim neck.

His hair is parted and styled into a sleek, professional look but there are just a few strands that have escaped the bonds and fall into his face and Pepper honestly isn't too surprised that Tony has trouble keeping his hands off of the man.

But what really stops her and makes her look is the odd vulnerability in his eyes. Despite his height, his strong stance as he stands against the glass wall, he looks almost... fragile.

It takes her a moment to breathe and to gather herself before she can really approach the man. But she does because she is no blushing virgin and more importantly, as much as she finds the fragile air about him difficult and his beauty almost... intimidating, she has work to do.

"Have you read over the package I sent you Dr Strange?" She asks him. Tony was having a last-minute chat with the R&D boys and gals and it left Pepper with Stephen to prep him for the interview. She wasn't concerned with Tony. He was used to media. She wasn't sure if Stephen was.

The doctor turns around to look at her and as he does, all of that vulnerability that she had seen disappears as if it had never been there. He looks confident, strong and charming. Pepper is almost impressed but she'd seen Tony pull that one too many times.

"Of course Ms Potts." He tells her with some confidence and she gives him a smile and a nod. They really should be talking about the press conference, but what Pepper really wants to talk to him about, what she needs to talk to him about is Tony.

"I know it's none of my business and you can tell me to stop if you want to, but I am curious. What happened between the two of you?" Pepper asks carefully. Stephen looks away from her as he does, she sees it again. That vulnerability.

He visibly steels himself and sits himself down in the lounge chairs available in the sitting room arrangement. He could have stayed standing, turned around so that she couldn't see him. Refuse to answer the question. He doesn't do any of that. He gestures for her to sit and she does.

"There were... certain things about myself that I had not disclosed to Anthony. When I did, I hurt him and broke his trust in me." Stephen informs her and well that's certainly a surprise.

It's similar to what Tony had said. That he could trust Stephen enough to work with him, but for a reason he would not disclose to her, he couldn't trust him as a person. But she had reminded him that spending time with Stephen might cut through that distrust and Tony had shrugged.

It was the first time in a very long time that Tony was brutally honest with her in terms of his emotions. Tony cared for Stephen. A great deal. Enough so that he had considered the relationship as a long term thing. But whatever it was that Stephen had been hiding had been so big, so unforgivable that Tony had stepped back.

The mere fact that he didn't completely cut Stephen out of his life though, was a strong indication that he cared for the man a lot more than what he had even admitted to her. Pepper thinks that Tony is in love. Tony doesn't know and he doesn't believe it.

But that's what she sees. That's what she hears when he talks about Stephen. As far as Stephen is concerned, she already heard from Tony that Stephen had told him that he loved him and she believes it. The pain is raw in Stephen's eyes and so is his regret.
Pepper doesn't quite know what to do. What to say. But the words make their way out of her anyway.

"So you fucked up." Pepper can't help that her voice sounds a little cold as she says that. This is her best friend that they were talking about. She was protective of him and wanted him safe, happy and not hurt by anyone. Especially in a romantic relationship because by gods he had gone through enough with them.

And this was the first time in years that Tony had made himself emotionally vulnerable and to know that Stephen had broken that fragile trust that Tony had given him? Yeah, that pissed her off. She expects Stephen to deny it. To be defensive. He cuts through all her expectations.

"Yes." Stephen's admission is clear cut and Pepper is shocked by just how much emotion can be conveyed with just one word. The heavy regret in his voice and his eyes and the pain is difficult to look at. Pepper is lost for words for a moment.

"You really do love him don't you?" She finds herself asking after a moment. She can't quite keep the awe out of her voice. It isn't that she thinks that Tony doesn't deserve love, because he does. It's more that... she is surprised to find that someone has managed to see enough of Tony to love him.

It's not an easy thing to get to know Tony Stark. It is even more difficult for him to show himself enough to someone else for them to love him for who he is and not what he is. And Stephen managed it and doesn't shy away from it. He nods.

"There is nothing that I would not give him or do for him. I just wanted him safe and happy. But I have hurt him and now I must live with the consequences of my actions." Stephen says gravely and honestly, the shovel talk that she had been preparing is the last thing she wants to say now. Stephen Strange was in enough pain and had enough regrets of his own that it really was not worth compounding that with a shovel talk. The fact that he is aware of the pain he caused to Tony and owns up to it? Pepper sighs. Well, that really takes the wind out of her sails doesn't it?

"Are you ready for this press conference?" She asks instead even though she had already asked that before. It's time to bring the focus back because by gods she isn't sure if the man can handle being in public right now.

Stephen gives her a small nod but he looks distracted.

She is almost jealous. Pepper isn't sure if she would ever have someone love her as much as Stephen seemed to love Tony. The devastation in his face alone tells her that. So much for work, she thinks.

"You know Tony still cares about you. If he didn't, he wouldn't be working this hard to protect you from SHIELD." She says because by gods Stephen looks so fragile and she just can't help but feel sympathy for the man. He gives her a nod and a small smile.

"I am aware. It... makes it worse. I rather that he told me that he hated me. That he lashed out at me." Stephen says and that is just heartbreaking. Pepper sighs.

"You know I came here with the full intention of getting you alone and giving you the shovel talk. But honestly Dr Strange, I'm starting to think that you're harsh enough on yourself. Tony doesn't forgive easy. But you can try to earn his trust back at least." She tells him only because he has been good for Tony. And because she knows that Tony cares for him.

And if there is a chance that this might work? Then she wants it to. Tony deserves to be loved with full dedication and devotion. She wants her best friend to be happy. Stephen... could maybe make
"It will be difficult. But I promise you, Ms Potts, I am going to be doing everything in my power to protect Anthony. Even if it means that he won't trust me." Pepper doesn't understand that, but she nods anyway because the conviction and the love that she hears in his voice is enough.

She doesn't know what else to say or how to respond to that. So she focuses back on the work instead. Gods, this is going to be hard, she thinks. She clears her throat.

"Okay. So, you've signed the contract. I have a copy of it filed away. So in terms of payment for your hours worked, how would you like the payment to be made?" She asks because she doesn't have Stephen's banking details on hand. He blinks and thinks for a moment before answering.

"Pay it to a charity of your choice Ms Potts. I don't need money." Well then. She knew that Stephen was filthy rich like Tony but that does surprise her somewhat. She nods.

"There are several charities that Tony supports. The biggest, of course, is the Maria Stark Foundation, which works mostly with abused children." Stephen merely nods.

"I'll put your paycheck through to them then. Would that be acceptable Dr Strange?" She asks just to confirm and she gets a nod.

Well then.

The conversation really wasn't going how she had expected or intended, but she is almost... happy for Tony. In a way. Yes he is hurt and yes he is upset, but knowing that her best friend is loved by someone to the extent that Stephen seems to care about him isn't necessarily a bad thing.

She's not sure how the relationship is going to go, or if it is going to go at all because Tony really doesn't handle trust very well, but she hopes that either way that Tony doesn't get hurt. After all, that's all that really matters to her.

"Ms Potts, it's time." The door opens and one of the PR reps that works for SI, Gina Park, sticks her head in through the door to inform her and Pepper knows.

"Well Dr Strange, shall we?" Pepper says as she stands up and Stephen nods and he stands up as well. Almost out of habit, Pepper straightens the man's collar and the collar pin and dusts off the shoulders of his suit.

"Knock them dead Dr Strange." Pepper tells him with a smile and Stephen gives her a small smile in return.

"Of course Ms Potts."

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Thursday

12 November 2009

It's all too easy to work with Stephen. They fall back into the pattern quite quickly. Stephen's keyboard is still set up and so is the computer he used for programming.

That really should have been the first clue that Tony couldn't shut the doctor out of his life. Not to mention Stephen's clothes in his closet. Or the extra chargers set up near the bed.
Or that his house still doesn't have any peanuts.

Stephen arrived at 9:00am and it was now well past dinner time but they were working. They take the breaks like they used to, to eat and rest Stephen's hands. It feels natural to be in the same space with Stephen even though there isn't that intimacy anymore.

Tony misses it.

There are awkward moments too. Their sexual attraction to each other hasn't changed. Stephen doesn't make the innuendos and the jokes anymore. He is serious and professional.

But his eyes show his desires, his pain and his regret. Tony can deal with that. He doesn't like seeing it, but he can deal with it. What he can't deal with is the fear. Every now and then, Tony can see the raw fear in Stephen's eyes.

It's not a fear of violence. Tony knows that at least. But it is fear of rejection. As if one harsh word from Tony could break Stephen and that fragility, that vulnerability is... painful to witness in a man that had been so confident and so strong.

When it came to the work it was fine, but even during their breaks, Stephen kept his distance and he always waited for Tony to take control.

It was awkward and difficult. Yet... it was better than not having the man there.

Stephen doesn't keep up with the pretence of travelling back and forth anymore. When he is meant to turn up at the mansion, he just does. The helicopter comes and goes and so does the plane, but Stephen isn't on them. He just appears.

Tony wishes that he could see it, but he doesn't ask and Stephen doesn't do whatever it is that he does within the view of any of the cameras.

Either way, they work as smoothly together as they had before. They are both professional enough to do it and having Stephen back means that everything happens a lot faster than it would be with Tony working on his own.

Tony isn't quite sure if he truly had understood what it would be like to have Stephen back into his life again with that wall between them. He hates it. But he also doesn't know how to fix it.

"I have a location." Stephen's words break through Tony's thoughts and the work he'd been doing to build another suit. Fixing the damaged suits take time and until he can automate the process, he was going to need a spare in the case of an emergency.

"Where?" Tony asks and walks over to Stephen's desk and leans over his shoulder to look at the monitor. His body is used to Stephen's. It doesn't feel uncomfortable or awkward to lean into his space. Stephen tenses up a little but doesn't move away. Neither does Tony.

He really hates backing down.

"Afghanistan. I would suggest that for your well being, you rest up tonight before you go for the flight. Arriving there in the early morning would also give you the element of surprise." Stephen says quietly as he brings up the maps and the satellite images.

As always, Stephen is right. Tony nods.

"Right. In that case, the spare bedroom is all yours. I'll leave early afternoon tomorrow." Tony says
because it is late and they really ought to take a break. Besides, Stephen's hands are shaking very, very badly on the keyboard.

He's not sure if Stephen sleeps in the spare bedroom or not. JARVIS doesn't tell him and he doesn't ask the AI. For all he knows, Stephen goes back to wherever he lives when he goes into the guest suite, but he doesn't care either way.

He does.

They leave the lab and Tony goes to bed. He's not fully exhausted, but he does slip under the covers. If he jerks off to the memories of being with Stephen, then it is between him and his hand. JARVIS won't tell Stephen. He knows that at least.

Eventually Tony does fall asleep. It's easier to sleep without waking up to the nightmares on the days that Stephen is in the mansion. He knows that is significant, but he doesn't want to think about it.

So he doesn't.

Around 3:00am though, Tony wakes up and he doesn't know why. Not for a little while. It's not because of nightmares, but when he hears the sob, he knows why. He is also somewhat surprised that Stephen had chosen to sleep here instead of going back to wherever he lives.

"J, is Stephen okay?" Tony asks quietly. He knows that the AI monitors them whilst they sleep. He has the sensors that he'd asked for in the cameras now. His night vision camera along with the biometric sensors and the laser temperature sensors should be more than enough for JARVIS to assess their conditions.

"Sir, I believe Dr Strange is experiencing night terrors and may require assistance." JARVIS informs him very quietly. Tony nods and he gets out of bed. The decision is surprisingly easy.

When he goes down the hallway, he can hear Stephen's hitched breathes and sobs and it is heartbreaking. When he makes it into the bedroom, for a moment, he freezes. Unsure of what to do.

Stephen is curled up on his side, his hands in tight fists that Tony knows will hurt the doctor and there are tears streaming down his face onto the pillow.

His eyes are screwed tight as if he is in great pain and the image is... Tony doesn't like it. He doesn't like seeing Stephen like this. JARVIS has lit up the room with a soft light just enough that Tony can see the man, but wouldn't hurt either of their night adjusted eyes.

"Stephen," Tony tries to call softly but the man doesn't respond. His whole body shudders and he whimpers between the sobs and Tony moves. He can't stop himself.

"Stephen, it's just a dream. It's okay." Tony finds himself saying as he walks over to the bed. He touches Stephen's shoulder, but he doesn't respond. The doctor is a light sleeper. He usually stirs easily enough to the sound of Tony's voice or a touch. He doesn't.

The doctor is cold to the touch.

Despite the sweat, the warm temperature of the room. The doctor is cold. That worries Tony enough that he physically moves the doctor until he is lying flat and he tries to shake the man awake.

"Stephen? Wake up! Stephen!" Tony calls a little louder in hopes that he can wake the other man up. But when Stephen whimpers again and starts to shiver, Tony feels the full force of panic.
This doesn't just feel like a nightmare. It's almost as if the man is experiencing something terrible or is ill. He isn't sure which. He can see the rapid heart rate from the thrumming pulse on the doctor's neck.

"Stephen! You need to wake up! Please!" Tony ends up almost crying out and apparently it's enough to cut through Stephen's nightmares because his eyes snap open. They are filled with pain and fear and his eyes are unfocused.

"Stephen?" Tony calls to try to get his attention and the doctor's eyes do start focusing and when they see him, they fill with relief.

"Oh Gods. You're alive," Stephen breathes out and when he reaches out to touch Tony's face, he doesn't push him away. He lets the doctor's shaking hand touch his face and when it does, Stephen lets out a shaky breath.

"You're alive." Stephen breathes out again as he can't really believe it. Tony just looks at him because he doesn't quite know what to do with that amount of relief and emotions going through the doctor's face and eyes.

"Of course I'm alive Stephen. You're in the Malibu mansion and it's 3 in the morning." Tony tells him because it helped him when Pepper told him where he was and what the time was. It was grounding.

It seems to take a moment for it to sink in for Stephen and as it seemed to, he seemed to also realise that he was touching Tony and withdraws the hand and looks away.

"I'm sorry to have disturbed your sleep Anthony." Stephen's voice is thready and Tony can hear the emotions the man was trying to hold back.

"I- It's fine. You going to be alright to go back to sleep?" Tony asks and the doctor does turn to look at him and shakes his head with a rueful, watery smile.

"No. Would it be alright if I went to the workshop?" Tony nods because he knows that urge well enough. JARVIS can keep an eye on the doctor and Tony is pretty sure that the last thing the doctor wants is company.

"Yeah. Do you want me down there with you?" Tony asks just in case. He personally would not want any company after waking up after a nightmare. He hadn't. But pepper hadn't given him a choice about it and having her had helped him. He's not sure where on the spectrum Stephen would fall.

"Always. But you need to rest. I really am very sorry to have disturbed your sleep." Stephen tells him again and Tony shrugs his shoulders. He doesn't like the way that the doctor's voice is unsteady and filled with shame.

"I have gone through enough nightmares doc. I know what it's like. It's fine." And he does. He sympathises with the doctor and he is about to say more when Stephen looks away from him.

"I don't have nightmares Anthony. I see." Stephen tells him with a bitter voice. He looks so raw and so vulnerable at that moment that Tony doesn't know what to say. How to comfort the man.

"What... what do you see?" He asks and regrets it immediately. Stephen is vulnerable and he was taking advantage of that in order to get the answers that he craves. Before he can take the words back, Stephen looks at him, his eyes filled with pain and sorrow.
"You." Stephen tells him. He doesn't need to say anything more for Tony to understand. Whether Tony believes he is seeing the future or the parallel universe or whether it is just a nightmare, the deduction is simple enough.

Stephen was seeing him die.

And it was affecting him badly enough that he had a physical reaction to it. One of abject fear of the doctor's temperature was any indication. It was devastating enough for Stephen that it had reduced the doctor to a teary mess.

"I won't let- I-I- My apologies. I should allow you to return to your bed." Stephen visibly gathers himself and his voice is stronger as he speaks, but it is clear enough that he is still shaken. Tony sighs.

"Yeah. I'm getting the feeling that it's gonna be hard for me to get back to sleep. How about we go down to the workshop?" Tony suggests. All the sleep that had managed to linger was gone.

Besides, if the doctor's fear was based on Tony's death, being around him and seeing that he was very much alive and well would be a source of comfort. Tony just isn't cruel enough to deprive the man of that.

He doesn't give the doctor a chance to actually answer. He just makes his way downstairs to the lab and the first thing he does is get the coffee started. He needs it. Not for waking up, but for the comfort it offers. The familiarity of that might help him feel a little better.

He instructs U to babysit it and bring it to him when it is ready. He can't trust Butterfingers or DUM-E with the fine motor control required to get coffee sorted.

Tony doesn't want to admit it, but it shook him up to see Stephen in the state that he had been in when he first got to the guest bedroom. For one. For another, the fact that the doctor's emotions concerning him were deep enough that a dream or whatever was enough to shake him that much? Yeah. That was a surprise too.

Tony doesn't quite know what to do with all that information, but it is easy enough to at least go back to work.

It doesn't take long for Stephen to join him. Tony doesn't acknowledge his presence by anything other than by handing him a cup of coffee that U manages to bring them. The doctor accepts it and thanks him.

They don't talk. Tony doesn't mention the nightmare or the fact that Stephen's eyes are rimmed red. He just goes back to working on the suit and Stephen goes back to working on the information gathering he had been doing before their break.

The silence feels heavy.

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Friday

13 November 2009

Stephen rubs his eyes tiredly. He is... exhausted. Despite the visions that he gets nightly and the fact that his mind is active at all times even as he is 'sleeping', Stephen usually feels rested in the
mornings. Despite the emotions.

But between the interruptions to that and the fact that though he had suggested that Tony rest up before the mission and get some sleep and the genius had, he hadn't. He should have.

Tony is flying to Afghanistan and the flight is long. Khwahan village is small and abandoned according to satellite and has a contingency of Ten Ring members hiding in it. Stephen had tracked the weapons there using the data that Tony had garnered from Stane's computers as well as movements recorded by satellite.

Stephen had also been tracking the Ten Ring's communications by pulling on the data that the military forces had gathered and following the bread crumb trail to other communication points and networks. He's had to rely on a great deal of rushed translation from JARVIS for the Pashto and Dari that was mostly spoken through the communications.

It hadn't been easy to even get to Khwahan and there were so many different points of communication that they were using that Stephen knew that he was only seeing the tip of the iceberg.

Tony was almost at the location. Stephen hasn't been able to put any spells on the suit or on Tony for that matter. The genius hadn't given him any opportunities to do so and without touch, it was hard to work spells like protection ones without the mandalas.

And that has Stephen nervous.

He doesn't know about these missions. He doesn't know how they are going to go. Most Tonys go through them, Stephen knows that, but he's not given details. The Time Stone doesn't show him everything that happens in Tony's life. Just slices.

"Dr Strange, Mr Stark has arrived in Khwahan." JARVIS informs him. Stephen settles the satellite over the location and carefully watches the explosions take place.

It's dark enough that it's hard to see any movement via the satellite. He can only really see the explosions taking place. He can't use the night vision capabilities for the satellite because of the brightness of the explosions.

The satellite also isn't a camera that constantly records what is happening in real time. It is more a series of photographs. Just enough for Stephen to figure out what is happening.

Stephen concentrates but can't feel any pain. Good. When it's over and done with, JARVIS informs him that Tony would be flying back. Tony can talk to him from the suit. He doesn't. It's a choice that Stephen respects.

Even if the distance hurts.

"Dr Strange, sir will arrive back in Malibu in about 4 hours. Perhaps you should rest until he does? You do not appear to have received sufficient rest." JARVIS suggests kindly. Stephen shakes his head but gives the AI a smile through the camera.

"I'm fine. Thank you for your concern JARVIS." Stephen informs him and returns to the various tracking programs he was using to follow the weapons trails. He has hundreds of spots marked on the maps. But he needs to narrow them down and he needs real intel to be able to act on it.

When he gets back to the Sanctum, he knows that there are several Masters that he can contact in the areas to get confirmation of Ten Rings activity. There are also enough Masters in the military and in
NSA that he gets intelligence reports from.

Once he has all that he will be able to narrow it down more. But for the time being, he just needs to solidify the intel and make everything clean and neat for Tony to be able to refer to it when he isn't at the mansion.

Which means data entry. Great.

It is mostly mindless work though and with JARVIS helping out here and there, it does go a lot smoother than he expected. The keyboard helps, as does the distraction that keeps his mind occupied.

Working with Tony is... difficult. In a way. The Connection and the Bond are pleased that their Soulmate is nearby but the wall between them is obvious and it is difficult knowing that it was him that put that wall there. That he had caused that pain to Tony to cause him to put walls up between them.

The guilt and the pain he feels along with the regret and yearning for the closeness they had once shared is... overwhelming and it takes every bit of his willpower to survive through each moment with Tony.

Stephen isn't sure if he had ever felt so overwhelmed with emotions as he had been with Tony. Even after his first accident, it hadn't felt this... difficult to breathe. To... survive.

Even though Tony is close and he is in the same space as him, Stephen misses him. It's insanity, but that's how he feels. Stephen sighs and backs away from the computer for a moment and closes his eyes.

With his emotions so awry, it is hard to hold back the irrational tears that keep threatening. He feels like a hormonal pregnant woman.

"Dr Strange, are you alright?" JARVIS asks softly. Stephen manages a nod.

"I'm fine. Just... tired." Stephen says but he knows that the AI probably knows that he is lying. The AI doesn't comment. A few minutes later though, he hears a chirp and is surprised to find DUM-E holding a cup of hot tea in his claw. Stephen takes it carefully and runs his fingers through the bot's sensors.

"Thank you very much DUM-E. I really appreciate this." Stephen tells the bot and it chirps back happily. Stephen smiles a little. DUM-E and the other bots were more like children than anything else.

Their basic AI and connection to JARVIS meant that they were capable of a lot of things and they were self-learning, but their programming was very simple. They needed approval or disapproval of their actions in order to adjust their behaviours.

With their interaction having been only Tony most of their existence, adding him to the mix has made them learn a little quicker. At least that's what Stephen hopes. Stephen looks down at the cup that DUM-E had brought him.

Jasmine tea. He hadn't been aware that they had that in the lab.

"Sir has requested that Jasmine tea be available for you when you visit the lab." JARVIS informs him. JARVIS must have suggested it to the bots then, Stephen thinks.
But it is Tony that had ensured that tea that Stephen preferred, that he had never asked for, was available. The touching gesture makes the guilt all the worse. Stephen nods anyway and takes a sip. The water is too hot for the tea and there is a burnt taste to the delicate leaves, but the bitterness suits his mood just fine.

He lets the hot cup warm his fingers and his hands and takes in some deep breaths of the calming scent and returns to work. As he does, he remembers to send JARVIS more questions to work with, focusing around privacy, as Tony had asked him to do and also on basic human rights. JARVIS sends back responses slowly.

It's not because of his processors or because he doesn't have the answers. JARVIS is timing them so that Stephen is through the particular section of data entry before he sends the response through as not to disturb his line of thought, which is incredibly thoughtful and Stephen appreciates it.

JARVIS has grown a great deal from the AI that he had been, but most of the personality that is now fleshed out had been there before through Tony's programming and the more that JARVIS develops, the more amazed that Stephen finds himself with Tony's abilities.

The thing is, in most other universes, Tony comes up with the program breakthrough necessary to get JARVIS to 'grow up', himself.

In this universe, he had contributed and he hopes that it is for the best. But he can't be certain. He can never be certain with any action he takes what the consequences will be. The big-ticket items, they are fairly certain about. But the little things? Stephen doesn't know. Cannot know and it is terrifying.

But despite everything else and despite knowing that it would be easier for him to just... stay away, he knows that he can't and he won't. The pain, anguish and all that was a price worth paying to be close to the genius. To have one more conversation with him. To see one more smile.

If the only price required of him to see Tony for just one more moment was pain, it was a price he was more than willing to pay. Even if it was killing him slowly.
A Bad Idea

Chapter Summary

The more that things change, the more that they stay the same.

Sexual tension and desire don't just fade overnight. Not when you're Tony fucking Stark and the man that he wants is in the same room as him.

Tony is known for making reckless, bad decisions. Even if he really, really ought to know better.

Chapter Notes

Oh boy.

This chapter is drama and the next one is going to be more drama. Oh boy.

The thing is, I KNOW that I am torturing you beautiful people with all the angst and the drama. I know that all you want is for the fluff to come back, but before there's going to be the fluffy goodness, there has to be the angst and the hurt. So... please excuse me for hurting you. I promise that I do it with the best of intentions. And mostly because the story actually feels like it flows better this way.

Blame Stephen and Tony. Not me.

Oddly enough, 90% of the time when I'm writing a story, aside from the main shipping, I tend to write what feels natural and right and then it's jsut up to the characters really to do what they want to do. It turns out right now? They want to be bad and be in pain and do the angst thing. So yeah.

BTW, winter fucking sucks. I'm freezing cold and my fingers type super slow in the cold. I hate it. T__T

Also, thank you for all the lovely comments and the encouragements. I really am surviving on those right now. Who needs food when I have comments?!

Friday

20 November 2009

Usually, Rhodey can read Tony like a book. He can see the man and just know where his head is at. Right now? Rhodey is finding that a little difficult.

Oh, he can read Tony well enough to know that his head wasn't in the room with him and the ridiculous movie they were watching.
But he didn't know what the genius was thinking about.

It was odd enough that he had been invited over to the house on a Friday night. Thursday to Sunday had been reserved for Stephen Strange, for the last four or five months. Not that Rhodey has met the man yet.

So, when Tony asked him to come over, Rhodey had been surprised, but he'd been more than happy to cancel on his other friends. He'd thought that maybe Tony was finally going to introduce him to the doctor.

But nope. The doctor wasn't even at the mansion. Rhodey didn't bring it up straight away because he wasn't sure what was going on. Tony was subdued. He was deep in thought and Rhodey got the distinct feeling that he'd been invited over to serve as a distraction.

So Rhodey had been talking to him about the suit, about what Tony was planning to do and to try to see if there were any points he could help without his military position getting in the way.

They both came to the conclusion pretty quickly that his involvement wasn't... ideal. Not with the current situation with the activities that he knew that Tony was planning to do and activities it was better if he had plausible deniability.

Yeah. Shit.

That cut the conversation short pretty rapidly. So instead, they got the pizza ordered and settled in to work their way through Tarantino films when Tony had gone quiet.

Normally, Tony and Rhodey talk their way through movies they'd seen before. They talk about the scenes, the lines, the blatant disregard for biology, medicine and physics. Oh and reality of course.

But Tony is quiet.

Rhodey is pretty sick of the silence and the brooding. Time to cut to the chase, Rhodey thinks.

"So, when do I get to meet your boyfriend?" Rhodey asks just as Uma Thurman chops the head off of some lackey or another and blood sprays all across the giant screen.

"He's- we're not- Stephen and I aren't like that." Tony's flustered response is interesting. Rhodey knows that Tony is well aware that he has no problems with Tony's sexuality. So it's not because of that. The military might have a policy of don't ask don't tell, but Rhodey doesn't give a fuck.

The thing is, Rhodey had been. Conservative that is, when it comes to sexuality. But meeting Tony had changed a lot of his thoughts and his views. Tony's exploration into his sexuality and his sexual life had been interesting to watch.

Tony's first forays into sex had been with women. He had been mature for his age, easy to be when he's an unparalleled genius, which meant that his sexual experimentation had started quickly.

Tony's genius had the added effect of him growing up outside of social norms from the very start. Tony didn't have the ingrained values of masculinity, sexuality and what was 'right' by society's views drummed into him in Sunday School.

There hadn't been a 'coming out' per say when Tony decided to experiment with men. He had simply stated that he was going to have sex with a guy and that he would return to the dorm in the morning. No grand announcements, no explanations.
Rhodey had to admit that he had been taken aback when he first heard that. He'd never been interested in a man and didn't quite understand why Tony was. Or why he was experimenting with them when it was clear that he was attracted to women.

The talk that they did have told Rhodey a great deal. Tony found both genders equally attractive and he enjoyed sex with both parties and didn't see why he shouldn't act on his desires. Rhodey hadn't been able to give him a logical answer. Especially when Tony brought up the animal kingdom, human history as well as psychology into it. Tony's logical explanation didn't mean that Rhodey understood, but Tony didn't ask him to.

He simply waited to see whether or not Rhodey could accept him for who and what he was.

It turned out to be surprisingly easy to. His sexuality didn't change Tony. He was who he had always been, it just meant that sometimes Tony was sleeping with dudes and other times, he was sleeping with women. Since Tony accepted that Rhodey for who he was for just wanting to sleep with women, it felt only right to accept Tony's choices too.

Besides, Rhodey had enough trouble dealing with the precocious best friend of his sleeping with much older people and ensuring that he stays out of trouble and safe, that he honestly didn't have the time to worry about the gender of his partners.

Then it just became a part of who Tony was and Rhodey just... accepted it. That changed a little when Tony did get into relationships. Some were extremely short, but he did date. Not just one night stands but date.

Rhodey didn't meet most of them. Tony didn't ask him to and Rhodey didn't need to as long as Tony was alright. At the end of the day, Tony didn't introduce Rhodey to people Tony didn't deem permanent in his life. So Rhodey just waited.

Katrina Cruz changed that.

With her and the exposure of sex tapes and all the drama, Rhodey had decided to take a more proactive approach in getting to know the men and women that Tony dates.

Tony doesn't introduce them as his 'boyfriend' or 'girlfriend'. He simply introduces them as 'friends'. Which apparently turns into a point of contention. Still. Rhodey tries to meet them and vet them just in case.

Carlos was the first of Tony's lovers that Tony really falls in love with. After Katrina, Rhodey had been worried that Tony never would. But he does. He falls in love... hard.

And when Tony falls in love, Pepper and Rhodey learn, Tony doesn't hold anything back. It's only when Tony is out of contact and an emergency pops up and Pepper realises that she's terrified of Carlos, that she asks Rhodey to come with her to the house to make sure that Tony is okay.

Tony... had been far, far from okay.

After Carlos? Honestly, Rhodey hadn't had anyone introduced to him as a friend. He hadn't heard any names repeatedly coming up in conversation.

Until Stephen Strange.

The amount of time that name gets mentioned is surprising. Then the way that Tony talks about him is... unlike anything Rhodey had heard from his best friend before.
It's different from even Carlos and how enamoured Tony had been with him. When Tony talks about Stephen, he talks about his brilliance, the way that he surprises Tony. He talks about him with a future in mind. All the projects that they could work on in the future. About all the places he might want to go with Stephen.

So Tony denying that they weren't dating is a surprise. Because Rhodey still remembers the way Tony had been frantically looking for a shirt that would look good on him.

Because he remembers how fond Tony had sounded when he had talked about the doctor. And how, though Tony never really talks about sex with him, Tony had indicated that they were doing it.

"Something happen?" Rhodey asks after a while because he's not like Tony. He can't process information and make amazing leaps of logic like he can.

"No. Nothing... happened. We're still working together. I'm just... not fucking him anymore," Tony says and there is discomfort there. Something that Rhodey doesn't quite get. Tony isn't telling him the truth. That's fine. Rhodey knows that there is a good reason if Tony chooses to do that with him.

"Because you don't want to anymore? Or he doesn't want to?" Rhodey asks because he doesn't understand. And if his friend needs help or emotional support, it helps if he can understand. Tony looks at him and sighs.

"No. Apparently the doc's in love with me." Tony tells him drily and Rhodey isn't too surprised. Tony doesn't like to deal with emotions.

It's not unheard of him to pull away from someone when they get emotionally invested in him because he's terrified that he will either disappoint them or he will invest in them too, only to be betrayed later. So Rhodey isn't... surprised.

He is a little sad for his friend though.

"And you aren't?" Tony looks away when he asks. The movie goes on in the background. Neither of them are paying any attention to it.

"Maybe? A bit? I'm not sure." Tony tells him and oh wow. That is a surprise. Tony's voice is a little bitter. Angry almost and Rhodey doesn't understand that.

"Then what's the problem? You worried that he's going to have a change of heart? Or the media? What is it?" Rhodey knows how difficult it would be for Tony if the world was to find out that he was having a long term, sexual relationship with a man.

It is 2009. But the world of business is cutthroat and there were plenty of conservative politicians and media people as well as the public in general that Tony revealing that aspect of himself to the world had never gone down well.

There had even been public protests over Tony's sexuality before.

"I can deal with that bullshit. It's just- He's got secrets. Shit that he can't tell me and I don't know if I can trust him." Tony says and he looks so frustrated that Rhodey can almost feel it for himself.

"Yeah but Tones, I got shit that I can't tell you either. I mean, he's a doctor and there's gotta be some confidentiality issues there right? And you can't tell him everything either about what the company is doing and shit." Rhodey guesses. Tony gives him a look as if he is thinking or considering something.
"His secret goes beyond that sorta thing." Tony says drily and Rhodey shrugs.

"It's up to you man. I mean, I'm gonna support you whatever you decide, but, you should probably decide what you want and tell him." Rhodey says because he gets the feeling that Stephen Strange, if he was indeed in love with Tony, would probably not be having a great time working with Tony.

Rhodey wouldn't be.

Especially if they had a romantic relationship before that's been reduced to something else, Rhodey's not sure if he can deal with that.

"Why? I mean, it's a bit awkward but we work together just fine." Rhodey rolls his eyes when Tony says that. He is very perceptive and Tony has an instinctual understanding and reads on people, but he can also be incredibly blind.

"Because if the man loves you and all of sudden you drew a line and said don't cross it, then he probably feels shit every time he sees you. I would be." Rhodey explains as clearly as he can because he knows Tony needs the help.

The genius looks thoughtful.

Rhodey turns to pay attention to the movie again. Kill Bill 2 is such a good movie. When the movie finishes though, Tony stands up and grabs his phone. Rhodey doesn't question it or start the next movie.

"Hey Pepper, we okay to go to the D'Arte Party tomorrow night?" Tony asks into the phone and Rhodey wonders if that means Tony's made a decision.

He honestly doesn't care which way that decision goes. All he cares for is Tony's happiness and his well being.

Tony doesn't look happy when he finishes the conversation with Pepper. But he does look less distracted. When JARVIS plays Pulp Fiction, Tony starts to actually watch the movie.

As they make comments about the movie, Rhodey makes a decision too. He was really going to have to meet this Dr Strange.

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Saturday

21 November 2009

The 19th Anniversary of D'Arte Corporation's Incorporation and the celebration of it's successes so far is a large event. It's also a charity event.

It also turns out to be the perfect platform to introduce to the world, officially, Dr Stephen Vincent Strange as the CEO and owner of the company, Mr Kenneth Anderson's stepson and next in line for the seat of CEO.

The venue is the Central Park D'Arte Hotel in New York of course, as it is the first one of their hotels to open and also the most luxurious one of their hotels.

All the social elites are invited, as are the business, political elites as well as celebrities. It is a night of luxury, glamour and announcements and... Anderson hates it.
He had never quite liked these sorts of shindigs. He preferred the professional, boring board room meetings where they crunched numbers over all the champagne, false smiles, niceties, small talks and music.

"Do smile and try to enjoy yourself, my love." Anne reminds him from his side. Even with her encouragement, he doubts he can actually enjoy the party.

Her on the other hand? He could enjoy. Anne is dressed in a deep red checked gown that has a sheer back complete with a decadent bow around her lower back and she looks gorgeous. Her dark red hair is done up stylishly and her make up isn't too heavily done.

She looks beautiful.

"I'll try. Now, where is that son of ours?" He says with the best imitation of an exasperated father's voice that he can manage.

Most of the Mystic Order masters do not have children of their own. It's hard to bring a new life into the world when you know that there are so many horrible things that will happen to it and happens inside of it.

Some still do.

Anne and Kenneth doesn't. They don't plan on it either. They both joined the Order later in their lives and just finding each other was a miracle that they hadn't quite prepared for. Kenneth had never married before and had never really found a long term romantic partner. In fact, he had given up on the idea of it.

But Anne's been married before. But the marriage hadn't lasted and that was one of the reasons she'd found herself at the London Sanctum and in the Order. For Kenneth, it had been a sense of something being missing from his life that had made him trek through Nepal and find the Kamar-Taj.

He'd been in the Order for almost 10 years before she had walked in and the moment he'd seen her, he had known that his life, his world, his universe would have her at the centre of it from that moment on.

The romance actually took them over 5 years to develop. The Connection and the Bond had sung between them from the moment they met, but they'd both had reservations and the fact that they were Soulmates helped them to become friends quickly, but taking their relationship to the next level had been a slow and careful process.

They were grateful for it regardless. Now almost 20 years in and they couldn't be happier. Each day spent in each other's presence makes all the difficulties of their lives worth it.

All the risks of being Masters of the Order, of risking their lives to fight to save others seems like almost a fair trade to even just have one more day spent in each other's company. Sappy and ridiculous but true.

It makes it all the more difficult to watch Stephen suffer.

For them, the Connection brought them love, friendship and joy. For him, all it seems to be bringing is tribulation, pain and anguish. The dichotomy is difficult to watch.

They are surprised that he is handling it as well as he is now, but it's only a matter of time before he breaks. They all see it. The tension. The drawn pain etched into his eyes permanently these days.
It's not fair.  

Stephen's burden as the Sorcerer Supreme is hard enough to carry without having the additional burden of a Soulmate that does not love him. That he cannot share himself wholly with, as Soulmates are meant to. The universe was a fucking bitch sometimes and Kenneth hated it.

But it was what it was.  

Kenneth and Anne can't change the universe. They can't fix Tony Stark and Stephen's relationship. All they can do is offer support and do what they can to protect their Sorcerer Supreme. Which includes shindigs like this, apparently.

"Clea is going to bring him down shortly. James wanted me to make sure you had your cards with you. You do right?" Anne asks and Kenneth taps his jacket pocket to indicate that yes, he did have those ridiculous speech cards for the press conference that was being held as a part of the party.

"Is he coming?" Kenneth asks quietly. Stephen doesn't know. If he did, he would have been annoyed. But Kenneth had sent an invite through to Tony Stark.

With Stephen and Tony collaborating rather publicly on a number of projects as well as D'Arte Corporation working with Stark Industries on the funding and building of the U-Gin Genetic Labs in Seoul, it made sense for the CEO of Stark Industries to be present.

"Most likely. Ms Potts have sent an RSVP back stating that both she and Tony would be here." Anne informs him. Kenneth nods.

As painful as it might be for Stephen to spend time with Tony Stark, it's worse to be away from one's Soulmate. Hence the... rather sneaky move to invite him without informing Stephen.

Stephen isn't their son. But over the years of pretending to be the man's father, if Anderson is honest, he has long ago considered Stephen to be his son. Family. Anderson is certainly old enough to be Stephen's father and sometimes... playing pretend can turn into a real thing.

Kenneth knows that Anne considers Stephen in the same light as him. It is... difficult not to care and love the man that dedicates his life to trying to protect the universe.

Kenneth and Anne makes the rounds. They socialise. Eventually, they get through the press conference and Stephen and Clea join them, as do the other Strange family members. The attention that Stephen garners is... dramatic.

Since the announcement was first made that Stephen would be joining Tony Stark to work on various projects together, the interest in Stephen from the general media had been overwhelming.  

They'd been aware of him, but only as a doctor and though he made the rounds on the tabloids every now and then, there hadn't been any significant attention on him.

Now, it was different. He wasn't just a medical doctor, he was a tech inventor working closely with Tony Stark and attractive. That made him a prime target for the mass media. The announcement declaring to the world that Stephen wasn't just a genius but another billionaire like Tony Stark?

Stephen was going to be front and centre in the social pages of the New York Times by tomorrow morning.

Then there were all the rumours that had made the rounds only for a short period on social media and the trashy magazines about speculations that perhaps there was more than just a working relationship
with the two men since Tony was publicly bisexual and there was chemistry between the two men during the conference.

But regardless, the attention that Stephen was getting from the socialites was enough that it was clearly making him uncomfortable. Kenneth is almost too amused to actually intervene and Anne and Clea are far too busy gossiping about various Order members in Sumerian to pay attention.

As it is, Stephen has been quite... effectively been cornered by a young woman. Kenneth keeps his eyes on the situation whilst he speaks with the Mayor of New York.

It is natural for any member of the Mystic Order to be aware of each other's presence. There are other Disciples and Masters present. Most of their staff at the hotels were Order members. Kenneth knows that they too would be hyper-aware of where the Sorcerer Supreme was at all times.

"So Dr Strange, is it true that you're currently... single?" The socialite asks with a fingernail running down Stephen's arm and Kenneth almost coughs at the audacity of both the question and the gesture.

Stephen doesn't stop her, but he does look at her coldly and does move his body so that she can't reach him so easily.

"Miss Rosenberg, I am not interested." Stephen says quite frankly, his voice cold and aloof. Kenneth has to stifle a smile. The Rosenberg family has some influence and wealth in both New York and in Washington. The girl is attractive and it is clear that she isn't used to getting no for an answer.

"Come on Dr Strange, I'm not asking for anything much. Just a night." She all but purrs and Kenneth has to fight back the laugh that almost comes. But Stephen's annoyance is obvious and he is considering whether he should step in when a smooth voice cuts through.

"Stephen." Tony Stark's voice is smooth, confident and just loud enough to draw attention. His entrance doesn't go unnoticed.

He's late to the party, but then he almost always is. The surprise in Stephen's eyes is obvious. As is the sudden heat when he sees the way that Tony is dressed in a well-tailored, dark blue tuxedo complete with a dim gold bowtie.

"Anthony." Stephen inclines his head and Ms Rosenberg seems to recognise a lost cause, but she doesn't go without a fight. She pulls Stephen's attention to herself by running her hand down his arm and grabbing his gloved hand. She puts what is clearly a room key into his hand and leans in close.

"I got my usual suite. You can join me later." The barely whispered words are just loud enough for Kenneth to hear. He sees the way that Stephen's eyes flash a hint of pain and he thinks maybe he should definitely intervene, but he's not the only one in the room that can read Stephen that well.

"Oh Ms Rosenberg, I do believe the doctor is going to be rather busy tonight. We have some work we need to discuss." Tony pulls out all his charm and his media smile.

He pulls the woman away, gently but firmly and grabs the card out of Stephen's gloved hand and puts it back into hers. She looks outraged for a moment, but Tony is already pulling Stephen into a conversation.

"Dr Cho contacted me yesterday. Something about DNA cell walls collapsing? I told her that the medical side was all yours, but it got me curious. Care to explain?" Tony is saying as he pointedly grabs the arm that the woman had been touching in his and leads Stephen away from the party out into the balcony.
Rosenberg stands there for a moment, clearly determined to say something to either Tony or Stephen and about to follow when Clea and Pepper intervene.

"Ms Rosenberg, may I compliment you on your dress?" Clea starts off and Pepper is also right there. The two women block her way so that the men can move on and Kenneth is surprised to see them working so easily together.

He gets a distinct feeling that this may be a bad thing, but when Anne comes to join him and draw him away from the mayor and can't stop laughing, he doesn't care.

"I think it's time we head upstairs, don't you love? Let the young ones be in charge." Anne suggests. Kenneth can't say no. He gives her a fond smile, nods and kisses her softly on the lips.

He lets her lead him out of the shindig and hopes that Stephen will be taken care of and that Clea wouldn't set anything on fire.

With Pepper Potts and Tony Stark being involved in the situation though? Kenneth cannot be sure. Either way, it'll definitely be a party New York will remember.

For now, Anne is giving him that flirtatious smile that he can never get sick of. It is all too easy to lose himself in those beautiful green eyes. So he does. All the worries and concerns leave him.

For now, only Anne exists.

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Saturday

21 November 2009

Tony hadn't quite meant to.

He hadn't even really meant to speak to Stephen... yet. He had come to the party because Rhodey was right. He needed to make a decision and let Stephen know what he thought and felt. To be mature. To be a better person.

It also made financial sense to come to the party. To show the world that SI wasn't falling apart and that it had business partners and that he could splurge and donate large sums to a charity without problems.

SI needed positive media attention to prove to the world that the drama was over and done with and SI was turning a new chapter.

Pepper and the PR team had jumped at the invite. He'd initially declined. Because if he was being honest, he didn't want to see Stephen all dressed up and beautiful. He hadn't wanted to be tempted. He knew that he would be.

And he needed to move on.

He could keep the relationship with Stephen as a working relationship. A friendship even. Forget about the man and his secrets because Tony can't trust Stephen Strange as a romantic partner with the bullshit secrets that he has.

He can't.
Tony had planned to wait until the party was over and done with before he acted on his decision. To speak to Stephen once everything was done. Maybe tomorrow morning, after he pointedly takes one of the socialites upstairs to his suite.

It's been a while since he's been out to a party. He dresses himself up to the nines. Pepper tells him that he looks delectable, which is good. He has a few drinks before they even get to the party because he wants to be warm and ready for whoever he can find at the party.

The plan going in is simple. Be Tony fucking Stark as he always had been before Stephen. Let the women throw themselves at him and take one to bed. In the D'Arte so that Stephen would know. That would send the message clearly enough. Right?

Yeah. No.

The plan was childish and stupid and he hadn't counted on what it would actually feel like seeing Stephen with someone else.

When he'd seen Rosenberg touching Stephen, leaning close to him, Tony realised something he wished he hadn't. Stephen could choose. Like him. To sleep with anyone he wanted.

Stephen was beautiful. Attractive. He could have anyone he wanted and he could take them to bed. Show them what Stephen looks like as he moans and pants and loses himself in pleasure.

No fucking way.

He'd stepped up to speak to Stephen and to draw his attention from the woman before he'd even thought about it. He had just... acted.

Then when he'd seen the way that she was treating Stephen's hand and saw the pain flash in his eyes, yeah. It had been a no brainer.

He knew how sensitive Stephen's hands were. He knew how difficult the pain was to deal with. The scarring around his own Arc Reactor was sensitive enough and that was chest area. The hands had far more nerve endings than his chest.

It's only when they are on the balcony, by themselves, the door closed behind them to ensure that there are no interruptions by some helpful person or two, Tony isn't sure, and he has Stephen leaning against a wall near one of those super-hot gas heaters, his hand in Tony's, that he realises what he'd really done.

He's acted like a lover. Like someone who had the right to touch Stephen the way he did and to take him away from the situation as he did without being asked.

He doesn't let the realisation stop him.

He takes the leather glove Stephen had been wearing off of his hand and feels the heat of anger that he has no reason to feel against the Rosenberg woman when he sees the muscle cramping just below the thumb.

Stephen's hands are thin enough that he can always see the cramping muscle twitch. He hates that she had caused him pain.

Fuck.

"It's- It's okay Anthony. I-" Whatever Stephen was going to say gets cut off with a groan when Tony
gently, but firmly, starts massaging out the cramp. The action feels so familiar that it's easy.

He's done it countless times in the time that they spent together. Tony's body moves so that it is closer to Stephen automatically. His body knows what to do.

When Stephen's lightly sweaty head comes to rest on his shoulder as Stephen curls into the pain, it also feels natural. Familiar.

Right.

Tony moves in a little closer so that he can support Stephen a little better and massages the hand in silence until Stephen's hand stops spasming and the man breathes out a sigh of relief. Tony doesn't let go of his hand.

The previous plan and decision go out the window.

"Did I interrupt something you wanted?" Tony asks and regrets it immediately. He has no right to do that. He doesn't. He knows that. But at least his voice isn't... jealous. Just curious. Stephen lets out a slow tired chuckle.

"No. I'm grateful you did." Stephen tells him. Tony realises that he had wondered whether Stephen would have taken the invitation if he hadn't been in pain and he hadn't wanted to show his vulnerability to the social elites and the journalists.

His denial... it feels good to hear it. Fuck.

Stephen doesn't lift his head from Tony's shoulder. Tony doesn't let go of his hand.

"If I asked you to come to my suite, would you?" Tony asks quietly and he can't help the heat in his voice. Because he wants Stephen. Of course, he does. Stephen is gorgeous and beautiful and he knows Stephen's body intimately. He misses the way Stephen feels in his bed. Stephen shudders against him.

He shouldn't though. He knows that. He knows this is a bad idea. A mistake. But it doesn't stop him from moving in even closer, from taking in the man's scent of musk, jasmine and books. To stop Stephen from thinking. To make sure that the answer is-

"Yes." Stephen bites out and Tony thinks that maybe, later on, he can blame it on the alcohol. Or the fact that he hasn't had sex for a while. Or the stress of everything going on at work. Or the work outside of SI. He has enough excuses he can use. He doesn't care.

He pushes Stephen almost harshly against the wall and kisses him hard. Stephen's lips open almost automatically under his.

The kiss is hot and desperate and Stephen moans into the kiss. Tony feels almost predatory, the way that he is pushing the other man but all the frustration and anger he has felt towards him comes out. It is also desire. He is desperate for Stephen in a way he had never been with anyone else.

"You're desperate for me aren't you?" Tony asks against Stephen's lips. He knows that he is the one that is desperate. But he wants Stephen to be desperate for him too. To need him and want him as much as Tony wants Stephen.

Fuck!

During the kiss, he's pressed himself hard against Stephen and he can feel the doctor's cock
hardening against his stomach. Tony smiles as he notices that. It's not a kind smile.

"Yes." Stephen breathes out and Tony should have known then that it was a mistake. That what he was doing was almost cruel. But he doesn't notice the emotional pain in Stephen's eyes.

"Come to my suite Stephen. Ten minutes." Tony whispers into Stephen's ear and feels the man shudder. Just a few words and a kiss and Stephen was already burning with need. Tony likes it. He loves that he can do that to him. So easily.


This is a bad idea. A terrible fucking idea but then Tony never could say no to temptations very well.

In fact, it's a fucking miracle he held out this far. He leaves Stephen to make himself look presentable and makes his way back into the party, puts on his smile and looks for Pepper.

He isn't too surprised to find her with Clea. Yeah. Definitely, a dangerous combination that, but too late.

"Hey Pep, I'm going to talk to Stephen some more. You okay to get back to LA or-" Get a room in a hotel is what he is about to suggest when Clea cuts in smoothly.

"Oh, that's not a problem Tony. I have Pepper and Happy sorted in one of the suites upstairs. I might even join them for a bottle of champagne if Pepper is okay with that." Clea asks and it is clear enough that the two of them are fast forming a friendship from the wide smile on Pepper's lips.

"So in other words, don't worry about me and Happy." Pepper tells him softly with a smile and he nods. There are plenty of media people about that he needs to be careful.

"Thank you Clea." Tony says because it's polite and takes his time to meander through the crowd to get to the elevator. He doesn't see Stephen but he's not too concerned.

The need and desire burn inside of him and he is almost agitated. Excited. It's been a while since he's been so excited for sex.

Tony can't help but think about all the things the wants to do with Stephen. All the things the wants to do to him. The private elevator travels easily up to the Penthouse Suite. Which it shouldn't since he doesn't have a card, but apparently Stephen's made arrangements already.

Good.

If Tony was careful, if he thought things through, he would have known that this was a bad idea. He doesn't though. He's just intoxicated enough, just sexually frustrated enough and just reckless enough.

When the elevator door opens and he steps into the Penthouse Suite, he stops and watches.

Stephen standing by the windows looking out into the city. When he turns to look at Tony, his eyes dilated and filled with desire and something else that Tony doesn't want to think about, all Tony can do is pull the other man into his arms and kiss him.

It feels... right.
Consequences

Chapter Summary

Tony... fucks up.

And the regret and the self hatred is nothing compared to what he's put Stephen through. He knows that. The problem is... he's not quite sure how to fix Stephen. Them. Himself...

Chapter Notes

Oh wow XD I should have prepared for the inevitable anger that you guys would feel against Tony and probably towards me for the Stephen torture that I have going on here.

Unfortunately, there's more where that came from.

There is going to be some growth pains and some anguish before we can get to the boys actually being able to fix themselves and their relationship. I am seeing that you guys do understand that there is a lot of shit that Stephen can't tell Tony because of the whole 'end of the universe' thing and the possibility of Tony turning into a villain, which is good XD

So in terms of this chapter. Please note that what is depicted in this chapter IS NOT what sexual relationships should be about. Like my previous rant about sex and what a good sexual relationship is about, please do as I say in the Notes and NOT what I write XD Stephen and Tony aren't stellar examples of a good relationship right now.

At any rate, please... um... try to enjoy the chapter and don't hurt me! >__<

I do love seeing the comments though, positive or otherwise so please continue to comment and to give me ideas, suggestions as well as your theories +__+

<3

Sunday

22 November 2009

It's morning. Sunlight is streaming through the windows, but neither men on the bed care. The scent of sweat and sex is heady in the master bedroom as are the pants and moans.

Stephen can barely breathe. He can barely lift a finger. He is beyond exhausted but Tony is buried deep inside of him. It feels like Tony has been inside of him for hours. It has been hours.

Every time Tony pulls out and pushes back in, the remnants of his cum and lube from their previous
encounters leak around his cock and travels down Stephen's thighs. It feels so incredibly wrong and right at the same time. The sound alone is absolutely and utterly obscene.

Stephen can't even hold himself up.

His head is buried in the pillows and his arms can't support him anymore. His fingers are curled around the sheets and it's only Tony's hold around his hips and the lock of his knees that are holding them up.

Stephen can't remember quite how they got to the bed. He remembers Tony walking into the suite. He remembers Tony grabbing him and pulling him into his arms and kissing him hard.

He remembers Tony pulling him out of his tux and turning him to face the window. With the view of the Central Park lit up in the night with the numerous street lamps and the view of the city across from that, Tony had left him. With a command to stay.

Stephen had obeyed.

Naked and vulnerable, exposing his burning body out to the night skies. When Tony had returned, he hadn't wasted a single second. He bit and nibbled at Stephen's neck and his blunt fingers were at Stephen's entrance almost immediately. When they breached him, Stephen had cried out. It had been awhile.

Since... since the last time that Tony had fucked him, Stephen hadn't even masturbated. He couldn't. The only hands he had wanted on him had been Tony's.

The entry had felt new but familiar and Tony knew his body well. The fingers moved more efficiently than kindly. When Stephen was ready, Tony had taken him hard and rough against that window.

Still, Stephen had come hard, streaking the window with his cum before Tony had and when Tony had finished, Stephen had been sated and it had been difficult to stay on his feet.

He hasn't been sleeping much. He hasn't been eating properly either. It's been... a hard couple of weeks. His body couldn't keep up with Tony's demands. But that was fine.

They must have made their way to the bedroom then. Stephen isn't sure.

But Tony had been laying behind him on the bed and when he recovered, he had taken Stephen again lazily until he encouraged Stephen to sit on top of him.

Stephen had given Tony what he wanted. What he needed. He had worked that cock inside of him up and down, uncaring that it hurt to use his body like that without sufficient rest and care after a rough fuck.

Tony was insatiable.

Stephen doesn't know how long he'd worked his hips for. Tony's hands on his hips had grounded him. That's all that mattered. The room had been dark, but he saw Tony's eyes well enough, dilated with pleasure and burning with desire with the light from the Arc Reactor. Stephen had leaned down to kiss him and Tony had let him.

That had pushed Stephen over the edge. Stephen came and moaned into the kiss. Then they had lain with Tony spooning him from behind.
Aside from the command to stay, Tony hadn't said a single word to him and Stephen was too terrified to speak. To break whatever this fragile thing was.

All he allows to escape from his lips were pants and moans. He's not sure when he'd fallen asleep. But he knows he did.

He's not sure if Tony did as well. But the Time Stone doesn't give him visions when he is with Tony. He's not sure how long he'd slept for, but he wakes up, it is with Tony buried inside of him. His body responds. Of course, it does.

Tony is his Soulmate.

For a long while, hours almost, it's just soft rutting. Nothing too much. But Stephen is sore and grateful that it isn't rough like the other two times. He is exhausted.

His rim is an abused mess and his insides feel like one huge bruise. It doesn't matter. It's Tony. Tony doesn't hold him as tightly as he used to when they fucked like this, but that's okay because he can still feel Tony behind him. And that's all that matters.

It's... Tony.

When Tony had moved him so that he was on his hands and knees, Stephen held the position for as long as he could but when Tony starts to move harder, he couldn't anymore. He feels limp as his body moves with Tony's movements.

The soft hum of pleasure that had been going through his body dissipates and he feels cold and numb.

The thrusts are coming harder and faster now. Tony's hips slam against his and with each thrust, there is now more pain than pleasure as the last of his endorphin disappears. The pleasant lull that he'd been riding, all the hormones that held him up?

They're gone.

And all that is left is pain and exhaustion. Tony is still hitting his prostate and his presence alone should be enough to give Stephen pleasure, but it isn't. Not anymore. But... That's okay.

This isn't... an act of love. It's an act of lust and Tony is using his body to get the pleasure that he wants. Stephen is okay with that. He has to be. The Connection hums happily with the physical contact. Stephen is okay.

He's not.

The emotion rises like a bubble from inside of him and it grows bigger and bigger until he can't handle it anymore. He feels the first tear drop and he buries his head in the pillow to hide it but has to move so that his mouth isn't buried in the pillows too because he can't breathe.

With each thrust, he grunts and pants out the pain that lances through him. He isn't even aroused. He realises for the first time that he just wants this to be over. He just wants Tony to come and for the sex to be over and done with so that he can go somewhere and just... breathe.

When Tony does come, it's with a primal cry and a particularly brutal thrust into him and Stephen can't help but cry out. For a moment, everything goes white with just pain. Stephen isn't even sure if it's emotional pain or physical pain. It doesn't matter.
He's grateful that it's over but he can't even really process that. His mind feels clouded. He loses all focus. He shudders and when Tony pulls out, he can't keep his hips up and he collapses to the side. He pants out against the pain and lets himself relax a little knowing that it is over now.

"Stephen?" Tony's voice feels like it's off in the far distance and it's only then that Stephen realises that he's dropping. It's a vague, distant sort of realisation.

He knows he should communicate that to Tony. He knows that. And he knows that Tony would care enough at least to do something about that. But Stephen can't even breathe properly.

The tears are flowing without rhyme or reason. Stephen is stronger than this. He is.

*He isn't.*

As he tries to get a hold of himself, the nausea hits hard and fast. His stomach roils.

Stephen manages to get his muscles working just enough to make it to the en-suite bathroom to throw up into the toilet. He is dry retching after the initial emptying of whatever was left in his stomach when he feels a warm blanket wrapping around him.

"Jesus fucking Christ Stephen. I'm- fuck. You should have told me." Tony berates him softly, but he is gentle as he runs a hand up and down his back. Stephen can't really respond.

He heaves until he can't anymore and when he's done, he has no strength whatsoever and can barely hold himself up. He's a mess and he knows it. He doesn't know how to stop himself. To collect himself.

He isn't even sure what emotions he is feeling. It might be abandonment, which is irrational considering the fact that Tony was running his hands up and down his back. It might be worthlessness, which... isn't new.

"Stephen, come on, let's get you off the cold floor. Okay? Let's take a bath and get you warmed up." Tony's voice is soft and gentle and sounds so very far away. It isn't.

Stephen can't respond. He feels absolutely wrecked and emotional and he hates it. He hates being this weak. This despondent. *Dependant* on Tony. He is the Sorcerer Supreme. He should-

Tony is gentle as he carefully helps him stand enough to brush his teeth and get rid of the scent and taste of vomit from his mouth. When Tony pulls him into the bath, Stephen is almost in a daze. He lets the other man take his full weight and Tony does so without strain.

"Stephen, this is my fault. I am so sorry." Tony says quietly. Stephen doesn't really understand what he is saying. He simply curls into Tony's wet arms as the other man's hand touches his sore rim.

"I should have known better than to do this." Tony says. The regret is heavy in Tony's voice. Of course, he regrets fucking him, Stephen thinks. He's not good enough for Tony. He deserves someone better. Someone who doesn't have to hide who they are.

Stephen loses time.

Tony is curled up in bed with him. He holds him tightly and he is saying things he'd heard before from doms he'd experimented with. How he'd been so good for them. That they weren't leaving. That he was safe and appreciated. Stephen doesn't hear the words. He just hears Tony's voice.

Then Tony gives him the one command that he can obey without difficulty.
Sleep.

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Sunday

22 November 2009

He... fucked up.

He didn't just fuck up, he fucked up badly. He fucked up as a friend, as a work colleague. He fucked up as a sexual partner and more importantly, he fucked up as a human fucking being.

He should have been careful. The moment he'd stepped into the penthouse and kissed the doctor, he'd noticed that Stephen was tired. But he hadn't cared. He should have.

He should have taken care of Stephen like a decent fucking human being. Like a good sex partner. But he'd been so focused on his own needs and his own desires. He'd forgotten to be considerate.

This was the price, Tony thinks.

This was on him.

When Stephen wakes up, they were going to have to talk. It was going to be an uncomfortable talk but yeah, they were going to have to talk because what happened was not good.

Very not good.

Tony had been so caught up need and want and desire and having Stephen's body underneath his after being without him, that he'd forgotten to take care of his sexual partner. Which was very, very bad. You just don't do that. Tony doesn't do that.

But it wasn't only Tony's fault. He's not stupid enough to only blame himself. It is his fault for not checking on his partner. Yes. But Stephen should have spoken up if he didn't want the intercourse and he definitely should have spoken up if he had been in pain.

The fact that Tony didn't recognise that Stephen had been dropping though? That was shit job on his part.

Tony had been careful enough to ensure that Stephen was properly prepped and enjoyed himself. But the third time? Yeah. He fucked that up. The first two times had been more about the passion and the need.

But the third time... when he'd woken up from the nap, he had been more angry with the man than wanting him. He was irrationally angry that this felt so much like... before. That Stephen felt so warm and plaint against him and that the sex was still so bloody amazing and perfect despite all the shit between them. He'd been angry at Stephen.

For being someone that he enjoyed spending time with. When he had so many secrets that he couldn't share with him. When Tony had shared almost everything about himself with the other man.

And that was all Tony and his fucking selfish, self-centred ways. It had been such a risk. Such a sign of trust for him to even let the doctor in and...
He'd never been the type to wake his lovers up with sex. But when he had touched Stephen's sleeping body, the man had responded almost instinctively and it had felt natural. And he'd been angry enough that he acted without thinking.

Fuck.

Throughout the night, Tony had tried to keep the distance. To keep things hot and exciting and the sex good but he hadn't wanted to hold the doctor tightly in his arms or to look at him. Because he knew that if they did... It would be a lot harder to walk away in the morning.

That was a mistake.

If he had been looking at Stephen, he would have known that the man was in pain. And that he was dropping. He hadn't and he really doesn't know how to apologise for that.

He fucked up.

'I can't say no to you'. Stephen had told him that. That it was hard for him to deny Tony. For whatever reason. Stephen had given himself completely over to Tony. Let him take all the control and it had been up to him to make the right decisions. He hadn't.

He should have kept that in mind. If that is how deeply Stephen feels for him, he shouldn't have taken advantage of that. It was immature and downright disgusting to violate someone's trust like that.

So this was on him.

And if nothing else, the fact that Stephen let the sex continue when he wasn't enjoying it and he was in pain... yeah. That proves a point that Tony wishes he didn't know.

Stephen is warm and pliant in his arms now. Deeply asleep. Tony had taken the time to ensure that his abused hole was okay with numbing cream. He is honestly not too surprised to find that in the en-suite bathroom. Because it's Stephen. Of course, he thought ahead. God.

He is starving. He can feel the hunger gnawing at him, but Tony doesn't want to leave Stephen to go and get food. When subs drop as badly as Stephen did, there's a chance that they might actually get sick and Tony doesn't want to risk Stephen waking up without him.

Even if the talk they are going to have is going to be very uncomfortable. The bitter taste of regret and self-hatred in his mouth isn't likely to leave him any time soon. But Tony knows better than to just walk away from his responsibilities.

Tony waits.

~~~

Sunday

22 November 2009

Clea feels it.

The Sorcerer Supreme is connected to the Sanctums and the Kamar-Taj. The Masters of the Sanctums and the Kamar-Taj can feel it when his focus wavers. Or when his strength wavers. So Clea, as a Master of the New York Sanctum, she feels her cousin's focus... wavering.
Then it breaks.

The spells that he should be upholding are transferred onto the Sanctum and Kamar-Taj Masters and Clea feels the heavy burden of it fall onto her shoulders like a wave crashing into her, hard and heavy. Nope. It's more than a tide. Like a truck. Shit.

In that moment, though she is in the middle of brunch with Pepper, she has to excuse herself to go to the bathroom and just breathe.

The pull of powers is immense. And the burden is divided between the other two New York Sanctum Masters, Wong and Yinn. Holy shit. She doesn't know how Stephen deals with this sort of pull day in and day out for not just the New York Sanctum, but the London and Hong Kong Sanctums as well as the Kamar-Taj.

It takes 30 Masters to take the load of the spells that Stephen handles most of the time on his own.

It's only at times like this that Clea really understands just how powerful her uncle is. Yeah. Fuck. But that's not all. It's also on times like this that she understands just what a heavy a burden he is carrying at all times on his shoulders.

Stephen never mentions it. He never complains. He just does his job and she forgets just how... difficult that job was. How heavy the burden is.

Most of the times, when something like this happens, it can be either because Stephen simply can't focus enough to draw on the power himself and the spells on him just in case of something like this kicks in to transfer the burden across the Masters, or he does it consciously in order to deal with a situation.

This isn't a deal with a situation sort. This is a Tony fucking Stark was involved and something bad enough happened for Stephen to completely loses his focus shit. Which Clea honestly doesn't know how to feel about.

The thing is, she knows that Tony has every right to be angry. He still doesn't know anything about what they are, what they can do and most importantly, what they know. But he does at least know that they know... somethings about his life and that they can sort of know the future. In theory.

When he finds out the rest, it was going to be either far worse or better. It's hard to tell. But Tony Stark does have every right to be angry and to be distrustful. But Stephen can't stay away from the man. He can't say no to the man and that makes him incredibly vulnerable.

That is dangerous.

Clea sighs and takes a few more deep breathes and opens herself up to the flow of the dimensional energies a little more to balance things out and lets the spell work in the back of her mind.

She wants to go and check on Stephen. She wants to make sure that he is at least physically okay, but she doesn't. Because if he wasn't she would know. This isn't a physical issue. It was emotional and psychological and she can't barge in. It's not her place.

Clea takes in a deep breath and releases it and goes back to Pepper and the lovely brunch they'd been enjoying.

She likes Pepper. The woman is funny, intelligent and she has a lot of tips to give Clea about her career, her studies as well as being a woman in the business world full stop. She loves it.
"You okay?" Pepper asks her almost immediately and Clea gives her a warm smile.


The little crumpets, cucumber sandwiches and all the finger foods is more high tea than brunch, but it's Clea's favourite and Pepper had been delighted so it's fine.

Clea digs into the mini sausage rolls as Pepper refills her tea. She's going to need the energy. She adds a healthy helping of sugar into her tea.

"So. Your cousin is in love with my best friend and my best friend is probably in love with your cousin. Considering the fact that they haven't come down or contacted either of us... I'm going to guess that they are having makeup sex or inventing something crazy." Pepper states and with either option, it looks like she's not going to be fully pleased. Clea shrugs her shoulders.

"If that's what Tony wants, that's what he is going to get. Either way. Stephen doesn't know how to say no to Tony. No matter what it is. So we are going to have to see. But I'm going to send breakfast up. Anything Tony doesn't like?" Clea asks as she calls the waiter over to the table.

"No. He's good with most things." Pepper says easily enough and Clea relays the instructions over to the waiter to deliver food to the Penthouse Suite. He's one of the Disciples and he is quick to respond. He will be discrete enough.

"So next week, Dr Cho wants to have a video conference with Tony and Dr Strange. How is his schedule looking?" Pepper asks and Clea pulls out her planner and they get to work.

They'd been communicating a fair bit to get the schedules in order because though Tony and Stephen were mostly independent and made their decisions without informing them first, they learnt that with press releases, conferences and media interviews as well as contact with Dr Cho for example, it was best if they started organising it themselves.

It was Pepper that had reached out to her first at the practice and they had been more or less sharing calendars since then. The discussion flows easily.

But at the back of her mind, Clea can't help but worry. Today was either going to leave Stephen better, focused and the Soul Connection satisfied or it was going to leave a broken Stephen for her to deal with.

She prays for the former.

~~~

Sunday

21 November 2009

When Stephen comes to, it's to the scent of coffee, surprisingly enough. And the feel of a warm body against his.

It takes him a little while to actually become conscious and when he is, he is surprised to find that he is curled up with his head buried in Tony's stomach and his arms wrapped around the other man's waist. There is a warm hand on his shoulder.

"You're awake. Good. You need to drink and eat something." Tony tells him with almost a gentle
voice. Stephen tries to get up and when he does, he finds that his muscles can't quite get the strength in there to hold him up. He feels like he'd just run a fucking marathon or something.

Tony catches him as if he had been expecting that and there is pain that travels up from his anus up his spine and he can't help the pained gasp.

"Slowly. Come on." Tony helps him until Stephen is reclined on the pillows, resting against the headboard. blankets cover him around the shoulders and there are more on his lap. He feels warm and comfortable despite the twinges of pain up and down his spine and buttocks.

He also feels well-rested and... fucked raw.

"Drink this." Tony says when he is settled. The other man is dressed in the hotel's pyjama pants. The cream silk pants look amazing sitting on his hips. Stephen feels a little dazed and confused, but he accepts the tall glass of orange juice but when it's obvious that his shaking hands can't quite hold it up, Tony is there to help him drink the contents.

Once he has finished the orange juice, Tony settles the glass down and settles himself down on the edge of the bed, reclining a little and looking at Stephen.

"You think you can eat something?" Tony is being oddly gentle and kind. Stephen gives him a nod and it's only when the other man is gone to get the food, presumably, that Stephen remembers everything that had happened before.

He'd dropped. Oh.

Tony was a considerate person. He didn't appear to be, but he was. Knowing that he'd dropped badly enough to throw up, it's easy to see why the man was being so kind. Stephen ignores the shame, guilt and regret rearing it's ugly head and focuses on staying calm.

All the spells that he usually works aren't running in the back of his mind anymore. So he must have dropped badly enough for the transfer spells to trigger. Yeah. That's pretty damned bad. From the rampant emotions, the aches and pains as well as the temperature he's running? He's still in subdrop. Fuck.

"We'll start with just plain toast and some coffee. You think you can handle that?" Tony asks and Stephen gives him a nod. Tony brings over the plate and the cup. The coffee is cold, but that's fine. It's been sweetened.

It's important to get the sugar levels back up after a drop. Tony was used to taking care of subs then, Stephen thinks as he starts eating.

It's easier to just eat and to not talk and let Tony be in charge than to try to make conversation. He feels fragile, vulnerable and there are rampant dark thoughts in his head that are difficult to control. It's hard to get his brain into gear properly to process what took place.

"I am sorry Stephen." Tony says and well. That kind of puts the whole let's just eat and forget about everything... out the window.

Stephen puts down the toast and looks at him questioningly. Tony isn't looking at him. He is looking out the window and standing with his back turned to him. Well then.

"What for?" Stephen says. Even to him, his voice sounds a little weak, a little husky. Considering that he's pretty sure that he hadn't blown Tony, that's a little surprising. He usually doesn't get husky-
"You know what for Stephen. You know better than to let someone take advantage of you like that."

Tony's words surprise him. They are berating but filled with concern and Stephen is a bit
confounded for a moment. He blinks as Tony turns to look at him and his face is filled with guilt.

The Connection lets him know that Tony is feeling anger, hate and pain. Not good. All of his own
dark thoughts, feeling irrationally abandoned, worthless and pathetic, get pushed to the back of his
mind.

Tony comes first.

"Anthony, I consented. At no point during our time did I not-" Tony raises an eyebrow and cuts him
off.

"You were in pain and you did not enjoy our encounter. It wasn't a scene. You let me fuck you
whilst you were in pain and dropping." Tony's voice is a little harsher. Angry. Stephen sighs.

He knows. In a BDSM situation or if he had been with anyone else, he would have safe worded out
before it got to that point. That's what safe and sane and consensual means. But he hadn't. Because it
had been Tony. With Tony, he honestly hadn't cared that he was in pain. That he was dropping. He
just... needed the closeness with Tony.

"It was you." It's the only answer that Stephen can give. The moment he does, Tony sighs. His anger
is obvious but it's not the kind of anger that burns through the Connection. It's internal anger and it's
an anger that rises out of concern. It's the kind of anger that the Connection enjoys instead.

Yeah, the Connection is messed up.

"So if it is me, you're okay with being hurt?" Tony asks, his voice bitter. There is only one answer
that he can give.

"Yes." Tony looks utterly defeated with that word. He comes over from the window and by the time
that Stephen sees the determination in his eyes and regret.

Stephen looks away and curls into himself a little more. He's disappointed Tony. He feels...
worthless. Useless. He just wants to disappear. Warm hands pull his head up and he closes his eyes.

"That's not okay Stephen. No one should hurt you or do anything you don't want them to do. You
know that right?" Tony's voice is so soft and kind. When Tony pulls him towards him, Stephen can't
pull away though he knows that he ought to.

"You're in subdrop. You know that right? All those things that you are thinking and feeling are
because of that. It's not your fault. It's mine." Stephen remembers those words, that tone of voice.

He'd used it before himself when his subs had dropped. Rationally, he knows that it wasn't his fault.
It wasn't even Tony's fault. It was just his body and his hormones and nothing that neither of them
needs to carry the blame for.

In any sexual situation, especially if there is pain involved, the body releases endorphin, adrenaline
and oxytocin during sexual activities. It allows the body to ignore the pain and make pleasure all that
more intense. It's just the body's natural way of dealing with the act.

Stephen isn't quite sure why he had slipped into a sub mind frame, to begin with, but it may have just
been that command to start off with. Or the fact that he had escaped into it because he knew that the
night hadn't been about... emotional contact. It had just been about releasing sexual frustration for Tony.

Either way, he had slipped into a sub mind frame and when the hormones ran out, all the emotions and pain had hit him at once and he'd dropped.

Rationally, Stephen understood all of that. But he couldn't... exactly grasp it. He couldn't understand it. Accept it the way he should.

"I'm- it's fine. I'll be fine." Stephen tells Tony, his words muffled against the genius's shoulder as the man basically... hugs him. It feels more intimate to be held like this than the sexual acts, as ridiculous as that sounds.

"You're not and that's okay. Stephen, you were beautiful for me. Gave me everything I needed. Thank you." Tony tells him. Praise and physical closeness and contact. Tony was giving him everything that he generally needs for aftercare.

If nothing else, Tony Stark is a good dom that knows how to take care of his subs, Stephen thinks. He stops that line of thought before he can wonder just how many subs Tony had taken in order to be this good at it.

"Anthony, you don't need to stay. I'll be fine." Stephen tells him. It's a lie. The Connection tells him that Tony is upset. Angry. It thrums sharply against his soul. He wants to fix that. He wants to make sure that Tony is happy. And safe. That was his job. His priority.

It's hard to think.

"If you don't want me to touch you, that's fine. But I'm not going until I know for sure that you've recovered." Tony's voice remains that soft, gentle tone and Stephen can't help but curl his hand around Tony's back, hold him a little closer because he doesn't want to be let go.

He needs physical contact to be grounded. Tony moves so that they are curled up in bed again, Tony spooning him. Tony's fingers run through his hair.

It's easy to pretend like this, Stephen thinks. Easy to pretend that Tony cares. That this isn't just aftercare.

But Stephen knows better. Tony isn't as relaxed as he used to be against his back. He is stiff and tight. His arms are carefully on Stephen's stomach and hair. Their hands aren't curled around each others'.

"We'll talk about what's going on between us later. When you're better. Okay? But for now, I need you to rest and tell me what you need. Can you do that for me?" Tony asks softly and quietly. Stephen nods slowly.

"Just... stay with me like this." Stephen asks. He hopes his voice doesn't sound as needy as he feels. Tony kisses his hairline.

They settle. Stephen isn't sure how long they stay like that for. It doesn't matter. The Connection still thrums with Tony's anger, but the physical contact keeps the yearning down at least.

With them laying about like this, close in bed and being held by Tony, Stephen can almost pretend that it's more than just aftercare. It's so easy to lie to himself.

He just wishes he could actually believe it.
The Mistakes Made

Chapter Summary

Tony wants things from Stephen. But they aren't possible.
So instead, he tries to focus on his needs.
Unfortunately, he won't realise that he's made a mistake until it's too late.
Isn't it always?

Chapter Notes

Okay so y'all are mad at Tony but doesn't seem too mad at me. Great.
I was worried! >_<

The whumpage is necessary but by gods its hard to be mean to Stephen. But I am not 23 chapters into ARC 2 at least and it's going surprisingly smooth after the 5th rewrite of the chapters XD ... I have issues >__<

A QUICK VOTE:

Please suggest nicknames that the two of them should use with each other when the fluff finally hits. It's really, really hard to choose something that doesn't sound super corny. I will reject BAE right off because it's 2010 and they weren't using it back then.

Please let me know what you think would go well and be creative. Because my brain can't XD

<3

Thursday

26 November 2009

Stephen isn't quite sure how he spent the week. It feels like it happened in a daze. He knows he saw his patients. He knows that he even worked hours at the free clinic. He knows he trained with Clea, Wong and Yinn. He even had dinner with his parents.

He attended the meetings with the Order. He did everything that he was supposed to do. He just feels like he'd closed his eyes, woken up and somehow the week was over.

Well, not over yet, but his normal days were done at least.

Stephen stands just outside of the Malibu mansion and he can already feel the Connection throbbing,
aware that his Soulmate is nearby. It is both grounding and focusing as well as disturbing to the small amount of peace he had managed to build up.

He isn't in drop. Not anymore. Tony had stayed with him until Monday morning. They'd spent the time mostly in bed, resting with Tony holding him and giving him that physical contact he craved. They talked too.

Not about them and what's going on. Or sex. Or anything really. Instead, they spent the time talking about Cho's project and its progress. They talked about work because that was a neutral topic that they weren't emotionally invested in.

Tony made sure that Stephen ate and could keep his meals down. Tony cared for him and made sure that he was himself before he had left. But Stephen hadn't been okay at the end of the weekend.

He wasn't ever going to be.

Not with the relationship in the air like it is now. Stephen knows that things have gone wrong between them. The revelation of what he was... was always going to do that. He had known that.

He thought he had been prepared for it. That he could deal with it.

He couldn't.

It was like... knowing what heaven was. Experiencing all the wonderful things before the rug is pulled out underneath him and he finds himself in hell instead.

The emotional pain is constant. The memories of Tony's warmth, his laughter, the easy way that they used to touch each other, tease each other and fall into each other's arms, the intimacies that they had shared, the way that Tony had allowed Stephen into his heart at least a little.

All of that hurts.

Stephen squares his shoulders and steadies himself. The helicopter is gone. It had flown in and had gone. The pilot, a Disciple that works for the D'Arte, was discrete and kind. He doesn't question why Tony isn't outside to greet him. Or why he doesn't go into the mansion.

Stephen does walk in. Slowly, but he does walk into the mansion.

"Dr Strange! Welcome back. Sir is currently out on mission and will return shortly. He's requested that if you are amenable, that you maybe look at the latest intel reports that he'd been able to gather for the next target." JARVIS says and that explains a few things.

"Of course JARVIS. How are you going with the human rights issues?" Stephen asks as he makes his way down to the workshop.

He and JARVIS converse easily about human rights, why it is fundamental and why it is important for JARVIS to both understand and respect it, as Stephen makes his way to his computer.

Talking to JARVIS is easy and it is always distracting enough that Stephen can get out of his own thoughts for a little while.

The bots greet him with chirps and Stephen takes the time to stroke all three of them and talk to them too.

It's easy to settle into the routine of the work even without Tony. It isn't the first time that he had been
left in the workshop by himself. But it also indicates that Tony trusts him. At least with the bots, the other suits that weren't functioning as well as his computer systems.

It's a level of trust that Stephen isn't sure if he deserves.

He knows that when Tony comes back, they are going to talk. It was necessary to talk. Stephen knows that. He doesn't think he is ready for it, but they will talk.

Even though Tony is his Soulmate, with the incomplete Bond, it's hard for Stephen to read Tony. It's hard to see what he is thinking, what he is feeling. What Tony wants.

It matters little. He will give the genius whatever he wants and whatever he needs. The Connection demands that. His love for the man demands that.

It was a mistake to fall in love with Tony Stark.

He had known that from the very start. But it had been impossible to avoid it. Tony's intelligence, his humour, his kindness and even his inability to deal with emotions... all of it was charming. All of it had pulled Stephen in and before he even knew it, it had been too late.

Stephen hasn't loved before. Not like this and he knows that he never will again. Tony won't love him. Can't love him. Not in the way that Stephen wants and needs. That's okay. He can deal with that.

It's hard to know how much time passes. Stephen works until his fingers can't deal with the typing anymore. He doesn't step away from the computer though. When his fingers tell him that he needs to stop, he talks with JARVIS.

Then goes back to work.

Stephen doesn't notice the time pass. Not until the Iron Man suit is flying back in and Tony is taking the suit off.

"Stephen, it's 4 in the morning. You should be sleeping." Tony's exhausted voice tells him. The Connection hums softly with pleasure with the proximity of his Soulmate. Stephen looks at the time in almost a daze. Tony is right. It is 4:00am.

"I... didn't notice the time." Stephen tells him honestly and gets out of the chair to walk over to where Tony is. He looks at the suit. There are some dents that indicate combat, but Tony looks uninjured. Good.

"If you were waiting for me to talk, you're going to have to wait a little longer. I hate to admit it, but I'm ready to crash." Tony tells him. His voice isn't unkind. It is perfunctory. Stephen nods.

"Of course. Any injuries or pain I need to be aware of?" Stephen asks, though he knows that Tony is okay. He can feel that much from the Connection.

The last piece of the suit falls away and Tony gets out and sighs.

"No. It went smoothly, surprisingly enough. But I'm pretty sure there's sand stuck in some of the sockets. I'll deal with it later." Tony shrugs and he doesn't even look at Stephen before he walks out of the lab, his exhaustion obvious.

The silence that Tony leaves behind is telling. Stephen takes stock of himself. He is tired and he does need to rest. Tony doesn't sleep a great deal and it was likely that even if he crashed out with
exhaustion, he would be up in several hours to work.

Stephen should sleep. But if he lays down, if he lets himself slip into sleep... The Stone was going to seize him and he can't. He can't risk waking up the genius with his 'nightmares' again.

Stephen goes back and settles behind the screen again.

"Dr Strange, you should rest as Sir has suggested. You appear to be exhausted." JARVIS tells him softly. Stephen looks at one of his cameras. The upgraded ones.

"I'm fine JARVIS. I just need... I just need to work for now. Okay?" Stephen tells him. JARVIS doesn't ask again.

Stephen is used to operating with very little sleep. All doctors were. On top of that, Stephen could even pull on the dimensional energies if it was necessary.

He steels himself and focuses on the work. The lines of information that he needs to analyse, the connections that he needs to draw pull him in. He lets it. It's easier than thinking about Tony and the dread in his stomach.

~~~

Friday

27 November 2009

The silence is uncomfortable and heavy.

Tony doesn't like it and he knows that he should say something, do something to break it up, but he isn't sure.

He had spent the last week thinking. It honestly hasn't helped him reach any solid conclusions as he had hoped it would.

He does know a few things.

Stephen Strange isn't a submissive. He is dominant in nature that doesn't mind submitting. But apparently when it came to Tony, Stephen Strange wasn't only a submissive, but a service submissive or even had inclinations towards slave.

He didn't just give up control to Tony during their sexual activities, but by the looks of it, he was more than happy for Tony to have full control over him. At all times. Pleasing Tony is what mattered to the doctor. Which is... ridiculous.

They need to talk about that.

Set some fucking boundaries. Make sure that neither of them loses control and do stupid things like what they had done last weekend. What Tony had done last weekend.

But he doesn't know what to do or what to say.

So, they eat in silence. Tony needs to make a decision. He needs to decide what he wants and what he needs. They are different.

What he wants is for everything to go back to before Stane and before Stephen had just appeared into his mansion. He wants to go back to a time when he had no idea that Stephen was something
more than what he claimed to be.

He wants that closeness that he had felt building between them. He wishes that he could just... let himself trust the other man. To fall in love with him as he had been. But he can't go back.

Tony is a realist.

He knows that he can't just turn the hands of time back and go back to the way that they used to be. Even if it had been a short time, it had felt... wonderful to know that Stephen was going to be there for him. To be able to learn to trust someone with his heart.

That trust is gone and Tony doesn't know how to get it back. He doesn't know how to fix it.

So Tony focuses on his needs instead.

Tony doesn't want to sleep with other people. Every time he tried to get himself to see another person in a sexual light, he remembers Stephen. His body craves Stephen as if he is a drug. Tony knows that it is unhealthy. But he needs Stephen Strange in his life.

The work that Stephen can do, the genius of his mind isn't something that is replaceable. Tony isn't sure if he can ever find someone else that he can work with so easily as he does with Stephen. That can work with him at his level.

So he needs Stephen to work with him.

But he needs more than just a working relationship with Stephen. Even if it is stupid and it's a mistake, Tony needs Stephen as a lover. Even now, even in this tension and this awkward silence, whenever his eyes graze over Stephen, he wants him.

His body burns with desire for the man in a way that it had never done with anyone else. It's distracting and it's hard to think rationally with those desires running through him.

Stephen puts down his chopsticks. Half of the sushi that Tony had ordered for him is uneaten, but the doctor doesn't seem very keen on the meal.

"Should I order something else?" Tony asks because Stephen should be eating more. He's toned and he is lean, but he isn't a small man and there are certain amounts of calories the man should be consuming.

"No. It's fine. Thank you." Stephen's voice is clipped. Professional. A doctor's voice. Tony doesn't like it. But Stephen does seem more like himself than he had been at the hotel at least. But this feels like when they had first met. When they hadn't had a read on each other.

Tony... hates that distance.

"We need to talk about what happened last weekend." Tony starts because he can't avoid the conversation. Well, he *can*. But if he does, then he knows that he will be returning this old habits of avoiding emotional conflict or... emotions full stop and he doesn't want to do that. Stephen deserves better than that at least.

"Of course." Stephen replies quietly. The doctor's eyes are looking at him, his grey-blue eyes more grey than blue and filled with so many emotions that Tony can't even read them all. But he recognises one well enough.

Pain.
"I don't apologise all that often, but I am going to apologise for what happened. I shouldn't have pulled you into sex like that. I should not have pressured you and I should have been more careful." Tony tells him. It's true enough.

He'd known that pulling the doctor into sex had been a bad idea from the start. It had been going through his head the entire time as he made his way to the room. He'd known it. But he had ignored it because his cock spoke louder than his brain apparently.

"There is nothing for you to apologise for, Anthony. I was aware of what was occurring and I was a consenting adult." Stephen informs him, his voice soft and careful. Tony sighs.

"We can agree to disagree on that. But I think we can agree that it can't happen again." Tony notices the doctor's eyes stutter for a moment before he nods stiffly.

"If that is what you want." And that right there is the problem. Stephen's complete and utter surrender of control over both of himself and of the situation to Tony.

"Stephen, you can't do that. You can't just let yourself be controlled by another person like that. Especially not me." Tony tells him because he wants better for Stephen. Stephen deserves better. The doctor looks at him and smiles. It's one of the saddest smiles that Tony had ever seen.

"Anthony, it is only to you that I would surrender all control. You won't understand why and that is okay. One day, you might understand. But I can tell you this. Whatever you decide you want me to be, even if it means you don't want me in your life at all, that's okay. I will be there, waiting, just in case you need me." Stephen tells him softly and it is even more powerful than the confession of love he had made.

"Why?" Tony asks because that kind of devotion is unheard of. Stephen gives him a shrug.

"Because I love you. That... is the only explanation I can give you for now Anthony," Stephen tells him and his words contain so much more meaning than that. Tony knows it. He also hates how his heart flutters at hearing those words despite the situation.

"Stephen, love isn't- it isn't like that. You don't just give up control to someone like that. You can't do that. It's not safe." Tony tells him. He can't be responsible for Stephen. He can't. He can barely be responsible for himself let alone Stephen.

"It is my choice, Anthony. My consent to give. You don't- You don't need to burden yourself with my emotions. Make your decisions upon what you want and what you need and let me know. I will give you whatever you ask for." Stephen tells him earnestly. As if it is that simple. It isn't.

Tony sighs.

He looks down at his own plate of sushi and puts the chopsticks down and leans back into his chair. His appetite is all but gone.

"Fine. What I want is to go back to before. When I didn't know you can teleport and pluck Arc Reactors out of the thin air. Before I had more questions than answers when it comes to you." Tony admits and he sees the raw pain in Stephen's eyes.

"But that's not possible. That's why I suggested a working relationship. Then I went and fucked it up." He shouldn't have. He should have just let it stay but fuck. But it also tells him that he can't do that. He isn't capable of keeping the relationship between himself and Stephen Strange at a 'professional' level. Tony can at least be honest about that.
"You didn't. If a working relationship is what you want, I can be professional." Stephen tells him in that doctor voice. His working voice. He would too, wouldn't he? Tony thinks. Stephen would do it. He would smile and talk to Tony as if they were distant work colleagues. He would be pleasant and kind and lovely.

Tony can't.

"Yeah no. I think last weekend proved that I can't do that. Well, maybe. But I don't want to. I like having sex with you. I want that. Only that." Tony says and he sees the emotions shutter in Stephen's eyes for a moment before he settles.

The conviction and determination in Stephen's eyes are surprisingly difficult to see. But it's the resignation in his eyes and the carefully hidden pain that really... hits Tony hard. But he steels himself too.

This is the best solution he thinks. He can be fuck buddies with Stephen. Right? He can do that. Stephen takes a deep breath. He nods.

"If that is what you desire." Stephen says quietly but he looks as if he had just been handed a death sentence. Tony doesn't know what to do what that.

"For now, there's some work to be done. I need to do maintenance on the suit." Tony says. He wants out of this heavy atmosphere and this ridiculous conversation.

Stephen nods and when Tony moves to go down to the lab, Stephen follows. Tony can't help but feel that he's just made the biggest mistake of his life.

He won't know just how bad that mistake is.

Not until it's too late.

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Sunday

12 December 2009

It hurts.

Every single breath that he takes hurts. It's not physical pain but it feels like it. Stephen takes deep breathes to control his own emotions as Tony thrusts into him.

The physical contact feels good. The sex feels good. It always does. Tony is good at sex. He knows how to make Stephen's body writhe with pleasure.

Tony hits his prostate with every single thrust. Stephen moans and pants as the pleasure build inside of him. But along with that is the knowledge that this is just sex.

There are no tender kisses. No caresses. Just... sex.

Tony feels hard and heavy inside of him. Stephen can feel his insides trying to cling to Tony's cock as it makes its way in and out of him. His body swings with each move that Tony makes.

The bedsheets underneath him feel almost cool with the sweat that he's shed. The air conditioning in the room isn't enough to keep him from sweating.
The Connection sings with physical contact. With the intimate act. It doesn't understand that there are no emotions attached to it.

This is killing him.

Stephen knows that. From the first week when Tony proposed this sort of relationship to now, they fuck at the very least once a day. Tony doesn't ask Stephen to fuck him and Stephen doesn't suggest it. He doesn't need to top.

"God Stephen, you feel so fucking good." Tony breathes out as he thrusts hard into Stephen and he can't help the moan that escapes him.

Even now, Stephen is glad that he can make Tony feel good. To relieve the stress that he is feeling. He holds tightly onto the sheets underneath his hands. His legs are folded into his chest and it's hard to breathe but it's fine.

His cock isn't touched but its erect and leaking precum. Another hard thrust has Stephen throwing his head back and arching his back. His hips move of their own accord, trying to get more friction. Tony is close. Stephen can feel it.

Even now, they fuck bareback. And it's a sign of certain trust. Trust that Stephen isn't sleeping around. Trust that Tony is careful when he fucks other people. But it also leaves Stephen feeling cold.

The pleasure feels amazing but his heart feels cold. he wishes he could reach up and pull Tony down and kiss him. He can't. This isn't that kind of sex. Tony doesn't want intimacy. Just release.

Tony's hips begin to move harder and the rhythm starts to break down. Stephen recognises the signs. Tony's hand curls around his cock. Stephen loses himself in the pleasure.

All the emotions and thoughts disappear for a little while as Tony pulls his orgasm from Stephen's body and coats insides with his cum. Stephen comes too. All over his stomach and his legs.

Tony doesn't lean down and kiss him as he used to. He pants for a little while before he pulls out. Stephen can feel the cum and the lube leak out of him with the move. He moans and hides his face in the bedsheets and curl up a little.

"You alright?" Tony asks because even with this sort of relationship, he isn't a cruel person. He is still considerate. Stephen nods. He's not sure if he can speak.

"Stephen- I- um I'm going to take a shower and go back to the workshop. You're okay right?" Tony asks and Stephen manages to gather just enough strength to lift his head, lower his legs and give his best smile to Tony.

"I am. If you don't mind, I'll shower before I go home." Stephen says and Tony nods and goes into the bathroom.

Stephen doesn't move for a little while. He can't. By the Vishanti, he had thought himself stronger than this. He hadn't known that he would crumble this easily. That this would be so hard.

But he can't help but feel... like this is a transaction.

It is still a price he is willing to pay if it means he can have at least some contact with Tony. He feels pathetic. He feels... dirty.
Stephen forces himself to get up and make his way to the guest bathroom. He stands at the vanity for some time, just looking at his own reflection for a while. He tries to reign in the harsh thoughts going through his mind.

He breathes in and out, meditative breathes to focus himself. When he feels ready, he showers and dresses in the clothes that are in the guest room. Tony is nothing if not prepared and generous.

Stephen doesn't question why there are clothes his size in the guest bedroom. He just wears it. Stephen doesn't particularly care what he is wearing. It doesn't matter.

He finds his phone in the living room and contacts the pilot and asks him to come and pick him up.

He could portal back to the Sanctum. He doesn't want to. He doesn't want to pretend that everything is okay. He needs some time before he can pull those masks back on.

Then he remembers.

Tony is about to go on a mission again. He has been steadily increasing the number of missions. His determination to wipe out the Ten Rings was... dangerous.

Stephen knows that. It's easy enough to make the decision.

"JARVIS, if... If Anthony is ever injured during one of his missions and I am not here, can you autopilot him to 177A Bleecker Street, Greenwich, New York?" Stephen asks the AI.

"Ah. Is that your personal address Dr Strange?" JARVIS asks him, which is fair enough. Stephen's address had never been made public before. All of his paperwork had the Malibu property as his official residence. He nods.

"Yes. If something happens to Tony and he needs help, go there. I will be there." Stephen informs him and JARVIS hums softly.

"If Mr Stark was to ask your residential address, would you be happy for him to be aware of it even if it is not an emergency?" JARVIS asks and Stephen doesn't have to think long. He sighs and nods.

"Yes JARVIS. If he asks, you may tell him. But... I... I don't want Anthony to simply visit me JARVIS. My home isn't... it isn't a normal home." Stephen informs the AI.

"Of course doctor. I will keep that in mind. Dr Strange, if I may, what is the nature of your relationship with Mr Stark?" And if that isn't the crux of the question. Stephen looks away from the monitor and focuses on one of the cameras the AI uses.

"We are colleagues. We work together. You are aware of that. We are also sexual partners." Stephen explains but even he isn't too clear what that means. No. He is clear on what that means. He just wishes it was different. That it didn't hurt.

"I see. I was under the belief that sexual partnership usually included a romantic relationship." JARVIS says and yeah, it sucks to have a computer point out that your sexual relationship with the man that you love isn't romantic in nature.

"Sometimes they can be separated. You are aware that Mr Stark has many sexual partners that he only sees for a short period of time." Stephen says and the AI is silent for a moment before he speaks up.

"Dr Strange, since Sir has returned from captivity, the only sexual partner that he's had has been
you." The AI says and for a moment, Stephen can't breathe.

He'd... He'd assumed that when he wasn't at the house, during the week, Tony had other sexual partners. He hadn't- they hadn't made any agreements to the contrary.

He knew that even on some of the days that they were working together, Tony went to benefits and charity events. He went to them during the weekdays too. Sometimes overseas. He had assumed that Tony would have other sexual partners. Even during their... even before. He had simply assumed.

Stephen sighs.

"JARVIS, that's Mr Stark's private information and you should have not have revealed it to me. He may have wanted to keep his sexual history and habits to himself." Stephen informs the AI. Because it is important for the AI to know when he did the wrong thing.

"Oh I see. My apologies Dr Strange. But I believed that as both Mr Stark's principal medical professional as well as his sexual partner, it was within your rights to have such information." The AI informs him and the logic is sound enough.

"If I was in a romantic relationship with Anthony and he trusted me to that level, then yes. But we aren't romantic partners. That is not what he wants." It hurts to say it, but he does anyway.

"I see. Thank you Dr Strange. I am finding that the more information that I am given about human behaviour, the more difficult it is to understand where the lines are. I believe the idiom is lines drawn in the sand and that thus it shifts. However, it is difficult to understand which way the line would shift." The AI says and Stephen has to smile a little at that.

"That isn't just you JARVIS. All of us humans feel that too. The lines are always in the sand because human behaviour and emotions aren't clear cut. They aren't permanent either. We can change our minds, our decisions. We can change our allegiances. That's why loyalty is so valued." Stephen tries to explain.

The AI has come so far but the more aware the AI becomes, the more difficulty JARVIS was having with the concepts that aren't so clear cut. Since no human could understand everything either, it was a difficult task for an AI.

"How about you doctor? Will you loyalties to Mr Stark change?" JARVIS's primary concern is always Tony and it always will be. The question makes sense. Stephen looks carefully at the camera and shakes his head.

"With most people, that might be possible. For me, it isn't. For me... there is something that ensures that I will always be loyal and devoted to Dr Stark. Very much in the same way that you will be. He is... my primary directive if you like." Stephen informs him with a soft voice. It's the best way to explain the Connection to an AI.

"Is that love doctor? If it is love, then how can you be so certain that it will not change? Great many literature indicate that love can wane and the target of love can be changed." JARVIS's question catches Stephen offguard.

They weren't at the level of discussing love yet. They were just working on the simpler human emotions and recognising them at this stage. But apparently, JARVIS studied ahead.

"It can. In most people. But there are some loves that doesn't change. Cannot change. The love a parent feels for a child or one that a child feels for a parent. They may not like each other, agree with each other but they will always have a bond between them. But no. My... loyalty isn't out of love. It
is... something I can't explain to you yet JARVIS. I will one day." Stephen informs him quietly.

"I see. Is that a part of the secret that you keep Dr Strange? Like how you can travel between New York and Malibu in a minute when it ought to take 5 hours and 48 minutes?" Stephen simply nods. He had explained that it was a secret that Stephen could move such distances so quickly and that JARVIS needed to keep it a secret for Stephen's safety and Tony's.

"I may have further questions in relation to that doctor, but I will not ask them. Sir has instructed me that questioning you beyond what is comfortable is not advisable. Your helicopter has arrived doctor." JARVIS informs him. Stephen nods.

"Thank you JARVIS. If you would like, we can discuss human emotions further next week." Stephen informs him. The AI agrees.

Stephen isn't quite sure how the helicopter trip went. He doesn't quite know how he got into the plane. But he does know that as soon as he is on the plane, he locks himself in the bedroom.

He turns up the music as loudly as he can. He curls up onto the bed and lets himself fall apart.

In 5 hours, he was going to be all better. He was going to be the strong Sorcerer Supreme that the Order needed. He was going to be Uncle Stephen to Clea. He was going to be best friends with Wong and Yinn.

He was going to be the Dr Stephen Strange his patients needed. He was going to be the Dr Stephen Strange that Tony needed to work with him and Stephen Strange that he wanted to fuck on a regular basis.

But for 5 hours, Stephen was going to just... be Stephen. The man with a broken heart. The one that can barely breathe for all the pain cutting him up inside.

Stephen breaks.

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Chapter Summary

Christmas isn't a time of celebration for Tony Stark. It hasn't been since 1991. It will never be.

But that's okay. Pepper, Rhodey and Stephen were all with their families and at least they can get their joy out of the holiday.

For him, he has his bottle of booze and the comforting voice of JARVIS and his rather comfortable bed. That's enough... right?

Chapter Notes

PLEASE READ THIS A/N!!!!!!

Right! Okay... I woke up and saw 28 comments. Haven't replied to them yet but I will after I post this. I broke a lot of you and for that, I am so sorry.

So the reasoning behind what I wrote is this:
1. Tony Stark is REALLY shit at emotions and has severe trust issues and trauma in relation to feeling love for people and having them shit on him.
2. He never had a proper childhood to develop and mature as a person and learnt to deal with emotions in the proper ways.
3. As such, he is pretty shit at dealing with them, recognising them in himself.
4. He is still trying to... become the man that we all remember him from Endgame, but he's seriously not getting anywhere close to that yet. Which means he needs to experience emotions, learn the consequences of his actions to be able to learn the proper responses to things.
5. Tony is really good at bullshitting himself.

Which is why he is in a way so cruel to Stephen. It really doesn't help that Tony honestly just doesn't understand what it is like to love someone the way that Stephen does and he doesn't quite believe that love like that is even possible. Most of us want it but we also have trouble believing it.

Hence the idiocy you see.

Having said all of that, I'm kind of really (in a not so sadistic way as this is going to sound) glad to see that you guys were hitting the really getting angry and upset point in a way because each time I tend to see those comments coming, I feel like I timed it just right. Stretched out the angst just right etc.

In this case? Not going to lie... a bit more angst.

NOTE: MINOR CHARACTER DEATHS
Sunday

27 December 2009

Tony hates Christmas.

It's hard to get into the holiday spirit when it's the darkest time period of his life. He spends Christmas usually on his own. He doesn't want friends. He doesn't want... anyone with him during that time.

He just wants to drink. Wallow. Remember.

He finds himself talking to JARVIS a lot. Especially this holiday. He ends up talking to JARVIS for hours whilst curled on the bed, too hungover to actually get out of the damned thing, initially. Then because he's too depressed to get out of bed. He drowns in his emotions and his pain.

Pepper is with her family in Washington. Rhodey was with his family. They both invited him to come over, but they knew that he would refuse. He always did. They do check up on him regularly throughout the days.

Stephen is with his family too. The Stranges and the Andersons were celebrating in New York because well, New York actually snows and it's more... Christmas-y.

The thoughts about Stephen bring bitterness into his mouth. He tastes regret. He remembers all their sexual encounters. How... distant he had felt even as he had felt the desire and need burn through him.

He had acted out what he wanted. He took what he needed from the doctor. But it hadn't been satisfying. It hadn't been as good, as wonderful as it used to be.

Sex with Stephen was good still. It gave him the release he needed. It helped him to get out of his head and let his frustrations out. But he sees the pain in the doctor's eyes every time they fuck. He feels the wrongness that lingers with each encounter.

It's a mistake.

He shouldn't have suggested this shitty only sex relationship. It's toxic.

It doesn't affect their work. Not really. When they are in the workshop, they are professional. They get the work done. The communication between them is smooth when it comes to working.

When Tony suggests they go upstairs, Stephen stiffens, but he follows. When Tony kisses him, hard and demanding, Stephen submits. He consents. His body reacts. But Tony can see that it is costing the doctor something to let himself be... used.

And that is what Tony is doing. Using him. He hates himself for it. He hates that he can't stop. He should.

When the holidays are over and the doctor comes over again, Tony tells himself that he will talk to the doctor. That he should put a stop to this before he destroys Stephen and himself. It may already be too late.

With that in mind, Tony closes his eyes. He is tired. He hasn't slept properly for weeks now. The nightmares are constant and he can barely sleep for three hours a night. If he manages to get to bed at all.
JARVIS is quiet now. They'd had their chat and Tony is too deep in his thoughts, too involved in his own head to talk to even JARVIS.

The bed feels empty.

"Sir... I apologise, but you should see this." JARVIS says. Tony isn't sure how much time had passed since he'd last talked to the AI. It doesn't matter.

"What is it J?" Tony asks softly. He's so tired. But when the images flash up on the window, Tony feels a rush of adrenaline go through him.

It's a news report. Of a motor vehicle accident. In New York. On the I-95. Tony doesn't recognise the car. But he reads the name flashing on the screen and he feels panic seize him.

*Dr Strange involved in a motor vehicle collision.* The news report scrolling underneath the newscaster reads.

Tony feel as if someone had poured a bucket of ice-cold water over his head. He can't breathe. He can hear roaring in his own ears and knows that it's the shock talking.

No.

Stephen can't be. He can't be in an accident. He can't be in critical condition. He can't. Not when-

Tony doesn't know how much time passes. All he can think about is the last time he saw Stephen. The pain that had flashed in the man's eyes. The feel of Stephen's skin. The taste of his lips. All the shit that he should have said. All the things that really at the end of the day didn't fucking even matter.

Tony needs to be there.

Their last interaction can't be-

No.

"That- it- it isn't Stephen is it?" Tony asks and his voice shakes. Fear and adrenaline go through him. He can't. He just can't lose Stephen. Not like this. Not when he hasn't fixed- He can't.

"Sir, it is not Dr Stephen Strange. The report indicates that it was Dr Matthew Strange and his wife, Mrs Caroline Strange that was involved in the collision. They have been taken to the Metro General." JARVIS informs him.

The relief that goes through him tingles along his limbs. It's only then that Tony really realises just how terrified he had been that he had lost Stephen. That he would never see the man again. Never be able to hold him. Or kiss him.

Gods.

The realisation hits him hard. JARVIS is talking. He's saying something else. Tony doesn't hear it. He falls to his knees. They can't hold him up anymore.

He is in love with Stephen Strange.

Fuck. Tony runs a shaking hand down his face. He realises that he's actually out of bed. He'd jumped out as soon as he had seen the report. As soon as the words 'critical condition' and 'Dr
Strange' had scrolled through the screen. The floor feels cold under his knees.

"Sir, sir!" The AI calls and Tony can finally hear him again. Tony takes a deep breath.

"Yeah J?" He manages to ask with a dry mouth. Tony doesn't know what to do with his own realisation. The heady regret he feels is nothing compared to the raw guilt.

He'd- fuck. He needs to see Stephen he thinks. He should get up. Get dressed. Go to New York. He needs to do something. He has to.

He's not even sure how you can fix a fuck up of that magnitude. He's not sure if he can... He needs to. Whatever it is that he can do, he needs to do it because he can't let this- No.

"Ms Strange is calling sir. She asks to speak to you. She... does not seem to be well." JARVIS informs him. Oh god, of course not.

"Put her through." He says almost immediately because he knows that there is only one reason she would be contacting him.

Stephen.

"I'm- I shouldn't have called but- I- Can-Can you come to New York? S-" Clea's voice is wet with tears and she can barely speak for the sobs that are breaking out.

"I- I know. I just saw the report. I'm- I'm so sorry Clea." Tony manages because he can be a decent human being every now and then and if nothing else, he knows what it's like to lose family during the festive season.


Tony closes his eyes. Gods he hates emotions. But he's not going to turn away. Not now. He's done with this bullshit.

"Clea, I'm going to get into my suit. I will be there in an hour. Okay? Where's Stephen?" He asks and he keeps his voice calm and soft because by gods he doesn't think she can handle him being anything less.

Tony ignores the lump in his own chest.

"At- At the hospital. Metro-Gen- They- They don't- They don't think- oh God Tony I know- I shouldn't- you're not- but he needs- oh god." It's honestly hard to understand a word she's saying between the sobs but he gets the message clearly enough.

Despite the pain and fear going through her, she was still thinking of Stephen. And so was he.

"Clea. I'm coming. You're- You hear me? It's... I'm coming." He can't tell her that it's going to be okay. So that's what he goes for. Eventually, Clea breathes out.

"Thank you." She manages and the phone hangs up. Fuck. Tony prioritises. Tony knows how to work under pressure. How to think when he is under duress. Tony takes a deep breath and make the decisions. They come quite easily.

"J. get Mark II ready to go. And call Pepper. Wake her up." Tony tells him and the AI obeys
immediately. He runs into the closet. He really should shower but whatever.

He pulls on the kevlar body suit that he usually wears under the suit because the doctor kept insisting on it and over it, he puts on woollen pants, a warm sweater. He can't wear anything more than that because it's just not going to fit inside of the goddamned suit. The warm ankle boots feel a little too hot in Malibu.

"To- Tony? God it's 2:00am. Why-" Pepper sounds cranky and clearly roused out of sleep, but Tony doesn't have time to feel bad about it. Not right now.

"I'm going to New York. I need you to have someone wait for me at Metro-General Hospital helipad with a winter coat. Stephen's grandparents were involved in- in a serious car crash." Tony manages to say as he is rushing down the stairs with his phone and wallet barely collected and shoved into his pockets.

"Oh god. Okay. Okay. I'll get that sorted. You're taking the suit?" She asks. Even at this ridiculous hour, she is brilliant. He can hear rustling and knows that she is getting out of her bed and dressing too. She really was quite fond of Clea.

"Yeah. Quickest transport I got." He tells her. It's true enough.

"Alright. Go. I'll get a private plane ready and get there. Tony... Clea and Stephen... they're really close to their grandparents." Pepper says quietly. Tony knows. Stephen talked often about them. Especially about his grandfather and his advice to Stephen.


"J, get me there." Is all he says into the suit and JARVIS takes over smoothly.

It's only when he is moving and he is on the way that Tony really thinks about his response. About Clea calling him. He's not... They're not. But... he gets it.

Stephen loves him and needs him. If Clea is calling him several hours after the incident, then whatever measures had been taken to save the lives of the Stranges wasn't working and Stephen was not handling it well. By the sounds of it, neither was Clea.

Stephen hadn't called him. He wouldn't. He doesn't believe that Tony cares about him. Not enough to get out of bed and fly over in a tin can over to New York at impossible speeds. But Tony was doing exactly that.

And yeah.

Tony remembers the conversation between JARVIS and the doctor. The little shit had allowed the sound to come through in the lab whilst he had talked to the doctor in the living room.

Tony remembers Stephen's soft words. His concern. His need to ensure that Tony is safe and well. Despite the shit way Tony had been treating him. He remembers the dead set conviction in Stephen's voice as he declared that his emotions will never change.

It had been... difficult to listen to. That should have been when Tony realised. He was an idiot. He's been such a fucking idiot.

It had taken an Artificial Intelligence system to teach him that. It had taken nearly destroying the man that loves him, that he loves to realise that. Not anymore, Tony thinks. He's done being a fucking
coward.

He needs Stephen in his life. He doesn't give a flying fuck about the secrets that the doctor is keeping. Not anymore. Stephen is more than his secrets. His dedication and love towards Tony have nothing to do with those secrets. Tony knows that now.

He doesn't actually know what he's going to do when he gets there. He's not... he hasn't done the whole supportive romantic partner thing before. But he's been a supportive friend before when Rhody's father passed. Tony hasn't had grandparents so he's not sure how that feels, but he knows what loss feels like. He knows how shit that is.

He's going to help Stephen through this. Whatever it takes. Then when they can, Tony is going to tell him. Show him... love him. He's not sure how yet.

He'll figure it out when he gets there, he thinks.

He has to.

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**Sunday**

**27 December 2009**

They shouldn't have let them drive. He shouldn't have. The roads were too sleek and though the snow had stopped for the night, it made the road dangerous. Stephen should have insisted that they stay the night instead.

But mum had wanted to- Caroline had wanted to make it back home for Monday and her book club. They had insisted. He should have told them that he loved them. He should have held them tighter. Told them that he was- Oh god.

There are warm arms holding him. It's the only thing that's keeping him together. Clea is trembling next to him, her hand a death grip on his and it hurts but it's grounding. He can't hold the spells in focus. They've been transferred over to the other Masters. They take Clea's burden too because she can't focus either.

They had known.

No. They hadn't known exactly what was going to happen and when. But both Clea and he had seen it when Caroline and Matthew had come into D'Arte's Penthouse Suite. Anderson and Cowell had seen it too.

Behind all the holiday cheer and warm smiles, laughter and hugs, from Christmas Eve until they just left, both Clea and he had known that they didn't have long. The fading life had been before their very eyes and they hadn't been able to do a goddamned thing about it.

Because it wasn't their right to interfere with the natural order of things. It wasn't their role to break that. Because people just had to die sometime. Even if they lived longer. Even if the Time Stone refused to let him die. Eventually, the universe would take them back.

Stephen doesn't even feel sadness.

He feels... numb. Empty. Logically, he knows it's the shock speaking. He's in emotional shock. He can barely think.
Caroline and Matthew Strange are gone. His parents. His loving, sweet parents.

Gone.

They should have felt something, shouldn't they? Caroline and Matthew had been in that crushed car for hours, bleeding out and dying and Stephen and Clea hadn't had a single idea. They had just returned to the Sanctum. Gone to sleep. Only to be woken up by the phone calls.

Even the goddamned Cup that was meant to be the voice of the fucking Universe had stayed goddamned quiet. It'd happily shown him all the little moments of Tony fucking Stark growing up but when it had come to his own parents dying, it had stayed silent. Because apparently they just weren't that important to the fucking universe.

Stephen thinks he might be angry.

It's hard to tell through the numbness that has taken root inside of him. He knows it's irrational to feel so angry. But he is. Is he? He can't tell. He should have told them. Gods, he should have fucking told them that their son wasn't gone. Dead, yes but... alive. That- God.

Yinn's soft voice is speaking to him. He doesn't hear a word. Is she speaking to him or to Clea, he doesn't know. Wong is holding Clea in his arms. Anderson and Cowell are right there with them, trying to lend support. They shouldn't be here. They should be at the London Sanctum because with the extra strain of- wait.

Someone should be at the New York Sanctum. As the thought comes to him and he knows he should do something about that. He's the Sorcerer Supreme. Stephen tries to focus. To speak up. But Anne speaks first.

"It's okay. We have Masters in place in the New York Sanctum and the London Sanctum. The Order is taken care of. Don't worry about it for now." She shushes him. Had he spoken out aloud? He's not sure. He probably had. They wouldn't read his mind.

He's a doctor. A sorcerer. The fucking Sorcerer Supreme even. He'd saved countless of strangers lives and he couldn't save his own family's? That's just- no.

Jonathon is doing what is expected of a first born. He's with the doctors. Making the arrangements. Stephen should be there to help. To support him. But Jonathon doesn't let him. He leaves Stephen with Clea and asks him to look after her.

Stephen had almost been alright when there was a crisis to deal with, scans to look at. Discussions to be had about trying to save- Oh Gods.

Anderson is with Jonathon instead. Quietly supporting him and helping.

He can't do this.

He can't. He's not-

"Stephen." When the voice comes, it cuts through all the thoughts and emotions. He feels the Connection flare up brightly inside of him and he looks up.

Tony Stark.

The inventor stands there, dressed in dark woollen pants, dark grey woollen coat and he's... he's here. How?
It doesn't matter. Stephen moves before he registers it. He's out of Yinn's warm hold. He sways and he thinks he's about to fall, but Tony catches him and holds him tightly.

"Shh it's okay Stephen. It's going to be okay." Tony tells him. It's not. Stephen wants to tell him. He can't. He can't get his lips to move and he can't get the thought together in his mind let alone out of his lips.

Stephen loses track of time.

Somehow, they are in the Penthouse Suite of the D'Arte. He's curled up in bed with Tony holding him tightly. He can feel Tony's fingers carding through his hair.

Where's Clea? Where are the others? What happened with- it hits him.

They were back at the hotel. Not at the hospital anymore. Yeah. He remembers Dr Jamerson's voice. He remembers the apologetic, sympathetic look in his eyes. He remembers the scans.

The accident had been bad enough and though their bleeding had been slowed down due to the cold and there had been life signs when they got to the hospital... there hadn't been anything that they could do.

Stephen knew that. He saw the scans. But he could have. If he'd... if he'd just been willing and able to use even the fraction of power under his fingertips, he could have- no.

No.

He clutches at his chest, where the Time Stone hums softly. Even now. He can use that. He can go back in time. He can- no.

"Clea's with um... Yinn and Pepper. She's been taken care of. Jonathon has Margaret with him. Kenneth and Anne are making arrangements. Your friend Wong is sorting out food, clothes and logistics basically." Tony's voice is soft and gentle and it's grounding. Stephen focuses on it.

"Clea called me. I came as soon as I could. I'm not sure if you remember. I was there at the hospital. I had to get a helicopter pilot to help me out of the suit and get it to fly back to the mansion. J tells me it arrived safely back. So there's that." Stephen realises if Tony is aware just how effective his voice is at keeping him calm. Tony continues to talk.

"I didn't even think about whether I should be here or not. I just came. I figured it wouldn't hurt to be here and you haven't let me go once yet, so I'm figuring you need me.” There is a hollow laugh in Tony's voice. Stephen doesn't quite know what to think. Or to feel. But that's true enough. Oh. Wait. Stephen realises that they are fully dressed. Tony must be overheating in that jacket of his. Stephen tries to move a bit, but Tony holds him tighter.

"It's okay. You don't need to let go. I'm here. Okay? Whatever you need, I'm here." Tony tells him softly. That- that doesn't sound right. They weren't in that sort of relationship were they? Tony didn't want emotions. He didn't need him to be needy and clingy. Stephen needs to stop.

"I- It's- It's okay. I-I'm fine." Stephen tries to say. His voice sounds odd. He tries to pull away from Tony and this time, Tony lets him. But he doesn't leave. He stays on the bed, leaning against the headboard, fully dressed down to his shoes.

"Yeah. You're not and that's okay. Not sure if you know this, but I know what it's like to lose family. At Christmas no less." Tony tells him almost with a light tone. Oh of course. Stephen looks at him and this time, he can actually focus a little. Think clearly enough.
This can't be good for Tony. To remember the trauma of losing his parents. he is probably having a
difficult enough time without needing to deal with Stephen and Clea and their loss and-

"How about we take off some of our clothes and get into bed properly? I can use some sleep Stephen
and so can you. We can think and work everything out later." Tony tells him. It's easier to move and
think when he puts Tony's needs ahead of his.

"Of course." Stephen says almost automatically. He sits on the corner of the bed and bends down to
take his shoes off. He unlaces the stupid winter boots and lets them fall onto the floor. He's up to his
socks when he sees Tony already down to his briefs.

"Let me help." Tony says quietly and he does. He strips Stephen out of his coat, his sweater and his
pants. The soft glow of the Arc Reactor and the familiar energy of it is distracting. Stephen focuses
on that as Tony strips him down to his briefs and leads him back to the bed. They slip under the
covers this time.

Tony holds him tightly against himself and lets Stephen settle so that his head is laying on Tony's
chest and he can hear the other man's heartbeat. it's reassuring.

"It's okay Stephen. It's going to be okay. When you... when you feel better, we can talk about us. I
just- I'm really sorry. Okay? I just need you to know that for now." Tony tells him quietly. Stephen
hears the regret in his voice. He doesn't understand it. But he nods slowly.

Eventually, they fall into silence. Just warm, comforting silence.

Stephen doesn't cry. He can't. Not yet. He's not there yet. He's still... processing. He feels so
incredibly numb and-

He closes his eyes. The Arc Reactor is a soft glow right in front of his closed eyes. It's strangely
reassuring. The steady drumming of Tony's heartbeat is even more reassuring. The warm weight of
Tony's arm around his shoulders, the way that he is holding one of Stephen's hands. It is all...
reassuring.

Aside from that, Stephen knows he should feel something. He doesn't. As he falls asleep, all he can
feel is... empty. He's not sure if he wants to feel. Rationally he knows that when the shock fades and
the emotions hit, it will be hard.

He's not ready.

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The Grief

Chapter Summary

Death is hard to deal with. Tony is all too familiar with that. He just wishes that he could help.

He's just not sure what can be done.

Chapter Notes

Alright! Finally something a little more... nice? Fluffy? It's no honeymoon but definitely some fluff. At least I hope it's enough to help heal the hearts that the story has broken so far >__<

I really do appreciate all the support and the love for the story thus far by the way. It has been amazing. I really love reading all the comments and getting your reactions.

They really do help.

So thank you! <3

Please continue to throw ideas/nicknames/scenes etc my way! ^__^

Monday

28 December 2009

Tony wakes up as he usually does, alert and ready to go. He does take a moment to gather himself. He recognises where he is immediately. The D'Arte Hotel in New York. Penthouse Suite. Tony fights back the sigh that almost rises at that realisation.

The Penthouse Suite has some quite... amazing memories. He remembers the pizzas shared, the chats he had with Stephen. Then he remembers that horrible weekend. He remembers the terrible things that he has done and it hurts. The regret is raw and will be raw for some time. But...

Stephen is curled around him still and they haven't moved during the night, morning, afternoon... whatever they'd slept through. Stephen is still asleep. But Tony needs to go to the bathroom and from the growling in his stomach? Probably eat something. He's starving.

But that's not why he woke up. When he looks around, he realises why. An Asian woman is standing at the doorway. She closes the door softly behind herself and pads over to where they are. Tony can't help but hold Stephen a little closer because yes, he'd seen her at the hospital but he also has no idea who she is.

It's not like any of them had a moment for introductions or heart to hearts during the transfer from the hospital to the hotel. Tony had been so preoccupied with Stephen and his state that he hadn't
particularly paid attention to the others.

She doesn't seem to care that they are pretty un-dressed under the covers or that he is holding Stephen in his arms. She leaves a bundle of something on a nearby chair. She strides across the room and comes to the bed and Tony can't help but pull Stephen even closer to himself.

The woman looks at him with a small smile on her lips.

"I won't harm him Mr Stark. I just wanted to make sure that he was properly asleep." The woman says and whilst keeping her eyes firmly locked with Tony, she moves carefully to lay a hand over Stephen's forehead and closes her eyes.

Tony doesn't understand what she is doing. But she opens her eyes just a moment later and nods. He's not sure whether the gesture is towards him or if it is to herself.

"Good. He won't wake for awhile. You should be able to leave him for a bit to get something to eat, Mr Stark." The woman tells him. Her words are oddly enunciated. Chinese accent, he thinks. Her accent is soft and rounded as if she has been speaking English for a long time. Probably has, given how good it is.

She's a pretty sort of woman. Not someone he would call beautiful in the traditional sense. She has a very petite body and face and everything about her seemed delicate and fragile, like a flower. Her eyes are wide and almond-shaped and black. Her black hair is pulled back into a simple braid down her back. She's dressed in dark grey trainers and sweatshirt. She looks comfortable.

"Ms Potts has organised for some clothes for you. Something comfortable. I left them there for you." She tells him softly. Tony isn't quite sure how to respond to her, but when she looks at Stephen with sympathetic eyes, he gets the feeling that she's a friend. He nods slowly.

She gives him a nod back and leaves the room. It's a difficult task to extract himself from the bed, but Tony manages it and Stephen does stay asleep. Good. Tony doesn't stop himself from bending down to kiss the doctor's hairline as he pulls the covers over him.

Tony goes to the en-suite bathroom and takes care of business and dresses in the sweatshirt and trainers combo that apparently everyone was wearing. Tony gets the feeling that with the shops closed, Pepper's done the best that she could to just pull whatever she could.

He checks to make sure that Stephen is still sleeping before he makes his way out of the room.

The living room apparently is filled with everyone but the Strange family members. They are all quietly gathered and eating what looks to be simple finger foods. Sandwiches, mini pies etc. Pepper comes to him with a huge mug of coffee and hands it to him. He hugs her.

The time at the hospital had been... difficult. Stephen had been there, but not... really there. He had talked to the doctors and once that had been done... once the Stranges passed, Stephen had become... almost unresponsive.

It hadn't surprised Tony. He had done something similar. Tony had to admit that though it was asking a lot, he was so very glad that Pepper had come. She's the one that made sure that there were cars to take them back to the hotel.

She was the one, along with Anderson, that had pulled the cops back when they tried to speak to Stephen, Clea and Jonathon about the circumstances of the accident.

It's not until he is hugging her that Tony realises that he is more affected by this than he had been...
willing to admit to himself. Or been aware of it himself.

"You alright?" She asks him softly. Tony holds her tighter. Yeah. He was remembering his own parent's death and it wasn't pleasant and he's not completely sure if he can deal with that right now, but this isn't about him. It's about Stephen.

He wants to be there for Stephen. He has so much to apologise to the doctor about. So many things that he needs to fix. The least he can do is to help the doctor through this.

"Yeah. I'll be. How's Clea?" Tony asks because though Clea had spoken to him, thanked him for coming and hugged him tightly, she too had gone quiet once the Stranges had been officially declared deceased.

"She's... she's sleeping." Pepper says and Tony nods. He gets it well enough. Tony wishes he could just stay, holding onto Pepper and drawing on her strength, but he knows that there are others in the room. That he has a role to play.

"Mr Anderson, Mrs Cowell, I am sorry for your loss." Tony says politely because its the right thing to do and he was aware that Stephen's family was close to the Strange family through Stephen. They give him small smiles and nods tightly.

"Thank you Mr Stark for the sentiment and for coming. Stephen... needs you right now." Anderson is the one that speaks up. Tony nods. It feels a little awkward, meeting the family of someone he was sleeping with. He'd kind of never done that and at the hospital, he hadn't even greeted them at all.

He wonders if they know just how badly he'd been treating their son and what they would say to him if they did know. The guilt feels heavy in his stomach.

"This is Yinn and that gentleman is Wong. They are... Stephen's housemates and close friends." Anderson introduces the woman and the Asian man seated in the corner. They all look... exhausted in the afternoon sunlight.

"Tony Stark." He introduces himself because honestly, he's not quite sure what else to say. He can't really say it's a pleasure to meet them given the circumstances after all. They give him small nods. The atmosphere is sombre and incredibly awkward. Still, Tony's used to awkward and he is hungry. He grabs a plate and some sandwiches and starts to eat.

"Do we know what happened?" Tony asks quietly because it's something to talk about and he doesn't like the silence. Anne Cowell, Anderson's wife and a rather stunning Scottish woman known for her charity work and social circles that goes all the way up to royalty in London, speaks up.

"Caroline, Stephen and Clea's grandmother wanted to return in time for her book club. We shouldn't have let them drive." She stops, emotions clearly getting the better of her and Tony is starting to regret asking the question, but she gathers herself and continues on. Apparently, she had adopted the British stiff upper lip attitude.

"They left us around 10:00pm. Matthew was driving. They were run off the road by a drunk driver around 11:00pm, the police believe. They were found in their car, in the ditch around 1:00am and rushed to Metro-General. There wasn't... there wasn't anything that could be done for them." Anne finishes and Tony can't help but just nod.

It's... very similar to his own parents' situation. As if aware of the comparisons he was drawing, Pepper moves to sit next to him and rests a hand on his thigh to comfort him.

He leans against her a little to let her know that the gesture is appreciated. He's also no longer
hungry. He eats regardless. He knows he's going to need the energy to deal with Stephen.

"Is there anything we can do?" Tony asks because he needs to do something. The four of them share a look and it's Yinn that speaks.

"Be there for Stephen. He's fragile, vulnerable right now. He needs... he needs you to ground him. Focus him. Support him. If you can." She says quietly and the option is there. He gets the distinct feeling that if he decides to leave right now, they would accept that. That they wouldn't judge. He won't.

He also gets the distinct feeling that Yinn and Wong were... like Stephen. He's not sure why he is so sure about that, but he is. It might be the way that they carry themselves. The quiet confidence that Stephen has. Or it's the way that they seem to be so alert and so ready.

"I can do that." Tony tells them with the confidence he wishes he had. They don't seem to notice. Tony realises that he doesn't actually know how to do the whole meet the parents' situation. He'd never done it before.

He also doesn't really know how to do the whole 'talk to grieving people' thing either. His limited experience had been just to be there. Sit and wait until Rhodey broke down and started to talk to him. He knows the words that he should say. That's it. Now that he's said it...

"We'll handle the funeral arrangements and the investigation side with the police. I already have my legal team on it." Anderson says and it's probably easier for the man to deal with the practical things rather than the emotions. Tony can sympathise with that.

They run out of things to talk about pretty quickly at that point. Pepper draw him into a conversation about how she would have to re-arrange his schedules a bit to make sure that he can stay in New York and arrange for clothes and amenities to be brought over to the hotel when Anne Cowell drops her teacup.

Tony turns to look at her, everyone does. As he does, he sees her eyes growing wide and filled with fury. But it's not just her reacting. Yinn and Wong, as well as Kenneth, are all reacting. To something that Pepper and Tony can't see.

"London?" Wong asks.


Before Tony and Pepper could question it, Clea and Stephen come out of the bedrooms, clearly exhausted but dressed immaculately. They look incredibly alert. Running on adrenaline, Tony thinks. Stephen is the one that really surprises Tony though.

"Who do we have in London?" Stephen asks and his voice is filled with authority. This isn't a side to Stephen that Tony had never really seen before.

"Sugisaki and Mikhailov. Farooqi is there of course and the Disciples." Anne speaks up and her tone is not of a mother addressing her son. It is a subordinate addressing their boss. A leader. Tony recognises the tone. He adds Anne Cowell and Kenneth Anderson to the list in his head. Stephen nods easily enough.

"Anne, go. Farooqi can probably handle it, but Sugisaki and Mikhailov are still new. Let's not risk losing anyone." Stephen says quietly and she nods firmly.

"As you wish." She tells him softly and she stands up and with a kiss on Kenneth's cheek, leaves the
Penthouse as if it is that simple. As impossible as it is, Tony knows that she's gone to London. Just like that.

Pepper tenses next to him. He holds her hand and realises that he too is tense. He just doesn't quite know what to think or to even feel. But that's... fine. He's already decided. If nothing else, Tony is stubborn. He's not going to change his mind.

"Stephen, you should be resting. We can deal with-" Stephen shakes his head when Anderson clearly tries to help. To get him to calm down. Perhaps to realise that both Pepper and Tony is in the room and they shouldn't be discussing whatever it is that they are discussing. Stephen doesn't seem to notice.

"Anyone worth their salt would have felt the transfer. If they saw the news, they'll know that I'm vulnerable. New York?" Stephen asks, his voice strong and authoritative. It is very... attractive, Tony thinks. He missed this Stephen. This confident Stephen that he'd first met at the Charity Function.

It's only then he realises that Stephen hasn't... been himself for awhile now and that was due to him. His fault. God. He needs to make sure that Stephen continues to be like this. Better. Be himself like this.

Tony swears Stephen is speaking English... he just doesn't understand what he is really saying. He also realises that regardless of what the paperwork may say, Anne Cowell and Kenneth Anderson probably aren't Stephen's parents. Well.

"Grimshaw, Steinbach and Bianchi." Wong is the one that answers him. Stephen sighs.

"Wong, go back to the Sanctum. If something serious comes through, Bianchi won't be able to handle it." Stephen says and Wong sighs and shakes his head.

"If something serious comes through, I'll go then. Right now, you're our priority." Wong tells him and he sounds exasperated.

"I'm fine. It's-" Stephen tries and Wong gives him a hard look.

"Of course you are. You're so fine and focused that you're discussing Order business with outsiders in the room." Wong tells him and his words are a little harsh, but he isn't berating. More... reminding and Stephen does look almost a little dazed when he notices that Pepper and Tony are in the room.

He goes pale.

Tony isn't sure what to do for a little bit, because there are so many new people he doesn't quite have a read on. And Tony isn't used to being demonstratively affectionate outside of bed let alone in front of people. But the decision comes pretty instinctively.

He goes over to Stephen and reaches up a little to grab the man's face into his hands and makes him focus on him. The blue grey eyes are mostly grey and pale. They are wide and filled with fear. Tony shushes him and pulls him in close.

"Hey. It's okay." Tony tells him softly. It's not. It really isn't but... at this point, he'd mostly accepted the fact that there were things going on Stephen's life that he might not be able to understand.

For now, he is okay with that. Well he isn't, but he can ignore it for now. Stephen needs support right now. Not him questioning him and sending him off on another pain excursion.

"It's- I'm-" Stephen looks so lost and confused and it actually hurts to see him like this. So uncertain.
All the previous confidence gone. It must have been an emergency situation, Tony thinks. Emergency big enough that Stephen had been able to put aside his grief to deal with it, but the grief was definitely back.

"I'm sure that Mr Anderson and Mr um... Wong can handle everything. Right?" Tony looks at them to get confirmation. They give him nods. Okay. Good enough. No idea what's going on but hey they seemed to know what they are doing. Hopefully.

He's going to have to talk to Pepper and explain a few things, but for now, he needs to make sure that Stephen is okay.

"How about we get some air? Go for a walk or something." Tony suggests because, after his parent's death, that's what he wanted to do. Just walk aimlessly through the streets of New York and get out of the house.

Stephen looks at him for a moment before he slowly nods. This is where he had seen Caroline and Mathew Strange last. This is... where Tony had hurt him.

This isn't the best place for Stephen to be right now, Tony thinks.

"Mr Stark, that's not a good idea. Stephen needs to be... somewhere safe." Anderson tells him and that's somewhat of a surprise. Wong, Yinn and even Clea, with her drawn eyes already filling with tears again, nods in agreement with him. Stephen sighs.

"Wong, coordinate with the others. Call in reinforcements if you have to. Get everything locked down." Stephen commands and though he still looks a little lost and a little confused, his words are steady enough.

Tony can see that at least... he is comfortable enough with the people in the room not to show any signs of shame for being emotionally vulnerable. Good.

"Yeah. I got it Stephen." Wong tells him firmly and Stephen nods and looks around the room for a moment before he just turns on his heels and goes back to the master bedroom.

Tony hesitates a little because he's not sure about leaving Pepper alone with them all but she gestures towards the bedroom.

"Go. He needs you. I'm going to get your clothes organised." Pepper says and she stands up. He gives her a nod and goes to Stephen.

He's still not sure what he can do or what he should be doing, but simply being there is helpful. He remembers Rhodey doing that for him. How just knowing that Rhodey was there with him helped to see past the pain even just a little.

He has no idea what is going on. What Stephen is and what the others are. But right now, Stephen is hurting and if nothing else, he knows that he doesn't want Stephen to be hurting. Even if all he can do is just be there and sit in the room in silence with Stephen, he's okay with that.

Anything to help.

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Monday

28 December 2009
It's early morning.

Tony is asleep and his sleeping face is lightly lit by the Arc Reactor. He looks stunningly beautiful despite the exhaustion drawn on his face.

If Matthew was here with them, he would work through their grieving processes. He would explain that grief is expressed and felt in many different ways.

The shock and daze that Stephen had been in, the confusion that he had felt and his inability to focus was all just a part of the natural grieving process. The denial that he had felt. That he still feels is natural. He knows that.

It doesn't make it any easier.

Matthew would have talked to them, gently. Explaining that it will take time but it will get better. Over time the pain of the loss will be lessened and eventually, you will be able to remember the good times more than the bad. That they will be laughing and smiling once again.

It is going to take time.

Stephen doesn't have a lot of time. He is the Sorcerer Supreme. He needs to get his focus back. Ground himself so that he can pull the spells back from the Masters and be the Sorcerer Supreme that he needs to be. He needs to be strong enough so that he can help Clea and Jonathon through their grieving processes.

He knows that Yinn and Wong are looking after Clea. That Anderson, though he himself is also grieving the loss of Stephen's parents as they had... become family over the years, was helping Jonathon and that Margaret was there for Jonathon as well.

They were going to be okay. They were going to get through it. The thing is... the grief, as overwhelming as it is, isn't as difficult to handle as the guilt.

He hadn't told them. He hadn't told them that he was Vincent. That they hadn't lost their son. He hadn't apologised for pushing them away. For hurting them as Vincent. He hadn't been able to make his amends. And now he never will.

He could have stopped it. He could have saved them. He's not quite sure what he could have done or how, but he might have been able to do something to prevent the accident. Or to save their lives.

He had the power.

He is angry. He is sad. He feels guilty and he feels regret. But everything feels muted. He feels like he is in the Astral Plane, floating over himself when he knows he is not. He feels distanced and numb and he hates it. He wants to feel. He needs to feel.

Having Tony nearby helps. He naturally grounds Stephen. Just his presence alone is enough for Stephen to feel at least stable. If not completely focused. That's what a Soulmate can do. But it's not enough.

And Tony's presence confuses him. They weren't in the kind of relationship. Tony has no obligations to be here. But he is. He doesn't say much, but he is there. Encouraging him to eat. To drink. To sleep. To talk.

Stephen doesn't, but as confused as he is by Tony's presence, it is grounding and comforting. He tells himself that he can't get used to this. That he shouldn't get used to Tony being kind. Being warm.
"Hey. You okay?" Tony asks quietly. Stephen hadn't even noticed that the other man had woken up. He looks tired still. He gives Stephen a small smile and yawns and stretches in the bed. Stephen can feel his morning arousal against his thigh as he stretches.

Stephen wants to feel.

Wants the numbness to go away. Stephen moves before he thinks. He kisses Tony and moves so that he is on top of the other man. The kiss isn't a chaste thing. It's a hungry, devouring, needy monster and Tony takes it. He lets Stephen kiss him hard and gives it back just as hard.

The desire and need are so heady that he almost feels dizzy with it. Somewhere in the back of his mind, he thinks that he shouldn't do this. This isn't right. He thinks that Tony will push him away. He doesn't.

Stephen kisses him harder and with the other man trapped underneath him, it's easy to grind his lips against Tony and to get that delicious friction.

Within minutes, between the heavy kisses and the way their hips are grinding against each other, they are both panting, groaning and sweating.


"I want to... I need to feel." Stephen murmurs to him. He doesn't understand why Tony isn't pushing him away. Tony kisses his ear.

"Yeah. Okay. We can do that." Tony tells him and flips them over easily. Tony might be shorter than him, but he is wider and the man has muscles.

He also trains with Happy and he is skilled in MMA. Stephen had almost forgotten that. No. Not really. He remembered every single moment they ever spent together. He just... doesn't let himself recall those moments.

"How do you want this?" Tony asks him as he kisses his way down Stephen's chest. This isn't right. Stephen thinks. His parents just died. He shouldn't be having sex with Tony right now. But he wants to. He needs to.

The Bond and the Connection can ground him. Physical contact and sex, in particular, is honestly the best way to strengthen them and to effectively ground him in reality. Focus him.

He needs this. He needs Tony. Gods he's fucking pathetic.

"Fuck me. Hard. I want to feel it." Stephen tells him. Tony moves up to kiss him again. There is lube in the bedside table. Tony knows to get it without him prompting him.

"No." Tony tells him. Stephen is confused. Why did Tony accept the kiss? Why did he get the lube out if he was going to refuse- Tony kisses him.

"It's going to be slow. And gentle. I know you think want hard and rough right now, but that's not what you need. Okay?" Tony tells him. Not asks. Tells.
Stephen feels his eyes widen. This isn't- Their relationship wasn't this. It wasn't gentle and kind and soft. That wasn't what Tony had said that he had wanted. This isn't-

"Right now, you need to feel good. Let me make you feel good." Tony tells him and when he starts to prep him, it is soft and gentle and so incredibly considerate and kind that Stephen feels the lump at his throat and heaviness in his chest.

The early morning sun is weak because it's the middle of fucking winter but as it streams through the windows, Tony takes his time.

Others are surely waking up now. They had to go down to the police station and speak to the officers about the last time they saw Caroline and Matthew. They had to make funeral arrangements now that it was Monday. They had to-

Tony's fingers graze his prostate and Stephen can't think anymore. He can only feel. He feels Tony's thick fingers buried inside of him. He feels the genius's hand caressing his nipples, drawing pleasure from his body as if he is playing him like an instrument.

He feels Tony's kisses on his lips, on his eyes, on his neck. Tony is everywhere. Holding him together. Pulling him apart.

He can hear himself moaning and crying out each time those fingers brush past his prostate. Stephen is touching Tony too. Clawing at him, trying to pull him impossibly close. He is kissing Tony, breathlessly and desperately, contorting his body to make that possible.

By the time Tony slips into him, Stephen is lost in the desire and heady need. He is desperate for Tony. Tony wipes his fingers on the bed sheets. They are going to have to get the maid service up here and it was going to be awkward considering but Stephen doesn't give a fuck.

Tony is inside of him and he can feel the pulsing heat and it feels beautiful and perfect. His hips are spread impossibly wide and his legs are pressed against his chest and it feels all a little too much, but it's fine. Tony is kissing him and they are connected.

When Tony starts to move, he doesn't break the kiss. Stephen is contorted to make that happen, awkwardly raising his head and spreading his folded legs apart so that Tony can slip between them and kiss him but it's fine.

Tony does as he promised. He moves slowly. Gently. The emotions that had threatened to become more and more real start to build in his chest. It's heady and overwhelming.

Stephen loses track of time. He's not sure how long Tony ruts into him for, slowly and gently, each movement just caressing his prostate rather than hitting it.

Slowly but surely the orgasm builds up and so does his emotions. When he comes, it's with a sob and he is holding onto Tony so tightly that his hands hurt.

Then he can't stop. Tony comes inside of him and he can feel it coating his insides and it feels so perfect. But the moment the afterglow hits, so does the rest of his emotions. He is sobbing like a fucking child and he can't stop.

He vaguely feels Tony cleaning him up and spooning him so tightly that he can feel the Arc Reactor digging into his shoulder blade and he knows it must be uncomfortable for the genius, but he can't pull away. He pulls at Tony's hands until his arms are completely surrounding him and he is sobbing into Tony's hand that he is holding against his face with both of his hands.
Stephen falls apart.
Chapter Summary

The aftermath of losing family is difficult. But with support and love, it can get better.
They just need to... have some time and let themselves recover.

Chapter Notes

Sorry for posting a little late today >__<
I woke up late lol and then got distracted. Cause that's just what I do XD
The pain is starting to get better and I hope the fluff is what you were hoping for. I hope you enjoy this chapter a lot more! =P

<3

Thursday

31 December 2009

New Year's Eve is meant to be a time of celebration. Champagne and all the fun things. Fireworks. Kisses with significant others. Hugs with friends. A new year dawns and so does the goals. You reflect on the year gone by. You prepare for the new year to come.

It is meant to be a celebration.

It isn't for the Strange family. They are still in the depths of their grief. But they are doing better than what Pepper would have expected.

Clea still has red rims around her eyes and she bursts into tears randomly, but she eagerly goes out with Pepper when she suggests that they do some shopping to try to cheer the other people up.

The shopping trip itself is meant to cheer Clea up, whether she knows it or not. Pepper doesn't mind. She could use some air. Yinn comes along for the trip and Pepper doesn't quite know what to make of the quiet and reserved Asian woman.

The last couple of days had been... emotionally draining and difficult. For one, she barely got to see Tony at all. He spent almost the entire time so far with Stephen holed up in the master bedroom of the Penthouse Suite.

She honestly can't help but feel proud of Tony. There are some really, really odd things going on with Stephen and Clea and their friends.

There was some... things that made no sense with them, but Tony seemed to be okay enough with it,
so she went with it for the time being. She was going to have to corner him at one point and ask some questions, but right now, that wasn't appropriate.

Tony doesn't do emotions well.

It's not a dig at her friend to say that. He avoids emotions. He avoids feeling them. He avoids dealing with them when he does feel them and when people around him are being emotional, he pretty much runs away. That's how he usually deals with emotions.

It's only been with her and with Rhodey that he had really stayed and helped when they were going through difficult times. Even when he'd been dating people and he knew that he was meant to be there for his partners, Tony had all but run away and ended the relationships when it got emotional.

But with Stephen, not only had he accepted the responsibility, but he was handling it remarkably well. When he'd called her and said that he was going to New York, Pepper had decided to follow because she'd been worried about Clea, yes, but more because she'd been worried about him.

She knows that he was having trouble and that it was difficult. She was finding it difficult and she wasn't even that deeply involved with anyone. So she can only imagine how difficult it is for Tony to watch someone he cares for go through grief like this. But he was handling it... very well. At least on behalf of Stephen.

He made sure that Stephen ate, drank and took care of himself. Tony made sure that Stephen slept and it looked like he did as well. No one woke up with nightmares so that was a plus as well.

Stephen was doing better than the first day or so. He is actually talking, which was a good start. He helped to arrange the funeral with the others and helped to make the calls to friends and family. There wasn't a lot of family, but there were a lot of friends, colleagues and local groups to contact.

Tony didn't exactly hover, but he remained in the same room with Stephen almost the whole time. When he wasn't there, Pepper noticed the difference. It was almost as if Stephen needed Tony there with him to focus. To be stable. That kind of reliance can't be healthy.

He doesn't eat unless Tony urges him to. He stares off into space often and it is clear that despite attempts to pull him into a conversation, he has difficulty engaging with anyone other than Clea and Tony. His grief is so overwhelming that even for Pepper, it is difficult to watch him.

She considers calling a few therapists she knows to see if they can help Stephen. Pepper had seen Rhodey go through grief and she has seen the remnants of it on Tony and she'd experienced loss herself, but Stephen... seemed to be at a different level altogether.

Jonathon, on the other hand, was handling the situation rather well. He was having some difficulty focusing, but between Anderson and herself, they manage to square away the funeral arrangements, the burial, the will, the estate, the Strange family home and everything else. It is a surprising amount of work to organise funerals.

Either way, she was proud of Tony for actually dealing with emotions and being there for Stephen. She'd known that he had feelings for the man that went beyond any relationship she'd seen him in but this experience had really brought that to light. She hoped that this meant that he was growing as a person and that perhaps... he could be a little more stable. Be healthier. Have some balance in his life. She's not sure.

"You and Mr Stark don't ask questions. We had expected you to. Why?" Yinn asks her softly as Clea is distracted by the cakes on display.
The beautiful bakery is exclusive enough that there are no other customers. Pepper is really glad she's brought Tony's black AMEX with her.

Pepper doesn't know what to make of Yinn. Just Yinn. No last name or first name or any other name. Just Yinn. She's been quietly in the background the whole time they spent in the Penthouse. They hadn't talked so Pepper was surprised when she'd asked if she could accompany them.

"It doesn't seem appropriate right now. Dr Strange and Clea are grieving and I can respect that." Pepper tells her softly. By gods she has questions. What was the Order? Who were they? Why did it seem like Stephen was in charge of some sort of large organisation that was not a company? How did they all of sudden know that somewhere in London was getting... attacked?

Yeah, she has questions.

"You can ask them now if you like. I can't promise that I will answer them." Yinn tells her easily as if it is that easy. It isn't. But Pepper chooses carefully.

"What is your relationship with Stephen?" Pepper asks, ensuring that Clea is sufficiently distracted with the sales person to choose the perfect cake. With a task in hand, Clea seems focused and has momentarily at least, forgotten about her grief. Good.

"Stephen is... my friend. My housemate. My leader and the one being in this universe that we would defend with our lives." Yinn tells her softly. Pepper feels her eyebrows go up at that.

"How?" Pepper asks. Yinn looks fragile. She looks petite and she looks kind of as fierce as a kitten in all honesty. Then Yinn gives her a smile that is all predatory and okay. Maybe more like a jungle cat than a kitten, Pepper thinks. But still.

"We have our ways. Stephen is more than capable of protecting himself and Tony Stark if required. We'd simply prefer it if it wasn't... required." If nothing else, this woman was fiercely protective and loyal, Pepper notes. She can appreciate that. It's actually nice to know that Stephen has support. He seemed like he needed it.

"What's the Order?" Pepper asks and she's fairly sure that the woman isn't going to answer the question. Yinn gives her an even look. Quietly measuring her. Pepper wonders what she sees in her or from her.

"That is, unfortunately, as you have guessed, a question that I cannot answer Ms Potts. I have no doubts that eventually, you will become aware of what the Order is, who we are and what we do. But for now, it will be a mystery to you." Yinn says quietly and yeah. She'd expected that.

"Is Stephen... Is he dangerous to Tony?" Pepper isn't quite sure if the question is even polite, but that's what matters to her. Tony and his safety and his well being. The woman blinks at her.

"Stephen Strange is the last being in the universe that would pose a threat to Tony Stark. To Stephen... Tony Stark is fundamentally important. Above all else. Even his own life. Your friend, on the other hand, is dangerous to Stephen. He doesn't know how much." Yinn's facial expressions don't change. She is incredibly impossible to read.

"What do you mean by that?" Pepper asks because she knew that Stephen loved Tony but she didn't quite understand how that was dangerous.

"Love can make you do many things Ms Potts. Love can turn you into a monster if it is... deep enough. Stephen's love for Tony Stark has no limits. There is nothing in this universe that Stephen won't do to keep Tony Stark happy and safe. That kind of love and devotion is a dangerous thing."
Well then. Pepper isn't sure if love like that exists, but if Stephen was that deeply in love with Tony... she's not quite sure what to do with that information.

"Hey Pepper, what do you think of this cake?" Clea draws her attention and Pepper willingly leaves the conversation with Yinn because she's fairly sure that though the woman has answered some questions, she's either more confused than she had been before or was just as clueless as before. Probably both.

Cake was far easier to think about right now.

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Friday

1 January 2010

The New Year fireworks display is lovely.

For the first time in years, Tony finds himself watching it not at a party, but quietly on the balcony of the Penthouse Suite with Stephen holding him with blankets wrapped up around them to keep them warm.

Margaret and Jonathon were holding Clea between them and Clea was holding Pepper's hand. Wong and Yinn were holding each other whilst Kenneth and Anne held each other as they all watched the fireworks, waddled in blankets and standing by the gas heaters.

There were champagne and good food, but it was more perfunctory than celebratory. They do their cheers and their toasts, but they are.. subdued and it is clear that they were all making the effort, but that it was an effort.

Still, the fireworks display is beautiful and the balcony of the Penthouse Suite does provide a good view for it at least.

"Happy New Year." Tony tells Stephen when the clock strikes midnight. Stephen whispers the words back into his ear.

Stephen was doing better.

Tony remembers the first couple of days and weeks after losing his parents and Jarvis well enough. The shock and the emptiness. The overwhelming sadness and grief. The slow realisation that this was permanent. The regrets and the guilt.

Then all of suddenly, one morning, waking up and realising that he can still live. It's not okay, but he can wake up and get himself out of bed. Move on.

Stephen's grief was a bit different. For one, Clea and Stephen apparently needed to work out their grief by beating the shit out of each other. When they quietly decided to go down to the gym, Yinn and Wong had sighed and followed and out of curiosity, so had he and Pepper.

And oh boy. That had been a surprise. The spar session that Tony had seen in Seoul was nothing compared to this. The two of them looked like they wanted to kill each other. It was fierce, bloody and no holds barred. They fought until they were too exhausted, too bruised and too bloodied to actually fight each other.
There were busted lips and bruises everywhere by the time they were done. But when they were
done, they hugged each other and miraculously, they were actually... much better afterwards. Tony
imagines it was rather cathartic for both of them to work out their emotional pain with a physical
confrontation.

Tony isn't sure if that was normal or safe, but if it helped them, he doesn't really care.

The other thing that Tony notices spending this time with Stephen is that though Stephen's secret is
more obvious with the others nearby, the fear he had felt dissipates quite quickly. Whether it is
because Stephen is so vulnerable and fragile emotionally and psychologically, he isn't sure. But it
does.

It is easy to forget that he still doesn't know what Stephen is. It is easy to just see the man for who he
is and just be there for him. Just to help him. To hold him and kiss him and be intimate because that's
what he needs and that's what Tony wants to do.

"So in Japan, they got this thing where they believe whatever they were doing on the first day of the
new year is what they are going to do for the rest of the year. So... how about it?" Tony whispers to
Stephen softly and the other man surprisingly chuckles.

"Who am I to say no to a Japanese custom?" Stephen mutters back and pulls them away from
the balcony.

They still haven't discussed where the relationship was going. Tony still hasn't told him what he was
thinking. What he was feeling. What his decision was.

Tony showed him instead. They will talk. They have to, Tony knows that. But for now, he shows
Stephen through his actions that he's going to be there for Stephen. That... they are different now.

He holds Stephen. Kisses him. Tony doesn't shy away from displaying his affections even in front of
the others. He doesn't care what they think. No one questions it. Or even looks twice. He knows that
at least, Pepper is surprised.

The others don't seem to care.

Tony wonders if Stephen understands. If he knows what Tony's decided. He's not sure. They trek
their way towards the bedroom, shedding the blankets that had kept them warm in the frigid night
winter atmosphere in the living room and makes their way to the master bedroom.

Tony is careful to lock the door behind them and as soon as the door is locked, he pulls Stephen
towards and kisses him softly. Gently.

Lovingly.

Stephen's lips taste of champagne and it is already heady. His tongue is soft and pliant and he knows
that he will never get enough of the taste of Stephen's lips. He kisses until they can't anymore and
pants against his lips.

"Come on baby." Tony pulls him towards the bed and lays himself down on the edge of the bed,
making sure that his buttocks are hanging off the edge.

He pulls Stephen on top of him and kisses him and starts to strip him out of the thick woollen jumper.
The soft cashmere wool feels wonderful against his neck as Stephen pulls it up and leaves it there to
unbutton his shirt.
His hands are steady today. It's been a good day for the pain as far as the hands were concerned.
Good. Tony wonders if Japanese tradition would hold that that too would continue for the rest of the year. He hopes he does.

It dawns on him, again, that he is planning not just the immediate future with this man, but the rest of the year. His year, as far as he can see, has Stephen Strange in it. It has to. That is a revelation that is both interesting and terrifying.

Stephen manages to get all the buttons undone and he kisses Tony's nipples as they are exposed to him and suckles on it gently and when he scrapes his teeth against them, Tony moans. Yeah, he can worry about his insecurities and fears and all that shit later. For now, he just wants to enjoy this moment.

"You're beautiful Anthony. So incredibly beautiful." Stephen murmurs against his skin. His tongue curls around the scars left behind by the insertion of the reactor and Tony shivers with the feeling of his tongue against his sensitive skin. It feels both amazing and a little dangerous.

Stephen doesn't touch the Arc Reactor. Ever. But he does lick around it and he does touch around it and the glow from the Arc Reactor means that Stephen's eyes, when they are intimate like this, are always are brilliant grey. He looks ethereal. Not quite human. Somehow that's incredibly hot in moments like this.

The nipples, sensitised, send tremors of pleasure down Tony's body as Stephen's fingers play with them as the other is licked. Stephen's other hand moves slowly down Tony's chest, caressing his abs and sensitive sides.

They travel down to brace Tony's hips onto the bed and when Stephen kneels between his legs, Tony raises his chest so that he can look down on the gorgeous man kneel between his legs. Stephen's hands focus on undoing the laces of his sneakers whilst his lips are- Oh gods.

Stephen uses his teeth to work the zipper down on Tony's pants and oh yeah. That's definitely something he isn't going to forget easily.

"Let me help you there a little." Tony tells the man softly and runs his fingers through Stephen's soft hair. He isn't wearing any product in it today. Neither of them was. It wasn't... that kind of day. So Tony holds Stephen's head close as he undoes the button on his pants and shimmies out of them. Stephen's hands take care of the shoes, the socks and the rest of the pants.

He stays where he is though and he runs his hands up and down Tony's legs as his lips start kissing at Tony's cock through the fabric of his underwear. Tony doesn't stop running his hand through Stephen's hair because he knows the man likes it. Every now and then he lets his fingers brush past the doctor's ears because he knows he likes that too.

It's nice knowing exactly what his lover likes. It makes it easier to enjoy themselves. It's not new and fresh, but the familiarity is surprisingly hot and exciting. Tony wonders how long that will last for. He's not sure. He's never really tested it.

Stephen is slow and careful with the prep. He always is. His fingers are long and thin and they reach so much further into him than his own can. Sometimes, prep is difficult for Stephen. His fingers a little too unsteady and the contact can be painful. Tony doesn't mind those days.

Despite how Stephen seems to find his hands a sign of weakness, something to hide in the public's eyes, Tony himself doesn't mind them. He likes how sensitive they are. How talented they are.
Stephen curls them perfectly against his prostate and yeah. All the deep thinking and appreciation goes out the window. He wants Stephen. He hungers for that cock to be inside of him. When Stephen goes for the condom, Tony grabs his hand carefully.

"Take me bareback. I want to feel your cum inside of me." Tony tells him and it oddly feels even more intimate than the act itself to say that. Stephen blinks. He must realise that it wasn't the first time that they did that without condoms. He blushes beautifully and he looks at Tony carefully.

Between sexual partners, though not always, going without protection is a sign of trust. A sign of the relationship going to a different level. Stephen isn't naive and he isn't an idiot. Tony doesn't have to lay it out for him.

"Are you sure?" Stephen asks after a pause and Tony nods. It's been a long time since Stephen's fucked him. Tony had been taking the doctor bareback but this is different. Tony knows that.

"Yeah. What- what I said before? Yeah, that's not working for me. I still have questions. I still have doubts. Not just about you but about myself. But I want this. I want you." Tony tells him and it feels so incredibly vulnerable to lay himself out on the line like that, but it also feels right. Stephen's eyes widen.

"I- Thank you." Stephen breathes out and Tony doesn't stop himself from acting out of sheer instinct and need. He pulls Stephen close and kisses him as lovingly as he can. He pours all the emotions that he doesn't know how to say or how to express and he just kisses him.

Stephen accepts all of it and Tony can feel himself smile as Stephen does too. They smile, they kiss and when Stephen finally starts to guide himself into Tony? The smiles go out of the window because by gods it is hot and it is amazing and Tony can't breathe.

There is a little struggle to get the head in, but once it is, the rest goes smoothly. Stephen pulls Tony a little further off the bed and the height of the bed isn't quite right for Stephen, but they manage.

From his position on the bed, Tony can see every little bit of pleasure cross Stephen's beautiful face. He can see the sweat falling down from Stephen's temples, see his lips form the moans and the pants and he is so stunningly beautiful.

His own pleasure demands that he closes his eyes. He can't. He won't. He wants to see all of it.

Tony would deny it if anyone ever asked, but it honestly doesn't take them very long to reach climax. Whether it's the emotions, or whether it's the tension that's been there all day, Tony doesn't know and he doesn't care.

All he knows is that when Stephen starts to fuck into him firmly with just that right amount of pressure, he can't stop himself from curling a hand around his own cock.

And when he comes hard onto his own stomach and tenses up around Stephen, he only last two or three more thrusts before he coats Tony's insides and oh boy. He shudders with the feel of it. The heat of it. It feels amazing. Brilliant. Perfect.

Stephen cleans them up. Tony doesn't want to move a muscle and settles himself properly in the bed instead. He curls up under the sheets whilst Stephen cleans up their clothes. When Stephen does come onto the bed, Tony pulls him immediately into his arms and they cuddle.

Yeah. Tony fucking Stark was cuddling and he wasn't ashamed of it.

Stephen has cooled down somewhat during his clean up, but he feels perfect against him. Stephen
lays his head on Tony's chest and Tony goes back to carding his fingers through Stephen's hair and drawing random patterns on his shoulder because he's a fidgeter.

They are quiet for a while. Not really ready to sleep yet, but definitely not ready to go again. Just both of them, quietly thinking.

"Come back with me to L.A." Tony says and it actually manages to surprise him. And Stephen. But honestly, Tony's pretty sure he's surprised himself more. He had been thinking about that, sure, but he hadn't meant to just ask. But the words are out and so Tony follows through.

"Your practice is closed for a while and we can come back for the funeral and we can come back for whatever emergencies you have. But you can use a break from New York and I... unfortunately have a lot of work I need to do." Tony hasn't quite known how to break it to Stephen that he needs to go back. From basically tomorrow, SI was going to be going full swing again.

SI wasn't fully recovered yet. Even if it was, there were products that had just been launched. There were more products that needed to be launched and there was a lot of work that needed to happen and be caught upon.

As much as Tony wanted to pretend otherwise, he was the CEO of a Fortune 500 company and that meant that he really did actually have to go to meetings and do company-related work.

"I- Are you sure?" Stephen asks, his voice full of uncertainty and hesitation.

"Yeah. I want you around Stephen. Stay with me for a bit. Help me with work. Just... give yourself some time to get yourself together." Tony suggests and Stephen looks up at him as if to confirm and when Tony gives him a smile, Stephen kisses him.

Tony pretends that he doesn't see the tears or feels them. Stephen nods and when he turns to face away from Tony, but drawing him closer to his back by pulling at his hand, Tony obliges.

Apparently Tony wasn't the only one bad with emotions.

Great.

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Wednesday

7 January 2010

LA is warm despite it being winter. Not hot, but warm. Comfortable. It does get a little chilly in the evenings, but it is warm and pleasant.

Clea is pretty sure that as a dutiful daughter, she should be back in New York helping her dad deal with the grief and the funeral and all of that. As a dutiful sorcerer, she needs to be where her Sorcerer Supreme is to protect him. As a dutiful cousin/niece, she should be with Stephen.

So it really hadn't been that difficult a decision.

Besides, she herself needed the break. Staying at the Penthouse kept reminding her of the last moments she'd seen her grandparents and the reminders were difficult to deal with. Getting distance and denial may not be the healthiest way to deal with grief, but fuck it. She needed it.

It was surprisingly Pepper that suggested that she come with them back to L.A. Tony had readily agreed and told her that he would be more than happy to set her up in the guest suite and Pepper also
volunteered to stay at the mansion with Clea, just in case Jonathon was uncomfortable with the idea of his daughter staying in the house with two men.

... Though by now she doubted anyone was out of the loop as far as what was going on between them. Besides, her loving father already did the shovel talk with Tony. Anderson and Cowell hadn't, but given the situation, she doubted that they ever would.

LA is lovely.

It's been a long time since she'd been in LA and it's nice to go out with Pepper and spend some time in Rodeo Drive with Stephen's credit card. It feels... just like a holiday.

Pepper is, unsurprisingly busy and so is Tony, but they do make a routine almost as soon as they are in Malibu.

They are in essence, all early risers. Clea hadn't been until she joined the Order but it is now ingrained in her. Stephen usually meets her in the gym when they first get up and Tony's gym is a state of the arts and just wonderful.

Tony joins them a little later than Stephen and by then, they are warmed up and they are either sparring or running through katas. Tony usually uses the equipment or spars with either one of them. Pepper, when she does come to the gym, exclusively sticks to the equipment. They work out for an hour to almost two hours depending on how much fun they are having and how hungry they are.

When they make it into the kitchen, sweating, starving and dying for coffee, Eliza greets them with wonderful breakfasts and coffee and they eat, talk and plan their day out.

The talking had been difficult for the first day or so, but the dynamics work out and it's... easy to forget about the heavy grief sitting at the pit of her stomach whilst she is with them all.

They eat, help Eliza with the clean up because they aren't savages. Stephen sometimes doesn't because of his hands, but no one mentions it either way.

Then Pepper and Tony usually spend some time in the office to deal with whatever they have to whilst Stephen and Clea shower and dress for the day.

Tony and Pepper do their showers and cleans up and usually Tony disappears downstairs with Stephen, or at the very least joins him depending on how long the meeting with Pepper takes.

Clea has been allowed into the lab to be given a tour and to gawk at the Iron Man suit, but she knows that she's not really welcome down there whilst they are working. She and Pepper usually head out of the house at that point.

Pepper goes into the office but leaves her with a wonderful driver that she knows is probably also security, called Derek. With him, Clea explores LA. She goes to the tourist spots and not so touristy spots. She visits the high-end stores and the low-end stores. She even spends time at the library and just... explores the city.

It's nice.

Sometimes, she's sad and in those moods, she goes to the library and distracts herself with books and with stories or to the beach where she can just sit and watch the waves roll in and out.

She knows that Stephen is doing better. The spells transfer back to him as his focus settles. Tony
being around and... giving himself more to Stephen helps. No one that sees them interact for more than 10 minutes can doubt their relationship.

Unless the two of them decide to behave. Which honestly? They most definitely have not been. Not that Clea minds.

It's actually nice to see Stephen smile and though he has his moments of the blues, Clea gets the distinct feeling that Tony either pulls him out of it with work or with sex. She doesn't want to know. Okay. Maybe she does. But she doesn't. Not really.

She just knows that Stephen and Tony have kiss marks and bite marks all the time and that Tony wears that look of satisfaction around the house... a lot.

But they are discrete enough that Pepper and her never catch them... fucking over the living room furniture or something. They do kiss and share intimate moments in front of them, but Clea and Pepper don't mind. It's actually sweet. So yeah.

In the evenings, they usually gather for a meal together before the boys disappear to work. Pepper doesn't cook. Doesn't know how. But with JARVIS's help, Clea does manage to make some simple meals for dinner. Otherwise, they order in.

It's nice.

"How are you going?" Tony asks her and his presence surprises her. She's sitting out by the side of the pool, looking over the sparkling artificial blue waters of the pool to the big wide view of the ocean she has from where she is sitting. It is beautiful, calming and the sunlight is warm.

"Not too bad. You?" Clea asks him back as he settles down next to her and offers her one of the two bottles of beer he had brought out. Corona complete with a lime. She takes it and they both shove the lime in, cover the top and shake the beer to get the taste just right. In sync almost, they clink the bottle and take the first sip and sigh with contentment.

"Good now that I got my beer." Tony tells her warmly. A year ago, she'd never would have believed that she would be here, sitting by the poolside at Tony Stark's Malibu mansion, laying back and enjoying a beer with him. He hadn't seemed the type.

She'd been wrong.

Tony was more caring, kinder and more generous than she had ever thought it possible. Yes he was immature, yes he was impulsive and by gods, he was bad with emotions sometimes, but those flaws don't take away from what he is fundamentally.

A good man.

"You changed your mind about Stephen." Clea can't help but comment. She wants to understand. She's watched Stephen as he had struggled after the initial revelation and conversation.

She'd watched as Stephen started to go back to Malibu but came back... broken and shattered each time. As if spending time with Tony had become something he needed but pained him. She had been too afraid to ask what was going on.

All of them had.

Stephen had seemed so fragile that they couldn't. They couldn't tell him that they could see through the masks that he put on in front of them. So they had quietly watched. And yes, during that time,
Clea had known that Tony was involved.

Yes, she was angry at him. But at the same time... she understood his reasons for anger. It didn't make everything okay but... there was nothing that Clea could have done. But something's changed now.

Stephen looks... not happy but... better.

"Yeah." Tony's answer is simple and it is so not enough.

"Why?" She asks because she needs to know. Tony doesn't respond for a bit and she doesn't hurry him. They drink their beer and just think for a while before Tony does respond.

"I don't know to be honest. I still don't know those secrets you guys are keeping. At this point, it almost feels like a conspiracy but frankly, I don't care right now. For now, I know that he... cares about me and that's enough." Tony says with a little difficulty and Clea gives him a giggle because she knows it'll be easier for him to laugh off the feelings he'd just revealed to her.

"You know what? I think you just got sappy enough to deal with Stephen. Congrats." She tells him with a light tone and Tony chuckles and they clink their beers again and take a healthy swig. It tastes good.

"On a more serious note, thank you for letting me come along. I think... I think I needed this." Clea tells him and she means it. She makes sure that he can see her face and see how serious she is being. he does look at her and shrugs his shoulders.

"The house is huge, we have room and Pepper likes you. But I get the feeling you didn't come because you needed it. You came because of Stephen." Sharp and perceptive. She's not surprised. She doesn't bother responding. Tony doesn't ask her to either.

"He's important, isn't he? Not just because he is your cousin. He's... important." Clea remembers thinking that Tony's intelligence was always going to be their downfall. So she's not surprised by the question.

"Stephen Strange is... far more than you realise. The burden on his shoulders is... I don't know how he does it. He is far wiser, far more responsible and stronger than I could ever hope to be." She says. She can't keep the admiration out of her voice. She really doesn't know how he does it. She wouldn't be able to in his shoes.

"You know you should teach Pep some of your moves. Teach her how to defend herself." Tony suggests and Clea thinks about it. It's probably a good idea. Pepper Potts didn't exactly have a smooth path in front of her either.

"Oh. That's a good idea. To kicking arse then?" Clea giggles as she offers her bottle for a toast. Tony clinks his bottle against it and they laugh and finish off their beer.

"I'm mildly terrified that you ladies will take over the world... but I have a feeling if you do, you will remember me and be kind." Tony says drily. Clea laughs out aloud. It feels good to laugh. She knows that's what he'd been trying to do and she is grateful.

"I promise to not burn the world down." Clea tells him seriously. They manage the serious look for only a little while before they break out into laughter.

It's nice to relax with Tony like this. She had always considered Tony to be Stephen's. To only be important to him. But sitting like this with him, she realises that Tony Stark meant something to her
too. A friend. So much more than just the man that they needed to keep alive.

That is going to make it difficult later on as Tony's path moves forward. But Clea doesn't regret getting to know him. And with this change in Tony's attitude towards Stephen, she gets a feeling that Tony isn't about to leave their lives any time soon.

She'd best get used to him.

~~~
Healing Process

Chapter Summary

Funerals can be difficult but even more so when you are dealing with your lover's family. It's even worse if you have never done the whole... family thing. But Tony can figure it out. Right?

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the late upload ladies and gents. I am not feeling very well.

So. I have a broken nerve in my solar plexus that gives me constant pain. Which means I haven't been able to work for the past year or so. Luckily, I have income protection and my parents are very loving and helping me out a great deal. But it does mean that my health isn't ideal.

I was bed bound for about a year until we found a pain killer that worked with nerve pain. Even on them, I am still in some amount of pain every single moment and sometimes the pain is worse for no reason I can figure out and some days, the pain is better.

But it does mean that I am... having some mental health issues as a result. I'm not writing all this to get sympathy etc. I just wanted you to be aware that a lot of the dark stuff that is written in the story is probably a reflection of my own pain and the fluff is probably my own need to have some joy and happiness in my life. Also, I wanted to let you guys know because when the pain is bad enough, I can't really get out of bed and thus make a post.

If that happens, like it has today, I will try to post as soon as I can, but if I go dark for a few days, it doesn't mean that I am giving up on the story etc.

So yeah.

Also, if you, like me, are suffering from depression or other mental health issues and my story has upset you or caused you to become more symptomatic as a result, I wanted to apologise. I will try to have better trigger warnings in the future.

Thank you so much for reading this story and all the support so far. Every comment I get that encourages and motivates me, honestly makes some days livable.

So thank you.

<3

Sunday
They fly back for the funeral.

It is held in Philadelphia, where the Strange family home is. Stephen pauses at the door to the house and simply looks up at the rather lovely two-storey and rather expansive home. Tony doesn't have to ask to know that Stephen doesn't want to go into the house.

Tony hadn't wanted to when he had been in Stephen's position.

There are enough eyes that Tony can't hold him or comfort him like the way he wants to. But he does keep his hand on Stephen's lower back. Giving him that point of contact.

"I'm here." Is all that Tony can figure out to say. He says it softly and as if knowing that Tony can't give him the comfort that he wants to, Pepper hugs Stephen and whispers softly into his ear and Stephen listens quietly before nodding.

Tony is so grateful for Pepper and her compassion.

His presence doesn't go unnoticed. Soon enough, he was going to have to deal with the media and speculations about his relationship with Stephen. The tabloids did that every time he was seen more than twice with anyone.

There are no media at the funeral. Anderson and Pepper had ensured that. The Stranges were well-loved and their impact on so many lives is obvious. Matthew Strange was a psychiatrist of some fame and his wife, Caroline Strange had worked hard as a nurse for the local hospitals for years until she had retired. She had strong ties with the local community and it showed.

The Stranges are buried on the quiet spot under a large oak tree in the expansive grounds of their family home. Next to where Vincent Strange is buried.

For a little while during the funeral and the wake, Tony loses track of Stephen. He had a phone call that he couldn't ignore from his security team for a minor crisis of some idiot trying to hack their servers.

Tony was going to have to seriously consider putting JARVIS into the SI servers properly so that he could work the defence, but for now, it was up to the lackeys and they were idiots.

Well, they weren't. Stark Industries doesn't really hire idiots and yes the problem was actually pretty serious enough that it did warrant the call. Tony was just... annoyed that they had taken him away from what he needed to focus on.

Stephen.

Either way, by the phone call is done, Tony finds himself looking over the photographs of the Strange family as he walks through the house to look for Stephen. It takes him a little to notice, but he realises quickly that Stephen looks remarkably similar to Vincent Strange at the same ages.

It's not impossible for a child to look similar to their parent, but Stephen looks remarkably similar to his. There are no photographs of Stephen as a child, but Tony recognises the younger versions of Stephen with Caroline and Matthew.

He sees Stephen's quiet, reserved smiles. He sees the aloof distance. This is the public face of Stephen, Tony realises. Because other than their very first interaction, the doctor had never... showed him that reserved, distant side of him. He had always been... open. Yes, he hid things but as far as his
emotions and affections had been... Stephen had always been open with him.

Oh.

Of course. Stephen had known that there was going to be secrets that he had to keep. So in return, he had shown everything of himself that he could to Tony. He had given as much of himself as possible to Tony and he had fucked up that trust.

It hits him hard. Stephen's feelings and thoughts when it came to Tony haven't changed. Neither has his treatment of him. It should have. The guilt of knowing what he had almost destroyed is heavy on Tony. He will have to live with that. He will have to seek forgiveness for that. Even if Stephen didn't consider it that way.

He looks for Stephen and realises that he isn't anywhere near the large living room or the kitchen. Or even the porch with sufficient heating to ensure that everyone was comfortable despite the chilly weather. There wasn't enough room in the living room, kitchen, dining room and even the porch to contain everyone that had turned up for the funeral and wake.

"He's with Caroline and Matthew." Anderson tells him quietly as if aware that Tony was looking for Stephen. Tony is surprised by the man's presence and his words, but he nods and gives him a tight smile.

It's... kinda awkward.

The time in New York had been so emotional that no one really had been in the state of mind to deal with the fact that Tony just met with the family of his lover. Something he had never really done. But here he was again.

Well, Stephen's uncle did do the whole 'hurt him and I kill you' speech already, but Jonathon was an uncle. Not a parent. Even if Tony doubted that Anderson and Cowell were really Stephen's parents. They were still... family. Tony can tell that at least from the way that they treated him outside of the emergency situation.

Tony really doesn't quite know what to say to Anderson about Stephen and their relationship. Hi, I'm Tony Stark and I'm fucking your stepson? Yeah no.

"Jonathon already gave you the shovel talk. I heard." Kenneth Anderson is a really fine businessman. A shark but a polite one. He also has an amazing poker face and mild tone of voice that must work really well in his favour.

"Yeah. Are you going to give me one?" Tony asks with his best light tone and his own poker face.

"No. Stephen is old enough to make his own decisions and he loves you. He's happy and better with you. That's enough. And I suspect that you are already aware of your own feelings for Stephen and what it will do to you should you harm him." Kenneth's quick acceptance is actually a shock.

For most people in the business world... or indeed in Kenneth's generation, homosexuality was a problem. There was the problem of heirs when it came to large fortunes. For one.

For another, there was... the inherent social pressures and prejudices that made such relationships difficult even in 2010. Kenneth seemed to read Tony's surprise and gives him a smile.

"Mr Stark, if the relationship between you two become public, there will no doubt be PR issues for both of our companies to deal with, however, I prefer to see Stephen happy rather than worry about politics or profit." Anderson informs him as if it is that simple and Tony guesses it is. He nods.
"If something does pop up, I will get my PR department on it and they will contact yours." Tony informs him. Kenneth nods solemnly. Well then.

"Go to him Mr Stark. He really does need you." Anderson tells him. Tony doesn't need further encouragement. He makes his way through the crowd. It's difficult because people keep trying to engage him in conversation, but he does manage to get outside and walk down the porch and meander through the expansive garden until he is able to find Stephen.

Anderson had been right. Stephen is standing before the three graves. Two freshly tilled and another with grass completely grown over it. There is enough snow that the two fresh graves stand out.

Clea is standing beside him and they are leaning against each other. They don't notice him as he stops to watch them. It doesn't seem right to interrupt them.

"Do you think they will forgive us?" Clea is the one that speaks, her voice soft and full of guilt and regret.

"I don't know." Stephen's voice is also filled with the same guilt and regret and Tony doesn't understand. The drunk driver was under arrest and he was already charged. Stephen and Clea had nothing to do with the death of Caroline and Matthew Strange. Why the guilt?

"Is there anything we could have done?" Clea asks quietly.

"A great deal. But you know what the price was." Stephen's voice sounds like it is about to break. Clea nods.

"Yeah. Stephen, you need to tell my dad before we lose him. I refuse to let him go without him knowing who you are and what I've become." Clea tells him almost fiercely.

"I know. We have time. There will be opportunities Clea. You know there is." Stephen says and Clea sighs.

"Yeah, I know. When that time comes, I'm having a coming-out party. It's going to be huge. I'm going to make everyone come to the fucking Sanctum and show them everything." Clea says almost lightly and Stephen chuckles.

"Please don't. The Sanctum will have a fit." Stephen says softly with almost a light tone and Tony decides that it's a good point to make his presence known. Eavesdropping was rude and he has a feeling he's heard a lot more than he was meant to as it is.

He walks towards them and makes sure that he steps on some of the fresh snow to make noise. They notice. They don't flinch or anything, but they notice.

"You guys doing okay?" Tony asks because it's polite to do so. Both of them turn to look at him and nod. Their eyes are rimmed red, but they give him small smiles.

"You guys doing okay?" Tony asks because it's polite to do so. Both of them turn to look at him and nod. Their eyes are rimmed red, but they give him small smiles.

"Hey Tony, do you mind if I stay with you for a little bit longer?" Clea asks and Tony finds it easy enough to nod. He likes having her around. Between her, Pepper and Stephen, the mansion actually feels more like a home than it had ever been and oh boy that's another epiphany he was going to have to deal with. Later.

"The practice doesn't open for another week." She informs him. He nods. He knows. Stephen needed a little more time to ground himself before he works with patients. Especially since so many of his patients... saw him as a last resort. It was emotionally difficult work and Tony respects Stephen for being able to do it.
"As long as you let me take you out to see Avatar. I'm dying to see it." Tony says with a wink and Clea laughs as he had intended her to.

"God yes! I'm looking forward to it." She tells him warmly and gives him a hug. More for her than for him, he assumes but he holds her tightly and let her take whatever comfort he can give her from him before she goes.

Her steps seem lighter. Good. Tony turns to Stephen and when the doctor holds out a shaking hand, Tony takes it and feels just how cold it is. He isn't wearing the gloves he'd been wearing throughout the day.

"God you're freezing Stephen. Let's go back inside hm?" Tony suggests as he pulls the doctor towards the house. Stephen doesn't budge. He pulls at Tony instead with their linked hands and Tony is willing enough to go into his arms.

"I don't want to deal with people Anthony. I- I want to go home." Stephen says and Tony realises with a start that he means the Malibu mansion. Tony's home. He blinks with the realisation, but he nods.

"Yeah of course. Hey, I'm gonna go and get that organised okay? How about you say your goodbyes to your family and meet me outside in 10 minutes?" Tony suggests and Stephen nods slowly. For a moment, he looks so sad that Tony can't stop himself from pulling the other man into a kiss.

Stephen's lips feel cold against his and Tony warms them up the best he can. He knows that other people will be able to see them. He knows that it might cause problems for the two of them. But right now, Stephen needs him. Needs the kiss.

When they pull away, Stephen has a spot of colour on his face and his eyes are filled with heady amounts of love that Tony doesn't quite know what to do with. He gives the man a smile in the absence of knowing what else to do and says the only thing that comes to mind.

"Let's go home."

~~~

Monday

18 January 2010

Oh boy.

The house feels so fucking empty.

Stephen and Clea were gone. He had known that they would. They had to. They had lives to go back to. They had work to do and so did Tony and Pepper.

They were getting busier now that the holidays were well and truly over and Pepper and Tony had been finding it a struggle to find time to be with Clea and Stephen between the meetings, video conferences and work dramas.

Some of them had included Dr Cho, so it was a good thing to have Stephen in the house for that at least but most of it didn't. Besides, Stephen and Clea had work of their own and a life that they really did have to go back to.
Stephen was coming back. Tony knew that. Clea and Pepper had re-arranged a lot of their schedules to make sure that the two of them could work on Iron Man projects and other projects from Thursday to Sunday. Clea wasn't coming though. Part-time or not, she was studying for her Masters. She had things to do too.

Pepper has also gone back to her apartment. The commute was easier for her from her house to the office.

The time together helps Tony make some decisions. For one, he gives instructions for the construction crew to get started on preparing the site to build the new headquarters for Stark Industries in New York.

It makes financial sense and if he decides that the top two floors will be a Penthouse apartment for himself along with a floor that... may or may not be an apartment that he may or may not be designing for Stephen. With a lab between them.

Then he decides to put in apartments for both Rhodey and Pepper as well as five more floors of luxurious apartments with large bedrooms for any other guests, such as Clea, or visiting scientists, researchers etc that may be working at Stark Industries.

He also designs ten levels of private labs for himself for all the Iron Man work as well as all the other work he thinks he can get into. Robotics, server rooms for AI work and other programming work, medical labs for medical research, chemistry lab, physics lab... etc. He may or may not be designing his own private playground, but the rest of the building is designed as a headquarters for a large corporation should be.

There are expansive R&D Labs for hundreds of staff to work in with proper precautions and security. There are underground parking garages and room for the Arc Reactor that he wants to power the entire building and servers for both the SI as well as JARVIS. He plans for JARVIS to run the entire tower as the main security system as well as... well everything.

It is going to be a completely energy-efficient, smart building with JARVIS controlling all the lights, security points, cameras and electrical equipment that needs control. As well as composting, rainwater tanks and the whole nine yards. He plans for Stark Tower to be the shining example of low footprint, green building.

It's an exciting prospect to work with. It also means that JARVIS requires bigger servers and better access and so much more learning to ensure that he can multitask throughout the building and actually be able to help the people in the building and recognise dangers.

Stephen was working with JARVIS through surprisingly... Youtube. To teach human emotions and reactions and so far it was going surprisingly well. Considering the fact that the teaching material was Youtube.

Aside from JARVIS and the suit, of which Tony now had two ready to go at all times, they also manage to make the medical application that Stephen had been working on... work. They also work on refining the holotable to work better with medical scans and Stephen had taken the upgrades with him to see how they work on his holotable.

The week honestly went too fast.

The bed feels empty without Stephen. The mansion feels empty without Clea and Pepper. Tony doesn't like it. But on Wednesday night or Thursday morning, Stephen was going to be here. Till then, Tony has some serious work to do.
... which really means that he needs to get off the goddamned phone he is constantly using to text
Stephen and actually focus.

Tony goes down to the lab. There are several targets that Tony had been tracing recently to locate his
weapons and they had just made contact with one of Tony's shady contacts to make a sale in Sudan
with a local warlord. Yeah. Not happening.

"Sir, perhaps you should inform Dr Strange of your intentions to go on a mission. He would be
concerned sir." JARVIS informs him. Tony shakes his head. Stephen has enough to deal with.

"No. He's got enough to deal with. It's gonna be fine." Tony tells the AI and gets into the suit. He's
fixed the assembly array somewhat and it's easy to slip into the suit now. He has work to do in the
morning, so he needs to make it quick.

"Hey J, push the speed. Daddy's got a day job too." Tony reminds the AI and JARVIS honestly to god
sighs.

"Yes sir." He says and Tony is gone.

The autopilot doesn't kick in immediately. It only does when Tony stops moving. As he flies out of
the mansion, Tony lets himself whoop, do barrel rolls and just enjoy the flight for a bit. The freedom
that you feel, flying through the night skies with each move that you make being responded to?
Yeah. It feels amazing.

But soon enough, Tony remembers that he needs to conserve energy and settles down. Lets JARVIS
take control.

It's time to be Iron Man.

~~~

Thursday

22 January 2010

To say that he is fully recovered from the loss of his parents would be a lie. The pain is still fresh. It
still hurts and he is still grieving. Stephen doesn't deny that, but he manages to work through his
patients but it feels like surviving.

Not living.

But when he gets to Malibu, he feels like he can breathe with Tony nearby. Stephen isn't too
surprised when Tony reveals his plans for the Stark Industries Headquarters in New York.

The Tower that will become the Stark Tower. Then the Avengers Tower in most universes requires
time to be built and it doesn't surprise Stephen too much that the genius is working on the plans for
it.

He helps out. He suggests a medical wing for possible injuries and to deal with the large amount of
staff that will be at the Tower. It isn't just a workplace. Tony plans for his employees to be able to
reside in a separate, smaller building on the large land that he'd somehow managed to acquire in the
middle of Manhattan.

Stephen tries not to think about the invasion. They have two years to worry about that. The Order
already has plans in place for that. Stephen makes suggestions to ensure that the building will be as
safe as possible. Tony wants that too. So they adjust the plans and play with it on the holotable.

They will need to show it to an architect and make sure that it is safe and that it is um... possible to even build the building the way that Tony wants it, but the building looks good enough to them.

The change in their relationship is... overwhelming. Tony is open with him now. He is affectionate... loving. He greets Stephen with kisses and holds him tightly and seems to breathe a little easier with him.

They work like they used to before and the conversation isn't awkward or restrained. The flirting is back and so are the casual touches, the heated looks. Only they act on those heated glances now. Tony reaches over to kiss him as they work. To touch him. It feels... amazing.

Despite the secrets that are between them, Stephen feels... accepted by Tony. The Connection and the Bond are strong between them now and Stephen feels so overwhelmingly happy in Tony's presence. He's not sure if he had ever felt so contented and happy before.

They are calculating just how much processing power JARVIS would need to run the Tower when Tony sighs.

"Alright, you know what, I'm actually gonna admit it. I'm too tired to do math." Tony says and throws his hands up in the air dramatically. He leans over towards Stephen and he takes the weight of his lover easily.

"I can finish up if you want to head to bed." Stephen offers because it's actually still early. Tony bites the nape of his neck.

"Or you can put me in bed." Tony counters. Stephen chuckles. When he turns his head a little, Tony kisses him. It's a slow seductive kiss. That kind of 'tired' then.

"Or I can do that." Stephen agrees when they break from the kiss.

"Good boy." Tony says against his lips. Stephen laughs and they do take that break and go to bed. It is only once that they are there that Stephen realises that he is actually tired.

The Stark Tower was an interesting project. Outside of his area of expertise and he had been so intrigued and engrossed to notice that he'd been working himself to the bone over the week and he really did need some rest.

"You know, my bathtub has jet propulsion and massagers." Tony whispers against his ear and Stephen chuckles and lets Tony lead him to the bathroom. The tub fills surprisingly quickly with hot water and in the mean time they strip down, shower and get all the hair products out of their hair.

It's easy. Natural.

"So tomorrow, I'm going to send what we got over to Mr Piano and make sure it's actually structurally sound. Then get the building going. We can finish calculating the power output for the Arc Reactor and the server stuff tomorrow too." Tony says as they shower.

"I want to run a diagnostic on Mark III. There's also a weapons dealer in Tehran that I think may be looking to deal in some of your weapons soon. I want to look into them a little more." Stephen says and Tony nods.

As they talk, they caress each other and they are aroused. It is honestly a new experience for Stephen to talk to a partner like this whilst they are engaging what was... foreplay.
"We need a breakthrough on that neural interface that I could really use for the suit. The iris-based extrapolation is good but honestly flying the suit is exhausting. Too much information to deal with." Tony tells him as he grabs the bottle of oil-based lube for the shower and the bath.

Tony presses the bottle into Stephen's hand as he clearly is thinking about the display issues. Stephen thinks too.

"We discussed this before haven't we? Reading the electrical impulses of the brain. We would need very sensitive electrical sensors to even be able to get a reading without it being an invasive procedure." Stephen says as he coats his fingers with the oil that Tony had pressed into his hand.

Tony turns to face the tiled wall as Stephen's fingers trail down his back and start to tease at his entrance. Stephen kisses the back of the man's beautiful neck. His hair has grown out a fair bit and his nape is covered. Stephen isn't sure if he likes that or not. He kisses there anyway.

"We need to get haircuts." Tony muses and moans deliciously when Stephen's finger breaches him. Though they engage in sexual activities frequently, it doesn't mean that prep is any quicker or can be sloppy. Tony does take him pretty easily. But they take their time anyway usually. The foreplay is always good.

"I'm guessing you have someone ridiculously expensive on retainer." Stephen says as he increases the fingers inside of Tony and he arches into it.

"God yes. Romeo is amazing." Tony moans out and dips his head as the pleasure starts to overtake his ability to think and talk. Stephen recognises it immediately. He smiles and when Tony can take three fingers with ease, he stops.

They turn the shower off and make their way to the bath. The hot water feels beautiful and the steam makes everything a little more heady and Stephen feels almost dizzy as Tony settles him down on one of the alcoves cut out like a luxurious chair within the giant tub.

As he sits, Stephen arches his back. The inventor apparently had an incredibly dirty mind because the jets don't just come out of the sides of the tub. Right where Tony had placed him, the jet shoots up right against his rim and Stephen can't think anymore.

"Told you I had jets." Tony looks smug at Stephen's expression as he fiddles with the control panel a little more and turns the water off. As he pushes a particular button, the seat that Stephen is on seems to come to life and there are massagers that travel up and down his spine from the smooth silicone the seat is made from. Between that and the jets, Stephen can't focus.

"Good?" Tony asks him softly. His eyes are fond as he looks at him and for a moment, Stephen can't breathe. But Stephen can only moan when Tony climbs onto him and positions him right above the jet and it hits his perineum.

"Fuck!" Stephen swears out because oh dear gods he has never felt something like that before. The jets of water is relentless. It's a steady stream of pleasure right where it is the most effective and when Tony climbs onto him and starts to take his cock inside of his body, Stephen forgets to breathe.

"I like seeing you like this. Overwhelmed with pleasure." Tony murmurs against his lips as they kiss and Stephen tries to focus on that. Not on the way that Tony had taken his cock inside of him. Or the way that the jets were trying to drive him insane because he honestly feels like he is about to be driven insane with sensations.

"Too much?" Tony asks softly as he starts to slowly lift himself up and come down onto Stephen's
Stephen moves to quickly help him with the movements and to brace him. He shakes his head but shivers as the pleasure builds quickly. Tony gives him a knowing smile.

"You think you can be good for me and hold on until I come?" Tony asks him and honestly, Stephen isn't sure. He really isn't. Tony's movements excite the water and move Stephen's hips. He bites his bottom lip.

He is trapped between Tony and the wall of massagers and with each movement that Tony makes, the jet moves between Stephen's balls to his rim and as it does so, he feels blinding pleasure.

It's almost torturous.

"Tony- I- I oh God." Stephen all but bites out as he tries not to come. Tony laughs between his own pants and moans. It's delicious. The steam, the heat and the feel of Tony's wet body in his arms. Everything is overwhelming.

Yeah. He's not going to last.

With that in mind, Stephen curls his hand around Tony's cock and starts to pump it in time with Tony's movement and he focuses in particular on fondling Tony's balls because he knows he likes that and his hands aren't strong enough to stroke Tony with the pressure that he needs.

Tony's movements start to become a little erratic, but with all the pleasure that he feels, it is not possible for Stephen to hold on.

Stephen comes with a cry and his vision whitens out. He feels Tony still riding his softening cock before he too comes with a shout. When Tony collapses into his arms, Stephen catches him and they sit like that, the massager working the kinks out of Stephen's shoulders and jets heating both of them on their arms and sides.

It's decadent and relaxing and when Tony comes to enough to reach up and to kiss him, Stephen is glad that catching Tony meant that the jet was now harmlessly shooting up against his back.

"I love your bathtub." Stephen tells Tony with a slurred voice. The genius chuckles.

"I'll make sure there's one in the Tower." Tony tells him and Stephen smiles and kisses him again.

By the time they actually get their act together enough to leave the bathtub, they were going to be all pruny and the giant tub was a huge waste of water but by gods, for the time being, they just relax. Enjoying each other's company and warmth.

It is perfect.

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A Year Ago Today

Chapter Summary

Tony doesn't remember the date, but his friends do. Stephen does. So movie marathon is apparently a thing. So are jokes. And text messages.

But then Valentine Day comes around and Tony isn't quite sure if he has ever felt so confused before about what he is supposed to do... shit.

Chapter Notes

First of all, thank you so much for the overwhelming amount of support and love from the last chapter and my little announcement.

I just wanted everyone to know in case I can't post daily because of my health issues. And to explain the mental health dramas that are both in the story and in my own head a little. I have seen from the comments that some of my readers are also going through very difficult periods and I sincerely hope that reading this story gives you at least some distraction and comfort. If it does... that would make this project well worth my time and effort.

Please throw me ideas, sex scenes you would like to see etc so that I can incorporate them into the story because by gods writing sex scenes differently each time is so hard XD but I try. I really need Loki to and the magic thing to be known to spice it up in the bedroom +__+

I have a very, very dirty mind XD... I blame fanfiction for that =P

Hope you enjoy this... much longer than usual chapter and VERY fluffy chapter.

<3

Wednesday

27 January 2010

And of course, because everything had been going so well, everything starts to fall apart. Well. Not everything.

The last weekend had been wonderful. Stephen and Tony had spent more time having sex, laying about and watching Star Trek than what was strictly productive, but they do get a lot of work done as well. Apparently being sexual satiated and sufficiently de-stressed made work easier.

Tony really should consider more leisurely activities. But just when Stephen arrives at his house and the helicopter leaves, Tony finds his stress level shooting up as he looks at a very unwelcome,
uninvited guest. Shit.

"Good evening Mr Stark." Agent fucking Phil Coulson says as he casually walks up the driveway towards him. He had to have jumped the fence. A really tall fence. And he'd timed it just for Stephen’s arrival too. He must have jumped when he'd noticed the helicopter because he's somehow managed to time it just when Tony was outside to greet Stephen.

Thank god Stephen actually was in the damned helicopter this time. As he thinks that, Tony realises that he has casually thought of Stephen's ability to... teleport himself without any fear attached to the thought. Well. That's progress.

"You know this is trespassing right? Private property. No invite. I, owner of the property really don't want you here." Tony says and Coulson gives him a look.

"Well Mr Stark, in that case, you can feel free to call the authorities. But you're too curious about why I'm here to do that. So shall we cut through the chase?" Coulson suggests. He's good, Tony thinks.

He does consider calling the local cops for kicks and giggles because he likes being contrary. But that's not a smart move. So he doesn't. Tony is smart enough to know that he can't avoid having a relationship with SHIELD. Not with the Iron Man persona in his pocket.

"Anthony?" Stephen questions as he steps down from the helicopter and makes his way towards him. Stephen's presence is welcome as always, but Tony does feel his concern levels go up at the idea of Coulson being near him. Coulson narrows his eyes. That doesn't help Tony's stress level.

"Dr Stephen Strange, I presume. Some of our agents have been trying to speak to you. I'm Agent Phil Coulson with SHIELD." The government man smiles and offers a hand to Stephen. The doctor doesn't take it. He's had a hard day of work and his hands weren't doing well. Tony knew that.

"Oh, you don't shake hands. I see. I am here to speak to Mr Stark, but I would also love to speak to you Dr Strange." Coulson says and he looks so mild-mannered, so soft-spoken and cordial but Tony knows underneath all of that, he was likely to be deadly and more importantly, a snake.

Yeah no.

"No, you came here to talk to me. You talk to me and you leave Stephen out of it." Tony tells him firmly. Coulson looks at the two of them. His eyes linger on the way that Tony had stepped forward, putting Stephen firmly behind him.

"I see. In that case, Mr Stark, we could use some privacy." He suggests. Tony is okay with that.

"Stephen, JARVIS has some programming issue that he would like to discuss with you in the lab. I'll see you in a bit?" Tony suggests. When he turns to look, he can see Stephen's reluctance. Then he slowly sighs.

"Agent Coulson was it?" Stephen asks and Coulson nods as he shows Stephen the badge that he rummages out from his jacket pocket.

"Please note that Anthony wears a watch that measures his heart rate. It is monitored by his AI system. If JARVIS reports any distress from him or if this takes longer than 20 minutes, you might find that your agents and your attempt to get me alone was a dangerous undertaking." Stephen warns him and by gods, it is a warning.

Stephen sounds... dangerous. Powerful. Tony can actually see the agent straighten up a little at the
threat.

It is also... incredibly hot. Tony's missed this Stephen. This confident, strong man that he'd... fallen in love with. Tony doesn't mind Stephen's vulnerabilities. He understands now that the doctor showing those to him was a sign of trust that he hadn't appreciated before.

But this Stephen with his strong voice and threats? Oh wow.

"Is that a threat Dr Strange?" Coulson asks him, his voice still soft and mild-mannered, but his body tense and his eyes narrowed. Stephen gives him a predatory smile.

"Just a friendly warning Agent Coulson." Stephen tells him and goes into the house. It's such a power move to threaten someone and then turn your back to just walk away as if they are nothing. Tony can appreciate that. A lot.

Tony also can't help but feel a little warm at the way the affection and protectiveness that Stephen had displayed.

"Well then. Shall we?" Tony asks and leads the man into the living room. Tony goes to the bar and pours himself a drink. He doesn't offer the other man one. He leans against the bar and sips at his drink and makes a motion for the man to start talking.

Stephen's voice had done some wonderful things to his libido and he really wants the government man gone so he can act on his sudden need to have Stephen's cock inside of him. His pants feel a little tight.

"Mr Stark, we are aware that you are working to take down weapons dealers dealing in your weapons. We are also aware that you are hunting down and destroying your weapon caches in Afghanistan and Iraq. Your actions are becoming noticed with the US military and other agencies and soon enough, they will become public." Coulson says. Tony knows.

It was only a matter of time before the US government has to officially come to him and speak to him about what the fuck he thought he was doing acting as a vigilante. Pepper and the legal teams were working on that.

"The problem is, Mr Stark, you're a civilian with no power or authority to act against these terrorists. You are operating outside of the law and you should know that is a dangerous thing." Coulson says and Tony rolls his eyes.

Having said that, terrorists weren't protected under the Geneva Convention as they were unlawful combatants, as were the Weapons Dealers. Neither was Tony acting as a vigilante, but it was more or less fair game. Unless the countries in which Tony was conducting his activities were to rise up and take issue with the way that their citizens were being treated.

"Just get to the point Coulson. You came here because you have something you need me to do. In return, you're going to tell me that you will smooth over the shit with the military and the government. Don't waste my time." Tony tells him. He's had plans damn it. He has champagne chilling and he'd been keen on getting Stephen back in the tub maybe. Or to watch the latest Doctor Who series. Depends.

Considering his need though? Definitely workshop sex now, he thinks.

"In that case Mr Stark, we have a list of Ten Rings hideouts that we can provide you. And we will smooth out the government side. You will have to answer to a senate hearing likely, but we can smooth over most of it for you. In turn, we need your assistance to take down a ring of people with
experimental weapons." The man says and oh boy.

Experimental weapons.

Great. It was either going to be a bastardisation of his own weapons or something else that was likely to be incredibly dangerous because sane people don't make weapons for criminals. And criminals weren't big on safety. Tony sighs.

"What scale we talking about?" Tony asks because by gods he needs to know whether the suit can even handle it. Coulson shows a photograph.

It's an energy weapon. using electricity by the looks of it. Yeah, it's a problem but not a problem for his suit. The titanium in the suit doesn't conduct electricity very well. And from the looks of it, it's not extremely high voltage. But it would be difficult for people to deal with.

"Yeah, I can deal with it. Give me the location and a time. I will get it sorted." Tony tells the man. It's not a bad deal.

"This isn't the only mission we plan to give you Mr Stark. There are other situations where Iron Man could be useful." Coulson tells him.

"I figured. My lawyers will get in touch with a contract. I won't be working for you. I am willing to help out but that's it. In turn, you work out the kinks in international law for me and share your intel with me." Tony tells him. Give and take. Business transactions. Yeah. That's normal for him. Those things are easy to deal with.

Coulson looks somewhat surprised, but he nods. Tony wonders what he had expected. That a businessman of his calibre would simply bend over backwards for the chance to work with a shady government organisation that tried to steal from him? Yeah no.

"In that case Mr Stark, we will be sending an email through tonight. The mission will be Sunday night. That's when our intel indicates most of the members of this ring will be in the same location." Coulson informs him. Sunday night. Yeah, that would work. He can send Stephen off during the day.

He can also spend some time tweaking the suit to make sure that it can handle the electricity. Just in case. Tony nods.

"Fine. Send the details through and I'll look over it on Sunday." Tony tells him and he expects Coulson to go, but he hesitates.

"Mr Stark, I don't know what your relationship with Dr Strange is, but I would advise caution. He is not who he says he is." Coulson tells him. Yeah, he knows. But how did SHIELD know that and why? Tony gives the man a narrow look.

"And who is he, Coulson?" Tony asks because he wants to know both for himself and for Stephen's sake. He needs to know how much SHIELD knows.

"Potentially someone dangerous. We aren't sure yet. That's why we wanted to speak to him. To get a DNA sample. To figure out whether he is a Mutant of some sorts or something else." The agent says. Tony sighs.

"He's human as you or me. I did blood work on him." Tony tells him and Coulson raises his eyebrow, clearly surprised. Tony rolls his eyes.
"I have a thing about geniuses. I ran DNA checks on him out of curiosity." Tony tells him. He did run the tests after all, though for... sexual reasons. But Coulson doesn't need to know that. Coulson looks unconvinced but nods his head.

"We will back off, for now, Mr Stark, but if I were in your shoes, I wouldn't trust him." Coulson tells him. Considering the fact that Tony doesn't trust Coulson or SHIELD, his opinion really matters little. Tony just gestures towards the door and Coulson gets the message.

When he is gone and JARVIS informs him that the house has been locked down and secured, Tony makes his way down to the lab.

He finds Stephen at his usual computer, not sitting by standing up and he is leaning against the table, his backside sticking out. The doctor's jeans are tight enough that Tony can see that gorgeous bottom perfectly and he can't help but enjoy the view.

"Doc, has anyone ever told you that you have the most gorgeous butt?" Tony asks as he meanders over through the lab. JARVIS locks the lab down once he is inside. He wants the house secured.

"Not particularly. Shady government agent gone?" Stephen asks him distractedly. Tony walks over to the screen to see what has his lover's attention.

If his hand happens to stray to cup one of Stephen's buttocks and rest there as he leans over to the computer screen, well. He's only human.

"Is this for real?" Tony finds his eyebrows arching once he grasps what's happening on the screen. Stephen hums softly.

"Apparently." Stephen is still distracted, but then so is Tony now. On the screen, the codes were flashing past at incredible speed. From the looks of it, someone was attempting to gain access into Tony's home system and was trying to break down the firewalls and JARVIS had gone into full protection mode.

"Did I know that J could do this?" Tony asks Stephen, who isn't even turning to look at him.

"I didn't." Is the only answer that Stephen gives him.

Attacks against Tony's servers, private or company-wise isn't new. It's a regular thing and most attacks are repelled through the firewalls and JARVIS had been programmed to put up one firewall after another in the case of an attack and to alert Tony if there are only serious issues. Unlike the idiots at SI security team. Okay, they weren't idiots just... incompetent sometimes.

"Hey J? Are you playing with them?" Tony asks the AI instead because JARVIS was coding around the attacks and he was doing a beautiful job. The code was almost moving too fast for even them to keep up with. To see what he was doing.

It also wasn't the way that he'd been programmed to behave in the instance that the servers are attacked. This had been an independent decision the AI had made. And the decision was apparently to... play cat and mouse with the hacker. It's brilliant.

"I am tracking them down through their routing and VPN systems Sir. In another 2 minutes, I should have their location. I will pass the information onto local law enforcement and alert the cybersecurity team as well as the legal team." JARVIS informs him. He sounds interested and excited. Oh great. Tony and Stephen do share a look at that point.

"Well then. In that case, um. We will leave you to it J and erm... you have fun okay?" Tony tells the
AI and moves to stand behind Stephen and pulls his hip flush against his and lets the doctor feel his semi-hard cock. Stephen shudders.

"Would it be fair to say that J is now entering his teens? He's playing with his prey Stephen. I'm pretty sure I didn't teach him that." Tony complains to him as he starts to undress the doctor. Every now and then, he watches the screen, but he's pretty convinced that the AI had it well in hand. Too... well in hand.

"It wasn't me either. We haven't gotten to game theory and even the concept of games yet. This behaviour is all you." Stephen complains even as he braces himself against the desk. Tony hums.

Tony wonders vaguely this is what married couples do. Argue over the bad behaviour of their children whilst they fuck. He's not sure, but he honestly doesn't care.

After talking to Coulson, knowing that there are missions that he needs to go to, knowing that JARVIS was advancing beyond even what the two of them had been aware of... Tony wants to stop thinking for a little bit. Luckily Stephen Strange was good at stopping Tony from thinking.

Almost too good at it.

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Tuesday

2 February 2010

SHIELD sucks.

They are absolute fucking monsters. Well... not really but their work is stupid and there is a lot of it and when they said a 'ring' of idiots with arcing taser guns, they should have told Tony that it wasn't just a few of them. But dozens of them. It wasn't just a group to be taken down and handed over to SHIELD.

It had taken all fucking night and then some, flying all over the goddamned country to get most of the 'ring members'. By the time Tony was done, it was Monday night and he was exhausted.

The suit needed repairs because they didn't just use the electricity gun thing. They used normal guns and one even tried a grenade. So yeah. Tony was in a foul mood.

On top of that, Pepper was a little mad with him because he missed a meeting because of the SHIELD thing, though he did at least manage to call her so she wasn't... mad mad. Just a little mad. Which is okay.

He sends a masseur over the to the office to apologise for it. She sent him a thank you email and tells him that the schedule is clear for the rest of the week.

Which... he's grateful for but he senses a conspiracy.

Even though it's mid-morning on Tuesday now, Tony is still exhausted. He hasn't managed a single phone call with Stephen and though there were some text messages, it was clear that the doctor was busy as well.

So the last thing that he really wants is company. But company he was apparently having.

Rhodey doesn't even ask. He just barges straight into the house with a box of beer. A box. Not a six-
It's only when they are halfway through the old Star Wars series because apparently, Rhodey wanted to watch it and well into their second six-pack, that Tony realises the date.

Oh.

He'd forgotten. He'd been so fucking busy that he'd forgotten. Oddly enough, realising that doesn't actually change anything for him. He doesn't feel all of sudden upset or sad or anything. The trauma doesn't just come back all of sudden either. He has a feeling that as unhealthy as it was, he was working out that particular trauma with the missions he'd been doing.

Then he realises that maybe it wasn't about him after all. Especially when Pepper joins them at the house with ribs, fries, salads as well as jacket potatoes with bacon just because they are awesome. She's out of the office before 5.

Yeah. This may not be about him, he thinks. It is about them. About the fear and the shock and the trauma they had experienced on the same day that he did and as such, their need now to make sure that he is okay. That they are with him. Reminding them that he isn't... gone.

Pepper actually joins in the drinking. She shoots off to the spare bedroom and comes back in denim shorts and a t-shirt and they all settle in the living room, food and beer littered everywhere. Eliza was going to kill them in the morning.

"I got tomorrow off. I'm staying here tonight." Rhodey informs him as Empire Strikes Back starts.

"Me too." Pepper adds.

"You guys aren't going to let me do any work today are you?" He asks them. They give him a look and he sighs. He doesn't mind.

A year ago, he'd been taken. Pepper would have gotten the news from Rhodey. Rhodey's convoy had moved first so he'd already been on location when he'd heard about Tony's convoy being attacked and turned back around to come and get him. It would have been horrible to see all the dead soldiers, the exploded vehicles and to realise that Tony wasn't there.

Yeah.

Tony gets why they are here. With him. For 3 months, they searched for him. They never gave up. Even now, they sit close to him.

Eventually, they end up sprawled on the ground. Tony cuddling in Rhodey's arms with Pepper draped across his lap. A great deal of beer has already been drunk and they are all loose-limbed and happy and buzzed.

All of their phones are in the corner of the room. They tell JARVIS to screen the calls and only put the truly important ones through.

As Empire Strikes Back ends and Pepper argues with Rhodey about watching the newer Star Wars or whether they should just switch to the Lord of the Rings series or not, JARVIS pipes up.

"Sir, Dr Strange has sent you a text message. Would you like me to read it?" Yeah no. That's a bad idea. He's about to stop him when Rhodey covers his mouth and Pepper shouts out.

"Yes please JARVIS!" And this is why you don't give your best friend same level of authority as
yourself in your own AI that runs all your security protocols.

"Well Ms Potts, I believe it might be in violation of Mr Stark's privacy, however, I have also learnt that amongst close friends and romantic partners missives can be shared. As such, I will disclose the message to you." JARVIS says and Tony honestly doesn't know whether to be impressed that JARVIS had read the situation really well or kill him.

Anthony, I just realised the date. Are you okay? Do you want me there? I can fly over if you would like some company. JARVIS reads out. The message is actually really quite sweet and Pepper and Rhodey ooh and ahh at it in their drunk haze. Oh, dear Gods. He's never going to hear the end of it.

"JARVIS, can you take a photo of us and send it to Dr Strange?" Rhodey suggests.

"Of course Colonel. Shall I attach a message?" Tony manages to free himself from Rhodey's hold just in time to speak up but Pepper beats him to it.

"Tell him thank you and that it's incredibly sweet but we're monopolising Tony today. And tomorrow. He can have custody on the weekends." Pepper tells the AI and Rhodey chuckles and kisses Tony soundly on the cheek.

"Use that footage JARVIS. Let's see if the doctor gets jealous." Rhodey chuckles. Tony sighs and JARVIS is apparently more than happy to go with his friend's instructions.

"Of course Colonel Rhodes and Ms Potts. I will send the message through now." The fucking traitor.

"JARVIS, we are going to have a long talk about pranks and jokes and loyalty." Tony tells him darkly but he honestly is in a fantastic mood.

It's actually good to spend some time like this with his best friends and he feels guilty because he realised that he hadn't even introduced Rhodey to Stephen and he really ought to have.

And also with his relationship with Stephen, he feels like he may have neglected Rhodey a little.

"So how did I become a child in a custody battle?" Tony muses as Rhodey and Pepper break down into laughter and an image takes the place of movie selections. Tony blinks as he sees it. It's Stephen with Wong and Clea. He guesses that it's Yinn that is taking the photo. Wong is kissing Stephen on the cheek whilst the doctor rolls his eyes and Clea is sprawled on his lap, a glass of wine in her hands.

"Oh wow." Pepper breathes before she breaks down into breathless full-bellied laughter and Rhodey blinks at the image for a while before he joins her and Tony doesn't last long either.

He bets it was fucking Clea's idea but it's brilliant and it makes him happy. From their clothes, it's obvious that they'd been doing something similar to what Tony and his friends had been up to. Relaxing. Enjoying each other's company.

"The attached message states; we agree to the terms of the custody arrangements." JARVIS reads out.

For a full minute or so, there is nothing but sounds of laughter and Tony's fairly sure at one point or another, they may have spilled a beer, but no one cares. Eliza really is going to kill them in the morning. But fuck it.
Tony can't help but feel loved. It's nice.

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Friday

12 February 2010

Pepper raises her eyebrows as she looks over Tony and his fretting. She is actually confounded. She doesn't do that often. So it's kind of a shock to the system, but she is most definitely... confounded.

Tony Stark was sitting in her office, outside of work, fretting because it's Valentines Day on Sunday and he's not sure if he should be doing something for Stephen Strange or not.

Yeah.

Tony fucking Stark, the eternal party and playboy who smoothly wins over women and men with a single drink, fretting over a romantic holiday.

It's adorable.

"Do you want to do something for him?" She asks because they are both mature enough that she's not sure if Stephen would really need grand gestures just because it's a day that people have decided must be romantic. Tony looks confused by the question.

"It's Valentines Day. I'm meant to do something, aren't I?" He asks and Pepper almost feels sorry for Stephen. How the poor doctor deals with this emotionally stunted man in a romantic relationship, she does not understand.

"Tony, it's a stupid holiday made up by card companies to sell cards and roses. It's a commercial thing." She tells him and pointedly looks at the dozen long-stemmed roses he's brought to her office. Apparently, gestures like that was a no brainer when it came to her but when it came to his actual lover, he had no idea. Great.

"Yeah but what if he expects me to do something and I don't do it and he gets upset?" Tony asks and well. That's adorable, isn't it? Tony insecure and worried about someone else's emotions. She's actually proud of Tony for even just being able to think like that.

"Do you love him?" Pepper knows the answer already but she wonders if he does. Tony sighs.

"Probably. Most likely." Tony tells her. Oh wow. That... shocks her. Tony doesn't admit stuff like that. Not about his lovers. She thinks she might have to get Stephen a gift. Maybe a trophy.

"If you appreciate him and you want to show him that you appreciate him then do something." She suggests gently. He looks at her with a helpless look that she hasn't seen for a long time.

"How?!" He all but cries out and Pepper knows she shouldn't laugh. She really, really knows that laughing out loud at him right now is so inappropriate. Especially when he was asking for help and he really doesn't do that all that often. It takes a lot of willpower but she does manage to hold herself back.

Barely.

"I don't know. Do something romantic? A nice meal? Buy him something nice. Fly him somewhere nice and do something. I don't know Tony. I don't know Stephen like you do!" Pepper tells him
when he keeps looking at her with that desperation in his eyes. He blinks.

"But I don't know what he wants. I should have thought of this whole thing a lot earlier right?" Tony asks her and honestly, yes. But it's kinda too late for her to say that. Stephen was arriving that afternoon. Stephen had been busy and Tony had been in Tokyo until this morning. Tony has maximum of 3 hours to plan something.

"Yes. I mean, we can't book any nice restaurants. It's too public anyway. You can try to cook him something but you'll poison him so don't do that." She rules out almost immediately. Though it would be really romantic for Tony to cook when he normally doesn't.

"Also how do you know Stephen hasn't planned something?" Pepper asks him and Tony blinks at her. He's an idiot really. Pepper sighs and gets her phone. She texts Clea because she knows if Stephen had planned anything, Clea would know about it.

"How do you date a man for eight months and not know what he likes Tony?" She asks him with a sigh. Tony looks at her and blinks.

"I didn't- we didn't really have that kind of relationship until August. I mean we flirted but we didn't." Pepper rolls her eyes.

"Tony, he was inviting you out to dinner and arranging romantic meals for the two of you before that. You were dating whether you knew or not. Okay. According to Clea, you have a surprise coming your way." Pepper tells him and he gives her a deer in headlights look. Okay, so the whole talking it out and getting him to figure things out was not working.

"Alright how about this. What does Stephen like?" Pepper asks him and gets out a pen and a pad because she still has a ton of work to do and as cute as Tony's crisis was, she is busy trying to help run his company. She hands the pad and pen to him. He takes it but he gives her that helpless look again.

"I don't know Pep. We don't talk about stuff like that. We work. We have sex. He likes adrenaline rushes and he likes challenges. But we talk mostly about science and tech not you know what romantic gesture he likes." Tony sounds almost frustrated. It really, really is quite adorable.

"We mostly work on- Oh. I got it. I got it!" Tony repeats and he stands up.

"Thanks Pep. Don't work hard and make sure you get yourself something lovely for Valentines Day on my card. Okay?" He says and before she can ask him what it was, he was gone. Well then. It feels like a storm had come into her office, turned everything upside down and left. The silence in the office is telling. Pepper sighs but smiles fondly. Tony freaking Stark. Gods.

Tony's finally come up with something. Don't know what it is. What's Stephen doing? Pepper sends to Clea because she's far too curious and she was a single girl and it was the Valentines weekend. She had a girl's night planned out with some of her single friends but she could live vicariously.

A titanium bracelet that Stephen made himself. He's been spent the last two days asking if it was too much and whether Tony would even accept it. It's sickeningly sweet. Clea complains. She even sends a picture of the thing along.

It's a simple, slim cuff design with darkened titanium that would sit quite nicely with the leather bracelets that Tony often wears on his left wrist to hide the scars. The centre has some designs drawn
on it in bronze or gold that looks very elaborate and special. Oh well then.

**Stephen made that?!** Pepper messages back because that's impressive work.

Well... most of it. He designed it. And he did the thing in the middle, but no he didn't make the whole bracelet. His hands can't handle metalwork. Clea says and yeah well that makes senses.

**Tony is going to love it I think. It's gonna go well with his other bracelets. He loves the leather Armani ones.** Pepper types back and returns back to work.

**Good. Now I need to figure out where the hell I'm going to spend the weekend.** Pepper sees the message and frowns. The concern is natural and also immediate. She was starting to consider Clea like a sister. A younger sister that she needs to look after.

**My housemates are going to be fucking like bunnies over the weekend. I'm not staying in the house for that. Gonna let them enjoy themselves. Might just room up at the D'Arte.** Yeah no.

**Come to LA with Stephen. Stay with me over the weekend. My girlfriends and I are doing a singles bar crawl. You can come with us. Bring something nice to wear. Or we can shop on Saturday.** Pepper suggests because it's always more fun with more friends and her two girlfriends would love Clea.

**You sure? If you have plans already I'm fine. I don't know how I ended up being the only single person out of my friends at 25 but hey.** Pepper chuckles.

**At 34 I have a two friends left single. You can join us. I know they will love you. Girls weekend!** Pepper writes back and isn't too surprised when she gets a response back saying that Clea will be there.

Great. She sends a group message to her girlfriends and invites Clea into the group so that she can get to know them. Her phone doesn't stop vibrating for the rest of the day. Still, Pepper does manage to finish up her work.

Eventually.

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**Sunday**

**14 February 2010**

Okay so Valentines Day sex is apparently amazing, Tony thinks as Stephen rolls into him and he clings onto the man for dear life. Stephen is buried deep inside of him and Tony can't help but look at the bracelet on his left wrist.

The titanium bracelet feels warm and natural against his skin. He swears that the design at the centre changes colour from gold to orange and it looks like it is almost burning. Stephen won't tell him what it is. But it is beautiful and Tony loves it.

Stephen bites at his shoulder, his head buried in Tony's neck and pants. They are both sweaty and it's their third time making love that day. Tony can't get enough and apparently neither can Stephen.

They've switched when it became obvious that Stephen's hole couldn't take anymore. Tony isn't sure if he's had this much sex over one weekend in his life, but it's fine because Stephen is amazing and
they both somehow have the energy to keep going.

Stephen isn't thrusting into him as much as rolling his hips and it actually feels perfect. Intimate. He is buried so deep that every little move caresses Tony's prostate and he feels full and stretched.

Tony's gift to the doctor had been simple.

A sign of trust that he hadn't been able to give him before. He opened up and showed Stephen JARVIS's code. Stephen had written code for JARVIS's program before, but Tony had never shared what made JARVIS... JARVIS, with the man before. Stephen had been mesmerised.

When his gorgeous brain had absorbed all the code and the information, he had all but attacked Tony enthusiastically. They had fucked until they were sore on the lab couch. Stephen riding him and muttering praise the whole time.

It had been hot and perfect. Tony isn't sure if he'd ever been thanked so enthusiastically for a gift before. JARVIS had been more than happy to give Stephen the access as well. Tony had asked. It felt right to ask.

Tony feels the orgasm building deep inside of him and it's a lazy build but he wants more. Tony's always been into the rough and hard sex more than this sort of slow and gentle. Oh, he likes it well enough. It feels smooth and it feels beautiful and he loves it but he also wants to come. He wants to hear Stephen moan and tense up.

"God Stephen please." Tony breathes out because by gods he needs to come and Stephen was holding him on the edge and it feels like it's been hours. Instead of speeding up, Stephen kisses him and grabs his wrist when Tony tries to reach between them to get to his cock.

"Not yet." Stephen whispers into his ear and nibbles on his ear and it sends another shot of pleasure down his spine and Tony moans and twists in Stephen's hold. He wants to get closer. He wants more. But when Stephen lets go of his wrist, he uses that hand to cling tighter onto the man instead.

His legs are wrapped around Stephen's slim waist and as he pulls Stephen closer, his cock is trapped between their abs and it feels so, so very good.

"God Stephen you're- oh God." Tony moans out as Stephen's hips snap against him for the first time that night and it knocks the breath out of him and it sends fires up his spine.

"So orgasm denial is a kink then?" Stephen asks as he pauses and lifts himself up a little to look at Tony. Oh god, he's beautiful, Tony thinks. Every time he sees Stephen like this, his beauty actually takes Tony's breath away.

Stephen's hair is a mess, curls falling onto his forehead. His beautiful eyes are almost completely black with a thin ring of pale blue and Tony's eyes distractedly take in the way a sweat drop travels down from his hairline down to his neck. He is all smooth, no hair on his chest and his body is so toned and yet so soft.

Tony reaches up to follow that trail of sweat down Stephen's chest and caresses his chest for a moment or two. It's only when Stephen's abs shake with the chuckle escaping him that Tony realises that Stephen had asked him a question and he hadn't answered it. He opens his mouth to do so, but Stephen kisses him softly.

Tony loses himself in the kiss and when Stephen pulls away, he moves slowly and looks down at Tony. When he looks at him, Tony can see it. Oh well then.
"You are not allowed to come until I do. If you do, I will punish you." Stephen tells him, his voice firm but not unkind. His eyes are filled with heat and dominance and it's been a while and they haven't properly negotiated, but Stephen's fucking genius mind picked up that he was slipping into a sub-state of mind from that little denial.

Stephen raises his eyebrow as a way to confirm that Tony was okay with that and by gods, Tony feels like his body is burning with desire now. He lets out a breath and pulls his hands away from Stephen and reaches up to hold onto the pillows on either side of his head. Stephen's eyes widen a little but he nods.

"Good boy." Stephen tells him and Tony can't help but feel that bit of thrill go through him. Self-imposed restrictions were always harder and always hotter. He liked it when he dominated and apparently so did Stephen.

"Traffic lights for now." Stephen tells him softly and Tony nods. Stephen doesn't move. But he plays with Tony and oh gods, this is going to be intense, Tony thinks.

Stephen licks and bites at Tony's neck and chest. His touches alternate between feather-light and hard and firm and it is so hard to guess what Stephen is going to do next.

He is still buried hilt deep inside of him and when Tony breathes, he can feel the fullness. He squeezes experimentally to get some sensation and to speed it up because he's never been the quiet sub. He likes to push back.

He gets a firm bite on his nipple for that and he cries out at the feeling of it and oh wow. Stephen knows how to dominate, he realises and it sends another wave of heat through his body. Fuck. This was going to be hard.

"I should have known you would be a bratty sub." Stephen murmurs to him as he moves Tony's legs from his waist so that his legs are spread out and bent towards his chest. Stephen knows that Tony is flexible enough for the position to be comfortable enough as long as they don't push down too hard on his chest. Stephen starts to move slowly.

Stephen's eyes close as he gives himself over to his own pleasure and Tony has to call upon all of his willpower to continue holding onto the pillows because Stephen's just hit another one of his kinks without even fucking knowing it. The bastard, Tony thinks as he fights back against the quickly building orgasm.

"We are going to have to talk about all this." Stephen says quietly as he fucks into Tony as if they are just discussing business. He thrusts in and out, his eyes closed, his hands firmly just on Tony's knees and using the leverage to move his hips on the bed.

Tony wants to say something smartarsey back but he honestly can't. Stephen's cock isn't just brushing against his prostate anymore. The head of Stephen's cock is hitting it every single time Stephen thrusts in and out and he is doing that with sharp snaps of his hips and the pleasure is making his toes curl and his eyes roll back.

Some men can't come untouched. Tony can. Right now, he hates that. He is panting and gritting his teeth and fighting his need to come. He wants to hold on. He wants to be good for Stephen. He wants to prove that he can do it. But it's so fucking hard.

When Stephen's hands leave his knees and they start caressing his chest and his neck, Tony knows that his knuckles are white on those pillows because the need to come is all he can think about and feel.
"You're so good for me Tony. So beautiful. So perfect." Stephen showers him with praise and actually calls him Tony. It's really not fair.

He has no idea what Stephen's kinks are. But there he is. Hitting all of Tony's without even negotiating it. Tony feels the first sob escape him, desperation and frustration expressing itself in the only way that he can.

"Please- God Stephen please. I- I need to come- Please." Tony begs and he knows that he is actually crying as his head moves side to side with the desperate need to hold on. Stephen stops touching him and starts to fuck into him.

When Stephen comes and the moment that Tony can feel it, He comes. Hard. So hard that he feels the cum hitting his chin. He's pretty sure he hasn't blacked out, but Tony doesn't notice when Stephen pulls out. Or when he wipes him down. No. that's not true. He does notice, he just doesn't care.

He feels completely loose-limbed, comfortable and so very, very good and oh gods he's in subspace. It's been a while. He can't usually go there without pain. It's usually what does it for him but apparently... just good sex with light domination can do it. More you know.

Stephen cleans them up, pulls Tony into the clean part of the bedsheets and curls up with him and runs soothing hands down Tony's body and spoons him and kisses the back of his neck and whispers softly to him.

"Next week, we're gonna talk. Because by gods you're- how the fuck did you pick up so many of my kinks?" Tony's words are slurred but he doesn't care. He leans his head back onto Stephen's chest so he can feel the doctor's voice vibrate through his chest.

"Observational skills. You're very responsive Anthony." Stephen tells him with a warm, contented voice. It sounds good.

"Well, I'm gonna find yours. Dominate the hell out of you." Tony promises him and Stephen chuckles.

"As you wish." Stephen whispers softly into his ear. Stephen pulls the blankets to cover them up better and as if that was the cue, Tony feels sleep pulling at him.

Yeah, he really wasn't a teenager. Can't spend the day working and then fucking all over the house and avoid sleep. But he knows that he won't have any nightmares. That his sleep will be peaceful. It always is with Stephen and if he's honest... it's always been like that. Almost like his brain knew something that he didn't.

He has a feeling that might be important.

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Hello! I am JARVIS!

Chapter Summary

It's about bloody time they have a negotiation talk isn't it?

Oh and JARVIS deserves a coming out party too... right? Let the world know about the brilliance that is JARVIS!

Chapter Notes

Sorry for being a little late! >__<

I fell asleep and didn't wake up for a long... long time XD

I'm doing some rehab stuff at the moment to get fitter and to get some energy levels back after being mostly bedbound for about a year so it's challenging and exhausting at the moment >_<

But hey!

As far as ARC 2 is concerned, I'm starting to see the light at the end of the tunnel as far as the story is concerned and can't wait until I can get to writing Avengers! +___+

Oh and LOKI!!!!!!! OMG!!!!!

*cough* ahem *cough*

<3 and keep up please with the comments, the suggestions and criticisms! Keep questioning please because you guys remind me of some things I didn't think about or missed thinking about!

Thursday

18 February 2010

Tony's week had been hard. Well, the week up to Wednesday anyway. He's had a mission that he finished up on Monday. Aside from that, he's had meetings left, right and centre and it's been chaotic.

There were the press conferences that he hadn't quite planned on about Iron Man's activities when he'd also helped out at the scene of a huge building fire in Nevada on... very early Wednesday morning.

Aside from that, he'd also been fixing up the Starkpad which was going to be released in a few months and he was arranging more interpreters to attend SI offices so that they can record enough voice samples and interpretations for the Universal Translator. He's handed it off to the R&D
Department to play with for now.

He honestly doesn't have the time to devote to all the interpreters and that shit right now. So they were gathering the samples for JARVIS to process later.

So.

Chaotic busy week. But honestly? Tony had been nice and relaxed throughout the week. And he knows exactly why. It's been a fucking long time since he'd been able to get into subspace and the experience has him wanting more. Not just the subspace experience, but he just wants to explore that part of the relationship with Stephen.

It's about bloody fucking time they negotiate.

So here they were. In Providence, one of LA's hottest restaurants. Tony's made the effort to book the private room and their table was set for two and their waiter was extremely discrete and made sure that they knocked before entering.

Providence had excellent seafood, wine and staff. It probably helped that Tony tipped very generously.

It's 2010. They should be able to display PDA without it being controversial. But they can't. It has a lot to do with who they were and public recognition and the scandal their relationship will cause. But it's more than that for Tony.

For the first time, he really doesn't want the world to know about his life. About Stephen. Tony has always been protective of his friends and his lovers, but with Stephen, he feels that even more so.

Even as the heir of the D'Arte empire, a medical doctor and genius in his field, Stephen's life hasn't been and isn't public as Tony's. The media is getting to know Stephen and so was the public, but Tony is a well-known quantity and everything about him is fodder for the tabloids.

Tony is used to it.

He is used to the hate mails and the fan mails. He is used to getting the threats. The social media comments about Tony's bisexuality. But Stephen isn't. He hasn't had any scandals. He isn't out in public.

Tony doesn't want Stephen to be scrutinised. He doesn't want Stephen to have to deal with the nasty side of the media. So Tony keeps the sexual tension to a zero... or as close to it as possible when they are in public.

They've done a few press conferences together and they had their pictures posted in the media and Stephen Strange was now known as Tony's close friend and collaborator. Good. That's what he wanted. He needs to keep the narrative at that.

Hence the private room.

Besides, their relationship is new. It's still building and Tony wants to be dead certain about Stephen and where the relationship was going before he even thinks about going public. There are so many things that they need to work through.

"It's been a while since I've come here," Stephen says after their appetisers arrive and their wine to match the appetiser has been poured. Tony has requested that the dishes be served in accordance to a schedule he had set out for them.
"I hope you find it acceptable?" Tony asks him with a raised eyebrow. Stephen gives him a smile. Stephen had been surprised when Tony had suggested that they go out. But he hadn't been that surprised when they had arrived at Providence. Tony had made sure no nuts would go anywhere near the dishes. It paid to be careful.

"Definitely. Not a bad venue for a negotiation." Stephen says, his voice casual with a lovely little lilt and by gods, this is it, Tony thinks. This is why he can't get enough of Stephen. Tony doesn't even have to spell it out. Stephen just gets it. It's wonderful.

"What makes you think that this is about that?" Tony asks with a sardonic tone of voice because he just wants to see how Stephen would react. Stephen simply gives him a raised eyebrow.

"In that case, this is a wonderful venue for our first date." Stephen tells him in exactly the same tone of voice and Tony chuckles as he raises his own eyebrows.

"Our first date was penthouse suite and Ray's wasn't it?" Tony asks and he can't help the soft tone of voice. He hadn't realised at the time. He had deluded himself into thinking at the time that he could just be colleagues. Friends with Stephen. He had been an idiot.

"I prefer to think of the New Moon as our first date." Stephen fires back. Fair enough. The New Moon had been great and Tony has to admit that it was probably the first time he had felt like he had been on a date.

"To the New Moon then." Tony says as he raises his wine glass and Stephen follows suit and they clink the glasses and smile at each other.

"So. Since we are both switches, we're going to have to discuss both of our limits." Stephen says as they start to dig into their appetisers. Tony likes the quiet confidence in Stephen's voice as he speaks. The shrimp cocktail is delicious.

"Yeah like I said before, I prefer to dominate, but I am happy enough to sub. And sometimes... I need it." Tony admits because it's important to be honest when it comes to kink negotiations like this. Stephen nods.

"You already know how I am when it comes to submission." Tony isn't sure what Stephen's submission is like with someone else, but with him, the only way to describe it was complete submission. Stephen was a service sub. Almost a slave in the way that he gave control completely over to Tony.

Even now, he knows that Stephen is his. His to do as he pleased and Stephen would let him. That amount of control was almost terrifying. It wasn't just in sexual relationships either. Stephen was a strong person and a dominant in all aspects of life, Tony imagined, but with him, Stephen had no boundaries. No limits. His trust in Tony was complete.

That was one of the reasons why Tony had decided to have this conversation. They needed to set boundaries. Make sure that Tony doesn't end up hurting Stephen accidentally. Because even in a consensual relationship, it is possible to abuse that trust and push the other person until it becomes... sexual assault and that is not something Tony is willing to do.

He's already hurt Stephen and he's not going to do it again.

The negotiation also had to happen somewhere... where they couldn't get distracted. The thing is, when Stephen and he are together, the sexual tension is always there. As is the desire. They manage to deal with it when they are distracted by eating, but otherwise... Yeah. A public location was best.
for a conversation like this for them.

"That's why we need to set some limits, Stephen. Tell me your hard limits." Tony commands and Stephen shrugs.

"Anthony, if it is you I don't-" Tony sighs and interrupts Stephen.

"No. I want you to tell me the things that you don't enjoy Stephen. I don't get a kick out of hurting you or pushing you past your limits by accident." Tony isn't willing to explore that part of their relationship if it means Stephen was just going to grit his teeth and do whatever Tony wanted. That's not safe, sane and consensual.

"When I experimented, I enjoyed light pain, bondage. Nothing... to do with my hands now, obviously. But I don't enjoy excessive pain. Nothing unhygienic. No knife play. No fire. Humiliation doesn't work for me. I prefer praise. I'm happy to engage in medical play." Stephen finishes with a suggestive tone and Tony can't help but laugh.

"I'm definitely coming over to New York one night and we're going to take advantage of your practice." Tony promises and Stephen's eyes heat up with desire. Good.

"Bareback?" Tony asks because he wants that in their relationship. They had already been doing it but he needs to make sure that Stephen was on board with that. He really should have done that earlier.

"I don't- I can't have sex with other people Anthony. You already know how I feel about you. There is no one else that I would engage in sexual activities with. I'm clean and I like feeling you come inside of me." Stephen's honesty is quite nice and despite the conversation, Tony likes how comfortable Stephen appears to be. Good.

"Good. I don't plan on it either. As I said, I want you. And only you right now." Tony tells him and honestly, it's a bit hard to admit to him, but honesty was what this was about. It's a two-way street after all.

"Your limits?" Stephen asks him, his eyes dilated and his voice velvety. Tony almost shivers. Public space, he reminds himself. It may be a private room but it wasn't that sound proof.

"Praise is good. No daddy shit. No puppy play either. You already know that I like bondage and denial play. Honestly, your needs match mine. I don't like extended scenes. I prefer short ones and sometimes, I like to plan a scene and play it out with a sub, but when I'm subbing, I prefer it to be... spontaneous." He usually is in a specific headspace when he needs to be submissive and it's rare. Stephen nods.

"Breathplay if you ever want to try that is acceptable. I don't enjoy food play. I don't have specific fetishes. As far as BDSM is concerned, I'm more... lightly into it than hardcore." That's fine. Tony likes more the control element of it more than anything else.

He's made the mistake of giving control away to an abusive dominant before. Before he really knew himself well enough to know that he wasn't submissive enough for 24/7 play. He'd been an idiot. But he'd been in love. Now, he was in the opposite position and Tony found it daunting to a certain extent. To know that though Stephen can dominate, he was, in essence, a sub to Tony.

"Stephen, I'm not going to do breathplay with you. I'm not going to do any hard scenes with you. I honestly am not sure if you can be trusted to tell me if something makes you uncomfortable." Tony is trying to be as gentle as possible as he says that, but he is worried about Stephen's reaction.
Surprisingly, the doctor simply nods.

"That's a fair assessment. As I have informed you, I... find it difficult to say no to you. If there is something that you want from me that I can do, I will do it. There- There are reasons for that. Later, I will tell you. You will understand at that point why my devotion and loyalty to you is so complete." It seems like it's difficult for Stephen to say but Tony nods.

This conversation isn't about all the things that he knows Stephen can't say. When Stephen tries to say something else, Tony shakes his head and the waiter enters just right on time to clear out their plates and bring in the main course and new wine. When he is gone, Tony looks at Stephen.

"Preferred aftercare?" Tony asks as they dig into the main course. It's almost a shame really because the discussion has him so focused that he honestly isn't enjoying the meal as much as he really ought to be.

"Closeness. Physical contact helps. What we already do. Essentially." Simple then, Tony thinks. He is going to make sure that there is a kit available just in case, but closeness he can do. He wants that too anyway after any sexual encounter with Stephen.

"Praise works for me. Physical contact is good." Tony tells him and Stephen nods. It's always interesting negotiating kinks. But it's even more interesting because of the fact that they are switches and verses. It helps that they share kinks but it is still a protracted process.

"I should have built in a dungeon. You think I can put one in the Tower?" Tony muses as the bass just melts in his mouth and it is amazing. Stephen chuckles and takes a sip of his wine.

"If you do, make sure you include a swing. They are always fun." Stephen tells him and all of sudden, Tony wishes he did have one already. He can almost see it. Stephen laid out in a swing, his long legs strapped- okay he's gonna have to stop thinking because fuck.

"Definitely getting one of those. St' Andrews cross maybe. You would look beautiful against one of those." Tony says and he can't keep the heat out of his voice.

"Anthony, if we don't stop, I'm going to end up testing whether or not exhibition is one of my kinks." Stephen tells him quietly. Tony chuckles lightly and he can't help it. He stands up and moves over to where Stephen is and pulls Stephen's chair out a little and sits on his lap.

Stephen's arm wraps around him almost automatically to steady him and Tony wraps his arm around Stephen's neck and kisses him. Underneath him, he can feel Stephen's semi-hard cock. Tony smiles into the kiss.

"When we get back home, I'm going to fuck you against the wall Stephen. spread out against the grey feature wall, your beautiful butt sticking out. You're going to be gorgeous." Tony whispers into Stephen's ear and the doctor shivers. Tony gives him another kiss and can feel that yup, Stephen is completely hard now.

"You are a menace Anthony." Stephen moans when Tony gets off his lap and goes back to his seat. He makes sure that his lap is covered by the napkin to finish off his bass and the delicious asparagus.

"Next time you plan a date, perhaps you should book a room in a dungeon." Stephen always gives as good as he gets, Tony thinks as he feels his mouth go dry at that thought.

"Honestly doc, you always manage to surprise me." Tony admires and sips at his wine. The white wine the sommelier paired with the bass was dry and did nothing to help his mouth.
Tony can't remember the dessert. At all. He is so glad that he'd given his credit card details before he got to the restaurant and left instructions for a generous tip because he's not sure if he could have managed to deal with it after the doctor's teasing.

The tension is obvious and Happy puts up the discretion window pretty much as soon as they get into the car. The classic music flows through the frankly wonderful stereo system, they still don't touch each other. Despite knowing that Happy has his own headphones and the discretionary window is up and he won't see anything.

It's better to have the tension.

When they get home, Tony instructs JARVIS to turn all the lights off except the one on the feature wall and to soften it. JARVIS does. He asks for soft jazz music and JARVIS complies. Tony doesn't usually set music and lights for sex. But it feels right. Especially after that meal.

This isn't really a fully negotiated scene, but they are both in the mood for it. Stephen doesn't even need prompting. He strips down and goes to the wall. He spreads his legs and raises his arms and leans his forehead against the wall.

Dear fucking God.

Stephen looks as beautiful as Tony had pictured against the feature wall. Naked, his hands stretched above him spread out so that he looks like he is on a St Andrew cross, his toned body lightly lit by the warm lights. Tony admires the man. He doesn't even want to touch him. He just wants to keep that picture in his mind forever. Maybe as a canvass on his bedroom wall.

Tony has had plenty of beautiful people in his bed. Men with muscles and bodies that screamed hours upon hours spent at the gym everyday. Perfectly built. But no one had been as beautiful as Stephen. Not to him.

"Anthony please." Stephen's voice trembles with need and it goes straight to Tony's cock. The lines between submission and just vanilla sex for them is blurred. If Tony thinks about it, it always had been blurred. Whether they had meant it or not, there had always been little hints of domination. Not all the time, but often enough.

Huh.

"Tony..." Stephen's need is rising. Stephen knows that Tony is admiring him. Standing back. Fully clothed. Just looking at him. It was driving the need and desire in the doctor. Fantastic.

"You're the most beautiful creature I have ever seen Stephen. Such a beautiful body. Gorgeous mind. Stunning eyes. I want this sight, this view of you on my wall so I can jerk off to it when you're not here." Tony lets his words flow and as it does, the doctor's body shivers and shudders.

With people like Stephen and himself, it was all about their minds. Sex is a release, a means to have physical contact and to relax them but at most importantly, it's a way of getting them out of their own heads. In essence that is why they subbed. To give control away to someone else. To let them think for them for a bit because their minds were always going so fast, doing too many things at once and they just needed to stop sometimes.

"I'm going to enjoy fucking you. Nice and hard. Would you like that?" Tony asks as he looks for the lube. He knows he has a bottle stashed somewhere in- Tony pulls it out from the crevice in the sofa. He opens it and makes sure that Stephen can hear the click of the bottle opening. The doctor moans.

"Please." Is all Stephen manages to say. Tony smiles to himself. Stephen's submission is beautiful.
Dangerous, but beautiful. He submits completely and utterly. Just trusting Tony completely. It's heady.

He does move towards Stephen but he doesn't touch him. He just stands close enough that Stephen can feel the heat of his body, hear his breathing, feel his breath against his skin. Stephen moans again.

Tony wants to touch him. Gods he does. But he doesn't. He wants Stephen firmly in that headspace where he can't think. Where he can only feel Tony and desire. He's almost there.

"God, please. An- Tony- I need you. Please." Stephen begs after a few more minutes of no touching and silence. Just Tony standing there, right behind him, breathing and admiring him. The soft lights illuminate him really well.

It is actually difficult to control his own desires, but Tony manages because by gods he wants so see Stephen fall apart in his arms. Tony is a good dominant. He's played with the best to find his style, his desires and practised enough to know how long you can prolong the tension for before it either becomes too much or it becomes stale.

When Stephen's arms start to tremble, Tony moves. His fingers are dripping wet with the lube. He doesn't touch anywhere else on Stephen's body. Just the exposed hole.

Stephen is clever enough and knows their bodies well enough that he's spread his legs just enough and tilted his hips just enough that he is at the perfect height for Tony to fuck him. It also exposes his beautiful hole for Tony to use.

Tony doesn't tease him with his fingers. He plunges the wet finger straight into Stephen. He knows that it will burn a bit, but Stephen tilts his hip further towards him, desire overriding that pain. Definitely pumping full of dopamins then.

"I want you to try to hold on Stephen. I don't want you coming on my fingers. I want you to come on my cock. If your arms start to hurt too much, you need to tell me. Is that clear?" That's an order. Tony makes sure that it sounds like an order. If Stephen wasn't going to take care of himself, then Tony had to make sure that he did by whatever means necessary. If it meant making it into an order, then so be it.

"Yes, sir." Stephen says and at that moment, it's Tony that has to shudder. Fuck. He hadn't expected that and it is delicious in that breathy voice. Tony does break his self imposed no-touch rule then. He kisses Stephen on his neck as a reward. Stephen shudders at the feather-light touch.

Tony increases his fingers, taking his sweet time. The delay isn't torturous just for Stephen. It is for him as well. But the delay will only make it all the sweeter and hotter when he is finally inside of Stephen. He knows that. It will be worth it.

Tony takes calming breathes as he teases Stephen and fingers him open. He is liberal with the lube. He wants the doctor dripping.

"When we're done and you're full of my cum, I should plug you up. Keep it in you all night till we wake up." Tony muses and Stephen clenches hard around his fingers. Definitely up for more extended scenes then, Tony thinks.

"You like that? You like the idea of me waking you up, taking the plug you out and taking you still loose and full of my cum?" Tony asks as he withdraws his fingers. Stephen's hole clenches, trying to catch his fingers. Tony steps in a little closer and start to rub his cock against the wet hole and
Stephen moans and trembles.

"Please, please God, please sir." Stephen breathes out when Tony doesn't fill him up straight away. Tony wants to tease him more but he can see the tension, the difficulty Stephen is having keeping his arms up and honestly, he is having trouble keeping himself at bay.

He goes slow. Gentle. It's going to be a hard fuck, but he wants to make it good for both of them. So he goes slow and watches carefully to make sure there is no tension in Stephen's shoulders. He does clench his fists, which Tony doesn't think is from pain, but he does stop.

"Stephen, fingers on the wall. I don't want them cramping up." Tony tells him firmly. Stephen straightens them up almost immediately. Tony kisses him on the neck again for that and Stephen's head drops further down as if to give him better access. Tony holds the doctor's slim hips in his hands and slowly moves until they are flush, hip to hip and he is completely hilted inside of the doctor.

"Is that better? You feel full?" Tony asks, his voice dripping with heat. Stephen moans and nods his head before he can find his voice.

"Yes Sir." Tony isn't sure if he is ever going to get sick of hearing that in Stephen's beautiful, velvety voice. He doubts it. He waits until Stephen's hole is loose and relaxed around him before he leans in and bites Stephen on the shoulder. Just nibbling. But Stephen's loud moan suggests that he knows exactly what Tony is communicating.

It's easy for Tony to hold his own pleasure back when he dominates. Because it becomes all about control and the pleasure and reaction from the submissive for him. So though Stephen feels hot and wonderful around him and is so beautiful against the wall, Tony knows he can fuck him for a long while before he will be overwhelmed with his own pleasure.

But Stephen's not going to last long against that wall. So Tony lets himself go more than he normally would in a situation like this. He fucks into Stephen, fast and hard, his hips snapping sharply against Stephen with every thrust and Stephen starts to moan and whimper and pant and the litany of noises the doctor makes are so hot that Tony isn't sure if he actually could have held on.

Tony comes before he had intended to and when he does, it's so intense that he has to catch himself with a hand against the wall to keep himself from squashing Stephen against the wall. It takes him a moment to catch his breath. He keeps himself firmly in Stephen as he reaches around and grabs Stephen's hard, quivering cock. He only has to pump him twice before Stephen comes with a cry and coats the wall with his cum.

"Lower your arms Stephen." Tony tells him softly with a kiss, holding him tightly around the chest and the waist. For a moment, Stephen doesn't move, but when he does, his arms aren't lowered as much as they fall. They shake badly. It's not surprising given the amount of time they'd been up there for and the intensity of the scene.

Pain or extreme bondage or action isn't what makes a scene intense. It's the headspace and for both of them, that had been a fairly intense scene. Tony runs soothing hands down Stephen's arms, pulls out of him and leads Stephen to the sofa and lays him down on it.

"You were so good Stephen. So beautiful." Tony tells him and covers him up with a blanket and positions them so that he can cradle Stephen in his arms and kiss him. Stephen responds sloppily to the kiss, but he responds.

"I'm gonna go and get a bath ready and I'm going to massage your arms and then we are going to
sleep. Is that okay or is there something else you need?” Tony asks but Stephen just kisses him in response. Good enough an answer, Tony thinks.

In the morning, they'll talk about how the scene went. Whether Stephen got what he needed or wanted. Whether they should incorporate that sort of thing to their regular sexual interactions or not. But for now, Tony was satisfied and from the looks of it, Stephen was too.

It was definitely going to be a good weekend.

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Friday

26 February 2010

Stephen is having a relatively good week. He'd been on the busier side. The trip to India halfway at the beginning of the week to sort out a few patients certainly didn't help.

But knowing that there were patients that were going to live because of him? Fantastic. And the worm inside of the spinal column was definitely on the interesting side.

In all honesty, aside from the grief that hits him every now and then like a truck, between the relationship with Tony, his work and the Order, Stephen actually feels good. He was still surprised by Tony's acceptance of him and the secrets that he was keeping and rationally Tony still had problems with that, but knowing that Tony had enough affection for him that it overrode that to a certain extent?

It was... amazing.

The last weekend had been amazing too. Filled with a lot of work, surprisingly and Tony had gone on an impromptu mission in Colorado with a terrorist threat situation by the request of the local government, which had also been on the interesting side.

But it worked out quite well for everyone involved and the press that Iron Man got was on a positive note so that was good too. They didn't manage to make any headway into the neural interface issue simply because Iron Man work as well as the programming for JARVIS and assigning the servers as well as the Stark Tower is what had them occupied.

They also had planned to work on the Universal Translator, but they hadn't gotten around to that either. There just was a lot of things that they wanted to do and could do but they didn't pressure themselves too much to work because honestly? The weekends were fast becoming...

Time to spend together. To relax. They worked hard during the week to take the time off between Thursday to Sundays. So they did spend time just relaxing, laying around the bed or watching movies or Star Trek mostly and just... enjoying each other's company.

It was everything that Stephen had dreamed of but had never thought that he would be able to have. And it was... all the more precious because he knew that the peace wouldn't last.

Slowly, the Arc Reactor was poisoning Tony. He doesn't feel it yet. He won't until the metal build-up is high enough to impact on his health. Once it does, Stephen doesn't know exactly what the impact is going to be. He knows that it's going to be bad. But he doesn't know exactly because Palladium poisoning is so incredibly rare because it's a low toxicity compound.

Once the poison works its way into his system and builds up and his kidneys are no longer able to
filter it, Tony is going to get sick. Then he is going to get worse. Stephen arranges a meeting to discuss with the Council what the options will be for them to deal with the situation.

Because now, more than ever, Stephen knows that he can't just stand back and let Tony be in pain. Not when he can do something about it. He also doesn't know what to do about Vanko. He wishes he could just take care of him. He could too.

He could track Vanko down, he could make that man go away. Dump him in the Nightmare Realm for all he cares. But he can't. Vanko brings about War Machine. He is the one that alerts the world and SHIELD to the dangers of the supervillains that will inevitably come with the superheroes.

He is a necessary evil. Just like all the other events that will come their way. They all have a purpose. A reason. The universe doesn't do things without reason. Stephen has to believe that. If he didn't... no. He believes that.

But for now, it's the groundbreaking ceremony on the huge expanse of land where the Stark Tower would stand. The media is gathered and Tony is prepping for the media conference with Pepper and they are going over all the talking points for Stark Industries. He and Clea are present to celebrate the moment with them.

Honestly, the speed at which Tony moves or rather Pepper moves SI to meet the genius's expectations is mindblowing. Yes, it helped that the land was already Tony's and yes, it helped that they already had permission from the New York Council to build a large scale business building. Yes, it also helped that Tony had the funds to make it happen immediately without waiting for a loan.

But getting the schematics for the building set up, finalised and then sent to the City Planners and for the permit to come through and for the ceremony to be held in less than a month? Yeah. By anyone else's standards, that was a miracle. By Tony's standards, that was just normal.

"Did we ever speed through a building process for one of our hotels this fast?" Stephen asks Anderson, who'd come as a courtesy considering the partnership Stephen had thrown D'Arte into with Stark Industries with the U-Gin Genetics Centre.

"No. I think our quickest turn around was 3 months." Kenneth tells him drily. Stephen knows that there wasn't any bribery or anything like that involved at least. It was connections if nothing else when it came to Tony. That and the huge influx of jobs and money that having Stark Industries Headquarters in New York would bring.

It was a move from the LA office, fair, but it wasn't just a move. It was an expansion for the company as well with more focus on medical, tech and science research to be focused on New York whilst the defence work remained within LA. As did most of the manufacturing.

"Thank you all for coming!" Tony says as he steps up to the podium and Stephen gives him a smile. He doesn't think it too presumptuous of him to think that Tony searches for his face in the crowd. There are no chairs. Tony doesn't like drawn out ceremonies, so it is more a party atmosphere than anything else.

There are cocktail waiters wading through the crowd to hand out the champagne. As expected in any Stark Industries function.

"New York's my home. I grew up here and Stark Industries grew up here. So I am pleased to announce that we are coming back." Tony says to the cheer of the crowd. It isn't the polite applause that you would find in most functions either. Everyone is more than familiar with Tony and his
expectations.

Tony is quick and efficient. He announces that the Tower will be running on clean energy from the Arc Reactor. He explains that the building will have the smallest carbon blueprint possible with the use of rainwater collection, gardens, efficient use of power as well as be the first smart business building in the world with JARVIS.

It's JARVIS's introduction that really wows the crowd. His voice pops through the speakers and everyone oohs and ahhs. Then, of course, Tony has to do something that no one has been expecting.

"I can't very well talk about JARVIS and the fact that there is an AI system out here in the world that will understand human emotions, reactions and interactions without talking about the man that helped JARVIS to take that step." Tony says and Stephen is already shaking his head, but of course, Tony just ignores him and moves right along.

"He wants to show you off. It's so sweet!" Clea squeals next to him. He could kill her.

"Everyone knows him for his medical research and his work as a neurosurgeon. But the man's also a coder almost as brilliant as myself. Almost. Dr Stephen Strange." Tony announces and there is no way that he can avoid it. Stephen sighs, hands his champagne glass over to Clea and makes his way to the podium.

Tony shakes his hand, all very professional and chuckles softly as he leans in close.

"I'm disappointed you didn't see this coming." Tony tells him with a whispered voice. Stephen sighs.

"I hate you." Stephen fires back and they straighten and pose for the photos for a moment before they separate.

"Dr Strange! Did you have a background in programming?" One of the journalists are quick to fire off.

"Yes. I studied programming at Harvard." Stephen replies when the mic is handed to him.

"In fact, Stephen has a doctorate in it. Because he's an overachiever." Tony teases him and Stephen rolls his eyes. God, he hates interviews and press stuff. Once he had enjoyed the limelight, but now, he really prefers the quiet.

"Dr Strange also has a doctorate in Linguistics and well versed in philosophy, morals and ethics." JARVIS chimes in. Stephen can kill them both. But it's a good way to show just how interactive JARVIS can be.

"Dr Strange, do you have any concerns that JARVIS can become a rogue AI system like Skynet for example?" Another journalist shouts out. Stephen shrugs his shoulders and turns to one of the cameras that had been set up for JARVIS.

"You want to take that JARVIS?" Stephen suggests and the AI is quick to respond.

"Mr Stark has ensured that my primary directive, the most fundamental part of my programming is set to ensure the safety, wellbeing and happiness of the humans in my care. Currently, I am tasked with looking after the welfare of Mr Stark, Ms Potts, Dr Strange, Ms Strange as well as other regular persons that enter the Malibu Mansion. I have also been studying the questions about morals, ethics and different philosophical points of discussion with Dr Strange. It has been very enlightening thus far." JARVIS is very eloquent and it is clear that the journalists are fascinated.
"So you aren't about to go for world domination JARVIS?" The question draws out laughter. Stephen chuckles softly as JARVIS answers.

"Ms Clemens, I do believe that would be both counteractive to looking after the welfare of those that I am tasked to protect and also a great deal of work. I prefer to keep my processors focused on ensuring that Mr Stark does not blow up the lab again." JARVIS chimes and the laughter is all the way around. As is Tony's indignant sigh.

"That was once J. Once." Tony fires back. It is clear though he is incredibly proud and fond of JARVIS and what he has been able to achieve. Stephen is too.

"You know what, how about this. Because I don't want to stand up here all night when there's a party to be had, I'll organise a chance for you to speak to JARVIS and learn more about him later. For now, let's call it a night with the mics." Tony says and everyone is happy enough.

Tony leads Stephen off stage and when Stephen glares at him, Tony laughs.

"Hey, I told Clea about the plan. Why do you think you were standing so close to the stage? Blame her if you didn't get the memo." Tony tells him. They are in public enough that they keep the heat and the flirting out of their voices and their eyes. But the fond smile is enough. Stephen sighs.

"I'm going to come up with a nasty surprise for her. As for JARVIS, I might have to mess with his speech functions or something. Make him call you daddy for a week or something." Stephen suggests drily and Tony bursts out into laughter just as Pepper joins him.

"Well done both of you and now, Tony, you need to make some rounds. Stephen, if you don't mind, can you maybe spend some time with the journalists and make sure no one tricks JARVIS into saying that he wants to wipe out humanity or something please?" Pepper asks and Stephen is more than happy to comply. He nods and they spread out through the crowd.

Stephen doesn't know if there was ever a coming-out party like this for JARVIS, but he likes it. The set up a little terminal where people can go up to ask JARVIS questions, though he has enough mics and cameras set up to be able to monitor the whole room.

It's also a test to see how JARVIS would handle a crowd situation and from the looks of it, he was doing quite well. Stephen couldn't be prouder.

"JARVIS, do you really see everything that happens in Tony Stark's house?" One of the female journalists are asking JARVIS as Stephen approaches the terminal.

"Yes, Ms Blunt. I do." JARVIS answers her easily enough. The camera on the terminal moves as his approach.

"Dr Strange, I have taken the liberty of ensuring that some soothing green tea has been prepared for you. A waiter has been instructed to bring it to you." JARVIS chimes at him. Stephen chuckles.

"Thank you JARVIS. How are you finding the crowd? Algorithms working okay?" Stephen checks just in case and JARVIS responds quite cheerfully.

"It is a larger crowd than previous experiments, but I am able to keep up with the situation Dr Strange. And I am keeping an eye on Ms Clea for you." JARVIS informs him.

"Good. If she gets to her fifth glass of wine, please alert me." Stephen tells him drily. The last thing they need is a drunk sorcerer in a room full of reporters and the city's elite. He doubts that Clea would go that far, but these days she had a tendency of getting... sad when she drank. Grief had a
"Of course Doctor." JARVIS happily agrees. The reporters crowd in to ask more questions to JARVIS and Stephen is honestly glad to know that he isn’t at the centre of the attention.

Until one particular reporter waltzes up and puts a camera and a mic in his face.

"Dr Strange, your friendship and close working relationship with Mr Stark has become the centre of attention in the recent months through celebrity magazines. How do you feel about working so closely with a bisexual man?" Stephen blinks. He just blinks because... what?

"I'm sorry? What does that have anything to do with-" It's 2010. Stephen is aware that there are prejudices out there but surely the question of friendship when it comes to sexuality shouldn't be an issue at this time and age. The other reporters go quiet.

"It's a well-known fact that Mr Stark is a playboy and bisexual at that. You're a handsome man and there's bound to be some attraction from his side. Does that make you uncomfortable?" The woman asks and Stephen has to remind himself of what their public narrative is.

He has to remind himself to remain calm and just sigh.

"Ma'am-" He starts. JARVIS interrupts him.

"Ms Hansen from The Star, Dr Strange." The AI informs him. Oh well then. After sensational journalism. Stephen really doesn't want to give them any fodder. Especially when she was trying to pigeon hole Tony and paint a picture of Tony making others uncomfortable with his sexual preferences? Yeah no.

"Thank you JARVIS. Ms Hansen, Dr Stark is a genius and his mind is absolutely amazing. Working with him is both an honour and a pleasure. I have never been nor am I ever uncomfortable working with Dr Stark." Stephen tells her and isn’t too surprised to find Pepper and Clea heading his way. JARVIS must have alerted them. He has a feeling that Tony might follow them shortly.

"Mr Stark is known for his-" Stephen sighs and looks at the woman.

"Ms Hansen, if you want gossip or information about Dr Stark's private life, you really will have to find someone else to speak to. I'm not interested." Stephen informs her. One of the other reporters thankfully draws his attention with a dark look towards Hansen.

"Dr Strange, speaking of your working relationship with Mr Stark, he's known to the media as a fun-loving party sort of person, but how do you find him as a colleague?" She asks and Stephen chuckles.

"Relentless. It's... It's easy to fall into the deep dark rabbit hole of science and tech and programming that I think there are times we literally forget to eat or take breaks. Without JARVIS, we might have starved to death at various points I think." Stephen says and he sort of means that.

Even with their current relationship, when they were deep in working mode, it was only JARVIS that really managed to snap them out to eat and take breaks. That hadn't changed.

"Do you ever get to work on the Iron Man suit?" Another journalist pops up and Stephen doesn't quite know what Tony wants him to say there. JARVIS, who apparently has the script, intervenes.

"Dr Strange has assisted in the programming for many of the suit's functions. Especially the Heads Up Display." The impressed gasp goes through the crowd. Stephen doesn't enjoy the attention.
"Alright ladies and gents, enough barraging the poor doctor. He's just getting used to dealing with the lot of you. Now, how about we all just enjoy the free booze and the party?" Tony suggests as he comes along and draws the attention away.

"No, I meant it when I said no questions ladies. Come on Stephen, your tea's gone cold and I'm wondering-" Stephen rolls his eyes at him.

"Dido. Thank you. 12 December 2000 as a CD Single, recorded in 1998 The Church Studios, London." Stephen says because he is all too familiar with the game.

"Correct Dr Strange." JARVIS chimes in. Tony sighs.

"The game is only fun if you don't also have a photographic memory." Stephen grumbles at the man. He really shouldn't have told the man about his surgical days and how he used to play games with the music that they played in the theatre.

"My photographic memory is how I remember that you told me that story. Besides, you're the one that told me that I wouldn't be able to find any song or lyric that you don't know." Tony tells him and Stephen sighs. He'd forgotten how competitive that Tony can be.

But as they talk, Tony is leading him away from the reporters and for that, he is grateful. Until the realisation hits him.

"You didn't want me to babysit JARV- you bastard." Stephen sighs. He hadn't been sent to babysit JARVIS. JARVIS had been babysitting him. Making sure that the media didn't get too crazy with him.

"Hey, I saved your arse back there. Got you away from the mean reporters. You should be thanking me." Tony throws back and Stephen shakes his head but he can't help but feel fond of the genius for caring and the foresight. Stephen doesn't quite hide the fond smile from his lips.

He can't.

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The Big Question

Chapter Summary

In every relationship, there are a few big questions that everyone tends to ask.

'Are we exclusive?'

'Do you love me?'

'Will you move in with me?'

Tony is ready to ask one and he is surprised by how it actually comes out.

Chapter Notes

Hello wonderful readers!

I got a good speed going with the rest of the ARC so hopefully I will be finished with it soon and I can do a quick re-write of some of the chapters to make sure that I am fully happy with it.

I can see from the comments that you are all quite enjoying the fluffy goodness XD so thank you and just in case your teeth haven't fallen out yet, I decided to add a little more.

Also if anyone can explain to me how Tumblr works (because I'm ancient and never bothered with tumblr or instagram) that would be great.

<3

Saturday

27 February 2010

Stephen does thanks him.

By God Stephen thanks him. With the most drawn-out, amazing blow job Tony has ever experienced in his life. Stephen is a master at holding Tony at the blink of coming and slowly but surely driving him insane with the sheer pleasure that his presence and his lips can bring.

Tony isn't sure if he's ever had a blow job that lasted that long or had been that intense before, to the point that Tony had literally been a sobbing mess blubbering at Stephen, all but begging to come.

He's also pretty damned sure that given that experience, he is probably completely and utterly ruined for sex for the rest of his life with anyone else. He is fine with that.

More and more, Tony realises that Stephen Strange is fundamental in his life. Tony works with him.
Sleeps with him and for half of the week, he lives with him.

Normally, that sort of realisation should have Tony terrified.

It doesn't. It's taken a while and some people, namely Rhodey and Pepper, would tell him that he was an idiot for not realising it sooner, but Tony knows now that probably from the first time he saw Stephen Strange, he had been falling in love.

And now?

Now he couldn't imagine life without Stephen. He didn't want to. Even with all the secrets and even with all the shit that is happening in their lives. He is at least starting to thin he is certain about one thing at least. Stephen Strange in his life.

"I think if we increase the remote access capabilities through-" Stephen was talking to him about the newest changes they wanted to make to JARVIS's program for when he is integrated into the Tower.

"Move in with me." Tony blurts out. This probably wasn't the most ideal venue for something like this, Tony thinks. It really isn't. Considering the fact that they are on the plane back to LA and that Clea and Pepper were just a few seats in front of them, deeply engaged in conversation.

"I'm sorry?" Stephen questions, as if he couldn't believe what Tony had just said. Honestly? Neither could Tony. But that's fine. He doesn't regret saying the words.

"I mean, I'm not asking you to move your practice to LA or anything. By next year or the year after that, the Tower will be completed and I will be in New York permanently and I realise that I'm kind of asking a lot, but I- I want you to-" Tony is rambling. He does that when he is nervous. Stephen puts a stop to it by kissing him. It's a passionate, enthusiastic kiss.

It feels like yes.

"I mean, you've kind of already been living at the mansion and I thought maybe we can make it more official. I have a place in New York that I'll get sorted out and we can live there when we're in New York and or there's always the-" Tony honestly can't stop talking. Stephen kisses him again.

This time, the kiss is lingering and warm and calming. Stephen regulates Tony's breathing with the kiss. Forcing him to calm down. By the time Stephen peels away, Tony feels a little dazed and more than a little aroused. Stephen gives him a soft smile.

"I would love to Anthony. If you are sure." Stephen tells him, his voice filled with joy. Tony likes that. Hearing that warmth, that happiness in his voice. Tony smiles back.

"Yeah. I'm sure." Tony all but whispers back, dazed still. Both by the kiss and the fact that Stephen had agreed. It's the first time he'd ever asked anyone to move in with him. His other lovers had asked instead and he'd always just... let them. But with Stephen, though they have more or less been living together, he had wanted to ask. To make it more... permanent. To make sure that Stephen knew that.

"Pepper, get the champagne please." Tony asks, loudly enough, still focused on Stephen and not quite being able to look away. The joy in Stephen's face is addictive.

"On it." Pepper says. Tony hadn't asked for any flight attendants. He preferred the flight to be just about the four of them and enjoying their time together. Not about worrying about other people. He's glad that he hadn't.
"Wait. What's going on?" Clea asks looking at the two of them. Though he'd told Pepper about the idea of asking Stephen to officially move in, they'd been talking quietly, so Tony knows that Clea hasn't heard them.

"Stephen's moving in with me." Tony tells her and Clea smiles widely and looks at both of them with glee in her eyes. She claps her hands and all but coos at them. Tony isn't sure whether he is insulted by that or not. He leans towards not though he does consider being offended for a moment. He can't. He's too pleased.

"Ohh that's so sweet! Did you ask us to come to LA just so you can pop that question?" Clea asks and Tony rolls his eyes at her. But he can't help but feel fond of her and her antics.

"No. I asked you to come to LA because Pepper wants to go to a male strip show." Tony tells her with a wriggle of his eyebrows. Clea squeals.

"Oh my god!!! Yes!" She squeals and hugs Pepper as soon as she is back from the kitchenette with the champagne and glasses for all of them. Pepper laughs and between the two ladies, they pour the champagne and they drink to celebrate.

"I was thinking of organising for one of the spare bedrooms to be turned into an office for Stephen for medical emergencies. I figured that he can do consults over video conferences, if he needed to." Tony suggests and Clea nods thoughtfully once they've cheered and gotten some champagne in themselves.

"That's a good point actually. As long as we can get the scans sorted out, there is actually no reason for Stephen to see his patients face to face. Most of the consults he does outside of the country is with doctors anyway. Not really with the patients." Clea says as she looks over the schedule.

"That means I can probably make sure that Stephen can be in LA from Wednesday night through to Sundays without much drama. I will have to organise for the overseas consults and other consults in the country to occur via video conferencing. I'll contact the doctors we deal with." Clea says efficiently as Pepper looks over Tony's schedule herself.

"I can fix up your schedule and make sure that all the meetings and appointments happen from Monday to Wednesday as well. Blackout from Thursday to Sunday as your workshop days." Pepper adds and Tony turns to look at Stephen to make sure he is okay with the way that everything is going.

It's already been that way for a while for both of their schedules but it has been a more of a week by week basis rather than a permanent arrangement.

It's odd to be thinking about such permanence with anyone in his life, but it feels right. Stephen gives him a warm smile and there is so much emotion in his eyes that Tony can't help but reach over and kiss him again.

He wishes he could take Stephen into the bedroom at the back of the plane. He wishes he could just be home right now with the man and be able to worship the man that's decided that Tony was worthy of being trusted again with his heart despite the damage that Tony knows he has caused. He wants to thank him.

There are still going to be problems in their relationship. Tony knows that. He knows that there is history there and that Stephen will have moments where he doubts Tony's affections for him and the truth of his feelings for him and Tony was going to have to do a hell of a lot to make sure that Stephen feels secure in Tony's affections. He will.
"You guys are sickeningly sweet." Clea announces with a groan even as she pulls out her phone and takes a photo. Pepper giggles. The atmosphere in the plane is almost... too sweet. Too happy. Tony feels that irrational fear that the happiness will break and he's not sure how he can cope with going from such a high to a low again.

"So are you two coming with us to the show?" Clea asks but Tony shakes his head. He has plans for Stephen. Those plans included a strip show of their own at the very least. Stephen chuckles softly as he can read Tony's thoughts.

"I think they're gonna be busy Clea. How about you stay with me for the weekend?" Pepper suggests and Clea giggles and nods.

"Yes, please. I don't think I can deal with them." The teasing is sweet and Tony is more than happy to be the target of it. For now, he is just happy.

The flight isn't very long and by the time they are ready to land, Clea and Pepper are buzzed with the alcohol and more than ready to paint the town red before and after the show. Tony is buzzed with warm heat of desire in his stomach and when the ladies are off the plane and the pilot is getting ready to park the plane, Tony makes his decision.

"How about you ladies go ahead without us. Get Happy to drive you. We'll take care of ourselves." Tony suggests. Pepper and Clea give him a look as if they know exactly what he is planning, but they agree and leave the plane. Stephen chuckles as Tony turns to look at him with heat in his eyes.

"Jackson, take us to the hanger and come back in an hour or so." Tony suggests to the pilot without even looking. Jackson has been working for him long enough that Tony trusts his discretion.

"Not exactly mile high club Anthony." Stephen tells him drily. Tony raises his eyebrows and advances on the man. Despite his tone, Stephen's eyes are already dilated and he doesn't protest being pulled out of his seat and driven to the back of the plane and into the bedroom.

"When we get home, I'm going to pull you apart slowly. Have you writhing on the bed, begging for me to fuck you. But right now, I'm going to plug you up so you're nice and ready for me. I'm going to see if you can come just from my fingers." Tony tells him and he goes into the bedside table to pull the plug out.

He prepared.

He'd been thinking about this for far too long, maybe. But it doesn't matter. Tony pushes Stephen down onto the bed and Stephen is more than happy to go on all fours as Tony slowly undoes his pants.

"I'm going to keep you full of my cum all night Stephen. Till you can't take anymore. Would you like that?" Tony asks him, his voice filled with heat and desire. Stephen moans.

Tony leans down to kiss Stephen's buttocks as they are revealed to him. He kisses each cheek and caresses them with his hands, kneading the soft flesh between them. Stephen really does have a nice butt. Soft skin but firm and well-toned. Pale as the rest of the doctor, but Tony likes him that way.

One day, he's going to clean the doctor out and he is going to eat him out, but for now, he lays a kiss on Stephen's tailbone. He is generous with the lube. The plug isn't huge. He wants Stephen to be comfortable. Tony is generous with the lube too. If he wants a long weekend of fucking Stephen,
he's going to have to be careful with the man.

Stephen takes the first finger easily and beautifully. He moans and as Tony fingers him slowly with the finger. Tony's jeans are so tight that it almost hurts. He's really not sure how he is going to last through seeing Stephen come. But he wants to.

"Do you think our driver is going to notice that you're plugged up, ready to be fucked?" Tony asks because he knows that Stephen likes the dirty talk. Tony does too. It drives up the desire within both of them. Stephen moans his reply.

Tony allows a second finger to join the first and he starts to scissor Stephen open. His fingers careful but firm and grazing ever so lightly over Stephen's prostate.

He loves the way Stephen feels inside. It's an odd thing to like, perhaps, but he loves the way that Stephen's walls clench around his fingers as if wanting to hold them inside of himself. He loves how silky and soft the inside walls feel.

More than that, he loves how fingering makes Stephen moan and pant and arch his back with desire. Tony moves them so that he can pull Stephen up so that his back was flush against Tony's front and he can kiss the doctor's neck and his jaw and his lips.

Stephen holds onto him with an arm thrown back and around his neck and Tony smiles as he kisses the corner of Stephen's mouth. The doctor was most definitely having a good day as far as his hands were going. Tony could feel the steady fingers against his nape.

By the time Tony has three fingers deep inside of Stephen, the doctor is moaning heavily and falling forward to bury his head in his arms. There is a thin layer of sweat that makes the thin sweater Stephen is wearing stick to his back and Tony loves it.

He loves that he can reduce Stephen into this state. Tony isn't quite sure how long he fingers the doctor for. He doesn't care. He is so hard that he is desperate to come, but watching Stephen writhing on his fingers? That's amazing enough.

Besides, from the way that Stephen is trembling and moaning, he isn't going to last much longer. Tony massages the prostate with his fingers, lightly drumming them on it. Keeping the rhythm irregular and switching from hitting hard to barely grazing it.

"Come for me baby. Come on." Tony all but coos at the doctor and he does. Stephen comes hard onto the bedsheets and Tony feels Stephen's hole clench hard around him and for a moment, he's tempted to throw all his plans out the window and fuck into that tight heat.

He doesn't. He waits until Stephen stops coming and relaxes around him and it's all too easy to slip the plug into him then. Stephen moans and shudders underneath him.

"How does it feel? Not too tight?" Tony asks because it's good to communicate and he knows that he has to be careful with Stephen. The only response he gets is a moan and the doctor falling to his side.

Stephen looks... debauched.

His pale skin flushed with colour, his eyes barely open and filled with the afterglow. With just his pants down to his knees, Stephen looks well fucked and honestly... beautiful. Tony crawls over the bed and kisses the pliant lips underneath him. Stephen sluggishly responds before he gathers himself.
"Let me suck you off. Please." Stephen slurs at him and Tony feels his body tighten with heady desire.

"Stephen, I can wait till-" Stephen paws at him. His hands are trembling lightly with the afterglow and they pull at him and Tony can't say no. He's not sure if this is what Stephen had meant when he said he couldn't deny Tony. But he finds that it really was hard to deny Stephen. Especially when it was about sex. Besides, he wants it.

"I want your cock in my mouth Tony. I want to taste you." Stephen tells him and it's really the 'Tony' that does it. And the way that Stephen flips them over expertly and pins him down. Where the doctor keeps that sort of strength, Tony is yet to find out, but man he loves it.

"You're going to have to teach me that move." Tony muses as the doctor kisses his neck and no doubt leaves a mark. Tony is so turned on that it's hard to think clearly, let alone speak, but Stephen is a great motivator.

He opens Tony's pants up just enough to get his cock out. There is no preamble. All he gets is a light kiss on the tip of his cock before Stephen swallows him down. Tony arches his back and it takes all of his willpower not to pull at the doctor's hair.

Tony can feel Stephen's nose against his pubic hair and it is so incredibly hot. When he manages to open his eyes and look down, he almost comes right then and there at the image. The doctor is looking up at him, his eyes almost a pool of black with desire and his mouth filled with Tony's cock.

Fuck.

Stephen slowly pulls up, knowing that Tony is watching and he starts to put on a show and Tony is so, so very glad that the bedroom is soundproofed and that he'd left all the lights on and the pilot had made sure that the engine was still on because he can't stop moaning and crying out between the pants.

Tony doesn't close his eyes even when he comes deep down in Stephen's throat because he wants to remember the image forever. Even if they have another thousand moments like this, Tony thinks, he's going to remember this.

The way that Stephen had sat back onto his haunches and threw his head back as the plug hit his prostate and he'd been hard already again as the put themselves back together. The way that he had tasted himself on Stephen's lips as they kissed.

Thousand times more may not be enough, Tony thinks. It will never be enough.

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Sunday

28 February 2010

The cum leaks out of him and flows down his thighs. It's warm from his own body temperature and the heat of the cock moving inside of him.

Tony keeps his promise.

The morning sunlight is starting to stream through the window and Stephen's pretty sure that it's ridiculous for two men that aren't teenagers anymore, to be fucking like this all through the night until the next morning, but here they are.
The well-used plug is sitting on the bed off to the side. With each thrust, the excess cum that had been filling him overflow and spill out with the lube. The sounds that come with each move of Tony's hips are truly obscene.

Stephen can't even remember how many times he'd come. His cock doesn't even produce cum anymore. He'd come so many times that he's dry. He feels so relaxed and contented that he doesn't care.

"God you're so fucking wet Steph." Tony murmurs to him as his hips snap against Stephen's. Stephen smiles at the heat in Tony's voice. They'd fucked all over the house. With Stephen bent over the boxing ring. With Tony laid out over the breakfast table even.

They fucked outside by the pool because they could. Over the billiard table because it was always lovely. Stephen discovered that fucking Tony whilst he is still plugged up and filled with the man's cum is far hotter than it really ought to be.

Tony is careful. He ensures that he doesn't push Stephen too hard. He makes sure that the plug is sufficiently lubed before he takes it out and he checks on Stephen often to make sure that he is comfortable enough. It is... incredibly sweet. Almost overwhelmingly so.

Stephen can't help but feel happy. At the back of his mind, he knows that this is just a start to Tony's journey and that there are so many trials ahead of them and so many times where this could all go wrong.

But he lets himself just enjoy the moment. He knows just how fragile this is. Just how... quickly everything can change. So Stephen reminds himself to enjoy this. This contentment, this joy, this love.

"Tony please- I- I can't-" Stephen almost sobs out as the pleasure threatens to overtake him. Tony leans over to kiss his neck and caress his back.

"Do you need me to stop?" Tony asks him, concern obvious. Stephen shakes his head and turns so that Tony can hopefully see the raw need inside of him. Tony smiles and nods.

"Shh baby. I got you." Tony tells him and aims his thrusts so that they land perfectly on Stephen's overly sensitive prostate and Stephen almost blacks out as the pleasure overtakes him and he comes hard. Nothing comes out of his cock, but he comes. The orgasm spreads through his body. He feels Tony shake as he too comes. Stephen isn't sure if Tony produces any cum either.

He really, really has never fucked this much over a 24 hour period in his life. It feels like all they've done over the day is fuck. There was some take away involved at one point or another, with them feeding each other, but that had led to the breakfast table sex.

Stephen is tired, but he isn't sore. Tony had been considerate enough to make sure he wasn't. His hole was sensitive, yes, but he wasn't torn and he wasn't in pain. He just felt limp and so very relaxed.

Tony helps to lay him down and curls up into the bed next to him.

The bed is an absolute fucking mess. There are cum, lube and sweat everywhere. With each breath that Stephen takes, he can feel the cum leaking out of his hole. It honestly feels decadent to have had a night and now a morning like this.

"You think you can stand up Stephen? We need to get you cleaned up and um... maybe we can use the guest bedroom bed." Tony suggests. The scent of sex and sweat is so heavy in the air and the bed
really is a mess. Stephen chuckles.

"I don't think I've ever been fucked this much in my life." Stephen comments as he does sit up, managing to get his shaking limbs to work. Tony chuckles along with him.

"And we aren't even teenagers." Tony fires back. Stephen chuckles. Loose limbed and uncoordinated, they do make it to the bathroom. They leisurely clean up. Even their lips are chapped and sore from all the kissing, the blow jobs and if they are being honest, from each other's facial hairs.

"I hate to admit it, but I think I might be fucked out." Tony tells him and Stephen smiles and leans down to kiss him anyway. It's a gentle warm kiss that makes Stephen smile.

"So how about we nap and then maybe get some work done?" Stephen suggests. Tony nods back. They aren't quite up to thinking about work, let alone talking about it, but they do make it to the spare bedroom.

When they fall on the bed, it is curled up around each other. Despite the rising sun, they fall asleep in each other's arms.

Knowing that this peace might end soon is what makes Stephen appreciate it even more. He holds Tony tight in his arms.

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Friday

5 March 2010

Director Nicholas Fury of Strategic Homeland Intervention, Enforcement and Logistics Division, otherwise known as SHIELD, frowns.

Tony fucking Stark should have been easy. The psych profile their best profilers generate told him that Tony Stark was vulnerable to manipulation.

He had daddy issues spanning a mile deep in his psyche, ridiculous habits, inability to deal with emotions and has severe trust issues. Coulson with his soft approach, along with SHIELD rescuing him from the rubble and providing him with the alibi should have been enough to earn his gratitude.

Then the idiots had to go and fuck it up by thinking that Tony wouldn't notice his suit being loaded onto their trucks to be taken away for analysis. Mistake one. But the alibi should have been enough to get some gratitude.

Instead, the idiot had to just go and declare to the world that he was fucking Iron Man and actually go out there in the public's eye and act as a superhero.

Then there was the matter of the people he surrounded himself with. Colonel James Rhodes should have been easy to manipulate. He was a military man after all and getting his cooperation to work with SHIELD to keep an eye on Tony and his activities should have been easy.

The man had declined and thrown their very generous offer to advance his career back into their faces. Pepper Potts was worse. When one of their agents had approached her and tried to get her to spy on Tony for them, though not with those words, trying to appeal to her patriotism, she'd threatened to make their more shady activities public.
Fury still didn't know how the fuck she knew about the mutant activity and SHIELD's involvement with them. But there it was.

Stephen Strange was the one that concerned Fury the most. The man wasn't human. He couldn't be. Multiple analysis with both technology and experts told him that Stephen had to be at least 55 years of age. that he was Vincent Strange. But the man didn't look a day over 30.

The only other theory that was viable currently was that the man was a clone. A genetic clone of Vincent Strange that had been put into place by some organisation that they haven't been able to identify as of yet.

When the agents had gone to collect the doctor for questioning, they had returned empty-handed, saying that they hadn't been able to follow the man past the very ample shield that the D'Arte Hotel was for him.

The fact that the doctor is the stepson of Kenneth Anderson, one of the most powerful businessmen in the world doesn't help. The questions over who or what Stephen Strange was something that they could exploit though. Tony couldn't know that his friend and collaborator was more than what he seemed.

Coulson's initial attempt had failed rather miserably. Fury was honestly surprised by his report on how protective the two had seemed of each other. Especially the doctor.

Dr Stephen Strange by reputation and all accounts indicated that he was a professional, arrogant and aloof doctor that was a genius in his field, but not a man that was used to wielding power. Not like Tony.

Nor threatening. But Coulson had reported that he had felt that the doctor was possibly capable of something. That he had felt a sense of danger from the man and Fury didn't doubt it if it was Coulson saying that.

But they had to get close enough to Tony to be able to hit that weakness.

The two geniuses proved to be extremely difficult to track down and get a hold of. Oh, it was obvious that they spent a lot of time in the workshop in the Malibu Mansion, but the security at the mansion was extremely tight and they'd shown their hands enough already that Fury wasn't sure about sending someone directly there again.

Otherwise, Tony's schedule was difficult to obtain and the doctor was just the same. With the public attention on the two men these days, Fury knew that it was a bad idea to force the doctor to come with them and detain him for even a few hours. He has a feeling that Tony Stark won't stand for it anyway.

Which is a surprise. The profile had indicated that Tony Stark doesn't trust easy and more importantly, that he doesn't display affection for other people. But so far, everyone that SHIELD had attempted to approach, Tony was fiercely protective of. And they, in turn, had been protective of Tony.

Fury has a feeling that he'd severely underestimated Tony Stark. He had thought that the man was just a genius in terms of tech and science. Not cunning. But he was. It also doesn't escape his notice that Tony hasn't been partying it up. He shows his face at some galas, but he doesn't go home with women.

He just goes home.
He doesn't drink to excess either. No drugs. Getting an in with Tony Stark was going to be a lot more difficult than Fury had imagined. His friends were a lot more... loyal than their profiles indicated and Tony himself was a lot more complex than Fury had initially judged.

Fury considers his options. Coulson is still his best agent and Fury knows that it would be best to keep Coulson on the case as the formal representative. But he's going to need something a little more to make sure that they get the information they need.

Besides, the energy signature that the Arc Reactor puts out is very similar to that of the Tesseract and they simply need to know more. What did Tony Stark have on his hands with the Arc reactor and the Iron Man suit?

Fury doesn't think Tony is going to be a problem per se, but he is too powerful both as a businessman and as a superhero. They need to keep close tabs on him and make sure that he can be controlled.

Iron Man and by extension Tony Stark was a weapon and SHIELD had to make sure that they were the ones aiming it.

So far, it wasn't working. Fury hates to waste resources, but he has a distinct feeling that he's going to need to bring out his best. She wasn't going to be happy to be pulled from her current work, but this is more important.

"Hill, call Romanov. I got a job for her." He says into the intercom. If nothing else, Romanov is just Tony's type and she knows how to pull men apart with just her pinkie finger.

Tony Stark would never see it coming.

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Conspiracy Theories

Chapter Summary

SHIELD is being SHIELD.

Which means they are up to no good.

But when they discover one of Stephen's many secrets and holds it over him... Stephen has a choice to make.

Tell Tony before SHIELD does or... not.

Chapter Notes

I... did a thing.

By which I mean I re-wrote 24 chapters of this story. Or rather is in the process of re-writing 24 chapters of this story. Which is why this update is a little late.

Kinda had to double check and make sure I was happy with how this chapter flows and goes with the rest of the ARC. I think it does...?

I really didn't mean for SHIELD to come out as such a baddie but the more I watch the MCU over and over again, especially back to back and watch Fury and Natasha etc the more I kind of realise just how immoral and unethical they are.

Essentially, if you look at it, SHIELD knows that Tony is poisoned that he thinks he is dying and they don't do anything about it until they have him in a position of such vulnerability and emotional and mental break down that he is easy to manipulate. That he would feel like he owes them something for them 'saving his life' or 'helping him'.

I find that reprehensible.

I personally am horrible at manipulating people. I have done it. Sometimes as a part of my job and every time I do it, even if the end result is a good one, I feel bad and horrible afterwards. Generally, when you're trying to convince a person with a serious mental health problem on a psychotic break trying to hurt themselves, there is pretty much nothing that is off the table. That's pretty much the only time I go for manipulation tactics. Even knowing that my intentions are good and knowing that all I was doing was trying to help someone...

It doesn't change the fact that I used someone's emotions or kept them distracted long enough for the cops to subdue them etc.

In another words, I don't approve of Natasha Romanov and Fury for what they do in IM2. So. If you were expecting a warm reception to those two in this ARC... um... you are probably going to be disappointed.

Having said that, I also won't be bashing any characters. Both Fury and Natasha are also
products of their environment. Natasha through her training in the Red Room as well as her work with SHIELD has conditioned her to behave in certain ways and manipulation etc is just the norm for her whilst Fury, a former CIA spy, is in the same boat.

They have hammers and everything looks like nails. All they know is how to hammer. They really need to learn to use a screw driver and find some screws. We might be able to get them to do that in this project. Not sure.

Also, I know everyone is eagerly waiting to see how Loki would fit into this project. I put the threesome tag in because I didn't want to mislead anyone that say... reads up to ARC 3 to find out it's not just Stephen/Tony but Stephen/Tony/Loki. Loki will be making an appearance in this ARC but romance wise probably not progress very far.

I am trying very hard to treat all the characters fairly and trying to make sure that I try to figure out motivations behind the characters actions etc but I will be honest. Odin fucking sucks and I can't justify his existence. I tried. I really did. I wrote 7k words to try. I give up. Fuck Odin and my wasted time.

.... and I just ranted on and on and on.

I am so sorry.

Hope you enjoy the new chapter. At least the chapter is also long? >__<

Monday

7 March 2010

Mondays are always hard.

Leaving Tony behind after the weekend had been incredibly difficult. It had a lot to do with the fact that Stephen still found it hard to believe that Tony wanted a more permanent relationship with him and he wanted to stay with Tony to confirm and reconfirm that it was the case.

But Stephen is a responsible adult and responsible adults don't get to do just what they wanted to do. Even if it meant that their last moments together had been spent curled up on the living room sofa kissing like teenagers.

It's time to work, Stephen reminds himself as he walks into his practice and the moment he does, he knows that something is wrong. He feels the hairs at the back of his neck go up and he tenses.

If he is honest, Stephen is both surprised and not surprised to find Agent Coulson sitting in his office as if he has been waiting patiently for an appointment.

SHIELD's interest in him had been obvious and he knew that they would come to talk to him soon. He hadn't realised that they would be this direct about it. But then Tony and he really hadn't given them any other choice. Clea tenses behind him.

"Clea, how about you go and get some coffee for Agent Coulson and myself?" Stephen suggests and Clea doesn't argue. She knows him well enough to know that tone of voice and what it implies. It's a command from the Sorcerer Supreme to a member of the Order. Not Stephen talking to his niece.
"Of course. Any preferences sir?" Clea asks instead, her voice sweet and mild. The government man looks a little surprised and taken aback but he smiles easily in that mild-mannered way that makes him seem innocuous when he is anything but.

"Just plain black will be fine Ms Strange." The man says and Clea closes the door behind her as she leaves. Stephen casually walks into the office and puts down the briefcase he had brought in by his desk. He moves to turn on the holotable to make sure that it is ready to go for the first patient that should come in about ten to fifteen minutes.

"So, to what do I owe this surprise visit?" Stephen says as he settles in front of his computer. He keeps his movements, his voice and his demeanour nice and casual. As if he has nothing to worry about. And honestly? He doesn't. If Coulson tries anything, he is going to find out just what the Sorcerer Supreme could do and more importantly, Stephen can ensure that he does not leave the room with any information.

But despite that, Stephen feels better once he is seated and he has the desk between the agent and himself. He can hide the badly shaking hands.

He is definitely having a bad day.

"You don't seem very surprised for someone who claims that they are." Coulson says and Stephen raises an eyebrow and turns his computer on to get all the systems going.

"I'm a doctor Agent Coulson. We deal very well with surprises, emergencies and generally, unexpected situations." Stephen tells him easily enough as he picks up his phone when he notices that it is 8:00am. Tony usually calls him during this time of the morning.

"I see. You must have an idea as to why I would be interested in speaking to you Dr Strange." Coulson's tone is mild and it is difficult to read. The man really does have a good poker face going at least, Stephen thinks. Just on time, the phone rings.

"My apologies Agent Coulson. One moment." Stephen says as he answers the phone and isn't too surprised to hear a groggy voice from the other end.

"Morning." Tony says as he yawns into the phone. This has been the routine since he'd returned to New York after the funeral.

Each morning, when Tony wakes up and before Stephen starts to work, Tony calls him. Even though it's 5:00am over there. Stephen knows that Tony usually goes back to sleep after the phone call, which means that the genius has to make a conscious effort to call him.

He knows that JARVIS wakes him up for the phone call and that Tony is probably laying in bed lounging about as he talks into the thin air of the room. But he wakes up in the middle of his sleeping cycle for a morning phone call with him.

It's incredibly sweet.

"Good morning Dr Stark." Stephen replies shortly and keeps his voice neutral and almost professional. Tony notices almost immediately.

"Someone's there with you." Tony says and his voice sounds alert.

"Yes. Got an unexpected guest. How about I give you a call at lunchtime? Should be around
10:00am for you. Unless you have a meeting?" Stephen asks, his voice nonchalant. Coulson isn't the only one with a studied poker face.

"Stephen, if you're in trouble, you need to let me know." Tony tells him seriously and Stephen can hear the genius getting out of bed. Stephen feels bad that he had caused alarm, but he knows that it would be worse if he didn't answer the phone at all.

"It's fine. Do you mind taking a look at the program I wrote for the MediHelp application for the Starkphones? I'm pretty sure I got everything squared away, but a second look would be good." Stephen suggests because talking about work is so much easier. As always.

"Sure. If something bad is happening, press the turn sound down button on the phone for 10 seconds. I'll get an alert." Tony tells him seriously and Stephen chuckles.

"Sure. Talk to you soon." Stephen hangs up the phone, puts it down on the table and gives Coulson his best pleasant smile.

"My apologies. Dr Stark usually checks in with me in the mornings." Stephen informs him and he can see Coulson thinking. The man may be able to hold a great poker face, but by gods, his eyes are telling.

"No problems, Dr Strange. However, I do want to know... what is your relationship with Tony Stark?" He asks and Stephen raises an eyebrow at him.

"I don't see how that is any of your concern." Stephen tells him nice and coolly as he had done in the media conference just a little while ago.

"It is our concern when you are not Stephen Strange." The man says coolly and Stephen leans back into his chair and looks at the agent, trying to gauge just how much he knows.

The files that SHIELD has on Stephen and the other members of the Order are being monitored by Diaz, who works at SHIELD. But there are higher level intelligence going on that would require further intervention than what Diaz is able to do without raising suspicion.

So this was in a way, a good opportunity for Stephen to figure out just what SHIELD knew and what they were planning to do.

"Oh? Who am I then?" Stephen asks and Coulson pulls out a folded bundle of papers, comes to the desk and puts it down in front of Stephen. He then sits down in one of the two comfortable chairs Stephen has set up for the patients to sit in.

"I'm sure as a doctor, you will recognise what these are." The agent says. Stephen does. And the emotions that come from that... It takes effort for Stephen to stay calm and rational. It is so very difficult to keep up the doctor persona when he wants to just... No.

"You took Caroline and Matthew Strange's DNA." Stephen says and even to him, his voice sounds cold as ice and filled with fury that he doesn't quite know how to deal with. Had Coulson been a Potential or a sorcerer, he would have shuddered.

The room fills with the storm of dimensional energies that Stephen has to hold back. If he had less control, the room would be in chaos with just the sheer amount of power that his anger had pulled into the room.

The paperwork shows it.
SHIELD had collected his parents DNAs, *without* permission, *without* any of them, as the family members, knowing about it and have run DNA analysis and comparison on them and on him.

He figures they collected his DNA from the skin cell deposits in his keyboard or something similar considering the fact that he's pretty sure that he had never given permission to anyone other than Tony to take a sample of his DNA.

Which means they did that too illegally and illicitly unless they somehow were able to justify what they did to a judge and obtained a warrant. Stephen highly doubts that.

There is nothing that is on the public record that would allow them to even have suspicions that he was involved in any illicit activity that would allow for a warrant to come through to be able to obtain his DNA legally.

"Did you have a warrant to obtain their DNA samples and mine?" Stephen asks and Coulson gives him a look that is almost patronising.

"This isn't something you want to make public, is it Dr Strange? We have the authority from the United States government to conduct any investigation we deem necessary into dangerous persons. You fall under that category." The man says and Stephen has to raise an eyebrow at that.

"And in what way am I dangerous?" Stephen asks him with some genuine curiosity. Coulson leans back into his own chair and puts his hands on his lap with his fingers crossed. So not *that* dangerous then, Stephen thinks quietly.

"Your motivations for approaching Tony Stark is what concerns us, Dr Strange. Was it instructions you were given by those that created you?" The question throws Stephen off for just a moment but he managed to keep his poker face at the very least. Despite the amusement he feels.

They think he is a *clone*.

That's precious, Stephen thinks. A *clone*. Really? The technology was available, sure, but there were so many problems with it that it was unlikely to be something that would be used. Even by those that were unethical.

But he isn't too surprised that SHIELD had come to that conclusion. The DNA conundrum that they have been left with along with his likeness could lead to one of two conclusions.

He is either Vincent Stephen Strange, a man that is 55 years of age that looks to be in his early 30s at the most by some means that had been used to prolong his life and youth or... he was a clone.

It's not an infeasible proposition but Stephen is still amused by the conclusion. SHIELD, it seems have gone on to create a rather wonderful conspiracy theory that was so far away from what Stephen really was that it was in a way, helpful.

But dangerous.

It's also interesting that Coulson doesn't question him in relation to his clone status. He speaks as if that is a given and he is only interested in figuring out why Stephen was involved with Tony Stark.

Well then.

"I didn't approach Dr Stark. He approached me. You believe that I have been cloned with a specific purpose in mind?" Stephen asks because he is finding the logic somewhat difficult to follow.
The whole clone thing, despite it being a very difficult process, it's not impossible to believe. Especially considering that his DNA would have shown that he has inherited his DNA from both Caroline and Matthew Strange. The test can show that. But the whole conspiracy theory like thought process behind it? That's a bit harder to understand.

It is a good indication of the way that SHIELD, in general, thinks though. To a shady organisation, everything looks like a shady organisation. They look for the secrets, the conspiracies. So Stephen really, really shouldn't be surprised but he is amused despite himself.

"We would like to know who cloned you and why. We would also like to run tests on you. Surely you would like to know if there are any health concerns that come from being a clone. We are also curious as to how they managed to clone you down to the injuries Vincent Strange received later in his lifetime." Coulson says and it seems like there is a lot of disclosure being made, but Stephen knows better.

"Agent Coulson, I don't have answers for you. I am not concerned about my health and if you try to coerce me or manipulate me, you will find that I don't take very well to that. Moreover, if you try to remove me from these premises or my routine you may run into severe difficulties." Stephen informs him quietly. He doesn't bother to hide his annoyance.

"I see. Well, in the spirit of full disclosure, Dr Strange, we will be watching. Tony Stark is a target of interest to us and if you are attempting to manipulate him or to use his technology for nefarious means, we will make our presence and our abilities are fully known to you." Coulson says and yes, there is the threat Stephen had been expecting.

Coulson didn't come here to get answers. He came here to show that SHIELD was in control. That they knew his secrets and that they could take advantage of that at any time. That they were watching.

Stephen really doesn't like being threatened.

"In that case, you are no longer welcome here Agent Coulson. Please leave before I am forced to take other measures." Stephen informs him and Coulson does stand up and reaches out a hand to take the paperwork. Stephen lets him take it. He doesn't need it.

"Before I do leave, I have one question." Coulson says as he tucks the paperwork back into his suit pocket. Stephen raises an eyebrow at him.

"How did you manage to gain Tony Stark's trust?" Stephen shrugs his shoulders.

"I'm not sure I have." Stephen tells him and it's the most honest answer he gives before Coulson looks at him with narrowed eyes and leaves. Clea hands him his coffee on his way out of the office.

As soon as he is gone, Clea comes into the room, but when he holds up a finger, she doesn't speak. Instead, Stephen closes his eyes as she does and runs a scan of their offices with their magic. Being in tune with dimensional energies makes them sensitive to energy full stop. So when it comes to electronics, they can feel the energy emanating from them.

They find the bugs quickly enough.

Very well placed and very discrete, but Clea and Stephen find them all and destroys them completely. By then, the first patients start to arrive and there is no time to discuss what had gone on with the meeting.

But the incident is just annoying enough and just disturbing enough that Stephen knows he's
probably not going to have the best of days.

He's right.

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Wednesday

10 March 2010

If Wong is absolutely honest with himself, he would admit that when he first met Vincent Strange, he had hated the man. He had been arrogant, stubborn but so incredibly and stupidly talented and smart that it had been infuriating.

Teaching Vincent to use magic, to expand his mind outside of science and medicine and to see the world in a new light had been a difficult but interesting process.

Wong hadn't expected him to become a Master sorcerer. To survive fights that should have killed him. To be chosen by the Time Stone.

Wong hadn't expected Vincent Strange to offer himself up to Dormammu. To be killed a thousand times over. To hold the monster hostage in the time loop to protect the planet and the billions of lives on it. To be prepared to be in that loop... forever, if that is what it took.

He didn't expect Vincent Strange to die.

Wong didn't expect Stephen Strange to come out of the Dark Dimension. To become the Sorcerer Supreme. To lead the Order into a new era where the members thrived and flourished. Stephen Strange was an amazing Sorcerer Supreme.

Wong wishes he wasn't.

As a Master of the Order that works with the Sorcerer Supreme, Wong is more than grateful for the work that Stephen does, the burdens that he carries and admires the doctor's ability to do everything so graciously without a word of complaint.

As a friend?

It is torturous to see Stephen suffering at every turn without being able to help. Without being able to take the burden away, without being able to offer solutions because all the solutions that he can propose will lead to the end of the universe. It's a zero-sum game and the Universe is a cruel, cruel mistress.

As much as Wong was grateful for the Connection he has with Yinn and the love that he finds with her, for Stephen the Connection is a source of pain and anguish.

Even now.

Even when the relationship between Stephen and Tony Stark is going well and Wong knows it is, because his friend seems lighter and happier in general, the Connection is a source of headaches, problems and constant... anguish.

The Connection demands loyalty and devotion. Hiding secrets from one's Connected goes fundamentally against that. Until that is fixed, until Stephen can be fully who he is with Tony Stark, the Bond between them was never going to be completed.
Which is a problem.

Not a huge problem, but it is a problem. Not to mention, when it comes to Tony Stark, Stephen has to fight back every single instinct he has to protect him and do the best thing for him... to ensure that the universe will survive.

Which means that Stephen was constantly struggling against his own instincts and needs. Wong feels sorry for him. And proud of him.

In general, that is.

Wong isn't very proud of his best friend when he is lounging about the lounge room moping and looking over the pieces of paper Diaz had dropped off as if it's his execution order. Wong isn't a fan of mopey Stephen.

"Aren't you meant to be in Malibu right now?" Wong asks him as he approaches and Stephen doesn't even look up. He looks down at the paper on the coffee table, his hands clutched together, clearly thinking. Desperately, by the looks of it.

"I told him I was busy. I need time to think." Stephen says with a dismissive tone. Anyone else would have just walked away at that point. Unfortunately, Wong wasn't just a Master, he was also Stephen's friend. Right now, Stephen needed a friend.

"Are you going to tell him?" Wong asks and Stephen looks up at him and his eyes are filled with pain and fear. Wong recognises it and he sympathises.

Stephen Strange and Tony Stark had a number of things in common. They grew up quicker than they should have. Neither of them experienced what one might call a 'normal' childhood. Being geniuses with photographic memories made being 'normal' impossible.

So they grew up quickly and they failed to build long meaningful relationships with a lot of people. Vincent only really had his family and Tony had Colonel Rhodes until he became older and added Pepper. But that was it.

Stephen has never had a romantic relationship that lasted more than 3 months before. That distinct lack of experience and his insecurities made Stephen's relationship with Tony Stark all the more difficult.

Tony Stark's relationships, on the other hand, had lasted for more than 3 months when he was in one but, they had been unmitigated disasters.

Two geniuses fumbling along in a relationship. Connection or not, designated and designed by the universe or not, the relationship was bound to have problems.

"What if he hates me?" Stephen says and as soon as he said it, he looks down as if embarrassed that he had said that. Wong doesn't know whether he should laugh or sigh.

He goes for the latter. Stephen can do without his mocking right now. He needs support and advice. Wong sighs and sits down next to him and lays a hand over the doctor's shoulder.

"Will the universe end if you tell him this part of yourself?" Wong asks gently and Stephen looks at him, clearly surprised.

"You think I should tell him?" Stephen asks and Wong shrugs his shoulders.
"It is up to you to decide but given that you are hiding so much from him, what is the harm in sharing
this part of yourself with him? Be honest with what you can?" Wong asks and Stephen looks
flabbergasted for a moment before he nods slowly then rapidly shakes his head again.

"I can't. I'm 55 years old Wong. I'm ancient compared to him and it's- telling him this might bring on
more questions that I cannot answer and more doubt." Stephen says. He isn't wrong.

Wong knows that with the secrets between them, the relationship is shaky. Given that and the
fragility of the happiness that Stephen has been experiencing, he is no doubt fearful that he would
lose that. Wong isn't unaware of that.

"Yes, but think of what the impact would be if it was SHIELD that told him instead of you." Wong
says and Stephen's eyes narrow and harden. His anger and annoyance when it comes to SHIELD is
no secret.

It is warranted.

In many ways and in many universes, SHIELD manipulates Tony Stark. Abuses his trust in the
system, abuses him and uses him. Having seen that many times and seeing what SHIELD is doing
now, it isn't a surprise to Wong that Stephen is unhappy with the organisation.

"I have to be the one to tell him. Shit." Stephen says quietly and it's not directed at Wong. Stephen's
words are directed at himself, a reminder of what needs to be done. Wong simply nods and Stephen
sighs.

"I hate this you know. I hate... all of this." Stephen says quietly and Wong nods sympathetically and
pats Stephen's shoulder.

"I know. I am so sorry that you are burdened with all this." Wong tells him and he means it. When
Stephen moves to lay his head on Wong's shoulder, he lets the man rest his weight completely on
him and just holds him so that he can take comfort from him.

Wong had never been the type to offer physical comfort like this until Yinn came along, but he
knows the value of a hug with a friend.

"It's going to be alright." Wong tells Stephen as the Sorcerer Supreme shakes in his arms and tries to
draw on the strength that he needs for the difficult conversation ahead.

There are no more words of comfort to give. Wong holds Stephen in his arms and just remains there.
Being the friend that Stephen badly needs.

It's the only thing he can do.

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Thursday

11 March 2010

Tony has missed Stephen.

Stephen hadn't come on Wednesday night as he usually does. He had called ahead to stay that there
was some paperwork that he needed to get before he can come and see Tony. Which was fine.

They were both adults with responsibilities and Stephen, if Tony is honest, is a lot more responsible
than he is. Tony doesn't mind.

But...

When Stephen had first walked in, Tony had wanted to just... have his way with the man. He usually does in Stephen's presence but always more after a few days apart. But Stephen hadn't even let him kiss him.

"You may not want to after you see this." Is what Stephen had said as he handed Tony the printed pieces of paper. The moment that Tony realised that the paperwork was from SHIELD, Tony had felt some of the happiness at seeing the doctor home fade a little.

Instead, fear and worry set in hard and Tony took the papers and started to read over the report as they moved towards the living room.

Once they settled into the sofas, sitting adjacent from each other, Tony reads over the paperwork again. Then again.

Tony looks down at the paperwork in front of him. He knows he looks surprised. Shocked, probably. His eyes are wide open and he probably looks like some sort of fish out of water.

"This- you're- What?!" Tony flounders for a moment before he takes a deep breath and looks over the paperwork one more time. Then he looks at Stephen.

"What is this Stephen?" Tony questions and Stephen gives him an even look. This is not what Tony had expected when Stephen had given him paperwork that was clearly from SHIELD's internal servers.

"Just what the paperwork says Anthony. You know that there are limits to the questions that I can answer. But I wanted to be as... forthright and honest with you as possible. I didn't want you to hear it from someone else." Stephen tells him and Tony appreciates that, he really does but this?

Tony isn't a doctor. He is a scientist. But he's not a biologist either. Still, he understands enough about biology to understand the paperwork in front of him.

"JARVIS?" Tony questions and even to him his voice sounds like he is in a daze. He holds up the paperwork so that JARVIS can read it and understand it and parse it out for him.

He was just having a little difficulty... believing what he was reading.

"Sir, I can confirm that SHIELD's tests do indeed confirm that Dr Strange does have equal amounts of DNA inherited from Dr Matthew Strange and Mrs Caroline Strange. The test results indicate that Dr Strange is an offspring of the two parties." JARVIS informs him.

Stephen's nervousness and apprehension, as well as a dash of fear, is obvious enough. Tony takes a few deep breathes and thinks carefully.

He reminds himself of the promised he made to himself that he would be careful when it came to Stephen. That he would be there for the man and that he was going to ensure that he earns the trust back from the doctor after he had mistreated it.

Stephen doesn't hurry him but he looks... devastated. Worried. Terrified. Grim. Tony doesn't like the haunted look in the doctor's eyes. But Tony needs time to think. He takes a deep breath and slowly releases it as he thinks.
He needs to be calm. He needs to be rational and logical. He needs to make sure that he doesn't lash out with his emotions. He needs to make sure that he is making the best decision for himself and for Stephen.

Tony thinks.

This doesn't change who Stephen is. He knows that. He has to keep reminding him that it is what Stephen does and says and how he is as a person that matters. Not what he is. Not the secrets that he hides.

It is how he was going to make sure that this relationship works.

"So two possibilities. Either you are a child of Matthew and Caroline Strange that was adopted out. Which I highly doubt. Second, you're a clone. Which is not impossible and which means we need to run more analysis on you to make sure that there are no side effects." Tony can't help the little spike of fear he feels at the second possibility.

There is a reason why cloning wasn't widespread. Even with animals. DNA, it appeared, had an expiry date. When the DNA was copied and though all the cells were created to be a copy and were fortified and 'fixed' to be as perfect as possible, they decayed. As the DNA decayed, cancer became more prominent and numerous health concerns appeared.

That was just the beginning. Then there were issues with rapid ageing as the telomeres from the ends of the chromosomes would break down with each division the cell makes. Given that Vincent Strange had been middle-aged at the time of death, if indeed Stephen is a clone, then his telomeres would reach the end of its life span pretty rapidly.

Tony feels the spike of fear at the idea of losing Stephen. It is so very, very hard to be rational with the fear spiking through his mind.

"I'm not a clone Anthony." Stephen tells him quietly. Tony looks at him and he can't quite understand what Stephen is trying to say. The doctor takes a deep breath.

"The DNA results are correct. I am an offspring of Caroline and Matthew Strange. In fact, SHIELD's analysis that indicates that I have impossibly similar facial features as Vincent Strange is correct. It should be. Considering the fact that I am Vincent Strange." Stephen's voice is matter of fact and calm enough but his eyes show that it is a forced calm.

This Stephen is the one that delivers bad news to patients. This is Dr Stephen Strange with his best poker face. It does nothing to hide the fear and pain in his eyes.

Tony catalogues Stephen's thoughts and tries to get a measure of the man even as he tries to wrap his head around the situation.

"I'm sorry... what?" Tony asks again and Stephen sighs.

"I am Vincent Stephen Strange. Or I used to be. I don't identify with the man that he had been and I don't consider myself to be Vincent anymore, but that is who I was. I was born on 18 November 1954 to Caroline and Matthew Strange." Stephen informs him.

Tony is so very glad that he is sitting down. He feels confused, a little terrified and astounded. There is also a part of him that is glad that Stephen isn't a clone and that he won't be dying an accelerated death. But as much as that explanation... explains things, there are so many more questions.

"You don't look like you're 55 years old." Tony's voice sounds distant and confused even to himself.
Stephen looks a little as if he is in pain.

"I don't... age like normal people Anthony. I- I can't tell you how." Stephen informs him and Tony nods slowly. That's the one thing that they have agreed on when it comes to this relationship.

If Tony wants to know something about Stephen that involves something that he can't answer, he will tell Tony and he won't push. It's a boundary he has to respect. The moment he pushes past that... Gods not again.

Seeing anyone in agonising pain had never been something Tony was interested in and he certainly wasn't interested in seeing it on the man that he loved.

"Okay. Right. Why the fuck does SHIELD have this? How do they have this?" Tony asks because for one, that's easier to think about and for another, that is very disconcerting. Stephen's anger is obvious.

"They ran a facial recognition program through their databases and other photographic databases throughout the world. I suppose my photographs were public enough that the hit came through pretty quickly. They were interested in seeing how I could share the features with a man that was supposed to be dead." Stephen sounds bitter and angry.

Tony can understand why. The deaths of his grand- no. Stephen's parents were still something that Stephen struggled with and to have SHIELD violate their bodies by obtaining samples of their DNA without the knowledge of family members was... disgusting.


"They believe that I have been cloned for some nefarious purposes and that I have been designed to... approach and manipulate you with an end goal that they haven't quite been able to come up with." Stephen's voice is dry and angry. Tony raises an eyebrow and leans back into the sofa as he evaluates Stephen.

It's not too far out an assumption. But there was a lot of holes in SHIELD's theory. For one, human cloning wasn't up to the stage where they can accelerate the growth of the human body up to the point of reaching full maturity rapidly. Even if they were able to do that somehow, getting the DNA to slow back down to ensure that the test subjects didn't die of old age rapidly is impossible.

The issue of the telomeres is still there not to mention that if you were talking about even 20 years back, cloning technology had literally been just science fiction.

Tony is pretty sure that if he put the effort in and he did the studies, he could probably clone someone, but even he would have no idea as to how he would deal with the telomere issue as well as how to deal with even the cell extraction, to begin with.

The moral, ethical and social questions aside, cloning was a field full of biological and medical issues. But given that without the accelerated growth problem solved, someone would have had to cloned Vincent before his death and at the time, Tony had just been a child, it makes no sense for anyone to 'create' Stephen with the express purpose of approaching Tony.

If Stephen had indeed been created before all of that and Tony just happened to be an interesting enough target? Perhaps. But then Stephen hadn't been the one to approach him. Tony had been. In some twisted logic, it makes some amount of sense but honestly? Tony isn't buying it.

"Anthony, I swear that I have no intention of manipulating you. I didn't approach you to get something out of you. All I wanted was for you to be happy and for you to be safe. I was-" Tony
cuts Stephen's desperate words off.

"I know. I'm the one that approached you. I was the one that called you and I was the one that started everything." Tony tells him.

Tony knows what it's like to be manipulated. Stephen didn't do that. It had all been Tony. It had always been Tony that made decisions when it came to their relationship. That needed to stop because equality in a relationship was important but that was something he would need to work on later.

For now, he had to focus on the information and situation on hand. It was a lot to process.

"Why are you telling me this?" Tony asks Stephen after a while because he is honest enough with himself to know that he is shaken by the revelation.

He is also honest enough with himself to know that it doesn't change very much of what he feels and thinks about the doctor.

He still looks incredibly attractive and yes, the knowledge that the man is 55 years old and not 29 as Tony had known him should make a huge difference, but age is just a number and Tony had been sleeping with people twice his age all through his college years.

Moral and ethical issues aside in relation to a younger person being involved with a much older person, Tony didn't see the issue with Stephen's real age.

"Because this is something I can share with you. Something I can be fully honest with. It is not something I wanted to share with you, but you deserve to know as much as you can about what and who I am. I should have told you earlier... I apologise for the delay." Stephen says and Tony has to agree with the last statement.

"So why didn't you?" Tony asks and Stephen looks a little pained almost as if he is recalling a terrible memory. Then he sighs.

"Because I don't think of myself as Vincent Strange. I haven't since I have become what I am now. I-I am not the same man as he had been." Tony recognises the emotion in Stephen's voice.

The self-hatred. The anger. The regret. It makes him both curious and also... he wants to go and just hug Stephen and tell him that it's okay.

Tony takes a moment to assess himself. Michelle really stressed that with him. Told him to make sure that he knew where he was in his own head and his own emotions as that will help him deal with others.

The thing is, the revelation is shocking. But if Tony thinks about it logically, it really doesn't change... anything. Stephen is still who he has always been and yeah, the age thing is a bit shocking but Stephen still looks the same.

The question of how he manages to look like he is in his late twenties or early thirties despite being 55 years old is something to be asked, but other than that? It doesn't change much.

Also, Tony is an idiot for not recognising it before. He'd seen the photographs of Stephen and Vincent. The similarities had been striking enough that he'd been confused by it. Then there was the matter of Stephen and fast vehicles. His aversion to that had been obvious enough too. Tony should have put the two and two together.
"Can you tell me about Vincent then?" Tony asks and he make sure to distinguish Vincent from Stephen because if that's how his lover sees it, then that's how he should address the issue. Stephen blinks as if he is surprised by the question.

"I- sure." Stephen says and he starts to talk. As he does, Tony realises a couple of things that... honestly breaks his heart a little.

Stephen well and truly hates who he had been as Vincent Strange. His tone of voice and the deep anger that he expresses at some of the actions he had taken as Vincent is... obvious. But it's the kind of self hate that Tony can sympathise with.

Because at the end of the day, Tony hates the man he had been before Afghanistan. The idiot that was used by other people, the idiot that created weapons without considering the consequences. The idiot that partied and lived up to the media expectations without thinking about what was really important in life. About his legacy.

Yeah. Tony gets it.

But he doesn't like seeing it on Stephen. The distinction that he makes between Vincent and Stephen himself is artificial in a way, but it makes sense.

The other thing that Tony notices is that... Stephen's grandparents or rather his parents, had died without knowing that their son was alive. That Stephen hadn't been able to tell them who and what he was. That guilt, the one that he had heard briefly about in Pennsylvania during the funeral... made sense.

It is also difficult to grasp just how difficult that guilt is to carry around. It's really at that point that Tony realises that keeping the secrets wasn't easy for Stephen. He believed it was necessary and so he kept them, but the burden of the knowledge was weighing him down and hurting him.

Tony and his desire to know and his need for answers probably didn't help with that. It's a good reminder to Tony to make sure that he doesn't push the man. Doesn't add to the guilt that he already seems to be dealing with.

When Stephen gets to the accident part of the story and his eyes go almost empty and his voice hollow as he describes what had taken place, Tony can't stay seated anymore. He moves.

"That's enough Stephen. I don't need to know all of that." Tony tells him as he moves to sit next to Stephen and pull him into his arms.

"I- It's okay. You deserve to know." Stephen tells him but his voice sounds raw and... for the lack of a better word, traumatised. Tony shushes him.

"I don't need to know. I don't need you to relieve your most traumatic memories just to sate my curiosity. It's fine." Tony tells him and he is quite proud of himself for being able to do that.

Tony before Stephen would have probed until he got the answer regardless of the pain he was causing. That Tony had been a dickhead.

"I- I'm so sorry Anthony. I should have told you sooner. I didn't- I don't-" Tony can hear the pain, the guilt and the regret. He doesn't like any of it.

A small vindictive, childish side of Tony, if he is completely honest with himself, is almost satisfied that Stephen has regrets for keeping secrets from him, but the part that loves Stephen, whether he can admit it or not, feels only upset and pain at the fact that his lover is suffering.
That's the side that Tony needs to focus himself on.

"Shh it's okay." Tony tells him and since Stephen is all stiff and difficult to manoeuvre, Tony climbs
into his lap, wraps his arms around Stephen's neck, raise the doctor's head and kisses him softly.
Gently. Lovingly.

"I'm glad that you told me and I am surprisingly okay with what you've told me. So you're 55 years
old. So what? You look beautiful and you had a life before all this, so what? So have I. I'm going to
need some time to process everything but this doesn't change Stephen." Tony tells him because he
knows that the doctor needs the reassurance.

Stephen isn't confident in their relationship. There is always a side of Stephen that Tony knows,
expects Tony to turn around at any point and tell him that it's over and that he can't deal with Stephen
and his secrets anymore.

Honestly? There is a part of Tony that thinks that way too. That he will reach a point where
everything becomes too much and he will just have to walk away. But that is a small part. A larger
part of him, the more mature part, Tony would like to think, wants Stephen, needs Stephen and
wants to work it out. Wants the relationship to work.

Because despite all the drama and the problems, Tony knows that Stephen Strange is one of the best
things that had ever happened to him in his life. Meeting the doctor in at Mt Sinai Children's Hospital
charity function had... changed his life. And as far as Tony was concerned, for the better.

So it doesn't matter if Stephen Strange was born as Vincent Strange.

The man inside is the same and Tony Stark... loves that man.

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Age is Just a Number

Chapter Summary

Knowing who Stephen had been doesn't change who he is now. It shouldn't change how Tony feels about him. What their relationship is...

Right?

Chapter Notes

Hello you beautiful people!

Alright, I'm going to go on another ramble because I kind of want to explain something about the story. It's more about my writing process and my head being odd, really.

So I spent pretty much all day thinking about Natasha Romanov and Director Fury and how to make them human. How to make them real. Clint Barton is humanised and becomes real etc through his family and that's easy enough. But Natasha has only the story about the Red Room, the stereotypical 'she's a cold hearted assassin' schitik and then her connection with Clint and that's about it.

In a way that makes it a bit easier because I can try to get into her head and explain her thought processes as she approaches Tony etc but at the same time it's harder because I have no idea what an assassin would think like >__<

I said I worked for the government. I work for the emergency sector. Not a spy. God I wish. No actually, I would be terrible at it. Never mind.

Which brings me to the question... when it comes to the other Avengers that hasn't made it into the story and all the side characters, what pairings do you think would make sense in this universe?

Aside from Jane Foster/Thor, which is definitely happening cause... cute! And I'm pretty convinced on Pepper/Banner but I'm not sure about the rest.

Any ideas?

(and yes. I am trying to use romance to humanise Natasha. It's so easy to do that when love is involved)

Friday

12 March 2010

Stephen wakes up slowly.
His eyes feel gritty and dry and his mouth feels dry as well. He feels as if he has just been in the desert. Then he remembers as he blinks rapidly to figure out where he is and what had happened the night before. That's a bit of an oddity for him. He usually wakes up quickly.

He knows he is in Malibu. Tony moves in his arms, reminding him of the genius's presence. Stephen blinks a couple of more times to try to get himself to wake up a little more. He manages with some difficulty.

Stephen feels... exhausted.

No that's not the right word. He doesn't feel tired physically. But he feels tired emotionally and mentally.

He feels... drained.

Yesterday and telling the life he had led as Vincent Strange, the fear that had lanced through him as he started to tell the story, even before that, when he presented Tony with the paperwork that proved definitively that he was not 'normal'... All of that had been difficult and emotionally draining.

But he doesn't regret telling Tony about himself and his past. There were so many things that Stephen couldn't share with Tony but his true identity as Vincent Strange or rather the man that he had been was something he could share.

Wong had been right.

The paperwork obtained through Diaz had been a mild risk but Stephen had needed to ensure that Tony got to see the evidence of the situation and be able to make a decision for himself.

SHIELD's approach to situations like Stephen's and Tony's was something that Stephen was all too familiar with and the last thing he wanted was for SHIELD to use it as a tool to manipulate Stephen himself or Tony.

The way that Tony took the revelation isn't what Stephen had expected. He had expected anger, outrage, disgust. Tony didn't give him any of that. Instead, Tony had been surprised, astounded, confused and concerned.

The latter was the most surprising of Tony's reactions that Stephen hadn't expected. Tony's concern that should Stephen have been a clone that his health would be adversely affected was incredibly sweet and so unexpected.

Then Tony had just... accepted him.

Stephen still finds that difficult to believe. Oh, he knows that the genius still has questions and doubts and that he will require more time to fully process it, but Tony hadn't treated him any different. Tony had been... kind and understanding in a way that Stephen had never even hoped for.

Stephen holds the sleeping man in his arms a little tighter. It feels like a miracle that he can still have this after the revelation.

The warm morning sunlight streams through the windows despite the light tinting and it feels luxurious to be able to lay in bed like this with his lover.

Tony is warm and pliant against him and Stephen can't help the sharp arousal that goes through him when he can feel Tony's buttocks against his morning hard-on.
"You know, for an old man, you really do have a healthy libido." Tony teases him as he wakes up and can most likely feel Stephen's morning wood against his backside.

Tony stretches a little luxuriously before he settles back into Stephen's arms and pushes back against his hard-on. The genius really was insatiable. Not that Stephen was complaining.

"Do you need me to prove just what this old man can do for you?" Stephen asks him almost darkly as he kisses Tony's neck and ruts his hips against Tony's backside as if to prove the point.

"God yes please." Tony moans out.

Stephen recalls the day before. How after that emotionally draining conversation, Tony had held him, comforted him and then made sure that they ate before they started to work. The work itself was mostly quiet but it was good. Stephen had needed the distraction and work was exactly what he had wanted.

Mostly because Stephen had been keen to check on how the tracking was going with the weapons dealers and the Ten Ring hideouts and Tony had been keen on trying to work on the helmet to try to work out the neural interface problem.

Their discussions haven't gone very far because somewhere during all of that, Stephen had been bent over the holotable to try to get a good perspective on the Stark Tower plans that had come back from the architect and Tony's loins had decided that work time was done.

Being fucked hard and fast against the holotable wasn't something Stephen would ever protest against. It was... delicious in every way imaginable.

It had also relieved Stephen to know that Tony still desired him.

And it proved more importantly that Tony didn't find Stephen being much older a turn off at least. And apparently, that was continuing to be the case from the way that Tony was moaning and thrusting back against his lazy movements.

"So you want me to put my cock inside of you Tony? Want me to fuck you long and hard?" Stephen mutters into Tony's ears.

He knows that Tony likes it when he calls him 'Tony' compared to his normal 'Anthony'. Stephen knows that Tony likes him calling him Anthony and even Dr Stark. But in bed, he prefers Tony.

"Yes." Tony all but hisses it out. Stephen smiles and turns Tony around so that they can kiss. Morning breath be damned. Tony's kiss is enthusiastic and it is more than enough for Stephen to be completely in the mood. Despite the dig at his age. Or perhaps because of it. He's not sure.

Stephen isn't quite sure how there is always lube available and how the bottle remains full almost all the time, but he really doesn't want to think about either Eliza or Finn switching out the bottles or refilling them. He's just glad that it's there when he reaches for it.

By the time Stephen has the lube in his hand, Tony is laying on his stomach with a pillow underneath his hips. Stephen doesn't touch him straight away. Instead, he takes the time to observe his lover.

Tony is gorgeous, spread out on the bed like this, ready for him. His brown hair looks almost caramel in the warm morning light streaming in through the windows and his skin looks kissed by the sun in the way that Stephen never is.
He likes the contrast of his pale body against Tony's tanned one. He likes the soft but firm skin underneath his scarred hands. He remembers the way that Tony had held his hands and kissed them as he had tried to tell the story about the car accident that had taken his hands away and the surgeries that he had gone through.

In the end, Stephen didn't get to quite finish the story. Tony had held him and told him that it was okay. That he didn't need to know. One day, Stephen will tell him. About the Order. About becoming the Sorcerer Supreme. The pain of losing his mentor. The burden of being the chosen Guardian of the Time Stone.

The trauma of dying over a thousand times to Dormammu. The pain that he had gone through. The guilt that he carries. The burden of... being Dr Stephen Strange, the Sorcerer Supreme of the Mystic Order.

One day, there will be no secrets between them.

Stephen kisses Tony's neck and works his hands down the man's body. Stephen can't massage him like Tony has in Seoul. All he can do is run his hands down Tony's body, Touch him with his hands and lips and worship the body underneath him.

Tony responds with moans and little movements that shows his impatience. Stephen lubes up his fingers and runs it slowly down the crack between Tony's buttocks as he lays himself almost fully on the genius. He knows that Tony can handle his weight.

It feels so intimate to be this close to him. Stephen is careful not to put too much pressure on Tony's back where the Arc Reactor is. He holds himself up just enough to avoid that.

"You are so gorgeous." Stephen can't help but breathe out and Tony chuckles softly. It's such a relaxed and luxurious sound that Stephen wants to hear it again.

"Says the most beautiful man I have ever seen." Tony mutters out and Stephen can't help but smile at that. He loves that Tony considers him beautiful. That Tony considers him to be attractive and worth his attention and affection. It warms his heart in a way no one has been able to do before.

"Compliments will get you everywhere." Stephen tells him and as if to accentuate the point, he lets his finger work its way into Tony and the man moans underneath him.

"Fuck." Tony breathes out as he is breached. Tony doesn't like extended foreplay. He likes providing it, but he doesn't like receiving it as much. But on mornings like this, when he is feeling lazy and is luxuriating on the time that they have together, Stephen knows that he doesn't mind.

As Stephen works his finger inside of Tony, his own desires and his own needs grow. His finger is straining and it's difficult to get the motion going and Tony notices.

It's not the first time that his hands and their inability to function properly have gotten in the way of sex between them. Tony had never made an issue of it and he usually caught on before Stephen became too frustrated or upset by it.

It's one of those things that told Stephen that Tony cared. Even from the start. Tony had always been a considerate lover.

"Here, let me help." Tony says and he reaches behind himself and joins his fingers with Stephen's, taking the lube off of Stephen's finger and working his own fingers inside of himself.

"How about you sit back and watch me fuck myself with my fingers?" Tony suggests with that lilt in
his voice and that playful tone.

Stephen bites back the annoyance and the disappointment he feels in himself and kisses Tony's shoulder instead and moves down Tony's body. He kisses Tony's left buttocks before he moves fully away to watch.

Tony isn't as careful with himself as Stephen had been. He is generous with the lube and he knows how to put on a show. Tony turns around and folds his legs up to give himself the best access and when he starts to finger fuck himself as he jerks his cock, Stephen can't help but watch.

The thing that he loves about having sex with Tony is how... shameless he is with pleasure. Tony enjoys sex and he enjoys being fucked or fucking Stephen and he doesn't hide his reactions. He doesn't downplay the pleasure. He just lets himself fully enjoy it and Stephen can appreciate that.

He's been with lovers that were ashamed of the pleasure they felt being fucked by him or fucking him and that made it difficult to truly enjoy himself. Especially when Stephen had been younger and homosexuality was... seen as a mental illness. Times have certainly changed.

But Tony is anything but ashamed. He is wanton.

Stephen watches almost hungrily as Tony's fingers move in and out of himself and Tony's expressions show just how much he is enjoying the act.

Stephen forgets all about his fingers and his inability to even prep his own lover and just focuses on watching Tony getting himself ready for him. Panting and moaning for him. Putting on a show... for him.

"God, I can feel you watching me." Tony moans out and Stephen chuckles as Tony's eyes crack open to watch him. When Tony can take three of his own fingers easily, he all but rips them out of himself and moves towards where Stephen is sitting on the bed.

"You're so fucking hot Stephen." Tony tells him almost wantonly and before Stephen can even stop him or aid him or do anything, Tony moves to sit on Stephen's lap.

"I'm going to ride you so fucking hard." Tony promises and he really doesn't hesitate at all. He takes Stephen's leaking cock inside of himself and slips down. Stephen leans back so that he can watch his cock entering Tony's body and by gods, it is an image that he definitely isn't ever going to forget.

"I'm not averse to that idea." Stephen keeps his voice nice and low and seductive and licks his lips. Tony moans as he takes Stephen in all the way down. He breathes out and flexes his internal muscles a little and Stephen feels his eyes close as the pleasure shoots up his spine.

This is not the first time that Tony had ridden him. This isn't even the second time, but each time he has sex with Tony, it feels new and amazing and perfect. Tony grins and kisses him hard.

With Tony's torso being the same length as Stephen's and only Stephen's legs being a little longer, seated on him like this, Tony is a little taller than Stephen and he uses it to his advantage. He puts his hands on Stephen's shoulders and starts to ride him, nice and slow at first.

"I'm going to make you beg to come Stephen." Tony promises him. Stephen puts a grin on his face and raises his eyebrows.

"If you think you can manage that, go right ahead." Stephen tells him but he knows that Tony will win out at the end. He always does. Tony grins back and when he starts to really move, Stephen can't help the pants and moans that escape his lips.
Stephen is shameless when it comes to pleasure too.

Tony's knees are almost around his hips and his grip on Stephen's shoulders are tight so that the engineer can get the full range of motion required to move on Stephen's cock as if he is on a ride of some sorts.

He bops up and down and each time he does, Stephen pants and moans until he loses a sense of time and everything else and is just lost in the pleasure that Tony brings him. He is almost incoherent and that at least helps him not to beg.

"Feel good?" Tony pants out at him and Stephen replies by grabbing his face and kissing him. It's a sloppy kiss with far too much tongue and panting to be a really intimate kiss, but it feels good and it adds another layer of pleasure for both of them.

But when Tony starts to really squeeze his internal muscles with every movement and his fingers stray down to Stephen's nipple and starts pinching it as he slows down his movements enough to stop Stephen from coming?

"Please- God Tony, please." Stephen begs.

Tony grins wickedly even when he is lost in his own pleasure and bites at Stephen's jaw.

"Told you, I'd make you beg." Tony pants out in response but he doesn't make Stephen wait too long. He starts moving faster and when he kisses Stephen, sucking on his tongue like a lollipop, it's all Stephen can take. His vision whitens out as he comes hard inside of Tony and as he is coming, he can feel Tony's cum covering his stomach and chest.

For a while, they breathe hard and Tony's head comes to rest on Stephen's shoulder as the engineer just tries to catch his breath. Stephen holds him tight against himself and falls backwards onto the bed. He is really, really glad that Tony has a bed large enough that he doesn't fall off the bed.

"That- That was fucking amazing." Tony breathes out against Stephen's neck as Stephen runs lazy fingers down Tony's back and sides.

"You are perfect." Stephen breathes out as he collects himself. Tony chuckles and kisses him on the neck.

"Actually, I would say that you are. God, your cock Stephen. It's absolutely beautiful." Tony tells him and Stephen flushes a little at that and when Tony lifts his head, they kiss. It's a soft, warm and gentle kiss that feels so very incredibly intimate.

"Well um... I'm glad that you like it." Stephen says after the kiss and they share a laugh.

Given the revelation the night before and the fears that Stephen had going into the conversation, this is more than he could have even dreamt about. He kisses Tony again just because he needs to. He wants to make sure that he isn't dreaming. Tony kisses him back and it feels real enough. But it still feels like a dream.

A perfect dream.

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Sunday

14 March 2010
Even Tony's hands were starting to cramp up. The fine engineering that is required to ensure that the suit will actually fold up without a problem and be able to cover him quickly and efficiently is a task and a half.

But Tony is used to that kind of work and he doesn't mind the headache of trying to design around his body and the problems. It's exciting and interesting.

The mundane nature of the actual building process is also a good time to think.

Stephen is in the corner of the lab working to finish up the application he had been building to release on the StarkPhones for medical professionals.

The application had two versions. One for the general public that would allow them to input a number of symptoms as well as their medical history so that the application can keep track of their medication, their symptoms so that they can share a simple file with their doctors to keep them updated on their condition.

As well as provide medical advice and assistance. There was some work that needs to come in from the legal department and Tony was in negotiations to buy a medical database company so that they could have full, unfettered access and control over the medical information to ensure that it's accurate and kept up to date but it's an application that Stephen was passionate about.

The second application, a branch off of the general application was designed for doctors and medical professionals in mind. It was designed to allow medical professionals to quickly lookup known medical conditions to outline procedures, medication and dosages to ensure that fewer mistakes could be made when it came to providing the right dosage of prescription medication and to ensure that the right procedures were performed.

Stephen was working on the searching algorithms to make sure that it could cover all sorts of spelling errors, older names and variations as well as ensuring that the dosage calculator would also function well for persons of any age, gender and weight.

It was an interesting project and Tony was glad that Stephen found something that he wanted to work on and that Tony could provide him with the resources and a platform to make it happen.

The days had been... interesting to say at the least. The revelation for one had been... incredibly fascinating, terrifying and to a certain extent, shocking. But now that Tony has had a little more time to process it and have been around Stephen during that time, he is more certain now than ever that he had made the right call.

Stephen was still Stephen Strange. Whether he had been Vincent Strange before or not doesn't change the man that he is now. Despite the clear insecurities in the man that Tony can see and sense every time Stephen turns to look at him.

That insecurity hurts Tony. But it is a pain of his own making and he will have to keep reminding himself of that. He shouldn't forget and he shouldn't let himself become complacent and he won't.

"Anthony." Stephen calls and Tony looks up from the welding work he had been doing and puts the welder back in the holder and stands up.

"Yes?" Tony calls back when he notices that Stephen hadn't turned around. He is focusing on the screen in front of him.

"Would- would it be possible for you to get me a heat pack and some pain killers?" Stephen asks and Tony hears the pain. Shit.
He should have monitored Stephen more carefully he thinks and he all but rushes over to see that the doctor was more or less frozen in his chair, stiff with pain.

"Shit Stephen. Bad?" Tony asks and the doctor just looks at him with eyes filled with pain and yeah that was a stupid question. Tony all but runs to the kitchen and grabs one of the several heat packs he has in the kitchenette for this reason and grabs the bottle of strong pain killers he keeps around and a bottle of water.

He rushes back and helps Stephen to take the pills as he wraps the heat pack around the doctor's badly cramping hand and cradles the man close to himself as if he can take the pain away by just holding him. He wishes that he could.

"I'm so sorry that you're hurting." Tony says. There is nothing else that he can say. Knowing how the doctor has sustained the injuries, knowing how much he blamed himself and how badly it had affected his life every day for the last twenty years almost... It's devastating.

Especially considering how much Stephen seems to hate his past self, Tony knows that just like himself and the Arc Reactor. For Stephen, it must be a daily reminder of all of that every time he looks at his hands or every time that it hurts.

"It's not your fault. It's- It's my own fault." Stephen says and Tony hears that hate. That anger. He hates it. he had brought it up closer to the surface of Stephen's mind as well. He's the one that asked to hear about Vincent and the life that Stephen had led as Vincent.

He is the one that drugged up the past that Stephen had likely tried to forget. So this was on him.

"You know, we could probably do like a sponsor deal with Harvard University and hand out Starkphones with this application on it to the medical students and get them to test it." Tony says to distract his lover from the pain.

Stephen looks up at him with some surprise and Tony gives him a smile as he perches on the desk in front of the doctor and takes the other hand, one that is lightly and trembling but not cramping up, a soft massage.

"you want testers right? My guys can test the app but it would do better in a practical setting wouldn’t you say? So how about we send it out to the guys starting their internship?" Tony suggests and Stephen nods as he thinks.

"Considering interns make the most amount of mistakes that would actually be a good idea." Stephen says slowly and Tony nods as he takes the sufficiently warmed up hand and starts to massage that one as well.

"We should see about maybe closing off this part of the lab and maybe making it a bit warmer." Tony muses. The temperature in the workshop is always on the colder side of comfortable. It has to be in a way to ensure that all the heat-sensitive equipment survive.

For Tony, who was almost always moving about and doing some sort of physical labour to go with the thinking and the experimentation, it was fine. But for Stephen, who remained mostly seated and working on the computer, he was probably a lot colder and it probably didn't help the cramps.

"It's fine Anthony." Stephen reassures him but Tony thinks about getting some of the engineers to come back to the house to see if they can do something about it before Stephen returns for the next weekend.

He wants his home- no, their home to be as comfortable for Stephen as it is for him. It wouldn't be
right for Stephen to be in more pain when he doesn't need to be due to a simple structure issue that
Tony can fix.

"Just a different air conditioning unit above this section of the workshop would probably do it." Tony
thinks out aloud and Stephen chuckles and pulls Tony into his arms and kisses him.

"Despite what your reputation would suggest, you are a sweet, sweet man." Stephen tells him and
Tony laughs at him.

"Don't believe a word the horrible world tells you about me." Tony tells him. He continues to
massage Stephen's hands until they are relaxed and the doctor is relaxed. Then he guesses it's a good
time for a break as any. Besides. Stephen is due to fly home soon.

"What do you feel like?" Tony asks the doctor as he pulls him out of the chair and starts to lead him
up the stairs.

"You." Stephen's suggestive reply almost has Tony stopping right then and there to turn around and
have his way with the doctor against the staircase but for one, it's not safe and for two, Stephen
needed to eat to make sure that the lightweight man wouldn't be too adversely affected by the pain
killers.

"Food first." Tony manages and Stephen chuckles from behind him.

"Tacos. I could kill for some tacos." Stephen says and Tony raises an eyebrow but now that he's
heard it, he wants it too. Then he remembers the tacos that he used to have with his mother whilst
Edwin Jarvis used to chide him over the way that he used to always end up with at least some salsa
on his clothes.

It's such a visceral memory that it's hard to shake it. He can almost taste the tacos. He remembers the
hustle and bustle of the crowd. He remembers the expo grounds. He remembers his father and his
annoyance.

The Stark Expo.

"JARVIS, order from that um you know that place off the highway? Get one of our guys to go there
and get the fish tacos." Tony says absently as he thinks. Stephen notices his distracted state almost
right away.

As soon as they are upstairs, Tony moves towards the windows and the large expansive ocean view
that it provides. Tony looks out at it for a long time, deep in thought until he feels Stephen come up
behind him and hold him from behind whilst offering him a cup of coffee.

Stephen's hands are shaking a little still, but it's not so bad that he can't hold onto the cup. Tony
doesn't take the cup but wraps his hand around the doctor's so that he can keep the man's arms
wrapped around himself as he takes a sip.

"When I was little, Stark Industries had an expo in Flushing New York, where our business park is." Tony
starts to say quietly as he leans his head against Stephen's shoulder.

"I remember. It was very big and very exciting." Stephen says quietly. In his distraction, Tony
doesn't notice the odd tone in Stephen's voice.

"It was fantastic. There were companies everywhere gathered together to put on an expo to display
the future of technology. Most of the stuff that we see now has been from-" Tony stops himself. He
turns around in Stephen's arms and he almost knocks the coffee out of the doctor's hand, but he
catches it just in time.

"It's the Expo Stephen! It's the fucking Expo!" Tony says with some excitement though he's pretty sure he isn't making a great deal of sense.

"You want to have one." Stephen says understanding despite the fact that Tony hasn't said anything that makes sense. This is why Tony loves this man's mind, he thinks.

"Yes. That should have been my father's legacy. He should have kept the focus of the company on that. But he went back to weapons. I won't. This can be my legacy. My statement." Tony says and Stephen looks thoughtful for a moment before he nods.

"It's 2010. It's a good round year to get the expo started. It could also work well to ensure that the world knows that Stark Industries is definitely stepping away from the weapons arena." Stephen says and the man is right.

The ideas form rapidly in Tony's head as he paces through the living room as if he is a caged animal, thinking and planning. When he turns back around to see Stephen, the doctor's expression is that of fondness and pride.

Framed by the window, the afternoon sunlight framing the doctor. he looks beautiful. Impossibly so. Tony stops pacing to admire the picture. All the thoughts come to a screeching halt.

Yeah.

This is Stephen Vincent Strange. The best damned thing that had happened to him and Tony was going to make damned certain that he keeps the man right here with him.

No more mistakes.

~~~

**Tuesday**

16 March 2010

To say that Pepper Potts is busy is an understatement. But when Tony freaking Stark, her best friend and her boss asks her, politely at that, for her to make some time for him during the week, she reorganises her entire schedule.

So she has the afternoon free.

He doesn't ask her to come to the house. Instead, he says that he will come to the offices because there are things that he needs from there for the meeting that he needs to have with her.

It's not personal then. It's work-related and it sounds serious from the way that he approaches it. Which is... somewhat surprising but not new.

What is new is the tablet that Tony brings her and the gigantic file that is contained in the damned thing.

"Tony... what is this?" She asks him as she looks up from the giant PDF file to him. Tony is in his suit as usual when he comes into the office like this and he'd already been through the array of meetings he had to sort out with the R&D people as well as the engineering people and the Board.
"It's a proposal Pep." Tony says. Pepper fights the urge to roll her eyes. She can see that. What she doesn't understand is why she is looking at this gigantic proposal document. He really can't mean to do this. Could he?

"I can see that. I mean why are you showing this to me?" Pepper asks and Tony gives her an even look before shrugging his shoulders.

"Pepper, don't be modest. You and I both know who is running this company right now. I want you to look over the proposal and tell me whether I'm insane or whether this is a good idea." Tony tells her and she is surprised by the statement.

Yes, she has been doing more and more work as the CEO but all the decisions that the company went with were Tony's decisions. It wasn't as if she was making independent decisions as to the future of the company on her own. That was all Tony.

But the day to day running of the company? She had been handling most of that. Still. She feels flattered by his confidence and the way that he'd just stated that he valued her input. She nods and looks over the proposal for a few long moments.

She is so incredibly grateful that a part of studying law comes with learning how to speed read because there is a lot to unpack in the giant document. She can't read over all of it immediately, but once she'd read over the main parts of it, she looks up at Tony with an incredulous look.

"The Stark Expo?" She questions and Tony nods back, excitement and seriousness on his face. The last Stark Expo had been more than 20 years ago. It was before Howard Stark brought on Stane and Stark Industries started to focus heavily on weapons manufacturing.

With their change of direction, this was not a bad plan. In fact, it was a great plan to show the world everything that Stark Industries could offer.

The thing is, Stark Industries wasn't just a weapons manufacturer. It had never been, contrary to popular belief. There were subsidiaries of the company that worked on medical advancements, general tech advancements as well as other science advancements in general. But that wasn't what the company had been known for.

So the Stark Expo was a way of showing that the company was more than just a weapons company and it made sense for them to throw the year-long tech expo to show the world that Stark Industries was doing well and that there were significant advancements being made across the board to help the world, as it were.

It was also a way for Stark Industries to set itself at the forefront of the technological race as the leader and to set an example of good practice to the other companies.

"Yes. I want it to open on 3 May 2010, but that's a Monday so how about 2 May 2010? It's when... I was reborn if you will. I want to celebrate it." Tony says and well, that's fair enough.

It was going to be hell to bring everything together, but it makes sense that Tony wants to turn what had been an incredibly painful part of his life into a celebration of being 'reborn' and it works well for Stark Industries as well.

That was the day that Tony returned and announced to the world that Stark Industries would no longer be producing weapons.

"Okay. That makes sense. We have the Expo grounds. It's been used for various shows and exhibits and we're going to have to pull some contracts but we can make it work." Pepper says as she looks
over the schedules. Tony nods.

"Send out invites to the world basically. I want any developing tech or prototype that can better the world to be on show. I want this to be a celebration and a showcase for all humanity benefiting tech in the world. Don't forget the small companies too. Actually, focus especially on the small companies trying to do good." Tony says thoughtfully. Pepper nods.

"Right. So invites. Cancelling the exhibits. If you want this to be a true tech expo and you want to show the world what Stark Industries has been up to, it might be an idea to maybe... turn the business park eco-friendly before we open?" Pepper suggests as she starts writing down what she needs to get organised and Tony's eyes widen as he nods.

"God yes! Let's get those Icelanders with their wind farm thing to come along and get the expo grounds sorted out. I'll talk to the engineers here and see if we can get an Arc Reactor built in that time." Tony suggests and Pepper nods slowly as the ideas start to form.

"Alright. What about the food stands and the park itself?" Pepper asks as she starts to type a list of what needs to be done. She has to admit that this isn't quite what she had signed up for when she started to work for Tony, but in all honesty, she loves the fact that he treats her as an equal.

He doesn't tell her to do things, he asks for help or in situations like this, they bounce ideas off each other to get the work done. She likes that.

"What about the plastic tree people? The trees that are supposed to filter out pollution? Let's get them into the park building process. Add some plastic trees into the park." Tony suggests and Pepper nods and adds them to the notes.

Tony was really good at keeping on top of the tech world and its developments. Pepper would honestly be surprised and probably shocked if there was any tech development out there in the world that Tony didn't at least know something about.

They bounce back and forth with a few more eco-friendly companies and ideas to ensure that the park is as green as possible. Stark Industries was leading the race when it comes to clean energy. It would be good to show the world that there was a lot more that could be done to make businesses environmentally sustainable.

They could lead the world on that.

Once they have the list of companies that they can use to make the park eco-friendly as possible, Pepper turns her attention to the next issue.

"Alright, I can get that organised. What about the food stands? Keep the ones we have or should we add more?" Tony thinks for a moment as does Pepper. She has a list of what is already available and she makes sure that Tony can see them.

"Let's get some cheaper food stands Pep. I want everyone to be able to have a good time. Get rid of the alcohol ones and maybe build something for the kids." Tony suggests. Pepper isn't surprised by the suggestion. Tony had a soft spot for children.

As someone that hadn't had much of a childhood at all and what he did have had been terrible, Tony had a level of empathy with kids that truly surprised her sometimes.

It isn't just a media stunt that had led to every Stark Industries building having a fully functioning and very popular daycare centre for children of the employees.
It's not just a government-mandated policy that made Tony decide that maternity leave and paternity leave should be a full six month period at the minimum. With options to work part-time for female staff with children under the age of 10.

"Of course. We can change up the fountain to be a water park of sorts for the children and we can ensure that the water filtering system that you developed is incorporated to keep the water clean and also to save on it." Pepper suggests and Tony nods then pauses.

"Erm... let's- let's add a taco stand." Tony says quietly and Pepper doesn't quite know why, but she gets the feeling that it's important to him so she nods.

"Sure." Pepper says but she looks at Tony with the question that she doesn't voice but he reads it well enough to answer it.

"It's what I remember the best about the Expo. I ate tacos with my mum. It's the only time I ate street food with her and Jarvis." Tony says and Pepper gives him a soft smile and nods.

It must be a bittersweet memory, Pepper thinks. Tony still grieved for his mother and Jarvis. He had loved them and they had loved him. He still feels the loss and this is a way for him to re-live some of those memories. Pepper makes a special note of the taco stand. They move on rapidly from that point.

The planning stage is always fun and Pepper is proficient enough to ensure that all of Tony's ideas and his wants and desires can be fulfilled with the Expo.

They end up in long discussions throughout the day and into the evening. It's actually nice to work with Tony like this, Pepper thinks. If she really thinks about it, the work that she does to ensure that Tony is more a part-time CEO than a full-time one means that she almost act as the CEO for Stark Industries on the days that Tony aren't.

It also means that they rarely get to just talk like this.

It's not really that Tony slacks off from the work. He still monitors all of his emails even on the weekends and he is there if there is an emergency, but a lot of the day to day running of the company is on Pepper's shoulders. The thing is, she doesn't mind.

The challenge is good and it's never boring to work at Stark Industries. The pay is good too. The more work that she does, the higher her pay seems to get. It's at a point that Pepper doesn't even really check her bank balance anymore. She knows that there is more than sufficient money coming in.

It's near the end of the night when they have worked out all the details and the offices are almost empty and Tony and Pepper are stretched out on the lounge set in the office that the conversation and the mood changes to their usual friendship mode.

"So, how's it going with Stephen?" Pepper asks as she grabs another slice of pizza that they'd ordered to let them power through the work.

"Good despite my fuck up." Tony tells her. They hadn't really talked about Stephen and the relationship for a little while but Pepper did know that at one point, Tony had proposed that they become... colleagues with benefits for the lack of a better word and Pepper knew that he regretted that decision a great deal.

"He's treating you right?" Pepper asks him though she doubts that Stephen would voluntarily hurt Tony. The love that she had seen in his eyes had been too powerful for that. Tony doesn't look at
her. He looks out towards the windows.

"He loves me. Really, truly loves me and Pepper, I don't think anyone has ever loved me like he does." Tony says and she knows that he is uncomfortable discussing his emotions because as far as Howard Stark had been concerned, showing emotions was a sign of weakness.

Considering the role models that Tony has had throughout his life, Pepper thought he honestly was doing an amazing job. Michelle Jones had helped a great deal too. Pepper isn't sure if she could ever thank the therapist enough for what she's accomplished with Tony.

"Good. You deserve to be loved Tony. You deserve to be happy and if he can make you happy, then by gods I love that man." Pepper tells him softly. She really does like Stephen.

He may have hurt Tony and there was so much about him that Pepper didn't understand, but Stephen was interesting, intelligent and he loved Tony. What was there to dislike?

"Pep, he's... he's got some serious secrets. Shit that I don't even understand but it's... I don't care. I just need him in my life." Tony tells her almost desperately and Pepper is surprised by that. Her eyes soften as she looks at him.

"You love him." She finds herself saying and Tony looks away from her and down to his hands. He takes a deep breath and nods. And that?

Wow.

"Have you told him?" Tony shakes his head. She's not surprised. Tony rarely even tells her that he loves her. And she is one of Tony's closest friends and they have known each other for almost 10 years now. So Tony hesitating to tell Stephen his feelings? Not a surprise.

But Stephen has to know, she thinks. Tony has asked him to move in officially after all. Stephen has to understand what that meant. How difficult it had been for Tony to even take that step. But Tony had.

"I'm sure he knows." Pepper tells him. Tony doesn't express his love with words. he expresses them with actions. And Pepper had seen enough of that in New York to know. Considering Tony's discomfort, it's time to change the subject, Pepper thinks.

Speaking of the Stranges...

"By the way, Clea's almost finished with her Masters and she was looking for work. I was thinking of offering a part-time position here." Pepper tells him and watches for his reaction. Tony seems surprised but pleased.

"Really? I thought she would work full time with Stephen." Tony says and Pepper gives him a look.

"Both of you have a part time schedule at the very most. She wants to work in the PR field eventually. She wants to work either for D'Arte or for us." Pepper says and she would personally prefer her friend to work with SI.

She is being a little greedy and very biased, she knows. But the idea of having Clea working with her at the office sounds amazing and it sounds like fun and Pepper knows that having someone that she can trust implicitly with both Stephen, Tony as well as herself would be helpful.

"If that's what she wants then it sounds good to me. I mean, I'll have to ask Stephen what he thinks and make sure he's good with it but yeah." Tony says and Pepper is proud of her friend for
considering Stephen's views on the matter before he makes the decisions.

He really has come a long way from the Tony Stark she had met 10 years ago. Really, really far. Pepper knows that a lot of it was thanks to Stephen Strange and she was forever going to be grateful for that.

"Good. Talk to him about it when he next comes and maybe ask Clea to come along for an interview. I can organise it with Gina and Mrs Novak." Pepper says. Gina Park is the head of PR. She works mostly on Tony's matters but she also works with a lot of the problems that come SI's way.

"Yeah. Let's make sure no one thinks she got in without merit." Tony says and Pepper nods. If nothing else, Mrs Novak, the head of Human Resources was known as a stickler for the rules and if she was involved in the interview process that resulted in hiring Clea, Pepper knows that there wouldn't be any suspicion of improper hiring procedures.

Given the privileged position that Stark Industries was in as a large company with good benefits and pay as well as being one of the best in the field, the company's hiring policy was strict and the competition was extremely high when it came to most positions.

There were programs that allowed people without degrees etc but showed skills to enter the company and go through education through the company, but aside from those programs, Stark Industries was well known for having high competition when it came to their hires.

So to have Clea come into the company without them officially advertising a position, it really had to be done in a way that ensured that no one would doubt her abilities.

"I'll let Clea know. She can stay with me. I'm sure you and Stephen really don't need anyone else at the house." Pepper says with a playful tone and Tony flushes. She loves it.

It's good to see Tony in love, Pepper thinks. Even if it means that she has to do extra work to make sure that he has time to be with his lover.

It's worth it.

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To Being Single

Chapter Summary

Clea needs another job to occupy herself with. Pepper has a job that she can offer. Tony just wants her to stop stealing his cars.

They will find a solution to all of their problems... right?

Chapter Notes

OMG I am almost done with this Arc. Well. Sorta. At least as far as IM2 is concerned. By gods this one has been hard to write. But that might have a lot to do with the fact that I just really want to write ARC 3 and the Avengers plotline >__< That is going to be epic fun XD

I have plans!!!!

This is also giving me a lot of ideas into writing an original novel as well. I have been writing stories, both fanfics and otherwise since I was like 13? I migrated to Australia with my parents when I was 10 and by the time I was in high school I was figuring out this whole English thing and writing is kind of what I always wanted to do.

On that note, whilst I did have racist and terrible English teachers I have had fantastic ones as well. The first story I wrote was 40 pages long 'short story' when I was 13? and my teacher marked all of it and told me that I should continue to write because she saw something there.

I also remember writing Harry Potter fanfiction as a competition between my girlfriends. Just so you know, we went to an all girls, private, Catholic high school (yes we had uniforms. We called ourselves Smurfets... for a reason -.-)

During that competition, most of our fanfics were slash and mine was Harry/Draco with a fuckton of BDSM but I was like 16 and really didn't know what it was all about but hey. So we wrote our um... PWP stories, which actually managed to somehow end up with more than half of our grade reading it and printing it out etc and it got to our English teachers... who actually marked them. And gave them back with a score XD

Surprisingly, none of us got into trouble over it but we were advised that we really shouldn't write explicit stories as a part of our creative writing projects >__<

Thought I would randomly share that with you guys. And throw up the idea of what do you reckon the reception will be in the world if there were more homoerotic novels out there? Would it be seen as ridiculous if a woman wrote it? I don't know. Let me know in the comments please? >__<
Wednesday

17 March 2010

Clea can't stop smiling.

She really can't. It feels like her facial muscles are straining with the wide smile that she can't stop it by gods, she doesn't give a fuck because she is goddamned happy.

The interview with Camilla Novak, a lovely older woman with elegant greying hair pulled into a bun and a strict dark blue suit had been quite intimidating, but Gina Park had been lovely and the interview had gone surprisingly well.

The questions, she had to admit, had been difficult but she got through them and apparently she had done better than what she had expected because, by the time the interview was actually done, both Gina and Camilla had shared one look before they both nodded and congratulated her.

The job doesn't start for a few weeks to make sure that she has some time to organise housing etc but the idea of being able to work with Gina Park, one of the best Public Relations experts out there right now, especially at her age and speciality in terms of social media, was something that Clea had just dreamt of.

The position was that of junior PA working with the PA team that is already in place for Tony Stark and working as an assistant to Gina at the same time to learn the ropes.

It meant that even when Clea was working with Stephen, she was going to be working for both Tony and for Gina via emails and phone calls. Which honestly? Clea didn't mind. Half of the time that she was working at the practice, she had been either doing her homework or mucking about on the internet anyway.

"Congratulations." Tony tells her as he raises the glass towards her and Clea laughs as she clinks the glass with his and the others join in on the toast.

As soon as she had the news in hand, Tony had suggested that they go out to celebrate. The four of them were seated at the lovely Culina, Modern Italian. It's a new restaurant just opened, but the modern Italian cuisine was good and Pepper had been eyeing it for some time.

"Does this mean that I get to order you around now?" Tony asks with a tongue in cheek expression and Clea gives him a raised eyebrow and jokingly picks up the knife and very delicately slices into the prawn on her plate.

"You could try." She tells him and Tony chuckles as she gives him a menacing smile. Pepper and Stephen join in on the laughter and it is such a lovely meal.

She is grateful for the opportunity and she is grateful that she could have a life outside of the Order. She remembers Wong and Yinn telling her what the Order had been like before Stephen and she isn't sure if she could abide by the strict laws that had been placed back then.

She is grateful to Stephen but she is also grateful to Wong and Yinn for their sacrifice. Because the Sanctum needed protectors, for Masters to be within its walls pretty much at all times. Which meant that Wong and Yinn had to remain at the Sanctum and give up at the chance to have lives outside of the Sanctum in order for Stephen and Clea to have theirs.
It is a sacrifice that she will always be grateful for.

"So where are you going to stay when you're in LA?" Tony asks her and it is clear that the mansion is open as an option if that is what she wants. She knows that. Tony is fond enough of her and he definitely loves Stephen enough that even by extension, he would be okay with her being there.

But she doesn't actually want that.

It is more or less a honeymoon period for them and having her around would mean that they wouldn't necessarily censor themselves, but it would definitely mean that they would have to be mindful.

"You can stay with me. My flat is definitely big enough and I could use the company." Pepper says with a smile and Clea nods gratefully. She enjoys spending time with Pepper. It's nice to have a friend outside of the Order. Most of her friends had been in Pennsylvania and since she'd been in New York, she hasn't been able to see them all that often.

Pepper has been a good friend. More importantly, they definitely had fun when they spent time together so there was that.

"Thanks Pepper." Clea tells her with a warm smile and Clea is almost caught off guard when Tony throws something her way. She barely catches it and when she does, she realises that she is holding a set of keys. To a car.

"I'll have it delivered to Pepper's garage. Consider it a signing bonus." Tony says and Clea looks down at the set of keys for a long moment before she looks up and narrows her eyes at him.

"Did you just buy me a car?" Clea asks him, incredulous. Tony shrugs his shoulders as Stephen sighs.

"No, I bought you an Audi R8. That is more than just a car." Tony says with a mischievous tone and Clea doesn't quite know what to say.

"I love you." She says with a gushing tone and Tony laughs as Stephen sighs.

"He's just doing it so you will stop trying to steal his." Stephen tells her and he is probably right but she doesn't care. She can't wait to drive the thing. She feels the excitement add to the happiness she already feels and she gives him a grateful smile.

"I've had the boys tinker with the car. JARVIS will be connected to it via satellite and I ensured that there were extra safety measures." Tony tells her in a more serious tone and she knows that the words are more aimed at Stephen than her.

Tony was sensitive to Stephen's issues when it came to fast cars. It's the kind of gesture that she truly appreciated because gestures like that told her that Tony truly cared for her uncle. That he truly loved him.

"Thank you." She tells him for more the thought behind it than anything else. Tony shrugs his shoulders and it is clear that he is uncomfortable with her sincere words and tone.

The media may have an image of Tony Stark as being an arrogant rich brat, but she knew better. He was humble and generous in ways that only those close to him could appreciate.

The rest of the dinner goes smoothly and well. By the time that they are done, they split up. Pepper takes Clea with Happy towards her apartment since Happy lives in the same complex and Tony goes
back with an SI transport driver back to the mansion.

When they are in the apartment, Pepper goes straight for the fridge and brings out a bottle of chardonnay which she lifts to show Clea and she approves wholeheartedly.

They settle down in the living room without their heels and start taking off their make up with wipes as they drink and talk over their week.

They have been doing that over the phone, but it's nicer to do it in person. They keep the calendar of the two men organised and they talk about their days and the different things that are bothering them.

Pepper takes the time to run through the work that Clea will be expected to do and tells her that if she ever needs help, all she needs to do is ask for it. Clea knows. She is grateful for the offer regardless.

"It's going to be so good to have you at the office and with me." Pepper tells her and Clea has to agree. Having a close friend nearby is always good. having a friend like Pepper and having a mentor like her in the business world is something that girls like her would kill for.

"Thank you for the opportunity. I really mean it Pepper. I'm going to make sure I make you proud." Clea tells her seriously and the older woman gives her a smile and nods.

"You better. I'm not going to go easy on you." Pepper tells her and Clea nods. She doesn't expect her to. Pepper turns on the TV and they watch the late-night news as they talk, drink and enjoy each other's company.

Clea's pretty sure that Stephen and Tony are probably doing something similar. Actually? She's pretty sure that they were doing something vastly different. if she really thinks about it.

If Tony's heated glance towards Stephen as they left the restaurant was any indication at least. When Clea blushes and giggles, unable to help herself, Pepper looks confused. The news about the stock market wasn't very amusing after all. When Clea explains, Pepper blushes too as if she had brought up some images in her own head before she bursts out laughing as well.

"And that is exactly why I told you to live with me." Pepper tells her drily when they are over their laughing fit. Clea can only nod and sigh.

"To being single?" Clea suggests as she lifts up her glass and Pepper sighs and clinks her glass to Clea's.

"To being single." Pepper echoes.

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Thursday

18 March 2010

It's late and they really should be in bed, Tony thinks. His eyes are starting to dry out and he is getting that distinct wool in the brain feeling that comes with being tired. It doesn't help that Stephen has cut him off of caffeine for the night.

But Stephen is in the zone, so to say and he is refusing to put a stop to the work. Not that Tony minds. He likes seeing the doctor preoccupied and working, not even noticing that Tony had stopped and was just watching him.
Stephen looks good in anything that he wears. But Tony especially likes this relaxed, t-shirt and jeans look on the doctor. The Converse shoes that never seem to leave the doctor's feet are tapping softly on the ground along to the Black Sabbath song playing in the background of the workshop.

Tony doesn't quite know what Stephen is working on, but he is engrossed. Tony himself had been working on building a suit that can fold into a suitcase.

Stephen had thrown his two cents in to make sure that it was as safe as it could be, but after that, Stephen had retreated into his corner of the workshop and started to work on something.

Tony likes just watching Stephen work.

He's such a distraction. Stephen's focus is amazing. Tony can see the way that his eyes are quickly scrolling through whatever is on the screen. His fingers are moving to type and to scroll. The mouse that Tony had made for Stephen seems to be working well with the doctor's hand and his unsteadiness. The cursor doesn't waver too much though Stephen's hands are starting to hit their limits again.

Stephen has good days and bad days as far as the hands are concerned. Knowing that Stephen's loss of his hands had occurred in the accident and that his hands had been through multiple surgeries and still wasn't able to be... properly saved, it breaks Tony's heart. Especially when he realised that Stephen is still in pain. That he has been in pain for 21 years or more.

Knowing that it is something that will never go away?

The permanence of it makes it all the worse. Stephen works around it, but Tony knows that there are days where the pain is so bad and the fingers are so stiff that Stephen can't work. They haven't had one of those days yet. Stephen had warned him about it, but so far they have been... lucky.

Tony is prepared for the bad days. He has bad days too. He has days where the casing around the Arc Reactor hurts and feels bruised and he is so sensitive and the muscles so locked up that he can barely breathe let alone move.

But the chronic pain issue is another thing that they share. They understand each other's pains and know how to deal with it. Tony is grateful for it.

"Anthony, would it- would it be possible for me to see a full list of Stark Industries projects and patents?" Stephen asks all of sudden, turning around to face him and his eyes are covered by the glasses that he usually wears when he works at the computer for a long time. Tony loves the way that they look on Stephen.

"Sure. J?" Tony says and JARVIS brings up the list onto the holotable and Stephen moves to it, clearly still preoccupied with whatever idea has him by the brain cells.

"What are you looking for?" Tony asks as he approaches the holotable too. He hasn't been doing any of his own work for the last... about twenty minutes or so anyway. Stephen has the most adorable frown on his face as he looks through the patents. Tony wants to kiss it away. He doesn't.

He does take one of Stephen's hand into his to start massaging it slowly. Stephen gives him a smile, but his focus on the work that's going on in his head doesn't waver. He looks through the patents.

"The electrodes. Can I get a closer look at those JARVIS?" Stephen asks and JARVIS complies easily. As Stephen looks at them Tony understands what he is trying to do and the excitement hits him.
"Neural interface. You figured out how to make it work." Stephen nods slowly as he looks at the electrodes and the specifications. It's an experimental electrode designed to be smaller and more efficient than the ones that were currently available to read the brain waves. They tap into the electrical currents running through the brain through the silicon chips.

But they were just experimental at this stage and though they were sensitive, there was no program that was sufficient to interpret the signals and to understand what was going on, That was what the team was working on at this stage. Also, the electrodes required a lubricant to be able to read the signals. In general, they required a lab environment.

"It's the synthesised silicone hybrid formula that your scientists announced last week. If we can coat the electrodes with that, there should be sufficient contact with the skins of the head to be able to read the signals without the use of lubricants." Stephen says almost distractedly.

Tony kisses him.

The thing is, Tony finds Stephen's brain and his capabilities to think outside of the square and to make connections... incredibly attractive. He loves the brilliance of the man's brain and Tony knows that even if Stephen wasn't as beautiful as he was, with that brain? Tony would have fucked his brains out at any time of the day.

"You are brilliant." Tony tells him seriously as he pulls away from the kiss.

"If we can add the electrodes, coated with the silicone formula and put them into your helmet, we would be able to get brain wave readings from the helmet. It will require some programming and experimentation, but I think I'll be able to program the neural interface we'd been thinking about." Stephen says and Tony kisses him again.

"Your brain is so fucking hot Stephen." Tony tells him when he pulls away from the kiss and doesn't end it there. He turns Stephen around so that he is leaning against the holotable properly and kisses him with some serious purpose.

"I didn't realise that my contract came with a reward scheme." Stephen says with a playful tone when Tony lays his hand against Stephen's growing bulge. To know that Stephen can get excited with just a few kisses and compliments?

It makes Tony feel so incredibly hot.

"You should have read it more carefully. You get bonuses for brilliant breakthroughs." Tony tells him as he slowly goes down to his knees and puts his hands on Stephen's slim hips and nuzzles the growing hard-on.

"I should have more breakthroughs then." Stephen manages to say but his breath hitches when Tony starts to get his hard-on out into the air-conditioned workshop air.

"Definitely. It'll give me more opportunities to reward you." Tony tells him as he kisses Stephen's beautiful cock. He makes sure that lookup so that he can watch Stephen's reactions.

"Hands on my head or shoulders." Tony reminds him because Stephen was starting to hold onto the holotable. It's never a good idea for Stephen to hold onto anything hard during sexual activities. Stephen tends to be able to hold on against the pain until they are done, but Tony doesn't like the fact that Stephen does that.

When the doctor's hands are firmly on him, Tony starts to truly suck Stephen's cock. It's always a challenge. Stephen isn't wide, but he is definitely long and Tony's had just enough practice with the
doctor to be able to deep throat pretty comfortably but it is always... a challenge when he first starts off.

But when Tony manages to get Stephen's cock all the way in and he can feel the doctor's pubic hair against his face, Tony looks up to see the effect he is having on Stephen. He almost smiles when he does. Stephen looks enraptured. He looks completely lost in the pleasure and the hard grip on his shoulders proves it.

Tony works his head and his throat. As he does so, he uses one hand to brace himself and another to jerk himself off. He can't help himself. He also keeps his eyes firmly on Stephen and his reactions.

Stephen doesn't fuck his face. He holds himself back and Tony can feel the small movements of Stephen's hips, but he is a considerate lover. Tony moves Stephen's hips for him using that one hand and the indication is more than enough.

"You sure?" Stephen pants out and Tony gives him a slow wink and breathes deep. The key to deep throating is breathing through the nose and being careful to keep his throat relaxed enough. Tony is good at that. When Stephen starts to move his hips, Tony closes his eyes and lets himself relax and just take what Stephen gives him.

Stephen starts slow. He always does, until he can make sure Tony is doing alright. When his hands close around Tony's head and he starts to move properly, Tony's hand moves faster on his own cock. It's a bit dry and he knows that he should be lubricated but he doesn't care.

It feels all too fucking hot to know that his lover was enjoying him and using him to get off. It's a kink of his to be used like this, with his partner not caring whether he gets off or not, but just using his body to find their own pleasure. It's perverted and it's odd, Tony knows that. He doesn't particularly care. He just wants it.

"Oh God- To-Tony!" Stephen tries to warn him. He needn't have bothered. Tony relaxes his throat enough and pulls Stephen close to him so that he can come inside of Tony's throat. Tony can't feel it, but when Stephen starts to withdraw, he can taste it. He grins around it and licks as much of the cum off of Stephen as possible.

"God you're amazing." Stephen breathes out as he all but slumps and leans against the holotable. Tony nods at him as he scoops up all the saliva and the remnants of Stephen's cum from his mouth to jerk himself off. Tony keeps his firm eyes on Stephen and to see how relaxed and freshly fucked his lover looks and knowing that he had done that.

"Oh God, you're so beautiful like that Tony. Come on, come for me." Stephen coaxes at him and Tony can't hold on. That voice! Stephen's come hither voice is so beautiful and so seductive and Tony can't- He just can't hold on against that. When Stephen almost coos at him again, Tony comes hard and fast all over the floor.

When he regains his senses, it's with Stephen kissing his tired lips and tongue. Stephen's shaking fingers are on his jaw and cheeks, trying to massage the facial muscles there. Tony appreciates the effort but stops him.

He pulls Stephen's hands towards him and kisses them gently before he pulls the doctor down for another kiss. It's a lazy, post-orgasm, gentle kiss and Tony knows that Stephen must taste himself from the kiss and wonders what he thinks about it. Some people get grossed out by it but Tony knows that Stephen doesn't care.

They kiss and relax on the cold cement floors of the lab for sometime before they manage to get up
and make themselves at least semi-descent.

"Tomorrow morning, I'm going to send instructions to the labs SI for them to produce the electrode and silicone thing like you suggested. When we get it, we can work on the programming and the signals." Tony tells him and Stephen nods slowly and helps him to stand up.

"But for now, take me to bed." Tony tells the doctor who gives him a smile.

"I would love to." Stephen replies back.

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Wednesday

24 March 2010

Clea's role in the practice that Stephen runs is... well... everything. She is his secretary, the practice manager, the accountant and receptionist. But she prefers the title of Personal Assistant.

Everything she does in the practice is designed around ensuring that Stephen's day is easy, organised and smooth. That is her job and she is proud of what she has been able to accomplish in doing it.

Adding the work of SI though would be good. Between her memory and her ability to process information quickly, she has a lot of spare time in the office. She'd spent most of it doing her work for her Masters but her thesis was done and she was just waiting for the university to finish up her program.

Which meant that she was going to have a lot of spare time on her hands. Clea preferred being busy. Clea looks up at the patients waiting to see Stephen. Stephen had always been busy even before the media blow up. The recent media attention that Stephen had gotten did increase demand, but Clea had been quick and careful in weeding out the cases that Stephen didn't need to see.

There were a lot of people that just wanted to see a celebrity doctor. Stephen didn't like that. He preferred to deal with patients that really needed him. Most of his patients came from other neurologists and neurosurgeons.

But there were also random walk-ins from desperate people and depending on the case, Stephen will take them on. It's just the kind of doctor he was. Which means she is perpetually in scheduling hell. She doesn't know how Pepper does it.

The three days that he does work, the schedule is... packed for the lack of a better word. Stephen sees up to 25 patients a day and considering the fact that his consultations aren't usually very short, it means that he is almost always running behind on schedule at least a little and there are always people sitting about waiting to see him.

No one generally minds waiting. Stephen had set up the office to ensure that there was plenty of reading material in a large bookcase and the chairs and lounges were genuinely comfortable.

The atmosphere in the office was professional but warm and calm. Clea liked it. It felt... kind of like the Sanctum but then having the two of them in it three days a week and the spells that have been woven into the rooms may add to the effect.

Most of the patients that come to see Stephen turn up usually because they are on their last resort. So the calm and comfort that the room provides are important.
Most of the patients usually come with family members to support them and sometimes to just to help them actually make it to the practice.

It's heartbreaking.

Stephen is good but he can't always save everyone. Sometimes, cancer just is in the wrong place and even Stephen doesn't have a solution for it. Or sometimes, their spine is really so damaged that even Stephen can't find a solution to fix it.

When the bad news is going to be delivered, Clea often knows about it before the patients even walk into Stephen's office. She can see it in the dimensional energies flowing around them. When they have a number of those patients in a day, they are usually subdued and a little sad after.

Except Clea has a feeling today is going to be extra bad considering the little boy that has just walked into the office holding his mother's hand. She is holding a younger girl in her arms.

There are no children booked in to see Stephen today.

From the bald head and the subdued look in the child's eyes, Clea guesses that he is the patient. He looks incredibly fragile. Clea feels her heartache already. The mother sits the two children down on the waiting room chairs. The boy solemnly takes his sister into his arms and holds her tightly as the mother comes up to the reception desk.

"Hi. I- We don't have an appointment but we need help." The mother starts off. Clea looks at her for a long moment and then at the children. She can feel the shifting dimensional energies on the boy. It is... intriguing. She hasn't seen anything like that on the patients before.

"My name's Clea. Can you maybe give me an idea as to what's going on?" Clea starts off and she keeps her voice warm and friendly. The mother turns to look at her son for a moment before she speaks quietly.

"I'm- I'm Vanessa Keener. My boy, Harley, he has Medulloblastoma and the- his doctor doesn't think that there is anything that can be done because of the location of the tumour. The thing is, I heard about Dr Strange on the news and I- We just drove here. I tried to make an appointment but he doesn't- I'm- I'm really sorry there- We don't-" The mother's emotions were obvious as was her difficulty speaking.

Clea can tell what she was trying to say at any rate. They were fully booked out for appointments for at least three months. The boy didn't have that long. God.

"Okay um. Let- Let me have a chat with Stephen and see if we can squeeze you in. Do you have any scans?" Clea asks and Vanessa is quick to grab out a USB drive and hands it to Clea.

"I thought- Harley said that Dr Strange will probably prefer the scans electronically because he works with Tony Stark and he likes technology." She says with a small smile. Her pride and her love for her son was obvious. So was her desperation and heartbreak.

"He was right." Clea tells her warmly and she makes sure that she is loud enough for the boy to hear her. he beams.

Clea can't look away from the boy. The way that his energies were moving about was incredibly odd and she was pretty sure she had never seen anything like it before. She would have to ask Stephen when he comes out, she thinks.

"Okay. How about- How about you leave me a number and take your children out to the diner?"
There's one just downstairs and they have fantastic milkshakes and there's also a park across the road. I will call you as soon as Stephen has looked at the scans.” Clea tells her and the woman looks at her for a long moment.

Clea can tell that she was worried that Clea was just fobbing her off. She wasn't. Clea just wasn't sure whether it was a good idea for children to remain in the office waiting. The office does feel calm and relaxed, but children usually need a little more than calm and relaxed.

"It shouldn't be a long wait, but just in case it takes a while. They also have free arcade machines.” Clea tells her to reassure her and slowly, the woman nods. But rather than leaving with the children, she starts to rummage through her bag.

"I- I can't afford to pay you a lot and I ran out of health insurance but I can-" Clea shushes her. The other couple of patients in the room all look just as heartbroken as Clea feels.

The boy and the girl seem more subdued and beaten down than anything else. Despite their young age, they are aware of the situation. They know about the financial difficulty. They know about the seriousness of the boy's condition. God. They have the kind of expressions that no children should ever have.

"Don't worry about the payment Ms Keener. Stephen is quite flexible.” Clea tells her and the relief and the shame that goes through the woman's face breaks her heart all over again.

"I- Thank you." Vanessa manages as she jots down her number on the post it that Clea gives her. Her son is quick to get his sister and follow the woman out of the practice. When Clea looks up, Mrs Robinson, who was supposed to be next, grabs her attention.

"We don't mind waiting if the doctor needs some time to look over that poor boy's scans.” She says and Clea gives her a grateful smile. Almost right on time, Stephen comes out to grab the next patient as the male patient thanks him along with his wife and they leave, some hope in their eyes.

"Stephen, a minute." Clea says and she grabs the USB and all but pushes him into the office and closes the door behind herself.

"You need to look at these first," Clea says and Stephen nods and goes to the holotable with the USB. He plugs it in and the table does what it usually does, pulling all the scans together and analysing it before it spits out the 3D holographic display of the brain. Stephen enlarges it a fair bit before he looks at her.

"This is a child's brain. We don't have any children booked.” Stephen says. Clea nods. It isn't the first time that they have let patients in without a booking. It won't be the last. Stephen isn't good at saying no to patients. Especially if they have travelled far to come to him.

"Yeah. The thing is, he's a little boy. Maybe 8? 10? Little sister too and the mum- God Stephen she looked like she was ready to fall apart. When I saw the boy, Harley? There was- there was something weird going on with his energies. It was like... I want to say flickering?" Clea can't quite describe the energy discrepancy. It was the first time she'd seen something like that.

"Wait. What did you say his name was?" Stephen asks sharply as he looks at the name on the scan. H. Keener, the scan reads.

"Harley? I think that's what the mother said." Clea asks, almost confused because she had thought he would be more interested in the energy issue she saw, not the boy's name. Stephen pursues his lips and is silent for a moment before he nods.
"Call her. If this is who I think it is, we need to save him." Stephen tells her and Clea nods but she is confused. Stephen sees the confusion even as he enlarges the scan even further.

"Harley Keener. He's the little boy in the other Universes that helps Anthony during the Mandarin incident." Oh. Oh! Clea almost smacks herself on the head. Of course! She should have recognised the name and should have understood what the energy flickers meant.

"I didn't see this." Stephen says quietly as he looks over the scans and nods almost to himself.

"What do you mean?" Clea asks. Stephen pursues his lips and is thoughtful for some time before he answers.

"Harley Keener has an important role to play. But all I have seen of him has been in relation to the part that he plays in Anthony's life. Not before. I did not know that he was ill or that he would be coming here. But if he is here, then it is because his life needs saving and we need to do it. Regardless. The flicker you saw is most likely in relation to that. The potential for his life to be saved by... magic." Stephen says quietly and Clea gets it.

Well shit.

"So... surgically?" Clea asks and Stephen looks over the scans one more time before he sighs. Clea isn't a doctor. She can't read and understand the scans in the way that Stephen can.

"There is something that we can do, but if this boy needs his brain to be functioning, which he does, then it's going to take more than surgery. We're going to need Grimshaw." Stephen says and Clea nods slowly. Stephen takes the USB out and sits down in his chair.

"Call them and get to them come in. I will speak to them and get the surgery organised with Grimshaw. We will need an all Order staff to do this. You'll need get something sorted out. I'll see Mrs Robinson quickly." Stephen says and Clea is more than happy to comply.

Harley Keener.

How could she forget the name? She had a good understanding and memory of all the parties that they would be crossing paths with. She doesn't know why she hadn't put the boy's face with the name that she should have recognised. How many Harley Keeners can be out there in the world? But not recognising him at least... made sense.

When she had seen him in Stephen's visions, the child had been smiling, his cheeks rosy and he had been generally more... lively. This Harley looked... sad and subdued. Not exactly the best expression on a child.

Clea picks up the phone. This was going to take some doing but she had a feeling that if the universe brought Harley Keener to be saved by Stephen, then saved he will be.

Because by gods, no child deserved to die.

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Chapter Summary

It is all about preserving the lives of those that would lead the future. Whether or not the universe will break or not, whether or not Stephen will be successful or not.

He will at least ensure that Harley Kenner survives.

Chapter Notes

Argh. I'm so sleepy of late... it sucks!

Haven't managed to figure out how to fix the end of the Arc yet, but we are getting there and hopefully I can sleep my way into a solution? >__<

I hope you guys are enjoying the story and hope that you keep commenting and supporting me through this giant project!

<3

Friday

26 March 2010

Stephen looks at the child lying unconscious on the bed. The wires that are connected to him and the tubes that ensure that he is kept alive makes the child look even smaller than he is.

The pale face that had been so excited to see the holotable and derailed the conversation about his treatment options with his mother with questions about how the holotable functioned is quiet now.

Stephen feels... nervous.

It has been a long time since he had felt truly nervous before surgery. Even when he had operated on important people. But this is different.

For one, Harley Keener is 8 years old. He is a child. A child that has a wonderful life ahead of him. Stephen knows it. He has seen it. Even in the universe that breaks, Harley Keener has a role to play. He is the child genius that will become the next generation of inventors. The next generation of brilliant minds to lead the future forward.

Had Harley been born in an environment more like Stephen's or Tony's, he would already have been known to the world and involved in the world of science and technology.

In a way, Stephen is glad that he wasn't. He deserves to have a childhood that Tony didn't get to have. That Stephen didn't let himself have.
It is important for Harley.

He is loved by his mother and there are issues with the father, but as effected as Harley is by that, it is clear that Vanessa had done more than she could to make up for the loss. She tries hard to provide him with everything that he needs and wants. Despite her meagre pay.

This tumour is not something that Stephen had foreseen. It has sent Vanessa Keener deep into debt and she was struggling but she was still doing everything that she could to ensure that her son lives. That dedication and that devotion is something that Stephen admires.

He instructed Clea to set up a trust for the family to ensure that they don't have any debts after the boy is cured. The mother hadn't been willing to accept the funds. But she does after Clea talks to her about paying it forward.

Let Harley grow up. Let him have the opportunity to be good for the world. It isn't a handout, Clea explains. It's an investment in the future. In the genius that Stephen had recognised in the boy.

That convinces Vanessa to accept the money with the promise that she will ensure that he knows of it and that he will pay it back. Or pay it forward to someone else deserving when he is older.

It's a fine line when it comes to charity. They ensure that the family will be comfortable but Vanessa insists that she wants to provide for her children. So the money is put into trust for them for when they grow up.

Stephen and the Order have to make sure that the family remains in Rose Hill. That Harley was going to be there to help Tony when he gets to Rose Hill. Whether those chain of events will happen exactly as they do in the other universes or not now... Stephen doesn't know. But it's not worth taking risks.

The surgery is a risk.

Alex Grimshaw, an Oncologist and a Master of the Order that specialises in Healing, gives him an uncertain look.

"Are you sure about this my Lord?" They ask. Grimshaw's features are hidden by the scrubs and masks that they are both wearing, as are the other Disciples and Masters in the Operation Room. They had to pull some strings to make this surgery happen.

For one, to book out an OR in New York with the best facilities possible? Difficult but not impossible. To fill the staff only with the members of the Order? Much more difficult.

It had taken significant money and legal documents to be signed to ensure that the hospital would not bear any responsibility should the surgery go wrong and lots of consent forms to be signed by Vanessa for the surgery to be able to go ahead.

But they got it organised.

It was all thanks to Clea and Tony actually.

When Stephen had realised that he needed some strings pulled that he didn't have access to, he had contacted Tony to both inform him that he wouldn't be able to make it to Malibu for a few days and that he needed help.

Tony hadn't asked too many questions once he mentioned a child being involved. Tony did his thing and the Mayor pulled the rest of the strings with the public hospital and that was it. They got their
surgery.

It was being done late at night to limit the number of personnel and to ensure that they had the privacy needed. Clea was with Vanessa and Maria, Harley's sister.

Clea had organised a suite for them in the D'Arte, but they had opted to stay at the hospital to wait for the surgery to finish up, though they knew it would take a long time.

"I am." Stephen says quietly as he steps towards the boy. Wong stands behind him, hands reached out and covered in the scrubs that everyone is wearing. Grimshaw steps forward as well.

The procedure is complicated.

They discussed the battle plan before they even got the theatre organised.

Stephen would conduct the actual removal of the tumour. He would need help from Wong to ensure that his hands stayed steady throughout the surgery. Once that was done, they were going to magically stabilise the boy and heal him as much as possible.

They weren't going to be able to get rid of all the cancer cells in the body. The boy would have to go through a little bit more of the chemotherapy so they had to prepare the body for that. Strengthen it.

There were several Disciples and Masters skilled in the Art of Healing ready to go to assist with that. But before they even cut Harley's head open, they had to ensure that the tumour was shrunk to ensure that they would have the best chance to remove it cleanly without damaging the brain.

In fact, Stephen was pretty sure that they would have to reconstruct bits of the brain and make it seem natural. It was going to be a difficult procedure.

But he is determined to make it work. They all were.

The idea of losing a child on the operating table was unforgivable. Stephen takes a deep breath and nods.

The operation starts.

Stephen isn't sure how long it takes. But it takes a long time. It is meticulous work to go through the brain, carefully and slowly to ensure that not a single nerve, not a single cell in the brain is damaged as they seek out the problem.

The Disciples and Masters move in to rest their hands on Harley's arms and legs to provide his body with the energy to keep up with the procedure. Stephen can feel himself sweating as he focuses.

It's good to have full control of his hands back. The sensitive fingers do the work carefully and well. Grimshaw is right there, assisting, helping.

Considering the fact that despite having worked at the same hospital at the same time, they have never performed surgeries together, they work extremely well together. Especially considering how experimental this magic mixed in with medicine surgery is.

When they are cutting through the last of the tumour, the sensors on Harley starts to go crazy. It's too much. of course, it is. Stephen hears the alarm and feels the energy in the room intensify as the Masters and the Disciples struggle to keep the boy stable and alive.

Stephen removes the tumour, puts it on the tray prepared for it and looks at Grimshaw. They look...
displeased.

"Close up. I'll heal the damage." Stephen commands. They look uncertain about it, but they nod. They may be the Master of Healing, but Stephen has the greater reserves of power that can be used for something like this.

He knows the human body well. Most of all. Stephen knows the human brain extremely well. Stephen focuses.

The alarms quieten as Stephen works the spell. The energies flowing through him move faster and stronger than what he had expected but it's fine. He can handle it. The pull at his personal energies as well as the dimensional energies that he channels is difficult, but Stephen can manage.

He has to.

Stephen can see the child's brain in his mind. He heals the broken connections. He makes sure that Harley will be whole.

By the time he is done and the alarms are quiet and Grimshaw had finished closing the boy's head back up, Stephen can barely stand. He sways heavily on his feet until Wong catches him.

"I will take him to the recovery room and we will keep an eye on him, my Lord." Grimshaw tells him with a relieved look in their eyes. Stephen nods.

"Thank you." Stephen rasps out. He lets Wong bear his weight and takes a moment to recover himself. The OR empties slowly and Wong helps to steady him until Stephen can stand on his own feet again.

"You're an idiot." Wong tells him drily but there is pride in his voice too. Stephen gives him a grin and takes a few deep breathes before the first coughing fit hits him.

As it does, Stephen tastes the blood on his tongue and inwardly sighs. He really has been an idiot. The magical backlash for using up too much of his personal energies is always harsh.

Sometimes it's just exhaustion. Sometimes it's a collapse of the body where the whole system just shuts down. Other times, it's something like this. A bleed in the lung. Great.

"You know we can't fix that." Wong says with some worry. Stephen knows. It's not the first time he's coughed up blood like this. It probably won't be the last.

"Why is it always the fucking lungs?" Stephen complains as he wipes his mouth with his scrub-covered sleeves.

"Hey it's better than the nose bleeds Yinn and I get." Wong tells him, though he seems concerned. Stephen sighs.

"I'll go and speak to Vanessa and go to Malibu. I need to see Tony." Stephen says. Wong raises an eyebrow at him but he nods slowly. He knows better than to interfere with Stephen's desire to see Tony and to be with his Soulmate.

As someone with a Connection, Wong knows better than anyone else how strong that desire and need is. And that desire was strong.

It's almost been six days since he had seen the genius last and Stephen misses him. So much. The Connection misses him. It pulls at Stephen almost impatiently.
It's only when Stephen walks out of the OR and sees all the staff bustling about that he realises that it is morning. Saturday morning. He hurries his tired steps towards the private waiting room Vanessa and Clea were in.

It's time to finally give her some good news.

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**Saturday**

**27 March 2010**

The first thing that Tony notices when Stephen walks into the mansion is that the doctor does not look good. In fact, he looks like he is ready to collapse at any point and Tony really, really doesn't like the look of his pale face, sunken in eyes and the almost hazy look in his eyes.

"Oh my God Stephen what- are you okay?" Is what Tony manages to say as he rushes over to him and all but catches him just as the doctor falls pretty much into his arms.

"Hi." Stephen says as he buries his head into Tony's neck and breathes in. Tony is pretty sure that he doesn't actually smell all that good considering the fact that he'd just been welding to work on the ridiculous amounts of electrodes that Stephen had insisted was required on the helmet.

"You said you were doing surgery Stephen, not working an entire roster." Tony chides as he half carries Stephen towards the sofas. He wants to take him to the bedroom but he's not sure if Stephen can handle stairs right now.

Stephen actually leans heavily on him, which is not like him. Tony can almost feel the man's exhaustion from just the way that the doctor is leaning so heavily against him and from the way that his head lulls back onto the headrest of the couch almost immediately as soon as Tony sits him down.

"It was a long surgery." Stephen says quietly, his voice almost as exhausted as his face appears to be.

"A child right?" Tony asks. When Stephen had called him on Wednesday night asking if it would be okay for him to delay coming to LA for a few days, Tony hadn't been too surprised. Stephen was still a doctor and he had patients to seen and Tony admired his dedication to the work.

Then Stephen asked for help. Which surprised Tony, to be honest, but it had been easy enough to contact the Mayor of New York to get him to pull some strings for Tony to make sure that Stephen can get the OR that he needed for the surgery.

It's the first time that Stephen had really asked for anything from him. Tony was grateful that both Stephen felt comfortable enough to do it and that Tony could help. The Stark family's connections in New York ran deep after all.

Tony has to admit that he is fascinated by the boy that Stephen had talked about. Any child that managed to figure out how the Holotable works by just looking at it? Especially when it's not been widely reported on in the media yet?

Yeah. Definitely the kind of future technologist to be looked forward to.

"Yeah. He's only 8." Stephen tells him quietly. Tony nods slowly as he moves them so that Stephen is leaning against him with Tony leaning against the armrest so that he can get his hands on the
doctor's shoulders. He massages them slowly and can feel Stephen relaxing into his touch.

Tony can only imagine how difficult it would have been to perform surgery on such a young person. To know that Stephen held the responsibility of ensuring that the young boy would have a future? Tony isn't quite sure if he can handle that sort of responsibility.

"I'm really sorry I couldn't come earlier." Stephen says quietly. Tony shushes him. It wasn't like they had anything big or important planned. Even if they had, they were talking about a child and if Stephen was working to save a child's life, Tony really wasn't going to give him shit about that.

"Yeah I'm pretty sure a child's life comes before our programming marathon." Tony tells him easily enough. Stephen moans out as Tony works on a particularly tight spot on his shoulder.

"He's going to be okay." Stephen says quietly and Tony is glad to hear that. No child deserves to be ill. No child deserves to die. He kisses Stephen's neck and hopes that the man can feel that Tony is proud of him.

"So how did-" Whatever Stephen had been trying to say gets cut short with a cough. Tony pats him on the back to help him through it and he doesn't think too much of the coughing fit until he sees the red spots spraying out from the doctor with each cough and landing on the pristine white sofa. The alarm and chill that goes down Tony's spine happen immediately.

"Stephen?" Tony hurriedly moves so that he is in front of the doctor and he can see it. The blood seeping from Stephen's hand covering his mouth and the blood being sprayed with the force of the cough through the hand onto the white couch.

"I- I'm fine." Stephen says even as he covers his mouth. If he is fine, Tony is Ozzy Ozbourne and his hair isn't dark enough to even try. Tony grabs the box of tissues from the side table and gives it to Stephen and he wipes his lips and his hands with the tissues and looks at his shirt and the sofa and sighs.

"I'm so sorry Anthony. I didn't mean to-" Tony doesn't care what he is trying to say. He is too busy grabbing the phone before he realises he can just get JARVIS to call a doctor because Stephen needs a doctor. People just don't cough up blood for kicks and giggles. They do that when there's something seriously wrong.

"J! Call one of the emergency doctors we have on the list. Stephen need-" Even to Tony his voice sounds alarmed. He can't even remember the names of the doctors he has on the emergency contact list. But JARVIS will know. AIs don't panic. Right?

"It's fine. It's not- It's not medical Anthony." Stephen says quietly and that stops Tony in his tracks. He looks down at Stephen, at the blood still staining his lips, the sunken-in eyes and the realisation hits him.

"You did something." Tony says and Stephen nods slowly, almost guiltily as he breathes in and out slowly. Tony catches just enough of a glimpse of Stephen's eyes to see the fear he hadn't seen for a little while.

That fear.

The fear that Tony will reject him. That Tony will fear him. That Tony will walk away. Tony hates that fear. He hates that Stephen can't trust that he will always be there. That he can't rely on Tony to be able to accept him without knowing the secrets.

He can't blame Stephen. He had put that fear there. He had done that to Stephen. No one else. Him.
So he had to fix it. He has to make it better.

"The boy- He's-" Stephen coughs again. This time, he catches most of the blood with the pile of tissues. Eliza was going to be very surprised when she comes on Monday morning, Tony thinks almost hysterically as he looks at his lover and the pain in his eyes.

"Stephen, you need to go to the hospital. That can be internal bleeding or something worse." Tony tries to say as he kneels by Stephen. He doesn't care what this is. He doesn't care what Stephen did. He wants Stephen to stop coughing up blood and he wants the pain in Stephen's eyes to go away. But more than that, he wants that fear to fuck off.

"It's fine. I just... What I can do requires a price. The price was just a little high this time. That's all." Stephen says as if it's that simple. He smiles a little ruefully and Tony wonders vaguely if this is what had happened to Stephen when he had taken Tony's injuries away.

He is actually surprised by the fact that he doesn't feel that anger this time. He doesn't have that anger or fear that he had felt the first time he had realised that Stephen had... abilities that science could not explain. Instead, all he feels is concern and fear for Stephen.

That's a surprise.

"Stephen, you're coughing up blood. Did- Is this what happened when you did whatever it is that you did for me?" Tony can't help but ask. He remembers how drawn and in pained Stephen had seemed when he had come to the hotel room. But what had it been like when Tony had gotten injured? Had he felt all the pain of all the injuries that he suffered? Or had it been worse?

"It's- that was different Anthony. It was just the injuries. That was the price. This is... something different." Stephen tells him quietly as smaller coughs escape him. Tony moves before he registers it to hold Stephen tightly in his arms from behind to try to soothe him from the coughs.

"And you're sure you don't need to be in hospital? You aren't- This isn't something doctors can fix?" Tony asks him and he can hear the concern in his own voice. Stephen leans back into his arms when it is obvious that the coughing fit is over. Tony doesn't look at the pile of bloodied tissues on the doctor's lap.

He can't.

"I'm sure. It's... like an extreme form of exhaustion." Stephen says and Tony doesn't quite buy it but he nods and kisses the doctor's neck and side of the head. He holds Stephen tightly because the fear is still strumming through his blood. The thought of losing Stephen... he'd thought that once and that was enough.

He's pretty sure he can't deal with that.

"Then how about a shower and bed? You look like you can use some rest and I can use a shower." Tony says quietly. He wants to ask just what Stephen had done to save that boy and just why Stephen would go so far to save someone else if it causes him so much pain, but he already knows the answer.

Stephen is a good man.

A man that cares about other people. That values the lives of other people above his own and Tony isn't sure if he can ever be that self-sacrificing, but he can appreciate it in the doctor. Even if he wishes that Stephen wasn't that way.
"I thought you would... ask me questions." Stephen says when Tony has managed to wrangle them into the shower. Tony was going to have to work out more, build his muscles and see if he can actually pick the doctor up in his arms. He has a feeling that might come in useful. Especially if Stephen keeps pulling stunts like this.

"I'm not gonna lie, I am curious about just what you can do and how you can do what you do and why the side effect is coughing up blood. But honestly, right now? I don't care. I just need you to be okay." Tony tells him and it is probably the most honest he had been with the doctor about the way he feels and he feels almost a little... shy about speaking about his emotions, but Stephen seems to appreciate it.

"I would kiss you but I'm pretty sure it's not very sanitary." Stephen says a little ruefully. Tony pulls him down for a kiss anyway. He doesn't like the taste of blood on the doctor's tongue. He wipes it away with his own tongue and wishes that he can taste anything but blood from his lips.

"Don't do that again Stephen. I don't care if it's the goddamned President of United States or the fucking Pope. Don't do this again." Tony tells him almost vehemently. Stephen doesn't respond. He just rests his head on Tony's shoulder as Tony takes the bulk of his weight and washes him. Tony hadn't expected an answer.

He still wishes he had it.

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Sunday

28 March 2010

Tony wakes up with a start.

That surprises him. Tony doesn't wake up in the middle of the night all that often unless it's a nightmare that rouses him. This time, it isn't a nightmare but he does wake up. And it's with strong nausea that has him hurrying out of the bed.

He makes it to the bathroom and manages to shut the door before he throws up whatever remains of the dinner that he and Stephen had shared.

Tony heaves for a long while and he tries to keep it quiet so that he doesn't wake up Stephen. The doctor needs the rest.

When he is done and his stomach quiets enough, the nausea doesn't go away.

He still feels like throwing up. Which sucks. But he's not drunk and he's pretty sure that the ridiculously expensive and exclusive APL that had delivered the steak and veggies to the mansion would have given him food poisoning.

But he is nauseous.

When he is sure that he isn't going to throw up anymore. Tony brushes his teeth and drinks some water before he leaves the bathroom.

In the soft light that JARVIS had turned on for him, Tony can see that Stephen is still sleeping. Good.

He wasn't doing the whole coughing up blood thing anymore, for which Tony was honestly grateful.
for, but the doctor was most definitely not doing well. In fact, he isn't too surprised to hear from both Stephen and Clea that he really shouldn't have come to LA. He should have been back in New York recovering.

Tony is grateful that the doctor came though. He would have missed him otherwise. Stephen did manage to stay awake enough to eat and do some work, but his exhaustion had been obvious. His hands were hurting him badly enough that he could barely type.

Though he did come down to the lab to help Tony with his suit or rather provide mostly companionship and verbal instructions, the doctor had also fallen asleep on the couch several times throughout the day. Not that Tony had minded.

Tony managed to get the pesky electrodes properly welded into the helmet as Stephen had suggested. Once the prototype is made, Tony knows that the rest would be easier, but it does require him to weld each little bit perfectly as the doctor designates. When that is done, they do run some rudimentary tests to get a good understanding of how the sections of Tony's brain worked and which electrodes were picking up what signals.

By the time that had been done, Stephen had been drained. Dinner and an early turn in honestly hadn't sounded too bad to Tony. He has been feeling a bit tired of late.

Tony doesn't want to wake up Stephen. He needs the rest. So he goes down to the kitchen and gets the ginger ale. If nothing else, ginger ale always soothed hangovers and nausea. It doesn't help.

He wonders briefly if he was coming down with something. He'd been tired over the last couple of weeks, but then he'd also been ridiculously busy and he really wasn't a teenager anymore. Maybe his body was just feeling all the effects of all the shit he'd been going through.

It's not unknown for the human body to react to physical and emotional trauma months after the incident. A lot really has been going on his life and he isn't quite sure if he had honestly been relaxed enough to actually let his body feel all the shit that has been happening.

But even amongst all of the bad shit that is happening, when Stephen is home, Tony feels better. He feels more relaxed. Calmer. He didn't have the nightmares every night anymore. Which was amazing.

He doesn't talk to Michelle all the time either. He doesn't need to and she agrees that now, all he really needed was time and to keep up with ensuring that he is mindful of himself and the others around him and to get the support he needs from his friends and Stephen.

It really has been quite amazing the progress he has made. Not just with dealing with the trauma from Afghanistan but his progress as a person. He knows he'd grown in the past year and a lot of it was due to Stephen.

He made his mistakes. He fucked up and he pushed Stephen away because he feared his own emotions more than he had feared the doctor and his abilities. Once he had realised that and once he really understood just how much the doctor loved and cared for him, the rest had come easy.

That wasn't to say that Tony was good with dealing with emotions now. He still was going to fuck up, probably. He still was going to be rash and irrational at times but he needed to keep reminding himself to be careful. To be mindful.

To cement in his own head that losing Stephen was not acceptable.

Tony sighs as he looks around the darkened kitchen.
They really needed to get the tricorder concept that Stephen and he'd been discussing whilst watching Star Trek during dinner to work. He knows that Stephen has some ideas already and it would really go well with his suit.

It would help to ensure that the doctor doesn't worry as much as he does now every time Tony goes on missions. He's not sure how, but Stephen always knows when Tony is out for a mission. Tony suspects the little shit that is JARVIS is telling on him.

Not that he minds. He loves that Stephen adores JARVIS and cares for him as much as Tony does. He loves that JARVIS cares for Stephen as much as he cares for Tony.

It's not just JARVIS either. Butterfingers, in particular, have taken to Stephen and when the doctor was in the lab, the bot was almost always nearby. Bringing Stephen tea, picking things up if the doctor drops something.

U was still shy and DUM-E was well... DUM-E but Butterfingers was definitely doing well and learning quickly through its interactions with Stephen.

Tony returns to bed because there isn't much he can do about nausea. Perhaps laying down and trying to sleep would help, Tony thinks.

He could wake up Stephen. There is literally a medical doctor in his bed right now that could probably help. But it's just little nausea and tiredness. Nothing to be alarmed about and definitely nothing to be waking the doctor for.

Especially when Stephen was so fucking pale and looked so very gorgeous and relaxed in his sleep like that. Yeah. It's probably nothing anyway. Besides, the doctor was leaving in the morning back to New York so he really needed the rest.

As soon as he is back in bed, Stephen moves, still very much in deep sleep and but moves to curl into his arms. Tony lets him. He closes his eyes and settles into the doctor's arms and try to get his stupid stomach to settle so that he can sleep.

Eventually, Tony fall asleep.

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Chapter Summary

Tony knows something is wrong. But it's probably nothing.

It has to be.

Besides, he is too busy spending time with Stephen and indulging in the growing relationship with the doctor to worry about something as mundane as a stomach flue.

Right?

Wrong.

Chapter Notes

Hm... I didn't even mean to make the second Arc 36 Chapters but that is how it has worked out. Good pattern I guess?

In another words, ARC 2 has been completed and though there's probably a re-write or two to be done in the last 10 chapters for me to be happy enough with it, I am at least happy enough with how the ARC has gone and how it is going to end.

Which means I can actually write the Arc I have been looking forward to writing for all of this time XD

It also means that you guys know that there are at least 18 chapter that are written and (almost) ready to go out to you guys. Which I hope you will find reassuring? I don't know.

I also don't know how long ARC 3 is going to be because that one is a monster.

Avengers plot along with pretty much an entire year of Stephen/Tony to cover as well as Loki and Thor and the drama there AND somehow squeeze in Hulk somewhere. Somehow.

In another word, it is going to be an absolute monster that I very much am looking forward to writing as soon as I edit and post up this chapter.

OH the palladium poisoning is most definitely in and settled so... HERE IS YOUR ANGST WARNING....

Though it won't be anywhere near as bad as it had been before. I promise.

Please support me with your lovely comments. They are the fuel that I run on XD

Thursday
The nausea comes and goes. Throughout the week. Which really isn't ideal, but it's not that bad. Tony thinks its most likely some form of stomach flu. It had been going around the office a little and he always goes through at least one of those bugs a year at any rate.

It's fine.

He takes his anti-nausea pills, drinks his ginger ale. He's also a bit tired, but that's probably a part of the stomach flu. Tony compensates for the exhaustion he feels with extra coffee. He can't go wrong with the caffeine and having Stephen around certainly helps.

The week had been busy and he'd run a few missions for both himself and SHIELD during the week. He tried to get them out of the way during his 'work week' before Stephen came to the mansion. It probably added to the tiredness he feels.

The doctor is doing a lot better now and his kiss when Tony had greeted him didn't taste of blood. Tony appreciates that.

Tony doesn't tell Stephen about his nausea or dizziness. The doctor has enough to worry about and Tony doesn't want to treat him like a doctor. He doesn't want to ruin the weekend and their time together.

They are down in the lab and Tony was working on the folding suit and Stephen was working on the programming for the neural interface. With everything set up and all the scans the doctor had needed of his brain waves obtained, Stephen was busy at work.

The neural interface wasn't going to be too sophisticated. Eventually, Stephen would be able to make it so that Tony could literally control the suit with just the neural interface or a combination of that along with the physical movements, but for now, Stephen was focusing on just making it work seamlessly with the iris scanner and the voice commands that were already available to smooth out the edges.

Tony has to admit that he quite likes the suitcase Iron Man suit he was working on. For one, he really likes the challenge of trying to make it small enough and light enough to fit into a suitcase that can be carried around and still provide enough protection for himself as well as enough weaponry to deal with whatever threat he had to deal with.

It was a fine line.

He had finished the Mark III, which really did have an easier method of getting in and out of the suit, with it simply opening and closing around his body, but the suitcase version was far more interesting.

"How's the Universal Translator going?" Stephen asks him out of the blue as he stands up to come over to where Tony is working. From the way that his hands are shaking, Tony knows it's because the doctor needs a break. Tony responds easily enough as JARVIS turns the music down just a little to make it easier for them to talk to each other.

"Good. The boys and gals at the lab got samples from all the languages we can get multiple samples of and we are working on the accents now. Youtube is turning out to be a surprisingly good resource." Tony tells Stephen, who nods and chuckles.

The Universal Translator concept was definitely one that Tony had stolen from the Stark Trek series but on a more serious note, it was turning out to be a fantastic project.
Whilst the translations weren't going to be perfect as what a live face to face interpreter could manage, there was a lot that the translator can be used for. Lost nuances could be covered by tone and expression by most intelligent beings. And the translator can be used by those travelling or trying to learn new languages.

The voice and the AI system is what was going to be very interesting about it after all. Tony had separated JARVIS from the program and was setting up a basic AI without a personality algorithm. Translators didn't need sass after all.

"Any ideas for the Tricorder?" Stephen asks and Tony has to admit, he really loved the fact that Stephen liked Stark Trek. It's become a bit of a ritual to sit and watch it whilst they eat dinner in particular and to discuss the science and tech that they see in the movies and the TV show.

"A silicone chip-based sensor small enough to be worked into the biometrics sensor to be able to read the temperature, heart rate, hormone levels and production of any white blood cells to detect infection is what I have so far." Tony tells him.

All of their ideas generally start as a concept. A thought experiment. It's whilst they are bouncing the ideas back and forth that they manage to come up with something that is brilliant and workable before they flesh it out and turn it into reality.

"But that wouldn't allow you to detect other chemicals within the blood stream, for example, allergens, sugar levels, cholesterol levels or even poisons and imbalances. We would also need something that can detect broken bones or malfunctioning organs for it to be a true... tricorder." Stephen says thoughtfully. Tony chuckles softly.

He loves how serious the doctor can be about the silly idea he had proposed a week ago in the midst of a food coma to invent a working tricorder. It was certainly an interesting challenge and Tony appreciated that Stephen could be on board and working on the project with him like this.

"Fair point. We would need something to be in the- Oh shit. I'm an idiot." Tony declares and he abandons the welding he'd been doing. He feels like he is almost always welding something in the workshop. He's at least careful enough to put the welder back into its holder and to turn it off before he rushes to the holotable.

Stephen follows and watches as Tony brings up the schematics for the micro-robotics design that he'd thrown at the R&D department some time ago. He hadn't seen an application for it at the time and he had honestly been bored of trying to machine something so small, he'd thrown the project over to his people to sort it out.

And they had, last Tony had heard of it. It wasn't fully developed yet, but it was almost there.

"Nan- no. These are microbots." Stephen says almost in awe and Tony smirks.

"Yeah but microbots small enough to work within the human body without disturbing anything and powered by the electrical currents going through the body and by the flow of blood." Tony explains and Stephen looks... fascinated. He loves that expression on the doctor. He loves that he can put that expression on his face. Tony continues.

"If we can build individual sensors for say, blood sugar levels, harmful chemicals and poisons along with allergens and put inject them into the body with the microbots having just enough capabilities to send signals back to a receiver on the body that can incorporate the other biometric sensor capabilities, which in turn sends out signals to a hand held device..." Tony grins at the doctor. Who grins right back, eyes sparkling with excitement.
"You would have a tricorder. That's- It's amazing Anthony." Stephen tells him warmly. Tony nods with some excitement.

"Hey J, how about we send an email to the R&D department in Tokyo about this microbot?" Tony suggests. The AI is quick to respond.

"Already done sir. I'll make sure they add the sensors in and have it ready for programming." JARVIS informs them with almost a satisfied note in his voice. Tony smiles and nods to himself. When he looks at Stephen though, he feels his jeans tighten. Just like that.

"I believe there was something in the contract about rewarding brilliance." Stephen says as he hooks his fingers into Tony's belt loops. Tony can't stop the smile from climbing onto his lips as he feels the sudden flush of heat go through him.

"Oh most definitely." Tony confirms. The smile they share is intimate and so very delicious and so very new for Tony. He likes it. No. He loves it. Stephen leans in for a kiss and Tony wraps his arms around the doctor's shoulders and leans against the holotable to bring him down to Tony's height for the kiss.

The doctor's hands don't leave Tony's hips and they are firm and warm against his hipbones. Tony moans into the kiss as the tempo builds. Their tongues dance with each other and their breathing becomes hot and heavy and laboured as they go along.

"How would you like your reward Dr Stark?" Stephen asks with a husky tone and that voice alone is more than enough to get Tony excited. He smiles against the kiss.

"Quid pro quo." Tony whispers against Stephen's lips. The doctor smiles.

"Of course." Stephen is so graceful as he slowly kneels in front of Tony. With his trembling hands, he works Tony's jeans open and he doesn't tease. Tony doesn't want teasing right now. It's almost like the doctor can read him like an open book.

Stephen's mouth is so incredibly talented. More than anyone else that Tony had ever experienced before, male or female. Or perhaps it's because it's Stephen. Tony isn't quite sure about that. It doesn't matter.

He's heard from people how sex is so much better when there is emotion involved. He had never believed such sentiments. He was starting to believe it now.

Stephen takes his semi-hard cock into his mouth and his fragile hands caress Tony's balls and perineum softly as he starts to suck the head of the cock into his mouth. Stephen's beautiful naturally dusk rose coloured lips wrap themselves around Tony's dark, flushing cock and the warm wet heat is everything that Tony had wanted and more.

He really was setting a dangerous precedent in the workshop, Tony thinks. But the doctor had definitely deserved his rewards and he feels justified in receiving his.

"I love seeing you like this Stephen. Sucking my cock as if it's the most delicious thing you've ever put into your mouth." Tony mutters because, by gods, Stephen isn't looking away. He keeps his warm grey-blue eyes that are mostly blue today, firmly on Tony's as he sucks Tony down.

The excess saliva leaks from around Tony's cock and the doctor's mouth and dribbles down his chin but Tony don't care and neither does Stephen. Even that is hot to watch. It's almost as if the doctor is so wanton, so filled with desire that he doesn't care about the dignity of the action.
"I love your voice too. It's the best sound I have ever heard. But I like you like this too. Silenced by my cock." Tony says and when he moves his hip a little, the doctor closes his eyes and loosens his mouth and moans around Tony's girth.

"I want to fuck your throat. Choke you with my cum." Tony says, his darkest desires making itself known. One day, he wants to take Stephen somewhere dark and secure. He wants to wrap chains and rope all around the doctor and see how his pale skin would do with bondage. It would look good with a black leather strap across it, Tony thinks.

Stephen moves his hands so that they grab Tony's from the holotable ledge and places the firmly on his head and hair. Tony grasps at it just as Stephen hums and the vibration goes straight from the doctor's throat into Stephen's cock. He shudders.

"Fuck Stephen- Fuck!" Tony cries out and he can't. He can't just hold himself back. He can feel Stephen's smirk around his cock. The bastard, Tony thinks fondly and gives the doctor exactly what he wants. A good face fuck.

Tony is just careful enough to ensure that he doesn't choke the man unlike what he had said, but he does start moving his hips and start fucking the doctor's throat. Stephen moans every now and then and the sound goes straight to Tony's cock each and every time.

When Tony comes, it's sudden, it's fast and it's hard. When Stephen releases his cock after thoroughly sucking it off, Tony all but falls to his knees in front of Stephen and pulls him into a hard kiss. His hands automatically reach for the doctor to relieve him of his hard-on.

Stephen's hands aren't doing well today and the last thing he wants is for the doctor to strain it further. Tony jerks him off until Stephen comes with a soft cry into Tony's mouth and slumps against him.

A chirp disturbs his afterglow and Tony honestly isn't quite sure what to make of the fact that Butterfingers has brought him a towel. A clean one at that.

"You know I think we might be the worst parents for AIs ever." Tony finds himself saying as he takes the towel, thanks Butterfingers and runs a finger down its sensors. Stephen laughs. It's a warm, fond, delicious laugh that sends tingles in all the right places throughout Tony.

"Well sir, if you are referring to your sexual activity, I am afraid that it is approximately 8 years too late for you to be concerned." JARVIS informs him dryly. Stephen bursts out into a full fit of laughter that leaves him on the ground as Tony watches helplessly. The amusement runs through him too.

In that moment, knowing that his AIs were growing, that Stephen was laughing and happy and knowing that everything was... working and everything was just perfect, Tony realises that he is... happy.

He isn't sure when he had felt that way before, so completely as he does now. But he feels.... incredibly and unabashedly happy.

He hopes it will last.

It doesn't.

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Wednesday
Stephen has to admit that he really, really enjoys the sandwiches from Joe's. They have the best Reuben sandwich ever and though Stephen has it pretty much every day during the three days that he is at the office, he doesn't get sick of it.

"Harley is almost well enough to leave the hospital now." Clea tells Stephen and he nods as he takes his last bite and savours it. She doesn't like Reuben sandwiches. She prefers the meatball subs which are also quite good at the deli.

They are so regular and on time that usually by the time that they arrive, the owner is greeting them with a smile and the waiter takes away the reserved sign off their table and serves them their sandwiches with a pot of Earl Grey tea.

Though it's rare in New York, Joe's actually has really high quality, really good loose leaf tea and it's delicious.

"Good. Did Maria break anything else?" Stephen asks with a smile. The Keener family had been staying at the D'Arte in a suite that Clea organised for them whilst they waited for Harley to recover from his surgery and also to go through the last bits of chemo he needed to go through under the supervision of Grimshaw.

During that time, Stephen had ensured that the family would be well cared for by the hotel and ensured that there were cars that would be taken back and forth from the hospital to the hotel.

Maria, the curious and still young four-year-old girl had broken one of the vases in the suite and Vanessa had been horrified. The hotel staff assured her that it was all fine and that it wasn't a problem, but Vanessa had been worried about payment for the antique vase.

"No. Vanessa had most of the things that can be broken moved. Harley is apparently in love with the Starkpad we sent over." Clea tells him and Stephen nods.

In all honesty, Stephen kind of wishes that he can have more contact with the boy and to learn about his mind and how he thinks. It's wonderful to meet a genius child and he wants to be able to guide him and help him.

But he is also aware of the dangers that could cause in the timeline. So he stays away. Instead, Grimshaw indulges the boy and Clea sends along all the things that would be useful to Harley. The Starkpad is the most recent of the gifts.

They finish up eating whilst discussing the rest of the schedule for the afternoon. They leave a generous tip with their payment for the meal and the waiter smiles and thanks them.

Joe waves at them as they leave. It's always a good idea to leave as quickly as possible. Tables as Joe's filled up quickly.

It's when they are almost back at the office that Clea tenses and so does Stephen. Right in front of the office is a black SUV that screams 'government vehicle'.

Considering the fact that they'd had a visit from Coulson of SHIELD, Stephen is a little concerned, but not overly so. He's fairly certain that SHIELD would not try to take him this overtly right underneath the surveillance cameras.

"Dr Stephen Strange?" There are two men and a rather attractive older woman. Unlike the men who are dressed in the typical government black suits, she is dressed in what looks to be a very
comfortable green dress.

"That's me." Stephen says as he approaches them and the woman nods and she looks grim.

"Doctor, my name is Dr Bergbreiter from the Centre for Disease Control." She says and Stephen feels the alarm settle for just a moment before it rockets up.

There is only one reason that the CDC would come to a doctor like him for. Deadly disease that was spreading. Probably something to do with the brain or the spine since they came to him. Stephen does the math and comes to the conclusion quickly enough.

"Meningitis?" He asks and Dr Bergbreiter looks taken aback but she nods slowly.

"Yes Dr Strange. It's a resistant strain and we really need your assistance. We would like you to come with us." She says and Stephen nods.

When the CDC comes to you and says 'we would like you to come with us', that was the equivalent of 'you are coming with us'. It was polite and they were asking but Stephen doubted anyone really said no.

He never has when it came to the CDC. It wasn't the first time he'd been asked to consult or to research. Though the last one had been Lyme disease and it really hadn't been fun.

But hey.

"Clea, cancel all the appointments for at least the next week. This isn't going to be done overnight." Stephen says because the CDC doesn't wait until they have everything under control to collect their personnel.

"Of course." Clea says and Stephen nods before he looks at the three CDC people.

Generally, when an outbreak happens, they contain it. No news is allowed and they ensure that they keep a tight lid overall information that passes in relation to whatever is happening. It's important to ensure that quarantine is maintained.

Which means that scientists and researchers often don't get to have outside contact unless it's monitored, just in case. There's NDAs involved and everything. Stephen sighs.

"Do you mind if I make a phone call? I have a standing appointment that I will need to cancel." Stephen says Bergbreiter looks a little concerned but she nods.

"You are aware of our policies, Dr Strange?" She asks as he gets out his phone and starts dialling. He gives her a smile.

"It's not my first time with the CDC." Stephen tells her and she nods as the phone connects to JARVIS. Tony's phone is always answered by JARVIS first.

"Dr Strange, how are you?" The AI asks him and Stephen smiles. He can't help it. JARVIS's tone is softer and kinder than it used to be and it's a good indication of the AI's growth that Stephen appreciates.

"I'm good. Can you connect me to Anthony please?" Stephen asks and JARVIS acknowledges the request and soon enough, Tony's voice comes through.

"Lunch break doc?" Tony's voice is light and it brings a sense of warmth and well being to Stephen
as it always does. The Connection hums softly with the pleasure of hearing his Soulmate's voice.

"Yes. Unfortunately, I'm calling to let you know that I won't be able to make it this week. I'm being very politely kidnapped by the CDC." Stephen says with a light, playful tone and Dr Bergbreiter looks a little mollified by hearing his words. He gives her a smile.

"Kidnapped? By the CDC? What- Stephen are you sure it's the CDC?" Tony asks and Stephen sighs. He knows what Tony is worried about. Given SHIELD's interest, he is worried that it may be SHIELD under disguise.

Stephen doesn't doubt it. For one, he can see the identification pinned on the doctor's dress and none of them are armed. Besides, Stephen recognises Dr Bergbreiter from her work on disease control.

"Yes, I'm sure. I just wanted to let you know. I won't be in contact for a while." Stephen says and Tony hums but he sounds distracted. Stephen figures that Tony is making sure through the surveillance cameras that he should not be accessing that Stephen is okay.

Stephen looks directly at one of the cameras and offers a smile before he turns back to the doctor. They need to go. The sense of urgency in her eyes is a good indicator.

"Don't forget to go outside and rest your eyes with something green." Stephen tells the genius before he hangs up and hands the phone to Clea. Tony will get what he was trying to say. After all, given their relationship and Tony's familiarity with the traffic light system, he will know.

"Don't forget to eat and sleep." She reminds him as she takes the phone from his hand. He gives her a nod and a smile as he is ushered into the black SUV. Dr Bergbreiter sits next to him and buckles herself into the seat before giving him an odd look.

"You're definitely going to be interesting to work with." She says drily and with a hint of amusement. He gives her a smile and nods before they turn serious.

"So. Where am I going and what's the situation?" Stephen asks and Dr Bergbreiter looks grim as she starts to explain. As Stephen listens and he grasps the situation, he can't help but feel that it is going to be a long time before he can go home.

Shit.

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**Wednesday**

**14 April 2010**

The week is honestly turning out to be shit.

The first problem is the fact that the nausea that he'd been experiencing along with the tiredness doesn't go away. In fact, he gets the added bonus of headaches and dizziness.

Which really ruins his week.

After the wonderful weekend with Stephen, Tony had gone right back to work. There was the Stark Tower to be worked on, the Stark Expo to organise and sort out and on top of all of that, there was the Iron Man work he was doing for both SHIELD and for himself. He runs just two missions though. He is too tired to do more. SHIELD can go and fuck themselves.
It gets worse when he gets a phone call from Stephen in the morning and damned if it wasn’t an odd phone call. Stephen had called to simply say that he could not make it for the weekend and that he was being very politely kidnapped by the Centre for Disease Control.

Which... Honestly did have Tony in a panic for a bit until he realised that Stephen’s voice had been light and almost playful and Tony was certain that it really was the CDC. As far as the New York Surveillance cameras showed of the people that had come to collect Stephen.

Tony can’t quite figure out what was going on where and Stephen couldn’t disclose where he was going or how long it was going to take or even what he was going to be working on. But then that was kind of straight out of the CDC’s playbooks.

The thing that had really reassured Tony was Stephen's soft chuckle and the word 'green' that he works into a sentence. The clever bastard knew that Tony would be worried that it was SHIELD. Surely Stephen would have worried about it too.

Either way, that means that Stephen can't make it for the weekend.

Not his fault and not planned but oh well. The CDC tends to get what the CDC needs because when the CDC comes calling... lives were on the line. Generally... a lot of lives.

Tony doesn't even mind the secrecy really. It's not like they are official domestic partners. The CDC NDAs usually included domestic partners into it so that anyone that worked for them could at least discuss where they were going and what was happening with their significant others. But Tony and Stephen weren't... out.

So yeah.

Besides, Tony himself had several projects that he can't discuss with Stephen that he did for the government himself. So there was that too. It comes with the territory of their jobs.

Though Tony was definitely going to miss Stephen, it's actually kind of good, because Tony isn't feeling too hot.

Tony was starting to think that maybe it wasn't just a... stomach flu has he had been thinking. The nausea was getting worse and so was the exhaustion, But the worst was the random dizzy spells he had like some sort of heroine from one of those bodice ripper novels.

Which is ridiculous.

Tony is healthy. He eats well, stays hydrated and since the pattern he'd developed with Stephen, he actually takes breaks, works out and sleeps even whilst he is in his deep 'work mode's.

Besides, even if he wants to do otherwise, Stephen, the minx, has made strong suggestions to JARVIS and short of actually ordering the AI and overriding his developing awareness and independence, Tony has no way of stopping the nagging.

On one memorable occasion, JARVIS shuts down the power in the workshop entirely. Which the AI flat out refused to restore until Tony got at least 6 hours of sleep.

Tony isn't sure whether he is proud or annoyed.

He feels mostly proud. Tony could just order the AI to stop. He has the overriding codes. But he doesn't want to. They were working on ensuring that JARVIS could actually see to more than just Tony's needs and Stephen's and the others at the house.
Stephen was teaching the AI how to read facial expressions, body language and how to interpret human emotion and the well being or state of an individual. Given that, the last thing Tony really wants to do is counteract all that good learning by shutting the AI down when he was doing what he thought was best to ensure that Tony remained healthy and well.

Except he isn't.

"Hey J, I'm going to ask that you keep my current condition a secret from the doctor. I know you want to tell him, but he's busy and I don't want him to worry." Tony tells the AI as he slumps over the toilet bowl and tries not to throw up again. It's a losing battle.

Tony knows that if JARVIS thought that Tony's condition was serious enough, the AI could more than easily find a way into the CDC's servers and get in contact with Stephen whether Tony liked it or not.

He would really prefer to not.

"Sir, I believe that given the frequency you're expelling food from your body, along with your unsteadiness and dizziness, that you are quite seriously ill. Isn't it common for a romantic partner to be informed of such states?" The AI asks, quite rightly so.

Tony sighs and closes his eyes to fight back the new wave of nausea. He has to wait until he's confident he's not going to throw up before he answers.

"Yeah. But not when the romantic partner in question is working on a super secret something with the CDC and is probably in some dangerous environment. We need to make sure we don't distract Stephen." And he is honestly proud of himself for actually being able to do that.

Tony before Stephen would have said, fuck it, tell the world and make them look after him and make sure that he is okay. Or would have alternatively gone about his life as if nothing was wrong with sheer stubbornness. That's not him anymore.

There are things that he is looking forward to. Things that he needs to accomplish. Things that he needs to do. He knows that he needs to look after himself to make sure that he can do that.

"Sir, in that case, shall I call for a doctor?" JARVIS asks him. The thing is, if he does that, then Pepper was going to find out and she's busy too. But he wasn't going to have much of a choice. He knows his body well enough to know that this? This is not normal. Tony sighs.

"Yeah. Call um... actually, let's see if Wu is available. Get the trip organised for me." Tony suggests and the AI is more than happy to comply. Since he's supposed to be seeing Wu anyway for a check-up soon, it wouldn't worry Pepper too much and it wouldn't worry Stephen either.

Besides, he knows he can trust in the discretion of Dr Wu.

Tony can still remember their first meeting and how... harrowing it had been. He remembers their short interaction in Bern well enough, but it's all the other information he'd received over the three months with Yinsen that he really recalls.

Dr Wang Wu had been life long friends and colleagues with Yinsen. The death of his friend had hit him hard, but meeting Tony, according to him, made it a little better for him, knowing that Tony was Yinsen's last patient. As such, Wu had been determined to ensure that Tony was well and that he would continue to live as his friend's legacy.

Wu isn't a very traditional doctor. Or rather, he is. Wu is a cardiologist of some fame, but he is also a
traditional Chinese Medicine practitioner and a lot of the healthier eating habits that Tony had gained since he'd returned from Afghanistan had been thanks to him.

Wu would make time for him, Tony knew that. Wu would fly over, if he asked. They were in regular enough correspondence over the months with Wu getting the ultrasound scans that Tony takes with JARVIS and Stephen. Dr Wu is impressed with Stephen and is aware of his reputation and Tony knows that it had put him at some ease.

Still, Stephen wasn't a cardiologist and Tony was due for a check-up. He had scheduled it for next month, but Tony knew he shouldn't wait.

"Sir, Dr Wu is able to set some time aside for you at Toronto General Hospital tomorrow evening. He wishes to inform you that it was the earliest time he could obtain the facilities necessary." JARVIS informs him. Great.

"That sounds fine. Get the plane ready for me J. Might as well as go there now and sleep on the plane." Tony suggests.

"Of course sir." JARVIS informs him. Great.

The nausea subsides just enough for Tony to shower, get dressed and get ready for the trip. He isn't too surprised when Pepper calls. All transport requests that JARVIS puts through goes through Pepper. Tony had expected the call.

"Tony? I just heard that you're going to Toronto. Is everything okay?" Pepper sounds concerned, of course she does. He loves her a little more for it but he doesn't want her to worry. Tony puts on his best nonchalant voice.

"Yeah. Dr Wu had some time this week and since next month's appointment is during the weekend and Stephen can't come this weekend, I thought I might get it over and done with." Tony tells her and Pepper laughs. Her relief is obvious, as is her glee.

"Oh I see. Didn't want it to interrupt your time with Stephen. Well. In that case, do you want me to come with you or are you going to be okay on your own?" Tony rolls his eyes.

Pepper was honestly doing most of the work that he should be doing as the President of the Board of Directors and the CEO of Stark Industries. He knows better than to pull her away from that.

He may have... a few years ago. But now, he knows just how hard she works to make his life easy and he can't make it more difficult for her. Besides, she will only worry.

"I'll be fine mum. I'm a grown up now and can go and see doctors on my own." Tony tells her with a sardonic tone of voice and she laughs again. It's a good sound and it is comforting. Trust Pepper to make him feel better without even knowing that he needs comfort, he thinks.

"Fine. Be good and if you need anything, call me." Pepper tells him with that amused tone he loves to hear from her. Tony confirms and hangs up.

It's nothing, he's sure. Maybe something to do with the shrapnel. The ultrasound scans haven't shown any movements but maybe something was effecting it. Maybe it was just a stomach flu. Most likely that, Tony thinks.

He can't help but worry a little, but when he's not nauseous or dizzy, he feels mostly fine. So it's probably nothing.
With that thought, Tony leaves the house. He'll have to remember to pick up some tea from Toronto. There were a few really good blended herbal tea places that he remembers Pepper liked. He wonders if Stephen would like them too. He recalls the taste of Jasmine tea from Stephen's lips.

Definitely, he thinks.

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Chapter Summary

Stephen is stuck at the CDC or rather with the CDC and the work is exhausting. He really isn't enjoying it.

On the other hand, in another country, Dr Wu is dealing with the realisation that his most important patient has complications that he isn't sure if he can save the man from.

All in all, it's all a fucking mess. Because when the Universe messes with you, she REALLY messes with you.

Chapter Notes

First of all... so sorry for the delay guys.

I've spent a lot of time in a fit of insomnia which means that I was awake just without two brain cells that would actually knock together effectively enough to do anything more than listen to Youtube videos whilst I try to sleep. Sleep and I have a very contentious relationship. I think about 7 years ago when I started to work for the emergency services, we had a very ugly drawn out divorce and somehow I lost 'restful sleep' and 'circadian rhythm' in the proceedings.

I was too sleep deprieved to be a good lawyer for myself clearly.

Anyway that's my "I'm tired and saying crazy things rant" done.

The other thing is that now that i know how the ARC is going to end, I really have to go back and rewrite everything so that I'm happy enough with it so that I can actually write the next Arc. It would really throw shit off, if I get like say 10 chapters into ARC 3 and decide that the ending to ARC 2 doesn't make sense etc.

So there's that.

Also, it's taking a lot of time to research all the topics for these chapters to try to make it as accurate as possible. Like this one? I spent ages looking up all sort of neurological disorders that can be contagious. Then tried to figure out how the fuck meningitis works. Did I mention that I studied Law? Like the exact opposite of Medicine? Like the thing that people go and do when they suck at math and science?!?!?!! ..... Once again. I was disowned from being Asian by my own dad for being really, really bad at math and everything involved in math. FOR A REASON!!!

So um yeah. Anyone with a medicine/science/tech degree that wants to work as my expert advisor for this story hit me up lol. God knows I can use help XD

<3
Dr Wang Wu is... devastated.

It has been some time since he had done his own lab work. It had sent him back to his intern and resident days, but he gets it sorted out. He looks over the paperwork that he had printed out himself. It had taken some doing, but he had cleared out the labs and run the tests himself to make sure that Tony's blood tests results or his name even doesn't get leaked to the media.

He has done everything he can to ensure that the man's privacy will be protected. It had taken some doing, but luckily the hospital administration was happy enough to work with him and Tony when he mentioned the amount of money that was in play.

Money always worked when it came to hospital organisations. They always needed more funds. Privacy not so much as they should be. It works out in Tony's favour at the end of the day.

The blood test result isn't what Wu had wanted to see.

Tony Stark was important to him. Yinsen, his life long friend, had given his life to save Tony's. All the good that Yinsen could have done was now on Tony's shoulders.

And Tony was aware of it and he has done a lot of good in the last year or so. He has tried to help many and he was inventing things that would continue to help the world. It was the kind of legacy his friend would have been happy with.

But now...

Tony Stark was dying and Wu had no idea how he was going to save the genius inventor. The poison being pumped into his body was from the Arc Reactor in the man's chest and it was basically keeping his heart beating and keeping the shrapnel from rushing into his heart.

The thing is, as the heart has gotten used to having the Arc Reactor nearby, the heart's rhythms have started to rely on the currents the Arc Reactor creates. Even without the shrapnel being in play, it would be a heavy risk for Tony Stark to remove the Reactor from his chest.

In fact, Wu wasn't sure if he could remove the reactor from his chest. The reactor and the case surrounding it was fused into Tony's skin and was holding the fragile rib cage together. Tony didn't have a sternum anymore.

Wu would have to figure out a way to rebuild the sternum and to support the rib cage before he could even remove the reactor and after that, he would somehow have to work out a way to ensure that the heart would beat at a regular rhythm without the Arc Reactor to provide it with extra energy.

The extra energy was speeding up the spread of the poison as well. Tony's heart rate was a little higher than most people and as a result, the blood flowed around faster around his body, carrying the poison with it.

Wu disposes of the vials of blood that he had used for the testing and stands up. He needs to do some research and then he needs to talk to his patient.

He has Tony set up in a private room in a corner of the hospital with a few nurses that Wu trusted to look after him. Only he and the two nurses that he had picked out were allowed in the room and
Tony had brought along security that guarded the room.

Tony set himself up basically what looked to be a mobile office and was working on numerous things but he was at least sitting mostly in bed and he had sufficient anti-nausea medication to help him fight against that.

Wu really isn't sure how he is supposed to break the news to the man. He really isn't. He is worried about how Tony is going to take it and more importantly, he isn't sure how he is going to be able to say it.

Delivering bad news has always been the worst part of his job. It just becomes that much harder and that much more difficult when it is someone that he knows.

He is failing his friend. He is failing to preserve the legacy that Yinsen had entrusted to him. Failure leaves such a bitter taste in the mouth, Wu thinks as he makes his way to his office.

Research. Then talk. Wu reminds himself.

If only it was that simple.

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Sunday

18 April 2010

Stephen feels the exhaustion pulling at him. He hasn't been able to sleep and he hasn't been able to eat or take regular breaks since... Wednesday. So now at least for four days.

It has been non-stop, all hands on deck work as the CDC struggles to contain the break out of a mutated strain of meningitis in Colorado Springs.

When he had first arrived, it had been all about trying to triage patients. To get the diagnosis and trying to isolate the patients with the strain and to get the quarantine situation contained. That hadn't been a large part of Stephen's job. But seeing the patients, getting patient histories and the diagnosis had been.

Once that had been done and he had the scans of the twenty-two confirmed patients and he had been assured that the situation was contained for now, he had spent hours upon hours looking over the scans and trying to work out with the neuroscientist and neurologist that had been called in to try to figure out what the fuck was going on.

Once they worked out what was happening, it was all hands on deck trying different treatments.

It was all about trial and error.

But of course, none of it worked. Which meant that they were on a race against the clock to try to keep their patients alive as their brains were being affected by the bacterial infection. With the speed the illness was progressing, Stephen honestly isn't confident that they can keep all the patients alive.

Stephen can see the dimensional energies around them. They don't tell him much. It's always the case for... as much as Stephen would hate to say it, for the mundane people.

There were people in the world that became suddenly ill and death wasn't... important to the universe. When it came to those people, sometimes, there just was no indication magic or otherwise
as to what their fate would be.

It made it harder.

Which meant that Stephen was working harder than he has ever really done before in the medical field. His hands are constantly shaking and the CDC are good enough to fetch his keyboard and that makes the work a little easier, but honestly? Nothing was going to make this easy aside from having maybe having JARVIS and Tony around. And assurances that their patients were going to both survive somehow and ensure that they won't be disabled by the end of all this.

They don't have that.

So far, none of the antibiotics and corticosteroids they were using was having an effect on the strain. Which meant lab work and data crunching. With JARVIS, it would be a lot quicker. But without him, Stephen was having to rely on his own tired brains to get the calculations done with the almost rudimentary computers compared to what he is used to using.

They have the raw processing power with a large server farm but not the programs or the AI to help them run the calculations and simulations through.

The patients don't have long.

Stephen almost wishes that he can use magic. Even if he did though, he knows that he won't be able to save all the patients. But some of them are so young and Stephen can feel his heartbreak at the mere thought of losing them.

It doesn't help that Tony is starting to feel the effects of the heavy metal poisoning inside of his body and the Connection, of course, is passing it right along to Stephen. It's different from the pain that he feels when Tony gets injured. It's a more persistent, ongoing thing that lingers and causes him to feel the same effects as Tony. Just... dampened a little.

Stephen wishes that he can open up the Connection more to take more of the symptoms like he had done when he was in Malibu and the days outside of it when he'd been in New York, but he can't. He needs to be able to work.

The CDC is careful with public panic. Stephen can't contact the outside world. Not really. He is allowed to have monitored phone calls with family members because the CDC isn't stupid and mental health is important for researchers.

Also, all the professionals that the CDC chooses to work with are more than well aware of the dangers of public panic and more importantly, just how much of a career suicide it would be to violate their NDA with the CDC would be.

Stephen hasn't used his phone call yet. He has barely taken a break. He'd spent all the time since he'd been more or less kidnapped by the CDC and brought into the hospital, studying the scans, the structure of the bacteria itself and trying to figure out how to fight it. It feels like the answer is at the tip of his tongue, but he is too tired and too stressed to think.

"Dr Strange, perhaps you should take a break." Dr Bergbreiter suggests. Her voice is tired and she looks exhausted too, but when he looks up from the microscope where he'd been testing out the newest change up of the antibiotics on the bacteria, she pointedly looks at his hands.

Oh.

"Thank you." He tells her quickly and stands up. He hadn't realised just how badly his hands had
been doing. He'd been forcing them to work. Just getting through everything with sheer will. The other scientists, doctors and personnel helped him to set the slides, to get the fine motor things done, but he'd been working the dials on the microscopes, the keyboards and everything else on his own.

His hands are shaking like leaves.

The nausea and dizziness along with the exhaustion and low blood sugar levels probably didn't help. Stephen goes to the kitchen to get something to eat. One of the staff members at the CDC is quick to get him a sandwich and a bottle of orange juice, which he opens up for Stephen.

The CDC really does have quite pleasant working conditions if nothing else. There are staff members literally just standing around to help out with anything that the doctors and scientists will need because it's the only thing that they can do and they are all anxious, worried and terrified for the patients. As most decent human beings would be.

"Would it be possible for me to make a phone call?" Stephen asks tiredly. He misses Tony. It's been five days since he'd last heard the man's voice and he misses him like a part of himself is missing. Besides, he was worried about how Tony was doing with the nausea and the dizziness.

"Of course Dr Strange. Once you have finished eating, I will take you to the conference room." The man tells him. Stephen nods and eats the sandwich and drinks the orange juice. He doesn't quite know what any of it tastes like. He doesn't care.

When he is done, the man does lead him to the conference room and Stephen isn't surprised when he stays and asks that the phone call happens over the loudspeaker. He'd been aware of the conditions for the phone call.

There is no duration limit to the phone call at least, for which Stephen is grateful. There is also no need to hide the fact that he is with the CDC. He just can't talk about the reason he is with the CDC. Which is fine. He's not worried about that.

"JARVIS?" Stephen calls as soon as the phone line connects.

"Good evening Dr Strange. Sir has been concerned about you. Are you well?" The AI asks him and Stephen already feels a little better. A little relaxed.

"Yes JARVIS. Are you looking after him?" He asks because he's left JARVIS with a very lengthy set of instructions to ensure that Tony takes regular breaks and is looked after during his time away from the mansion.

It had been JARVIS's idea and Stephen had found it so amazing that the AI would even ask that he might have gone a little overboard.

"Of course Doctor. Sir is waiting to be connected to you." The AI informs him. So Stephen hadn't woken him up then. Good. He really ought to have checked the time before he made the call. It was hard to keep track of time when they were working without sunlight in a closed lab environment for so long.

"In that case, I'll speak to you when I finish up here." Stephen informs the AI and waits for a moment for Tony to come on the line.

"You know, the last thing I expected was for the CDC to kidnap you." Tony's voice sounds... subdued but there is a sardonic edge to his voice. One that he is forcing in there. Stephen closes his eyes. He knows then, Stephen guesses.
Which means that Tony was at least taking his health seriously and have hopefully gone to a doctor. One that Tony trusts. Probably Wu, Stephen conjectures. But he doesn't ask.

"Well, the CDC at least does very polite kidnappings. They even feed, water, sleep and entertain me." Stephen tells him with a similar tone of voice. He can't quite keep the stress out of his voice and Tony picks up on it. The CDC staff member that Stephen doesn't even know the name of, raises an eyebrow and looks amused.

For a man that wasn't used to dealing with emotions or closeness with people, Tony is fantastic at picking up on subtle cues when it comes to emotion and Stephen wishes he wasn't some times.

"You sound shit doc. No breakthroughs?" Tony asks and the CDC guy gives Stephen a look. He resists the urge to roll his eyes.

"No. Which means I'm probably going to be here for a while longer. Did you speak to Dr Cho?"

Stephen asks because it's easier to talk about work than their personal life with someone watching over the conversation and listening in.

"Yeah. She got the cell walls to stabilise. Something about feeding the right proteins to the skin cells to encourage growth. Honestly doc, I wasn't paying much attention. It was the usual reporting thing she does." Tony's voice tells him a lot more than what his words do.

Stephen isn't too worried about Cho. She reports in with them on a regular basis. As investors into the project, she seems to believe that it is necessary for her to provide them with regular reports of the breakthroughs that she has. Stephen finds the work interesting and he's grateful for it. Tony isn't fussed.

But Tony's voice tells Stephen that he is worried, stressed and that he was trying to hide all of it from Stephen. Which meant that either he knew that the CDC phone calls were monitored and he didn't want to discuss what was happening on the phone line, or he was trying to hide it from Stephen altogether.

Stephen closes his eyes. If it's the latter then... Stephen doesn't know what to do. He will have to think about that. He will need to see whether it would be better to be forthright with the genius and try to help him, or try to do it denying the knowledge.

But if he does-

"I'll look at it when I get back. Would- would you mind just talking to me about something innocuous? Please?" Stephen asks almost desperately. Tony's voice is soothing and calming to him and he needs some calming and soothing right now. There is a pause on the line for a short while.

"God Stephen, you were in New York for just two days and you end up getting taken by the CDC to work on something so critical that you have someone there monitoring your phone calls? And you're working without sleeping or resting by the sounds of it." Tony's voice sounds a little sharp. A little annoyed perhaps. Stephen sighs at the alarm on the staff member's face and waves him off.

Tony's mind is sharp enough to make the right conjectures and that isn't something that neither Stephen nor the CDC can stop. It's just what happens when you deal with geniuses like Tony Stark.

"Yeah well, that's what happens when Tony freaking Stark declares to the world that I'm a genius. I'm blaming you for this." Stephen tells the man and the staff member's eyes widen to comical levels.

"Don't be coy Stephen. I know you worked with them before. Is the work at least interesting?" Tony asks and Stephen chuckles tiredly. Of course Tony would ask him that. Of course.
If the work was interesting enough, for them, the sleepless hours and the lack of food or rest was almost worth it. Just to be challenged. Just to be interested. It's a dangerous trait and both of them were just well-raised enough to recognise it and be careful.

To apply morals and ethics to that curiosity.

"Yeah. Unfortunately, it is." Stephen tells him with a sigh. He shouldn't be fascinated. Challenged. Interested. He should be terrified. The disease was out there in the world, the strain was out there in the world and peoples' lives were at stake. He ought to be ashamed. He isn't.

"Anything you need me to do? Any tech you need?" Stephen bites his lips. He wants to ask. If he could borrow JARVIS to do some calculations, this would go so much faster. He knows that. He hesitates. The staff member looks at him with wide eyes and he's not indicating an answer. Stephen closes his eyes.

He thinks about Theresa Maine. The youngest patient they have. She's only 9 years old. She wasn't doing well.

Stephen doesn't know how to ask.

"Stephen, I can speak to the director of the CDC and clear anything if you need it. Tell me how to help." Tony tells him and Stephen knows he shouldn't but he opens his lips, ignoring the panic in the staff member's eyes.

"JARVIS. I need... I need JARVIS." He tells the genius. JARVIS is Tony's baby. His most important and most treasured invention. The AI is a part of Tony and the one asset that he protects with absolutely everything that he is. Asking for JARVIS to do work outside of what Tony approves of is... a huge ask.

"You'll need a satellite connection. I can set up one of my satellites to work exclusively with one of the servers at the CDC. I'm guessing you need him for processing information." Stephen is shocked to the core when he hears Tony's matter of fact voice. The staff member looks just as shocked.

He had expected Tony to say no.

"I- I'm so sorry that I-" even asked, is what Stephen had been planning to say, but Tony chuckles.

"Stephen, JARVIS is as much yours as he is mine at this point. Besides, he wants to help. Let me get in touch with Director Parkes. Once J gets through on the connection, I'll set it up on my end so that the data doesn't come through to me and sign whatever confidentiality agreement they need signed." Tony informs him as if it is that simple.

The relief that Stephen feels is... overwhelming. He slumps into the chair and just breathes for a moment.

"Thank you. I really, really am grateful." Stephen tells him, hoping that his words and his voice convey the sheer relief and gratitude he feels well enough. He's pretty sure that it doesn't. Tony chuckles.

"You better be. I expect you to make it up to me Stephen." Tony says and there is just a little hint of suggestion in his voice that anyone else would just take it as harmless flirting. For Stephen, it sets off the warm pool of desire that had been forming the moment he heard Tony's voice.

"I most definitely will." Stephen promises. He means it too. He really has to hold his mind back from going to all the things that he could do to show the genius just how much he appreciated the gesture.
The phone call ends swiftly after that and the staff member looks at him with some shock for a little while once Tony has hung up.

"You- That was Tony Stark." The man says. Stephen nods and gingerly picks himself out of the chair.

"That was." Stephen confirms as the man looks at him as if he is seeing him for the first time.

"So you really are close friends with Tony Stark? I thought that was just a media thing." Huh? Stephen's tired brain hears the question and is confused for a moment before he understands the tone and the question.

Ah. A sceptic then. The media had been going on about Stephen after the few press conferences. The current narrative in the tabloid circles was that the two giant corporations were using their 'friendship' as a cover to hide the fact that Stark Industries was failing and D'Arte was keeping it afloat in order for an acquisition to occur.

Or that their friendship and collaborations were some sort of media stunt to gain more attention to both of their companies.

It was ridiculous and they hadn't bothered to respond to it. But that was the media. The story wasn't that outrageous either, considering that after Tony's announcements, SI shares had fallen a great deal. But what the public never knew was that there was a lot of things happening in the background of SI that doesn't get public attention.

Stark Industries was a weapons manufacturer company. But they had subsidiaries and many other companies with many other fingers in different pies. SI's finances had been... weak but it hadn't been struggling. And Tony himself had enough means to pull the company out of a blackhole if required. Not to mention enough inventions.

Given D'Arte's own holdings and subsidiaries as well as financial stability, the tabloids hadn't exactly been barking up an impossible tree. Just an empty one. Still, Stephen is surprised that the staff member believed the story.

"Of course. Dr Stark is a valued friend and colleague." Stephen feeds the usual line as he does to the media and steps back into the lab.

He is still tired, but he feels invigorated. He feels hopeful that they can somehow work this out. The computer systems at the CDC weren't horrible. They had good strong servers and alright programs.

But no JARVIS.

JARVIS would be able to run simulations and computations are levels that they couldn't. Simply because they would have to program it all in but JARVIS can do that for them. He can compare data and do so much more, so much quicker than what they'd been managing so far.

Stephen hopes that he might be just what they needed to beat this strain. Because he's not sure if he can forgive himself if he loses Theresa. He wishes he didn't, but he remembers his parents and all the lives he'd failed to save as Vincent. Stephen takes deep breathes.

He wasn't going to fail. He couldn't.

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Sunday
Dr Wu looks distinctly upset when he comes back into the discrete hospital room that he'd set up for Tony under a false name with strict instructions that only a select few designated nurses and himself be allowed to enter the room.

There are security guards outside to ensure that. There have been so many confidentiality agreements and NDAs signed that it was ridiculous. But Wu takes Tony's need for confidentiality seriously and Tony does appreciate that.

No one but the media really wants the whole Tony Stark hospitalised! headline.

"Dr Stark, I thought I told you that you needed to rest." The man says. His tone says it all. Disappointment, annoyance and concern. Tony holds up a finger as he finishes up the phone call.

"Yes Director. Of course. If you send the paperwork through to the email I have forwarded to you, I will get it signed and returned to you. I hope you do understand that JARVIS is only on loan. Once Dr Strange's work is done, JARVIS will not be accessible to you." Tony tells the director, who isn't particularly upset by that, but do ask what it would cost to get an AI system for their own servers.

"It took me 8 years to develop JARVIS and far too much money to even give you a ballpark figure. If you would like an AI like him, I would suggest you start the research now." Tony tells him flatly. He wasn't going to create another JARVIS. He has some plans to maybe create a different AI and he's got some ideas, but there was never going to be another JARVIS.

The phone call ends and Wu waits patiently. He is quick to understand that something serious might be going on at least. Tony hangs up and looks at the doctor with an apologetic smile.

"Sorry Dr Wu. Had to deal with a bit of an emergency" Tony says. But honestly, he is grateful for the phone call that he'd had with Stephen on a number of levels.

For one, he'd missed the doctor's voice but knew that he couldn't contact the doctor and that he'd have to wait. It had been difficult to wait. Especially given the situation. He didn't want to tell Stephen. This was... no.

He has a feeling that Stephen might already know like he knows the other things, but he's not sure about sharing this. He isn't sure how Stephen was going to deal with it.

He's not sure how he is going to deal with it.

"The blood test results came back after the dialysis." Wu tells him. Tony grits his teeth and breathes out and nods. The doctor waits until he is ready at least before he gives the diagnosis.

"The toxins have cleared up marginally but the dialysis machine can't remove the toxins from your skin Dr Stark. Your blood toxicity level is currently at 3%. But I believe that it will rise back up to 6% rapidly." Wu tells him. The doctor's voice is professional. It helps. Tony nods and breathes. Just breathes.

The diagnosis had come back pretty quickly. Wu was efficient. Scarily so. He was also a good doctor. Once he'd seen Tony and spoke to him for a bit about his condition, he'd asked for the blood work to be done and did the labs himself.

The results had been... Tony isn't quite sure what the word is. It had been shocking. Devastating. Terrifying. But something he really ought to have expected, if he thought about it.
The Arc Reactor worked by using the Palladium core inside of it as fuel. As the Palladium was used up in the reaction, Tony should have known that there would be byproduct being released.

He should have known that the casing wasn't sufficient to hold the byproduct inside. He should have known that the palladium, the silver and the rhodium being expelled by the reactor would seep into his bloodstream and his skin.

He should have known that.

Especially after the first palladium core had burned up. He should have known that it would have side effects. He hadn't. Instead, all he'd done is speed up the process by which the palladium burns by exerting more and more energy from the Arc Reactor into the suit to make it faster and make the repulsors more powerful.

He was an idiot.

"I see. Anyway we can combat the symptoms?" Tony asks him. Even to him, his voice sounds cold and distant. As if he is discussing something that is happening to someone else. It isn't. He knows that. He's not silly enough to spend time in denial.

"You can try to help your body's detoxing abilities with chlorophyll, antioxidant-rich diet and exercise. But Dr Stark, as long as that Reactor is inside of you with the palladium core, you will continue to have the poisoning effects." Wu tells him. He doesn't pull punches. Tony isn't surprised.

He can see the doctor's devastation.

"At this stage, I do not know how to remove that reactor from you without killing you. The surgery would be so traumatic that I do not believe that it would be possible for you to survive it. Furthermore, I am unsure as to whether or not the shrapnel will stay in place long enough for the surgery to remove it to take place." Wu informs him. Tony nods.

"I am aware. Thank you doctor. In that case, I would like to leave. I have work to do." Tony informs him and Wu nods.

"I will arrange for all evidence of your time here to be destroyed and work on a method to remove the shrapnel from you Dr Stark. You can be reassured of that." Wu's determination is nice. But Tony knows that it was going to be unlikely that Wu would be able to come up with a solution before Tony's time is up.

"Thank you Dr Wu. I do appreciate your assistance with this and your discretion." Tony informs him and grabs everything he'd brought with him into the simple overnight bag he'd come into the hospital with. Dr Wu stays silent and watches him for a moment before he speaks up.

"Dr Stark, I refuse to give up and to let you die. You- You are Yinsen's last patient. The man he gave up his life to save. I cannot let his legacy die." Wu tells him quietly. Tony turns to look at him and the shared pain and loss between them makes it easier to talk to the doctor than it would be otherwise.

"Professor Yinsen's legacy wasn't my life Dr Wu. I already fulfilled most of what Yinsen had wanted for me. My company no longer produces weapons. We research and produce inventions that can save lives and protect lives. That legacy, I hope is already set." Tony informs him solemnly.

Tony is never usually this serious or emotional. But knowing that he was dying does put some serious tones into his thoughts and it follows through in his voice.
The doctor looks solemn too and nods.

"Yes Dr Stark, but your life is Yinsen's legacy and he's passed on the task of keeping you alive to me. He sent you to me because he believed that I could remove the shrapnel and do what's necessary to save your life. So I will." Well then.

Tony gives the man a smile and shakes his hand. The security guards lead him to the helipad where his pilot waits for him. He boards the helicopter and directs it to the airport.

The thoughts are rushing through his head, but over the two days he'd spent at the hospital, he has at least come up with some things that he needs to square away.

He's going to save himself. He is. But in the event that he can't, he needs to make sure that those that he cares about, his legacy and Iron Man, live on somehow. He will make sure of that.

But first, he has a visit to make.

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Legal Questions

Chapter Summary

When one finds out that they might be dying, which... well, everyone is dying aren't they? Okay, so when one finds out that they are dying soon... the responsible thing is to make arrangements.

Tony isn't used to being responsible but someone's got to do it.

God he hates being an adult.

Chapter Notes

Alrighty!

Full disclosure. I studied law. I practised law for like two years. I never touched corporate law. Cause business and my brain do not play well. Like... at all. Aside from that, I never studied US law. I mean, there are some case law shit that we looked at but not really cause the US isn't in the Commonwealth legal system and their precedents don't hold as much weight as the ones from like the UK does. For example.

On top of that, the US corporate law is weird and I did my research but I got really confused over all the state laws and there doesn't seem to be like one governing body like there is in Australia that looks after ALL corporations, their documents of corporation and deal with all of the problems like ASIC. So um yeah. Aside from the fact that there are so many differences in corporation formation depending on which state you form your business in etc and the possibility of bylaws and conditions etc...

I gave up.

That is to say that any legal information in this story as far as the business side of the legal debate is concerned is an educated guess at best and a play at the logic and trying to apply my limited knowledge to try to make it make sense.

I should just write stories with crim law. I can do crim law. And civil suits. I can do those. Heck, in a pinch I'll read a real estate contracts or two whilst I try not to strangle the idiot that decided to write stupid arse sunset clauses with unnecessary attachments to blow up the contract to a full fucking binder size bullshit that- okay. I may have some pent up issues.

It's fine.

Anyway. Please enjoy and the next few chapters, I'll probably post up pretty quickly since I did just finish the re-write of ARC 2 and I'm okay with it. I might have to rewrite the last two chapters again but I am 4 chapters into ARC 3 already so I better get ARC 2 up XD

<3
Monday

19 April 2010

Jonathon Strange is used to unusual things happening, dealing with unusual complaints and legal issues as well as hearing so batshit crazy situations. It kind of goes hand in hand with being a lawyer.

When your lawyer of some years of practice tells you that there is literally nothing that they haven't heard or seen, they generally mean it.

But this has him a little... confounded.

Jonathon doesn't do a great deal of legal work these days. He is primarily a lecturer that practices part-time to keep up his qualifications and to keep his toes in the waters to ensure that he is teaching his students the latest and the best information possible.

Besides, teaching at Harvard had allowed him to connect with Stephen and that was a blessing that he would forever be grateful for.

Stephen Strange was very much like Vincent but... though Vincent had been his brother, if Jonathon was honest with himself, he would say that Stephen was much better than his brother.

Stephen Strange was everything that Jonathon had wished his brother had been.

Stephen was kind, considerate and generous in a way that Vincent hadn't been. Stephen doesn't shut himself away from family and friends. He doesn't let his career derail all personal contacts. He doesn't focus on the fame and the money. He focuses on the patients.

Jonathon is proud of the man that Stephen had become and he is proud of what Clea was doing with him. The two of them were as close as siblings and Jonathon was happy to see that. As only children, they could certainly use the support from each other.

Jonathon was even happy with the relationship that Stephen had started with Tony Stark. Well. Mostly.

Tony Stark's reputation was concerning and Jonathon was worried that the man was going to end up breaking his nephew's heart, but by the sounds of it, the relationship was actually going quite well.

Decades ago, Jonathon would have been a little... taken aback that Stephen had fallen in love with a man, but it was 2010 and such bigotry wasn't a part of him anymore. For that he was grateful.

All of that means very little when Tony Stark turns up at his office during his rare consultation hours.

Jonathon blinks as he looks over Tony Stark and thinks about what he has just said. The man is dressed in an expensive dark brown, almost black suit that makes his eyes seem darker and he was sitting comfortably in Jonathon's client chair as if the office belonged to him.

That was just how Tony Stark was, Jonathon supposed. The confidence and the charisma that Tony Stark has just oozes out of him. Jonathon can appreciate how that trait could be attractive.
"I'm sorry, you want to do what?" Jonathon asks him as he tries to process what the man had said as soon as he had walked into the office.

"I want to make Pepper the CEO of my company. Effective as soon as she hears the news." Tony repeats and Jonathon blinks again at him before he nods slowly.

"May I ask why?" Jonathon asks because it's such a big decision to make. He is familiar with men like Tony Stark and they don't give up control easily. The man was about to give up control over a very big part of his life. That in itself is disconcerting.

The other problem is that he still doesn't quite understand why Tony had come to him when he had very competent lawyers working for him, including Pepper Potts and one of his own students, Alexander Winters.

"I've been working my whole life Mr Strange. Lately, I've been more a part time CEO than a full time one and she's been doing most of my job. I would like to make sure that she can do the work with the full authority of the position. I have many other concerns such as Iron Man and my inventions that I would like to devote my time to." Tony says smoothly.

Jonathon raises an eyebrow.

If nothing else, dealing with corporate clients have taught Jonathon a few things. When people in power are willing to let go of power, it is usually because there is some sort of crisis going on or there is a significant change in their lives.

For another, Jonathon has learnt to spot when people weren't telling him the full truth. His bullshit meter was very, very well developed over the years. And he recognises a practised and rehearsed speech when he hears it.

Tony Stark is bullshitting him hard.

Except Jonathon doesn't know why. Being a good lawyer means that he has to figure out why people are lying to him. Not just pick up that they are lying.

But he nods.

If Tony wants and needs him to draw up the paperwork, it is something that Jonathon can do and it is something that Tony is entitled to ask for. Tony Stark is a fully grown adult man with a sound mind that can make any decision that he likes.

Jonathon doesn't need to question him. He does anyway.

"May I ask why you came to me?" Jonathon asks him even as he starts to draw up the usual confidentiality agreement as well as the standard contract that he has. It's so very important to ensure that he has everything squared away. Especially when it comes to people that he has a relationship with.

"Because I know I can trust you and because I want this to be a surprise for Pepper." Tony tells him and Jonathon feels his suspicion meter rise, but he nods as he prints out the paperwork to start the process of getting Tony signed up.

"Alright. So given the nature of your company, the structure from what I know of Stark Industries, I'm going to suggest that Ms Potts be hired by the company as the CEO. As the owner of the company, you have the right to appoint a CEO of your choosing." Jonathon says as he looks over the company's registration from his computer.
"Oh. That's a lot simpler than what I thought it would be." Tony says and Jonathon isn't too surprised. Considering the company itself and the bylaws, it is obvious that the company had been designed to ensure that the Stark family stays in power.

The ownership wasn't in question but it wasn't rare for companies owned by families to hire professional CEOs to run their companies whilst they remained the face of the company and kept influence by having a large number of stocks or flat out ownership of the company.

Stark Industries was a publicly-traded company, but the majority shareholder was Tony Stark. There was no disputing that. He also wasn't letting go of all of his control over the company. He was holding onto his position as the President of the Board.

It's a good way to go about appointing a CEO.

Jonathon isn't too surprised that Tony has thought far enough ahead. He also isn't surprised that Tony did need some advice as to how to go about what he wanted. Corporate law in the US is a bitch. It was so very dependent on the state the company was formed.

"I'll draw up the contract to appoint Ms Potts as the Chief Executive Officer of Stark Industries. Are there any particular conditions you would like to add?" Jonathon asks him. There are standard CEO contracts that he could refer to.

Tony looks thoughtful for a moment before he shakes his head.

"Once I draw up the contract, I can send it to you and you can read over it and let me know if there are any changes that you would like to make to the contract. Ms Potts should also have a chance to review the contract and ensure that she is happy with the contents." Jonathon tells Tony and he nods slowly.

There is some silence in the room for a short while before Tony takes in a deep breath and drops the second statement that surprises Jonathon and has him confused.

"I would also like you to draw up a will." Tony says and this time, Jonathon is most definitely concerned. Appointing Pepper Potts as CEO? Odd but not outrageous but a will? At 29?

It wasn't unheard of for people of wealth to have wills even when they are young because of the vast nature of their holdings. But for Tony Stark to ask for a will from him? When he has his own legal team? That's odd.

"With the change, I want to make sure that Pepper will be the successor of my company if I die before she does." Tony tells him and Jonathon can see the reasoning behind it. To a certain extent.

After all, Tony Stark was Iron Man and that wasn't exactly a risk free job so the idea that he would be planning for a terrible eventuality isn't infeasible but it just feels odd. All of this just feels... odd.

It also feels like Tony is in a hurry. That... isn't good.

"Do you have a will currently in place?" Jonathon asks and he is somewhat surprised when Tony nods.

"Yeah. Got one made after I came back from Afghanistan." Tony tells him and Jonathon understands. Of course. Nothing like a kidnapping to remind you of your own mortality and the fragility of life.

"Of course. What are the conditions you would like to outline?" Jonathon asks. Thew contract to hire
a CEO is not that complicated. Divestment of power from Tony Stark as the CEO of the company whilst he keeps his powers as the President and owner of the company and then ensuring that the powers that Pepper Potts will have simply needs to be outlined.

He can get all of the information he needs from the Stark Industries bylaws and the documents of their corporation which is available through the SEC. But a will is different. That requires more input and a clear understanding of exactly what Tony wants included.

"Virginia Potts to get all of my shares in Stark Industries. For Colonel James Rhodes to receive the War Machine project as well as ongoing support for the War Machine." Jonathon blinks a little at that but he lets Tony continue as he makes notes. He has no idea what the War Machine project, but he doesn't need to know exactly what it is at this stage.

"The New York Mansion is to go to Rhodey as well. There is going to be a lab set up there to make sure that he can do maintenance on War Machine. It's... a suit like Iron Man." Tony explains and well, that explains a great deal. Jonathon nods slowly and Tony continues.

"The Malibu Mansion to go to Stephen Strange as well as all of my patents and all of my inventions, including the Iron Man suit and brand as well as my Artificial Intelligence systems, with the proviso that he will continue to allow Stark Industries to use them and innovate on them." Tony says and Jonathon definitely stops at that.

Jonathon isn't quite sure if he can calculate just how much money the man was talking about there. All the inventions that Tony has made come with royalties. Stark Industries and other companies that use his patents pay him royalty.

Most of the inventions that come out of Stark Industries does so with Tony Stark as the owner and inventor of the product. Which means that he was talking about stupid amounts of money that go on perpetually. Tony looks at Jonathon and shrugs his shoulders.

"Stephen will know what to do with my inventions. He will be able to use them in a way that no one else could. As for the rest, my funds and other properties can go to Maria Stark Foundation and for Pepper Potts and Stephen Strange to have control over the Foundation." Tony says and for a multi-billionaire, that really was a simple outline of a will.

But then there wasn't a large number of family members. Jonathon nods but slowly, he puts his paper and pen down and looks at the man.

"Mr Stark, I apologise if this question seems inappropriate but what is wrong with your health?" Jonathon asks and Tony looks at him with surprise in his eyes for just a second before he sighs.

"You know, you're scarily like Stephen." Tony says quietly but he doesn't answer the question.

"I need the documents sorted out as quickly as possible Mr Strange. I would like to get Pepper settled into her position as quickly as possible." Tony tells him and though Jonathon wants to ask more questions, he has a feeling that Tony won't answer it and more importantly, a little part of him doesn't want to know.

Stephen was happy with this man. Jonathon doesn't want that happiness to be destroyed because the man is ill. That would be devastating.

"Does Stephen know?" Jonathon asks instead and Tony looks at the printed confidentiality papers and signs his name across the bottom of the page.

"No. And I would ask that you do not divulge any information." Tony says almost pointedly.
Jonathon isn't an idiot. He didn't get this far into his practice by disclosing his clients' private information to anyone. But then he'd never had to hide it from family either.

"He should know." Jonathon advises the genius. The man shrugs his shoulders and it is clear that Tony Stark was struggling with the decision. Jonathon decides to let him be. It is a personal decision that Tony Stark needs to make on his own. Even if Jonathon's heart breaks a little to hear it.

"I will forward you the documents via email." Jonathon tells him after a moment and Tony nods slowly and looks at him.

"If- If something happens to me, you'll look after him right?" Tony asks him quietly and Jonathon is shocked for a moment before he can fully understand what the man was saying.

The concern and fears that Tony Stark is carrying are worrisome. Jonathon doesn't know what is going on with the man's health but clearly, it was serious enough that he was worried about the aftermath of it.

Jonathon can't help but think about the children. Oh, he knows that both Stephen and Clea aren't children, but they will always be to him. It is his job to make sure that they are happy and that they are safe.

To know that someone that they cared for deeply was unwell and that there was a possibility of a death... Jonathon feels his heart break.

"Mr Stark, is there anything I can do to help?" Jonathon asks after a little while once he has gathered himself. He had seen the way that Tony had been with Stephen following his parent's death. He had seen the care and love that Tony had displayed to support Stephen during the difficult time and process.

He was grateful for it and he knew that Stephen was grateful for it. Jonathon didn't know the man very well yet, it's not as if they had talked extensively during those times, but Jonathon does feel concerned about him and what his illness would mean for Stephen and for Clea.

"No. I just need the paperwork sorted Mr Strange. As quickly as possible." Tony says and Jonathon nods slowly to him.

"You'll have it." He assures the man and Tony stands up easily and before Jonathon can really think to say anything else, leaves.

Once he is gone, Jonathon sits for a long time in the silence before he gets to work. Even if he wants to break confidentiality for the first time and speak to his nephew about what may be going on with his partner, Jonathon knew that Stephen was unreachable.

This is probably the biggest legal dilemma he has had in decades, Jonathon thinks. Besides the fact that Stephen and Clea were going to be devastated if something were to happen to Tony. It has only been a short time since his parent's deaths too.

God.

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Thursday

21 April 2010
Virginia 'Pepper' Potts is frustrated.

Honestly, Tony had been amazing to work with in the last couple of months. He's been responsible, he's been present and working really hard during the three days that she schedules meetings, events and actual Stark Industries work.

Until this week.

Something was wrong. Though Tony had told her that everything was fine after the meeting with Wu, though he had stayed a lot longer in Toronto than he usually does and he’d handed her a lovely bag of herbal teas, which she really liked... something is off.

Because Tony's missed three meetings. Important meetings. Not dire important, but important. Meetings that she’d trusted he would be there for because for the past few months he has been.

Also, he hasn't returned the emails she’d sent to find out what he wanted to do about the companies he has contracted for the Stark Expo. He proposed further research contracts and he hasn't done anything with them.

It's not as if she doesn't have enough work to do. She is working her arse off trying to make sure that the Stark Expo happens on time with all the things that Tony had wanted included.

She's trying to run the goddamned company all day trying to make sure that all the little day to day stuff doesn't fall apart and Tony wasn't even responding to her goddamned phone calls!

Which is why in the middle of the day, she's had to rush over to the mansion.

"Tony! What is going on?" She asks as she all but storms into the workshop. Tony doesn't even look up from something tiny he's manipulating with precision tools.

"You missed the Board of Directors meeting Tony! I told you that it was important!" She is mad enough to be speaking loudly. It might be worse because honestly, the stupid cold had her all congested and she's feeling shit. But that's only a part of it.

"You handled it right?" Tony tells herabsently. Oh, Gods no. This is the old Tony. The Tony that partied all fucking night and made her come into the mansion every morning to throw out overnight guests. The Tony that drank like an idiot and that didn't come in for the meetings. The Tony that treated people like shit because shit was happening in his own head that he didn't want to deal with.

She'd honestly thought that they were done with that Tony. She had hoped that they were well and truly past that. Apparently not.

The disappointment resounds through her.

"Tony I can't do your job for you. You're the President of the Board. You need to be at the Board meetings. Not me. I'm trying to do your job for you but you need to help me do it." Pepper says, frustration overtaking her.

More and more, Tony's responsibilities on the company had been falling onto her shoulders. She hadn't minded it, because the job of a PA is literally to make their employer's life easier. Tony still made all the big decisions and signed off on all the paperwork. She just curated everything for him and laid it out for him to quickly look at.

She attended the meetings, took notes, passed on pre-approved instructions and relayed what happened in the meetings to Tony. She sent him report after report via email throughout the day.
Even on the days that he was with Stephen.

She had done that because Tony had been more efficient, more focused during the three days that she did have him for and it was good to see Tony being happy with Stephen.

That was kind of the luxury that Tony paid for by employing her and her team of assistants, lawyers and PR specialists. But she can't do her job without him replying back to her emails, coming to the really important meetings.

"Then do the job Pepper." Tony tells her as he finally puts down his tools and turns to look at her. Pepper frowns at him. She was! It was like she was talking to a brick wall. A really thick, a really well built one that she just wants to take a wrecking ball to.

"Tony, you just announced the Stark Expo. You rewarded contracts to the wind farm people and the plastic tree plantation people. Which was your idea, by the way, they are already on the payroll and you won't make the decisions!" Pepper runs through all the agendas that Tony had been ignoring as she follows him through the lab.

Since Stephen had been working with Tony, the workshop has evolved a great deal. For one, there was more medical equipment and DNA research capabilities in one corner of the lab. The holotable technology was now in the lab in a large form, covering the entire garage section, where the Iron Man suits and schematics were displayed.

Tony walks through them as Pepper follows him.

"I don't care about the details of the Expo or the liberal agenda anymore. It's boring. I have other things I want to work on. You do it." Tony tells her like a petulant child trying to get out of doing homework. As he turns around to face her, she sees his eyes go hazy for a moment as if he is dizzy.

The disappointment is really settling in hard. She's not sure if she is dealing with Tony Stark her best friend or Mr Tony Stark her boss. Either way, she is disappointed and furious.

"I'm trying!" She shouts back at him as he picks up a bottle of something green from the fridge. A smoothie, she thinks as he gulps it down and looks at her when she sniffs.

"Are you sick? If you are, I'm going to have to ask you to wear a mask." Tony tells her. She frowns at him.

"Tony, don't try to distract me. I'm telling you that I can't do both your job and my job!" Pepper tells him and Tony sighs, turns around and looks at her.

"Which is why I'm telling you to do just mine." Pepper honestly feels frustrated beyond what is probably good for her blood pressure. She feels like strangling her best friend and that can't be too good for her either.

"I am trying to and I can't without you to approve the decisions. You're the CEO. Not me!" Pepper shouts back as Tony moves towards the other end of the workshop.

"So be CEO." Argh! She just wants to wrap her hands around his throat and throttle him until he shakes out of whatever funk he was in because he was being an immature brat!

"God Tony, have you been drinking?" She asks because this irrational behaviour was so out of the norm for him. Especially these days. She had no idea what magical powers Stephen Strange had, but he had turned Tony Stark into a healthy, properly functioning adult and apparently one week without him and Tony was reverting right back.
"No. Only chlorophyll and Pepper, you aren't listening to me." Tony tells her. No, he's the one that isn't listening, she thinks. In fact, she says it.

"No, you're not listening to-" They are standing so close that she could feel Tony's heat and he blinks at her, his caramel brown eyes conveying emotions that she doesn't understand. Then he says something that she really, really doesn't understand.

"Pepper! I'm trying to make you CEO!" Tony exclaims and the words don't quite register. She stares blankly at him.

"I'm sorry... what?" She asks back, dazed.

"I hereby irrevocably appoint you Chief Executive Officer of Stark Industries, effective immediately." Tony tells her and she blinks at him. He can't just hand over the company to her. Well, he can but why?

Being the Chairman, President and CEO of Stark Industries is a part of his identity. It is what they worked so hard for after Afghanistan to ensure that he had full control of the company.

What the hell was he doing?

She just stares at him blankly as he claps on her the shoulders and lets go. He walks towards Butterfingers, who is holding onto a tray with flutes and champagne. Dom Perignon Vintage, she recognises. She prefers Dom Perignon to Veuve but-

That's not important.

"I've actually given this a fair amount of thought, believe it or not. Trying to figure out who the worthy successor would be. Then I realised it's you. It's always been you." Tony tells her with a warm smile as he uncorks the champagne.

She wonders vaguely if the last couple of days had been a test of some sorts. Or if the whole three days a week thing had been a test. She's not sure. But she feels the shock spread through her and she's so very glad that somehow during their argument, they'd ended up back in the kitchenette area and she can sit down.

She sits down hard.

"I thought there would be a legal issue, but, it turns out, I'm capable of appointing my own successor." Tony informs her. He consulted a lawyer? He'd gone to see someone outside of his legal team? Why? Pepper looks at him with the shock still spreading in her system.

"I spoke to Jonathon Strange. He specialises in corporate law, as you know. In case you are worried about this, I've actually been considering it for awhile. I'll be honest. I want to focus more on the inventions and Iron Man and all the other projects Stephen and I can come up with." Tony tells her and it makes sense, she thinks.

Tony has been working since he'd been a child. He'd never had a life outside of SI. Even the glitz and the glamour had been a part of working for Stark Industries. Being Tony Stark was a job. But lately, he'd started to live life outside of SI and Pepper can see how that would be... attractive to Tony. That freedom.

"I don't know what to say." Pepper tells him. The anger and the disappointment fade away. If he'd put thought into this and she knows he has because as impulsive as Tony might seem to the outside world, when it came to SI, Tony was incredibly careful.
"Say yes? I need you to do this for me Pepper. I'm not going to leave you stranded. I will be the President of the Board and I will still be the owner of the company. You'll be a contract CEO with Stark Industries. It means that I will be there for you to lean on if you need help." Tony tells her warmly. Pepper nods slowly.

"It's not going to be very different from the work you've already been doing. It'll just mean that you don't need me to sign off on things anymore. Just make the decisions and act on it. You're going to do great. So... say yes Pepper." Tony tells her. Pepper takes a deep breath.

"Yes. I accept." She tells him and somehow gathers up enough strength to hug him and let him hug her back. She holds onto him tightly enough that she can feel the Arc Reactor digging into her. She doesn't care.

"Tony, are you sure about this? SI is your's, your baby." Tony shakes his head.

"No. It's my legacy and I'm trusting it to you." Tony tells her and he pulls away from her to pour the champagne and hands her one of the flutes.

"I'm going to make the announcement on Monday. Celebrate and enjoy. After the announcement, Jonathon drew up the papers for us to sign to make the transfer happen. I'm going to give you a week for an adjustment period." Tony tells her and she nods slowly.

"I'll read over then when you send them to me. Make sure they are in order." Pepper trusts Jonathon. He had a great reputation, but it doesn't hurt to check. Tony nods towards one of JARVIS's cameras.

"You heard the lady J." Tony says easily towards the AI.

"On it sir. Congratulations Ms Potts." The AI tells her and Pepper thanks him as she continues to look at Tony.

"Is this because of Stephen? You want more time to spend with him?" Pepper asks him softly because she knows that things like this are difficult to talk about for him. Tony shrugs his shoulders.

"A part of it. But it's more because of you. You're a fantastic businesswoman Pep and a lawyer. You've practically been doing my job for the last ten years. I thought it was about time I made it official. Besides, I've been steadily employed since I was basically born. It's about time I find out what being a freeloader was like." Tony's tongue in cheek expression makes her heart ache a little.

If she could have met Howard Stark, she knows she would have punched the man in the nose, regardless of the consequences. She'd always known, even in an abstract level, that Tony had been designing weapons and working for SI since he'd been a child. But when she'd seen the number of patents that Tony had released since he'd been 8 till now?

Even when he'd been at MIT, he had been working for SI. There hadn't been a single moment since Tony has been 8 that he hasn't been working. Been employed.

Even before all of that, just being Tony Stark had been a job. It still was a job. There were medial appearances, the galas and charity events, the lifestyle that he is expected to have and has to maintain. The image of success is as important as success itself when it comes to men like Tony.

Gods, he'd never had the chance to be a child and she guesses that a lot of his immaturity and his impulsiveness stems from that.

Yeah. Howard Stark can get fucked.
Because genius or not, he never should have let a child work on weapons. As a parent, he should have protected Tony and should have let him have a childhood that every child deserved to have. Tony didn't have that.

He wasn't allowed to be free to do what he wanted to do. He never got to find out in a way what it was that he was passionate about. He was moulded and designed into the inventor the world knows.

"Okay. I'm going to call you a lot in the beginning. You're still going to be the face of Stark Industries. I'm going to need you at press conferences and Board Meetings." Pepper tells him. She can't be both his PA and the CEO of Stark Industries.

"I know. Assign me a few PAs or something to sort out my schedule and stuff." Tony suggests to her and Pepper nods slowly. She will. She has to. Without Tony Stark, Stark Industries doesn't work. He is the brains behind the multi-billions of dollars worth of inventions.

The dawns on her just how huge the task is. Because she doesn't have Tony's memory. Or genius. She can't process information at the speed that he can. That was going to mean that she was really going to need help.

She already has help. But she was going to need more.

"We're going to have to hire more people." She says a little numbly. He chuckles.

"Nope. You're going to have to hire more people." He reminds her. Oh yeah. She smiles and shakes herself a little and nods.

"Yeah. I'm going to have to do that. For now... champagne?" She says a little weakly and he laughs and they clink their glasses. She already knows what to do. She does. She just needs to put it into action.

"You got this Pep. Make me proud." He tells her with a wink and she hugs him. She has to. He hugs her back just as warmly.

Virginia 'Pepper' Potts, Chief Executive Officer of Stark Industries.

She likes the sound of that.
Chapter 21

Chapter Summary

Thinking about his impending doom isn't pleasant but Tony isn't about to bury his head in the sand and ignore it. That would be irresponsible and he's been so goddamned good so far.

So Tony continues with his plans.

But he's not the only one that is making plans.

Chapter Notes

Alright. Oh God. So. I fucked up. I bumped my stupid fucking stomach into my stupid fucking desk and my nerve pain has flared up to the point I can't get out of bed. Luckily, I have a laptop.

The bed is warmer than the desk anyway. It's fine.

The only problem is pained me writes more angst. ARC 3 is starting off super angsty now. I'm not sure whether that's good for the story or not... I'm just feeling angsty so that's what's going in the story. If I have to suffer, so does Stepehn and Tony. Apparently.

Yes, I am aware that I have issues. Yes, I am aware that I am using my writing of this fic as therapy. It's working for me so it's fine. Right?

Anyway, I hope you enjoy this chapter and please keep up with the comments, the kudos and the support. Your girl really needs some uplifting stuff to ignore the pain for at least a few minutes at a time!!!

Friday

23 April 2010

The call and the request to come to the mansion catches Rhodey off by surprise. It has a lot to do with the fact that he was currently... 'investigating' Tony and his activities as Iron Man.

Though Tony had been conducting his 'missions' incognito, it's not as if the flashy red and gold suit can go unnoticed for long. It also doesn't help that he ended up helping out a number of times right out there in public with matters that really could have used a superhero.

Like the time he helped out the fire department in Colorado and in Nevada during the huge fire incidents. Or the times he intervened in a shooting in LA.

The public attention and the fact that Tony had been also helping out with a few of the military
objectives with SHIELD made the Iron Man suit and Tony's capabilities an important question for the US Armed Forces.

Which is why Rhody has somehow been roped into- no. Ordered into an investigation into his best friend.

Tony knows about it. Rhody knows that Tony knows about it. He has to. He's a genius and he must have known what making public the fact that he was Iron Man was going to do.

More, Rhody may be Tony's contact with the Air Force, but Tony has other contacts. Other informants throughout the Armed Forces that would have given him a heads up. Aside from JARVIS being inside of the military systems that is. Not that Rhody knows anything about that. Of course.

So. Tony has to know.

Which is why it makes no sense why Tony would ask him to come to the mansion during this time. Especially why Tony would take him directly to the lab without saying a word and show him a full schematic of the freaking suit in question.

Not to mention what Tony tells him.

Rhody looks blankly at the Iron Man suit- no, not the Iron Man suit. A suit... in front of him. Rhody has been studying the images and videos of the Iron Man suit enough to recognise that this isn't it. This is something... different.

He can't quite look away, though he does want to look at Tony to make sure his best friend isn't... fucking with him.

"It's yours Rhody-bear. I made it for you." Tony tells him, his voice amused. Rhody gets the distinct impression that he probably has a ridiculous expression on his face. Actually, he is fairly sure that he does.

But how can he not?

"You're kidding." Rhody says as he does finally manage to turn his head away from the suit to look at him. Well, the schematics for the suit. It wasn't a physical suit yet.

He had been shocked enough to know that Tony would even show him the schematics let alone-

"You're going to help me put it together. I built all the components already. You need to learn every part of the suit and know how to put it together, pull it apart and maintain it." Tony's words are making sense. It's incredibly sensible even, but that doesn't mean that Rhody can actually... understand him.

"I'm sorry, but it sounds like you're giving me an Iron Man suit." Rhody tells him and Tony sighs in that dramatic way he does. He even throws up his arms in the air.

"I am trying to if you'll let me." Tony sounds amused. Rhody blinks at him and tries to get a read on Tony. He sounds like he is serious enough. Amused and having great fun at his expense, yes, but also... serious.

"You're not drunk or high are you?" It pays to check because Rhody can distinctly remember the first time they got high and Tony trying to give him a Lamborghini whilst rambling about nachos. Tony sighs.
"What is with you and Pepper? No. I'm not high or drunk. It makes sense Platypus. I'm not going to let you go public with it for a couple of months, but the suit is going to be yours. You will be its exclusive pilot." Tony informs him. Rhodey blinks again and looks back at the suit.

"Man... you do know that the military is going to get a hold of it right? That I won't be able to you know... quit and go vigilante." Rhodey double checks because Tony can be thoughtful and carefully think out consequences but by the same token, he can just... be impulsive and crazy.

"Yeah I know. But the suit is going to only work with your iris scan. Only you will be able to pilot it. No one else. Also, if it is messed about the wrong way, it will self destruct." Tony informs him. Well then.

Rhodey doesn't quite know how to thank someone for literally handing over the power to be a superhero. He's pretty sure that isn't any standard set of words for that.

"Seems a bit excessive but fair enough. I'm not going to ask how you know, but you know what they are asking me to do right?" Rhodey double checks because that's honestly the reason he'd made the trip to the mansion.

The military and indeed the government and the Senate was becoming concerned with the power and influence that Tony was starting to garner. The Iron Man suit basically turned Tony into the equivalence of an army on his lonesome and that kind of firepower was in the hands of an individual was dangerous.

It made governments nervous.

They wanted to know what the capabilities of the suit were along with what the dangers and risks were in having someone like Tony in charge of security around the world. It was a fair concern and they'd asked him to do the risk assessment. They were trusting him to be impartial despite the fact that his best friend was the target of their investigation.

Either they trusted that his patriotism would override his loyalty to Tony or they didn't know just how close they were. Or perhaps there just wasn't anyone else that knew Tony's tech as well as he did. He figured it was a combination of those factors.

"Yeah. I'm going to ask that you don't include this in the report. You need to learn how the suit works and how to use it and it's going to take time. Until that happens, I'm not going to let you take it." Tony tells him. It's fair enough.

Rhodey loves the fact that Tony trusts him enough to ask. Not to demand, but to ask that he doesn't include the suit in the report. That he trusts Rhodey to be impartial and fair. It's a heavy burden but Rhodey can bear it for Tony.

"Tell me Pepper made you get some paperwork for this." Rhodey tells him and he isn't too surprised when Tony presents him with a tablet and a lengthy PDF file on it. That's more like it, he thinks and nods.

He thanks the Gods that he has enough fucking experience reading the bullshit, long and complicated legalese in the documents to understand what the contract is saying. He has had enough practice with them working as the liaison with Stark Industries.

"Good. This better be fucking airtight Tones. I don't want to be compelled to give away your trade secrets." Rhodey informs him and Tony nods.

"When you're done reading it, I'm going to walk you through how the repulsors work. Then how to
put the suit together. How to repair it. How to run diagnostics. Your suit doesn't have JARVIS, so you're going to have to learn the gestures and movements to get it to move and do things the way you need it to." Tony informs him. Rhodey nods.

This Tony isn't new.

This serious, let's get to work Tony is one he'd dealt with before. It just has... been a long time since he'd seen this side of his friend. He appreciates it.

"Yeah. I figured piloting the suit isn't a walk in the park." Rhodey says and he is surprised when Tony doesn't answer him, but hands over the helmet that's been sitting at a nearby desk instead.

Tony's gesture makes it clear enough that he intends for Rhodey to put the helmet on and the moment he slips it over his head, Rhodey doesn't know where to look.

It is overwhelming.

The Augmented Reality displays that light up to identify all the items in the workshop, the current speed, air temperature, incline, height, distance to every object, the clear flight path outlined along with targeting information and a few things he can't even understand yet.

Shit.

He takes the helmet off and lets out a breath. Rhodey is a fighter jet pilot. He is used to having to deal with raw data but it's too much. He is honestly not quite sure if he can handle it. It is definitely going to take time and training to get there.

"Holy mother fucking shit." Is the only thing that he manages to say as he takes the helmet off and hands it back to Tony, who shrugs.

"JARVIS takes care of a lot of the information for me and having the data means that you don't have to do the calculations yourself." Tony tells him as if it is that simple. It isn't.

Flying with that much data being thrown at him and having to make movements based on the data that he sees and trust it as well as making gestures or movements that he isn't familiar with?

It has taken him years upon years of intense training to become a fighter jet pilot worth his salt. He has the knowledge and the instincts and he was going to have to unlearn a lot of things to learn how to pilot the suit. He knows that. He breathes out.

"Right. Let's get started." Rhodey suggests because by gods he was going to need the time to learn. Tony nods and leads him towards the workshop benches.

"I'm going to be setting up maintenance bays for you at SI workshops throughout the world and in the New York Mansion. It means that if your suit breaks down you can either come here or to one of those labs. There will be sufficient tools and replacement parts for you to fix your own suit. But you're going to have to learn to do it yourself." Tony informs him.

Rhodey has a mechanical engineering background. He is educated and clever in his own right and he knows that he can build things that he can imagine, but the suit goes beyond his imagination and he was going to have to really learn how to fit everything together and how all the different components work in order to ensure that he can keep the suit in good condition.

Pilots in the Air Force learn what the plane does, basic maintenance and what to do in emergencies, but generally most of them don't learn how to build the plane. This was definitely taking him a little
out of his comfort zone, but Rhodey is confident that he can do it.

Especially with Tony's help.

"So do I get to make some changes?" Rhodey asks as they start to look at the components. Tony shrugs his shoulders.

"I designed the suit that so you can. For example, if you want to add more weapons, you can. It will make the suit heavier. The Arc Reactor runs on a palladium core and if you burn through that, you will need to replace it. The reactor itself should last for a long time though." Rhodey nods and thinks.

"I may need to add more weaponry. The repulsors might not be enough for what I know the military is going to be asking of me." Rhodey says because he knows how the higher-ups are going to think. Tony nods.

"That's why your suit is a heavier build. It will be built with iron titanium with enough gold thrown in to make sure that it doesn't have the icing problem pure iron suit will have. It's slower than mine, but it is designed to basically be a tank." Rhodey noticed.

He nods as he looks over the helmet design, the suit design overall and as he does, he can definitely see that Tony had built the suit for him. For his build. For his needs. It's... overwhelming.

Rhodey stops and he turns around to look at his best friend. The gratitude that he feels and the excitement that runs through him has to be obvious.

"Thank you for trusting me with this man." Rhodey tells him with all the feeling that he can't just put into words and hugs the other man. Tony accepts the hug and pats him on the back.

"You deserve it. But if you let some idiot touch the suit, I will be pissed." Tony says pretty seriously and Rhodey doesn't doubt it. Tony was protective of his creations. The suit even more so.

"Never." Rhodey reassures him and they get stuck into the work. As they do, Rhodey can't help but think that there is something off about Tony. About the situation.

It's not until much later that Rhodey realises that Tony never talked about him being there to help fix the suit. Or to upgrade it. Or to work with Rhodey on the suit.

As if he wasn't going to be there.

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Friday

23 April 2010

Natasha Romanov is a master assassin and now a master spy. The two trades have a great deal in common. Assassinations taught to her by the Red Room relies on a great deal of... integrating oneself into the lives of the target. In becoming a lover, a colleague or a friend. For a night or for a month.

To find that perfect moment to strike.

The art of seduction is what the Red Room has taught her. It works for espionage too. But they taught her more than that. They taught her to fight, to hide in plain sight. To blend in. She can work long-distance surveillance just as well as close surveillance from inside the lives of her targets.
She knows how to find the weakness in her targets. To find vulnerabilities. To strike them when they are weak and down. To be able to bring out the worst in them if needs be. Or to make them trust her so implicitly that she can destroy their lives from the inside out.

Anthony Edward Stark.


The profile for Tony Stark is literally a dream for someone like her. Entitled, narcissistic men are easy to target. They are blind to their own weaknesses and they are so confident in their own abilities and their brilliance that they don't see people like her coming.

They don't doubt their ability to attract a beautiful woman into their beds. Or their ability to detect deception. They also don't ask for help. Men, in general, had a problem with that, to begin with. Powerful men, in particular, were especially bad at it.

On top of that, Tony Stark is a genius. A validated, true genius that is lorded by the world. His own self-confidence would be his downfall. But geniuses can also be fragile. They are often misunderstood by the world and needs and wants validation and understanding.

They are often lonely and isolated.

Tony Stark is a good example of that. When Natasha really takes the time to look over Tony Stark, his contacts and his life overall, she can see that he only has two people that truly matter to him. That is it. It's a very lonely existence.

Not that she has any right to judge.

Flattering him and playing a little hard to get should get him interested. Being a playboy, Natasha knows that he would find her attractive enough to try to seduce her. Not knowing that she is the one seducing him until he is safely under her control.

The work should be so easy that it is almost a waste of her time, but Fury wants her on the job.

"Tony Stark huh?" Clint comments as he looks over the profile that she has laid out on the table of her dorm room. He throws her an apple. She catches it and takes a bite.

"Yeah. We need to know what's going on with Iron Man and get access to the tech." She tells him. Clint shrugs. The Iron Man suit looked incredibly powerful and dangerous. SHIELD was already working on means to disable the suit. To ensure that if Tony Stark got out of hand, they can deal with him.

"Honeypot?" Clint asks and Natasha gives him a predatory grin.

"He is a playboy." She tells him. Clint shrugs his shoulders as he looks over the profile himself and the recent reports on Tony Stark. He points to the page of his recent attendance in galas in the tabloid magazines and the social pages of newspapers.

"Is he? He hasn't pulled anyone to his bed for a while from the looks of it. Performance issues?" Clint suggests. Natasha frowns as she looks over the reports again herself.

Clint is right of course. The time leading up to Afghanistan showed hundreds of articles, news reports, social media posts and photographs indicating a very busy and... vibrant social life. But not after Afghanistan.
The thing is, if Tony Stark has PTSD as suspected by both the media and the SHIELD profilers, then sexual performance issues wouldn't be uncommon. But honestly, that was going to make the job a lot more difficult.

"God, I'm going to have to be the nurse then." Natasha groans. She really doesn't like the jobs where she has to look after the target. To make them feel better and to 'fix' them before she can get their trust. But at least Tony is attractive, she thinks as she looks over the photograph of him from the newspapers.

"What's your in?" Natasha doesn't answer the question but points Clint's attention to the advertisement for new Personal Assistants for both Pepper Potts and Tony Stark.

"Secretary? Really? I would kill anyone that makes me fetch them coffee." Clint says and Natasha doesn't doubt it. She smiles and takes a few deep breaths. It wouldn't be the first time or the last time that she has played a role like that.

"Personal Assistant." She corrects him. Though as far as either she or he is concerned, it is basically the same thing. She sighs.

"It's better than hoping that he'll pick me up. At least I can be around him and look for an opening." She says as she thinks. Clint nods and studies the report in front of him with some interest.

"Phil couldn't get one over on him. This is gonna be a tough one Nat." Clint tells her and she shrugs her shoulders. Coulson wasn't the type to be able to play dirty like she can. She puts a serene smile on her face.

"I think I might just be fine." She reassures him. She will. She hasn't failed a mission yet. At the very least, she can get a read on the man and provide the profilers with the details that they had been asking for.

Besides, the man is dying. The palladium in his chest was slowly killing him according to their scientists. Which meant that he was already vulnerable. Already weak. It's almost unfair really. That is if he knows.

It would be so easy to either seduce him and to offer him the 'comfort' that he desperately needs as he is dying to manipulate him to ensure that SHIELD can gain control over the suit and over him or to ensure that he acts out and causes a serious enough problem that SHIELD would be needed to step in to 'rescue' him.

Either way, it was going to take a little time but the work itself shouldn't be too difficult. If she was being honest, she was actually looking forward to it. It was going to be interesting.

The Black Widow has her sights firmly set on her prey.

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**Saturday**

**24 April 2010**

Stephen comes to with a start. For a moment, he has no idea where he is, what is going on and why he is even awake when he is so tired. Then he remembers and he groans.

"Dr Strange to bed 22." The announcement calls. Stephen gingerly runs a hand down his face. He
can almost feel the dark circles under his eyes and he gets out of the bed. He has work to do. It's so good to know that his residency panic responses are still applicable.

The thing is, the hospital and the quarantined off areas and the lab have literally been the only thing he'd seen in the past week or so and he was really getting sick of it.

He wants to go home.

He wants to see Tony. He misses Clea and Wong and Yinn. He misses magic. He even misses the Cloak and its antics. He misses his life.

It's almost over though, he reminds himself as he shrugs on his gown and makes his way out of the private room that they have been using as a rest area. A few of the other doctors and scientists toss and turn as he leaves.

Everyone is exhausted and drained. It is going to take some time to get back into the rhythm of a normal life after this for everyone. Even doctors that are used to having very little sleep has days off to rest up and to recover. They haven't had that luxury.

But having JARVIS has meant that they have been able to come up with a combination of antibiotics and anti-inflammatory medication that works.

The patients were recovering and they had a new type of antibiotic to work with, which was great, but they had to wait to see whether some of their patients would still pull through or not and there were others that will have permanent disabilities to deal with.

Which is why he couldn't leave. He wished that he could, but with the brain being at the centre of the problem and the nervous system being affected, they needed the neurological specialists to stay. Stephen hadn't argued with Director Parkes when he asked for Stephen to stay.

He had a feeling that it was more about keeping JARVIS around because as soon as Stephen was out of there, so was JARVIS and he was helping to run some projections that the CDC really wanted done. Which was fine. JARVIS was happy enough to do it and it didn't risk him. Stephen had made sure of that.

"Dr Strange, Theresa is doing well, but it seems like maybe her vision is... affected." Damn. Stephen nods to the nurse who looks worried and heads over to the girl himself.

"Hey, how are you doing?" He asks, despite knowing the answer. She gives the approximate direction he is standing at a bright smile though.

"I'm doing okay." The girl says and Stephen knows that it must be incredibly difficult for her to be acting so mature despite her young age, especially because her family wasn't allowed into the hospital. The nurses were doing the best they can to give her their attention but Stephen only knew too well how difficult hospitals were in general.

"You're being very brave Theresa. I'm going to have to see if we can do another scan to make sure I know what's happening in your brain. Is that okay?" Stephen asks. The girl gives him a nod and he slips her the lollipop the nurse had given him.

"Thank you." Theresa gives him a warm smile in turn for the lollipop. Stephen doesn't quite smile back. For one, he is too tired to and for another, he just can't smile when a child is suffering.

"Okay. Let's do some scans and we can figure out what's going on." He tells her. He really doesn't do patient care. Or much communication with patients other than consults really. He especially
doesn't like talking to children. But Theresa breaks his heart.

"Let's get an MRI done and an fMRI. I want to know what's going on in her brain. And get another set of labs if her blood pressure is okay." He tells the nurse and she nods and makes the arrangements.

Stephen knows that it's going to take some time, so he makes his way back to the lab where the one computer has been set up as JARVIS's terminal. It was an artificial 'terminal' situation, but it made the others in the lab more comfortable.

"JARVIS." Stephen calls as he sits down. There is no one else in the lab now. They found their cure. The scientists have mostly gone home. As has the researchers.

It was only the doctors that stayed behind to treat the patients. Some of them because they couldn't deal with the thoughts of leaving their patients without being certain they weren't going to lose another patient. Some because they weren't confident that the solution would work.

"Dr Strange, are you well?" JARVIS asks. He has no access to the cameras in the facility. If he did, he doesn't mention it at least. There is a webcam set up so that he can at least see who is talking to him though. Stephen slouches in the chair and runs a hand over his face again.

"Yes JARVIS. Just... tired." Stephen isn't quite sure why he has chosen to come here. He could go back and try to sleep for a little while longer, but he had wanted a reminder of home.

"Sir is concerned about you doctor. As am I. You have not been eating or resting sufficiently." The AI sounds almost chiding and Stephen chuckles as he fights back a yawn.

"I will rest when this is all done. How is Anthony doing?" Stephen asks though he knows he shouldn't. He has opened up the Connection a little more since the solution has been found. He's been feeling more of the nausea and the dizziness coming through from the man but without it being a completed Connection, Stephen couldn't quite get a grasp on what the man is feeling.

He knows that he should be in discussions with the Council to figure out whether or not they should let Tony know that Stephen knows. Having said that, he knows that the decision is going to be left up to him. Tony is his Soulmate and he is in the relationship with Tony.

The Universe has an agenda and requires saving, but Stephen doesn't want to risk the fragile happiness and their relationship breaking down. Not to mention, the risk of rejection is... terrifying.

Aside from the more mystical implications, Stephen honestly isn't sure how he is going to deal with the relationship breaking down between Tony and himself. The fear is... primal almost.

But then this incident with the CDC, Stephen knows, is probably another manipulation on behalf of the universe so that Stephen isn't right there to be able to help Tony through the process of discovering the poisoning.

Stephen hates that.

But it does give him time to think and to accept it. It had been so much easier to accept that Tony suffers through everything when... he hadn't been so head over heels in love with the man. Now? Now everything that he knows Tony is going to face? It hurts him to even think about it.

He supposes he should be grateful that the Time Stone hasn't been giving him any visions during the meagre sleep he has managed to steal here and there at least.
"Sir has been busy, doctor." The hesitation and the response says a lot. Stephen sighs. Tony must have instructed JARVIS not to tell him about the poisoning. Which means that Tony might not tell him about it. Stephen doesn't know what he is going to do and what he needs to do about the situation.

"JARVIS, how are you going with the facial expression studies?" Stephen asks more to distract both himself from the palladium issue as well as to ensure that JARVIS was still getting through his learning processes.

They wanted to make sure that JARVIS had a clear read on people, expressions and feelings before they got him into the Tower. He had a good understanding of their expressions in order to identify threats as well as to ensure that everyone that enters the Tower as well as the staff are well protected and cared for.

Being an Artificial Intelligence system, with a good enough camera system, JARVIS was able to catch micro-expressions that normal human beings may miss because they go by so quickly.

It meant that JARVIS could be much more effective at protecting people than human guards could be when it comes to recognising aggression. But it had to be carefully taught to him so that they can deal with concerns in relation to overreaction and context.

"Well, I believe Dr Strange. However, I do believe that context is required for a great deal of human expression for me to sufficiently understand the cause and effect of expression and emotions." JARVIS informs him. Stephen nods.

"Of course. We can work on that when I get back. For now, we can move onto crowd dynamics and crowd behaviour." Stephen suggests as he flags up the videos that he wants the AI to study.

"Of course Dr Strange. Do you perhaps know when you would be finishing up your work here?" Stephen wishes he knew. The solution they'd come up with was working.

But recovery periods were not as predictable and with the inflammation caused to the brain tissues as a result of the infection, Stephen and the other neurosurgeons wanted to ensure that there weren't nasty side effects or surprises.

"Hopefully soon. I don't know for certain JARVIS." Stephen informs the AI just as the announcement comes through for him again. He sighs.

"We look forward to having you back doctor." JARVIS informs him and Stephen gets the distinct feeling Tony is aware of the conversation. He wouldn't be too surprised. Stephen manages a tired smile before he returns back to work.

He really should take the time to think about what on Earth he is going to do about the poison situation. Unfortunately, his tired brain couldn't come up with any brilliant solutions so far.

He hopes that he will before he goes home at least.

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Sunday

25 April 2010

Tony Stark is dying.
He has to keep telling himself that to make sure that he believes it. That he doesn't go into the stupid denial phase because he doesn't have the time for that.

Preparing for one's death isn't... an easy process. Tony wasn't giving up, but he needed to come to terms with it and he is just practical enough and realistic enough to make arrangements should the worst occur.

He is honestly a little proud of himself for being mature enough to do what he has done so far to organise his life. The will is drawn up with Jonathon Strange. There were tweaks that he needs made to it but he also organises for a living will just in case as well.

The last thing he wants is for his body to be artificially kept alive when his brain is dead. The metal poisoning was going to heavily affect his mind. He makes sure that Pepper and Rhodey are in charge of his living will in a medical situation. Perhaps he should add Stephen to that.

Yeah, he should.

He sends the email through to Jonathon Strange. The man was effective and his contracts were tight and well written. Trust a member of the Strange family to be good at their jobs.

He'd already organised a lot of things for the worst-case scenario. Making Pepper CEO and ensuring that his company was in good hands. If he doesn't make it, she will get the controlling shares of the company and even with Stephen owning the patents, SI will still have access to them. That will help her to run SI.

As much as Tony jokes about the R&D boys and gals and the Cyber teams and so forth, Stark Industries has some of the most brilliant minds working for them. His legacy and hope for the world will continue. Tony knows that.

Then there is also JARVIS. He has a set of protocols set up that Tony programs into the AI himself to ensure that JARVIS would always be around to help Pepper and to work with Stephen. He wants to make sure that the AI's growth isn't impeded by his death.

After all... JARVIS and the bots are the closest to what he has to progeny.

Tony also make sure that Rhodey has the suit and he can continue to use the suit with the assistance of both the labs, JARVIS as well as Stephen himself. Tony knows that Stephen will understand and that he will help. Stephen himself will have the Iron Man suits, whether he chooses to use them or not.

He's pretty sure not. The doctor takes his oath not to harm seriously. He might find a pilot that is worth the suit though. Tony can trust his judgement.

After talking with Jonathon for a bit, Tony has set aside some funds for Rhodey to ensure that if he wants to, he can leave the military life and become a superhero and work full time with War Machine. After all, Rhodey is a talented mechanical engineer and between JARVIS and Stephen's help, Rhodey will be able to run the suit without problems.

Maybe... not JARVIS. JARVIS was Stephen's. Tony's and Stephen's. Perhaps Rhodey could use something else, Tony thinks quietly as he starts typing. As he does, he thinks.

Tony isn't... angry per se with what has happened to him. He is annoyed and he is disappointed and he is afraid, but he isn't... angry.

It's hard to be when he feels like to a certain extent, he deserves this. He led a life of destruction and
he has profited off of the destruction that he has caused. He was aware of that.

He should have died in Afghanistan. He only survived because of Yinsen's sacrifice. He cheated death so many times already. He can do it again.

But even if he can't... Though there is so much that Tony wants to do, so much that he wants to still see and experience, Tony... doesn't feel angry that he was going to miss out on those things.

He is... most worried about Stephen, if he is honest. He isn't sure how the doctor was going to handle the situation. He really wasn't sure whether Stephen already knew or not and if he did, Tony doesn't quite know how to feel about it.

But that was a conversation that they were going to have to have, he assumes.

The CDC really has chosen the worst time to kidnap Stephen. Well... the worst or the best, Tony wasn't quite certain of it just yet. It... did help to be without the doctor to go through the initial shock of the discovery.

He wasn't sure if he could have been as honest with himself as he was now with his emotions and his fears if Stephen had been there. He may have used Stephen as a clutch instead. That wasn't ideal.

He misses Stephen. He wishes Stephen was with him, to hold him tightly and to tell him that everything will be okay. God he wishes.

But Stephen isn't here. Instead, he has the element table, a fuck ton of calculations to do and far too many things still left to think about.

And a lot of goddamned chlorophyll to drink.

It really tastes like shit.

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Job Interviews

Chapter Summary

Pepper is busy. She has to take over SI and maybe take on the world after. Either way, she is going to need some help. Perhaps Natalie Rushman is exactly who she needs.

On the other hand, Stephen finally comes home and Tony has a decision to make. One he has been putting off.

What was he going to do?

Chapter Notes

God. I hate pain. Seriously.

Now the first five chapters of ARC 3 is so angsty that I have to re-write it. ARGH!!! But hey at least I know where it's going and how I want it to work out so there is that. But it also means I have to rewatch a couple of movies from the MCU. Again. So difficult a task!! =P

You might have noticed, in some of the scenes that are directly out of the movie, I actually use the full dialogues as much as possible. Some of them, I don't. But most of them, I do. I like the fact that I can take those lines and then put them in a new context XD

So I'm in for watching a LOT of the Avengers and Thor over and over to make sure that I don't miss the plotholes and details.

We will have to see whether I do a good job there.

I hope you enjoy this chapter and the little twists I put into the story.

So far, the opinion seems to be very anti-Team Cap and Natasha and Shield. Which honestly, I'm not surprised by. A lot of Tony Stark fans seems to have issues with the way that he was treated in the latter movies. Since I share those views >__<

I am still going to be trying to give everyone a fair chance at redemption and to try to bring the Avengers together the way that they were meant to be in a healthy manner. We will have to see whether that is possible or not. I am torn between forming a 'new Avengers' team with say Defenders etc or just 'fixing' the Avengers.

That is way in the future but I do need to think about it if I plan to plant the seeds. So ideas?

Monday
Since Wednesday when she got the news that Tony wanted her to become the CEO of Stark Industries, Pepper's days have become long and difficult.

It wasn't necessarily bad though. It was just the catching up of work that she needed to get through to make sure that she could handle the responsibilities handed to her.

The day to day of her job wasn't honestly going to change that much. The Board of Directors take the news quite well. In fact, they celebrate it and congratulate her without any problems.

She has been more or less running the company for some time now and they have no concerns with the direction the company was going and with her abilities to handle the responsibilities.

So that was one problem out of the way.

The biggest problem was honestly Pepper herself. She was used to putting Tony's needs and his work before her's so she needed to re-prioritise her life and her perspectives a fair bit.

So she starts by reorganising the support staff that had been utilised so far to ensure that Tony's day goes smoothly.

She keeps the current team of staff for the PR department and the legal department that works with Tony as it is. She makes sure that he is going to get the support he needs to do what he needs to do without problems.

She makes sure that the transport coordinator remains in place for Tony to ensure that all of his flights, his vehicles etc are going to be available for him when he needs them.

She also makes sure that Gina Park, the Public Relation expert that is absolutely amazing at her job and has been managing Tony's affairs in relation to the public for the past five years, remains assigned to him and that her team would continue to work on the Iron Man issues and Tony Stark image issues.

She also assigns Alexander Winters, her friend and colleague from the Legal Team to continue to work with Tony and his patent filing as well as his personal lawyer. She can't take that responsibility whilst she is working as the CEO of the company.

Once that is sorted, Pepper divides the current team of Personal Assistants, secretaries and support staff into separate groups for both herself and for Tony. Then she makes the one decision that she knows is probably going to bring her some drama later on. Perhaps.

She assigns Clea to be Tony's personal PA. The one to interact with him and to assign the jobs that need to be handled by the others.

The decision is based on the fact that she knows that Tony likes and trusts Clea. That and the fact that the girl has skills that might be necessary to both protect herself and Tony if the need rises go into consideration.

Pepper doesn't explain that to the others. Tony has insisted that Happy stay with her as her bodyguard and protection as well as driver from now on and Pepper is happy to abide by that. Tony trusts Happy to keep her safe and so does she.

So there was that.
Clea is a good replacement for both herself and for Happy. It would also be easier for her to keep the calendars in place considering she has been doing it for months now with Pepper to ensure that both Stephen and Tony's calendars worked well together.

Besides, Tony didn't need a PA to be at his house at all times with him or to accompany him to every meeting. If that was required, Pepper was going to be there in most of the meetings and even when she'd been his PA, she didn't attend all the meetings with him.

That wasn't a problem. If it is needed, Gina had informed Pepper that she would be more than happy to attend the meetings with Tony. So that's sorted.

The actual paperwork needed some tweaking to make sure that the power balance between Pepper and Tony was fair and that they both had equal influence over the direction of the company. Pepper had sent the suggested changes over to Jonathon and was waiting for them to be returned.

The paperwork didn't need to be signed yet for her to assume control of the company and start acting in the role. She had the blessings of both the Board of Directors as well as Tony himself as the owner of the company.

Tony is due to make the announcement that Pepper will take over the company in the afternoon. Despite that, or because of that, Pepper has a lot of things that she needs to get squared away.

One of those things that she really needs to get sorted is a PA for herself. The thing is, though they have a team of Personal Assistants, secretaries and support staff, Pepper needed a dedicated Personal Assistant that would accompany her to all the meetings, events and press conferences that meant she needed someone with clear experience in the field.

None of the PAs that they had was willing to take on the responsibility of being that available at all times. Most of the current staff had family and Pepper wasn't about to pressure anyone to choose between a promotion or their family. That was just bullshit.

That wasn't what Stark Industries was about. Which meant that Pepper wanted to choose a PA that was like her... in a way. Focused on work and friends with no young children that need to be taken care of.

Hence the interview process.

"Ms Potts, Ms Rushman is ready for you." Janice, her secretary informs her quietly as she opens the door and comes in with a rather stunning woman in tow.

"Ms Rushman, please, take a seat." Pepper suggests. She gets up to shake the woman's hand and is surprised to find a firm grasp with hands that indicate calluses that she had not been expecting.

"Would you like something to drink?" Pepper asks because it's polite but the woman shakes her head and Pepper takes the opportunity to take a good look at the woman.

A lovely curved and shapely figure with beautiful, startling green eyes along the shock of the dark red hair presents an extremely attractive sight. If she didn't know that Tony was occupied with Stephen and that they actually had a romantic relationship going, then Pepper would have struck the woman off the list almost immediately.

Tony really did like his redheads.

To pre-Stephen Tony, this woman would have been like candy being dangled in front of a child. Tony would have taken to her immediately and yeah. That would have been a problem. Right now
though? Pepper was pretty sure that this woman could walk in naked into Tony's mansion and he wouldn't take a second look.

The man was head over heels in love.

"So Ms Rushman, what made you apply to work with SI?" Pepper asks the mundane interview question as she carefully balances her attention from looking over the woman and the resume that she had brought along with her.

Pepper makes sure she checks the 'dependents' section of the resume though she had already asked for Camilla to ensure that applicants with young families be taken off the list. Camilla has also already conducted interviews with the applicants.

Only those that passed through Camilla's strict interview process even made it to Pepper. Which was honestly good because Pepper didn't have the time to interview the 29 applicants that came along.

She only had three that she had to see.

"Stark Industries is one of the top technological companies in the world Ms Potts. With the recent changes made to the company's directions and the inventions that are coming out, I was intrigued to see the inner workings of the company. It's exciting." Natalie says with a warm, confident smile and continues on.

"Not to mention Mr Tony Stark. His genius mind and his generosity and change of direction in the company is fascinating and I would love to be able to work with him." Not a new statement to be made in an interview like this, but the way that she says it... Pepper gets the little tingling senses that usually warns her that something is off.

There is a lot about Natalie Rushman that Pepper likes. She runs the woman through what she believes the job of a PA is as well as going over the woman's experiences in the field.

Natalie isn't extensively experienced in the field and there was bound to be some culture shock coming from a smaller company into one like SI, but Pepper can see the potential at least.

But there is just something about her that Pepper can't pinpoint but finds disconcerting. It's like looking through pale sunglasses. Like when your brain knows that the colour is off a little but adjusts and it seems normal. It takes Pepper a while, but she is able to figure out what seems wrong or uncomfortable about this woman.

Natalie's eyes don't smile as her face does. Her eyes are cold, calculating and though her voice sounds warm and pleasant, Pepper can't help but feel that she is being measured. Analysed. She doesn't like it.

More than that though, it's Natalie's interest in Tony that has her a little... worried.

It's not the first time that a woman has comes into SI with the intention of getting Tony's attention. His reputation as a playboy didn't help and his reputation as a man that liked attractive women and would compensate them generously after NDAs were signed, also probably didn't help.

Except Pepper gets the feeling that wasn't exactly what Natalie Rushman was after.

Pepper finishes the interview off and calls in the other candidate but whilst her secretary gets that organised, she sends a message to JARVIS with a file attachment for Natalie Rushman's resume.

They were working on seeing whether or not JARVIS could work as a part of the security team,
both physical and cyber for SI and a little background check was a good start, Pepper thinks.

She is impressed enough with Natalie to consider her as a PA for herself but she decides that she should probably wait until JARVIS returns the results of his background search on the woman before she makes the decision.

It was likely that she was going to have to hire all of the three that was interviewing if she is honest. They definitely needed help now that the work was going to be divided between Tony and Pepper.

Also, because there was a lot to do. The Expo was coming up and throughout the year, she wanted at least one PA assigned exclusively to organise everything and keep the event going smooth with the other support staff that they have.

On top of that, she needed to make sure that she could find someone to do what she used to do for Tony. Someone to curate all the information from the reports that the CEO gets almost on the daily from the various departments so that Pepper can process the information quickly and make the necessary decisions.

Whilst Pepper is thinking that, the next candidate walks in. Pepper stands up again and shakes their hand and asks if they would like something to drink.

God, she hates job interviews.

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Thursday

29 April 2010

The week had been... chaotic.

Seriously chaotic.

Stark Industries took the news of Pepper becoming it's CEO extremely well. Generally, from what Tony can tell, the employees were happy with the change and the only one that made an issue was the head of R&D but that was more about budget concerns.

But following the announcements there had been press conference after press conference after interview after meeting after- you get the point.

It had been hell.

But when Tony got the news that Stephen was finishing up at the CDC soon from Director Parkes, he talked to Pepper and made sure that he could have some time to spend with Stephen. Pepper and sighed but she had smiled as well as she spoke to the PAs and they reorganised the rest of the schedules.

Clea starting to work at SI has also changed things a fair bit. Her approach to work was... interesting. She worked mostly from New York, which was fine since Tony can handle most things digitally and she worked with JARVIS more than him.

She ensured that Tony was awake and moving about at the right times and she chimed in here and there to make sure that he knew everything that he needed to know before meetings etc and organised everything quite smoothly.
It was her tactics in dealing with his desire not to comply with some of her instructions that were truly interesting.

They ranged from 'I'm going to teleport over there and kick your arse' to 'I'm going to make sure that Stephen can't come over during one of the weekends'. They were odd but highly effective in motivating Tony, if he is honest about it.

Her threats to ensure that he won't be able to see Stephen, in particular, worked well. They both knew that as much as Stephen loved Tony, if there was a life that he could save, Stephen would work to save that life than to spend another few hours with Tony.

It's one of the many traits that Stephen had that Tony admired in the man. And as for her threats to kick his arse? Other than the 'I can teleport to you right now and kick you out of bed you know' being kind of terrifying on it's own, knowing that she can throw Happy down in a few seconds? Yeah.

Tony had every reason to comply with her instructions. Pepper really had chosen quite well.

But Clea isn't what Tony needs to think about right now.

Stephen's helicopter has arrived and as soon as JARVIS tells him, Tony is out of the lab and all but running up the stairs to greet the doctor.

"Meningitis? Seriously?" Is Tony's greeting as Stephen walks through the doors of the mansion. He is almost disappointed to find out that what had taken Stephen away for the last almost two weeks is what sounds kind of mundane.

Especially if it was going to leave the doc looking as if he was some sort of zombie or a corpse warmed over, it really ought to have been something more... exotic, Tony thinks critically.

Like the African Sleeping Sickness or something crazy like the Black Death. Not that he was wishing that upon anyone.

Stephen looks... terrible. Oh, he is still gorgeous, there is no doubt about that, but there are bags under his eyes that look etched in and he is so pale and slouched over that Tony feels overwhelming concern.

He had been planning to feed the man something to eat, but he looks so exhausted that Tony knows that he is probably at the nauseous stage of exhaustion. He tells JARVIS to cancel the food order he'd just put in when he realised that the helicopter had arrived.

"Yeah." Stephen does manage a reply. He looks just about ready to collapse into a heap and sleep for a week, Tony thinks. It seems that the doctor had come straight from the CDC as soon as he was released from the hospital instead of resting. Which is incredibly sweet.

Tony moves closer to hold the doctor in his arms and Stephen lets him take almost all of his weight. Stephen feels lighter than the last time Tony had held him like this. He doesn't like that. Stephen lets out a sigh.

Exhaustion always hits harder when everything is done and you relax. Stephen had probably reached that point when he just really had nothing left in the tank. He was an idiot for working himself that hard.

Tony leads them towards the bedroom.
"I signed a confidentiality agreement. You can tell me all about it when you wake up." Tony tells him softly. Stephen moves until he has Tony fully in his arms and they are stopped in the entrance to the bedroom.

"I missed you." Stephen says simply, holding him as tightly as he probably could. Tony hugs him back and kisses the neck that is exposed to him.

"Me too." Tony admits and that surprises him a little. But he really has. If he is honest about it, he would admit that he had been apprehensive about the doctor coming back to the mansion. To... home.

He is surprised that Stephen had chosen to come here. Not to New York. He's happy that Stephen has and despite all the shit going on, the transfer of the leadership of the company to Pepper, the poisoning and his... impending death.

He still doesn't know whether he should be telling Stephen or not, but for now, he decides that he should put the doctor to bed.

He had thought because of that, because of his uncertainties and all the shit going on his head that seeing Stephen would be difficult. It isn't. He feels relief and gladness that he's not sure if he's felt before.

"Come on baby. Let's go to bed." Tony murmurs softly and leads him to bed. Tony strips Stephen down to his underwear and puts him under the covers and watches him settle against the pillows and become limp. Tony smiles. When Stephen is like this, he is almost childlike.

It's a vulnerable side that Tony is pretty sure Stephen doesn't show anyone else. This side of Stephen, this vulnerability is reserved for him. Tony is privileged. He knows that and he is grateful for it.

He watches Stephen for a while before he strips down and gets into the bed behind the doctor and holds him. The lights in the bedroom are dimmed automatically thanks to JARVIS.

"Don't want to sleep yet." Stephen tells him and his hands and the way he turns around to look at Tony indicate exactly what he wants to do instead.

This is a good change, Tony thinks. Stephen initiates sexual contact now. Not like before. He touches Tony and kisses him when he feels like it. When he wants to rather than waiting for Tony. Tony loves it.

He hadn't realised just how odd the behaviour was until Stephen changed. It dawns on him that Stephen feels secure enough with Tony and the relationship that he would. Tony feels like he is doing it right.

Unfortunately, he doesn't know what to do next.

Not the sex bit. He knows exactly what to do there. But what he is supposed to do with the whole dying thing. That part, he0 really isn't sure what to do about. Also, he's pretty sure the sex thing is also not a wonderful idea.

"Stephen, you need to sleep. You're overtired. Exhausted." Tony tells him but the doctor's shaking hands don't stop moving against his fast forming hard on. Oh, Tony wants it. He wants it badly.

Tony honestly can't remember just how many times he's jerked off to the thoughts about Stephen. Not in the last couple of days between all the drama, but before? Definitely.
"Baby, I know you want it, but you need to sleep." Tony tells him though the temptation was getting hard to resist. Stephen moans and ruts against his thigh. Tony chuckles.

"Please." Stephen moans out as he manages to get his hand into Tony's underwear and yeah, Tony is a sucker for that please and the doctor's scarred, soft, trembling hand on his cock. Tony leans over to kiss Stephen and it's a soft, languishing kiss.

"God, you're a menace. Sleep after?" Tony asks because one of them has to be responsible. Right? Even if he was bad at it. He can't keep the fond amusement out of his voice or his face, he expects. He likes Stephen like this, wanton and unabashedly beautiful and seeking out what he wants. What he needs.

Yeah. He is definitely on board with this plan.

Stephen's only reply is a moan into Tony's lips as he turns himself around and lays flat on the bed, his hand drawing Tony's onto his buttocks a clear enough indication of what he wants.

Tony knows that exhausted wanton lust. He's had it plenty of times before. He also knows that an orgasm is a fantastic way for the body to overload just enough and to switch off that brain to sleep.

Tony chuckles as he lays himself on top of Stephen and kisses the doctor's neck. Stephen moans luxuriously as if he is some sort of porn star. Tony can't help but feel fond of him at that moment.

It's not too difficult to reach into the bedside table to get the lube. Stephen's tired body is relaxed and pliant as Tony spreads his legs just enough to get his fingers inside of him. Tony is nice and slow in the prep, keeping a firm eye on the doctor's relaxed face, turned to the side as he clings to the pillow.

"You know, I missed you. I missed the feel of you around my fingers." Tony tells him as he inserts the second finger. He is generous enough with the lube that he can hear it squelch as he moves his fingers. He loves how relaxed Stephen is in his hands and the moans that he can produce in the man's body with just a few movements of his fingers.

By the time that Stephen can take three fingers easily and he is stretched, the man is almost purring like a cat and so relaxed that Tony wonders if he is actually awake enough to consent.

"Do you still want this Stephen?" Tony asks just in case because he's never going to let himself hurt the man again.

"Please Tony." Stephen moans out. Consent given, Tony thinks to himself and he lays himself on top of the doctor and slowly enters him. Stephen moans long and beautifully as he arches his back.

Honestly, neither of them are going to last long. It's been a little while and Tony has missed him too much. Missed the intimacy too much.

Tony ruts into him slowly.

He knows that he's never been this careful with anyone before. He had never cared this much before in the pleasure of his partner. Sex for him had been about his partners, but never just about them. This is. This is about Stephen and giving him what he wants and needs so that he can rest.

He wants it too and it feels wonderful to be inside of Stephen, to feel the familiar heat. But Tony is also worried about Stephen's current state. So he lets his fingers wrap around the doctor's cock and jerk him off with the movements that he makes. Stephen is a moaning mess within seconds.

Tony kisses his neck and caresses his body and encourages him to let go and to come. Stephen does.
With a shudder and a soft cry. Tony doesn't. But it's fine. He focuses on Stephen and getting him settled. Tony isn't surprised that Stephen falls into sleep almost immediately.

He runs calming hands down Stephen's body and pulls him to the centre of the bed, away from the wet spot. He makes sure that Stephen is in a deep sleep before he moves out of the bed to clean him up and to finish himself off in the bathroom. It's almost perfunctory.

Tony climbs into the bed and pulls Stephen close to himself and holds him tightly. He feels relaxed but he can't stop the circular thoughts in his head.

The thing is, Stephen might already know. Chances are, he does. If he was able to know when Rhodey would be coming to the house and what Pepper had been up to during the Stane incident, then chances are he had means by which he could know about the poisoning.

Tony wonders vaguely what the doctor will do. Will Stephen admit that he knows? What's Tony going to do when he does? How would that feel?

Then there is the issue of... Tony isn't sure if he can save himself. He and JARVIS were running calculations to figure out if they can find an element to replace the Palladium with in order to prevent further poisoning, but Tony isn't sure how that is going to go.

But he does know one thing. If the poisoning progresses at the rate that it has been... he doesn't have long. He has faced his own mortality before. He'd been aware that the shrapnel might kill him. He'd almost come to terms with the fact that he might never make it out of Afghanistan to begin with.

But...

This time, he doesn't want to give up. He has things... people that he wants to live for. He thinks back to what Yinsen had said.

'You're a man that has everything but nothing at all.' Yinsen had said. That was no longer true. As crazy as it is, as difficult as it is for him to deal with the fact that Stephen still had secrets from him, Tony had Stephen.

He knew that Stephen loved him. He knew that Pepper loved him. That Rhodey loved him. He... loves them too. And that makes him want to stay. To see how far this thing with Stephen will go. To see just what... love really is.

Tony looks at Stephen, deeply asleep in his arms and pulls him closer to himself. Stephen feels warm. Tony closes his eyes. He is tired. He is nauseous. He needs to sleep. To rest. To think. When he wakes up, he isn't sure what he is going to do.

But for now, Tony has Stephen in his arms and that makes everything okay.

Almost.

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No Rest for the Wicked

Chapter Summary

Stephen is finally back home at the Malibu Mansion but then so is Natasha Romanov. Besides, the universe has plans.

Not a moment of rest.

Damn.

Chapter Notes

Alright, I'm going to be honest. Not making a great deal of progress in ARC 3 ATM. I'm torn between the angst and the drama and then trying to somehow not make it so dramatic >__<

Lol before this it was all the research that slowed me down but now it's more the characterisation and trying to figure out how I want the story and the characters to work. Loki is difficult a character because of how secretive he is. Some of his motivations are obvious but there are so much of him that is unknown or hidden.

So it's hard to figure out how I am going to work him into the story and what his role should be. I also don't want to hurt him too much but let's be honest... I hurt those that I love... >__<

All I can say is that um you guys should probably be prepared for the um... the drama and the angst. It's going to get rough XD

So... what are your views when it comes to Loki?

Friday

30 April 2010

Stephen wakes up feeling groggy and confused.

It takes him a little while to notice that he is home. For one. For another, he realises that Tony isn't in bed with him and it's probably sometime in the mid-morning. So that's not a surprise.

The nausea hits him and he groans as he realises that he is in that terrible exhausted nausea state and he really ought to have eaten something before he slept. But it also may have something to do with the nausea that Tony is experiencing. It's... hard to tell what belongs to him and what belongs to Tony.

Either way, he feels like shit.
"Good morning Dr Strange, did you sleep well?" JARVIS asks him and his voice sounds warm and Stephen yawns as he nods.

"Good morning." Stephen manages a reply as he tries to figure out why he was awake. He is tired enough and he has experienced enough of this sort of exhaustion to know that he should have slept until he was well and truly rested.

He is known for his almost coma-like sleeping habits.

As he always does when he wakes up, Stephen reaches out and stretches his magic and focuses and grounds himself and as he does that and his sensors stretch throughout the house, he realises why he is awake.

Oh.

Stephen should have remembered. He can feel the presence of a new person in the house. Someone that does not belong. An unfamiliar person and energy that Stephen does not recognise. There wasn't malicious intent so the shields hadn't triggered, but his magic had alerted him.

That's why he had put the shields around the house.

Agent Natasha Romanov was in the house. Stephen can feel her energies and he's not sure how he feels about that. For a short while, Stephen does debate staying in bed. He is so tired and he really doesn't want to get out of the comfort of the bed.

"JARVIS, where's Tony?" Stephen asks the AI because it's the normal thing to do and he can hear his own hoarse voice. He sounds shit. God he really shouldn't have pushed himself so hard during his time with CDC.

"Mr Stark is in the gym with Ms Potts, Mr Hogan and Ms Rushman, doctor. Sir would be pleased to know that you are awake. Should I arrange for breakfast?" The AI asks him and Stephen finds himself smiling a little as he forces himself out of bed.

"Yes please JARVIS. Something light." Stephen says as he makes it to the bathroom and sees from the corner of his eyes the screen flash up on the window as the AI goes through the breakfast options for delivery.

The screen follows him to the bathroom as Stephen cleans his face and teeth.

"The egg white omelette with spinach please." Stephen says and JARVIS makes the arrangements as he makes his way to the walk-in wardrobe to get dressed.

The walk-in wardrobe is neatly divided into Stephen's clothes and Tony's clothes as well as clothes that they share. It's... almost odd to see it so neatly laid out and for his clothes to have a place so prominently in Tony's closet but Stephen likes it.

Every time he sees the wardrobe, it reminds him that he really has a spot in Tony's life and in his home. In their home. It always makes him feel warm and happy a little.

Stephen puts on a pair of jeans and a pair of converse and chucks on a simple t-shirt. He is too tired for anything more than that. It is all about comfort.

It only takes him a few minutes to get dressed and he is out of the bedroom and making his way towards the gym. As he moves, he can't help but think about the Black Widow.
When he is close enough to the gym, he can hear the conversation happening.

"Rushman. How do I spell that?" Tony's voice asks and the unfamiliar voice of the Black Widow spells it out for him. Stephen... isn't quite sure what to expect of Natasha Romanov.

Not this Natasha Romanov anyway. He has seen millions and millions of versions of her, but he wonders what version of Natasha Romanov this one would be.

He walks into the gym and isn't too surprised to see Pepper and Tony seated at the couch with Tony looking over Natalie Rushman's resume. And with Natasha and Happy in the boxing ring.

"Stephen! How are you?" Pepper asks him as soon as she spots him. he gives her a warm smile and fights off the yawn.

"Exhausted. Next time the CDC wants something, I might have to say no to the polite kidnapping." He tells her drily. She laughs and stands up so that he could sit next to Tony instead. Tony looks up just long enough to look at him and give him a small smile.

Stephen hates that in a way they have to hide their relationship and who they are in the presence of new people like Natasha, but he's glad right now. He really isn't sure if he wants SHIELD to know what their relationship is.

It may present another point of manipulation and Stephen has no intentions of being a tool to manipulate Tony in any way.

"Congratulations on your promotion by the way." Stephen tells her with warmth in his voice and Pepper smiles brightly at him and accepts the hug that he gives her and kisses him softly on the cheek.

He's not quite sure if they were close friends at this stage, but Pepper Potts was definitely a friend. She was fond enough of him and he was certainly fond enough of her.

He appreciates the love and care that she gives to Tony and the affection and stability that she provides. Tony wouldn't be the man that he was without her. In some of the universes, Tony and Pepper aren't close friends as they are in this universe.

In those... Tony isn't as responsible. He isn't as self aware and he doesn't have the support system he requires. Stephen is grateful that this Tony has this Pepper.

"By the way, are you aware that Clea has started to work as Tony's PA?" Pepper asks him and Stephen blinks. He hadn't realised that Clea had started to work already.

"Oh. How is she going?" He asks towards both Pepper and to Tony. The genius scoffs whilst Pepper giggles lightly.

"Extremely well. She's very, very good at controlling Tony." Pepper tells Stephen with a very amused voice whilst Tony sighs.

"She's a menace Stephen. A menace. She keeps threatening to kick my arse. Why the hell do you think I'm training?" Tony asks with a dry voice and Stephen chuckles lightly as he goes over and sits down next to him so that he can look over his shoulder at the small side table display and see what's happening.

Oh.
"Well, unfortunately, she can probably kick my arse too right now so you're on your own." Stephen shoots back easily enough as he settles his head against the sofa.

From the looks of it at least, this Black Widow was going to have some severe difficulties in gaining Tony and Pepper's trust at the very least. They are already considering the background that she's provided through SHIELD to be suspicious.

Fantastic.

Tony and Stephen had tweaked enough of JARVIS's programming and his accesses to ensure that JARVIS can run some rather thorough background checks and though SHIELD has really done a quite thorough job at creating the cover, they hadn't been thorough enough.

Actually, from the looks of it, they had done a rather too thorough a job. Everything matched up a little too well. A little too perfect and that was enough to raise suspicions.

Tony wouldn't be able to see that she was SHIELD per se, but there were enough red flags for a mind like Tony's to be suspicious.

"Fluent in Italian, Russian, French and Latin. Do you speak Latin?" Tony throws the question at Pepper, who rolls her eyes.

"No one speaks Latin Tony. It's a dead language. Besides, she's my PA. Don't poach her. You have Clea." Pepper informs him and it's so easy to see that fondness she has for Tony in the way that she speaks to him.

In most of the universes, Pepper Potts is Tony Stark's lover, friend and the mother of his child. Stephen knows that in this universe, they are just friends but he can't help the little niggling feeling that perhaps... Pepper might have been better for Tony than him.

He hates that.

He hates his uncertainties and insecurities. There is so much that he has to apologise for, to hide from Tony when it comes to their relationship. Stephen just can't be sure whether... The Soul Connection, the love and affection he feels for Tony are going to be enough to get them through... everything.

The years that Stephen had spent watching Tony as he grew up. The magic that he hides from Tony. The futures that he has seen and knows will come to pass.

He can't provide Tony with a child. He can't always prioritise Tony above everything else. He is responsible for the Order. He is responsible for the Time Stone and to ensure that the Universe will survive and thrive.

Is love really strong enough to conquer all of that?

He isn't sure. His exhausted state and confusion most likely has made him more reflective and insecure. He knows that. He doesn't feel as emotionally stable as he normally would be. The concern over Tony's health and the poisoning is a contributing factor of course.

As he is thinking that, he hears a loud grunt and looks up just in time to see Happy being thrown onto the floor of the mat by Natasha. Pepper's surprise rings through the gym, but Tony doesn't react very much to it. Neither does Stephen.

For one, he knew that she could do that. He is somewhat surprised at Tony's lack of surprise. But he does react.
"Alright! That's what I'm talking about!" Tony does all but shout as he jumps up and goes over to the table to ring the bell. Happy makes some excuse or another about falling and Stephen doesn't pay close attention.

There are so many things that he needs to consider, to think about that it is almost overwhelming. What is he going to say when it comes to the poisoning? How much can he tell Tony without destroying their universe and derailing the universe's plans? Stephen needs to think.

Even as he does, he watches the Black Widow carefully.

Her role in Tony's path is significant. She is the one that writes the report on Tony for SHIELD. She is the one that makes the judgements about his character that will become the general way that SHIELD and the Avengers will consider Anthony Edward Stark.

She is the one first Avenger to enter Tony's life and the one that will keep her eyes on Tony for SHIELD. In some universes, she breaks away from SHIELD and finds her own feet. In others, she forever works for Fury and for the 'greater agenda' of the World Council.

In some, she is a HYDRA agent. In others, she becomes Tony's true friend and confidant. In some... she becomes Tony's lover.

Stephen closes his eyes briefly and leans his head back as he considers his approach with Tony and with the Black Widow. He wishes that he can just act or speak without having to go through such an extensive process in his mind.

But he reaches for the Time Stone anyway. Laying his hand gently over his upper abdomen as if he is just resting his hand there for comfort.

He feels the Stone pulsing under his fingers.

"I need your impression, Mr Stark." Natasha says with that coy tone as she looks up at him with her head tilted in that seductive manner. Tony blinks at her and flounders.

Stephen feels his heart skip a beat.

He is distracted from his spell and the Time Stone for a moment. He's an idiot. He knows that. Tony won't sway just like that. Will he? Not when he knows that she is not what she appears to be... right?

Stephen feels the insecurities eating at his insides.

Tony is bisexual. He is attracted to both sexes. The Black Widow is attractive. She is beautiful. She knows how to seduce and Stephen isn't- He can't do what she can. Stephen closes his eyes.

"Um, you're quiet, reserved? You have an old soul?" Tony tries. Stephen opens his eyes in time to see Natasha smiles warmly with that coy look still on her face.

"I meant your fingerprint." She tells him as she picks up the folder with the paperwork she had dropped in the ring and presents it to him.

"Ah right." Tony's tone is flustered and Stephen looks away and debates leaving the gym because he's not sure if he actually wants to see this. Not sure if he can stay and watch the man that he loves flirting with another person.

He's pretty sure that it might just break him... if Tony really does consider another lover. Like Steve
Rogers. Or Bruce Banner. Loki. Thor. James Buchanan Barnes. There are so many that in different universes, Tony Stark falls in love with and has relationships with.

Stephen feels the fear spike through him but he takes a deep breath and goes back to the spell. He needs some guidance to make sure that he can actually deal with the situation with Tony's poisoning even as he pays some attention to what is happening.

"How's it all going?" Pepper interrupts their looks by walking up to them and both of them look away from each other and Tony clears his throat and shows her the paperwork.

"You're the boss." He tells her with a warm, genuine smile that Stephen can't look away from even if he wanted to.

"Will that be all Mr Stark?" Natasha asks him, her tone suggesting that she wants him to say no. But he doesn't. He and Pepper share a smile and they both dismiss her.

"Do you mind waiting for me at the car Natalie? I'll be out in a moment." Pepper tells her and she leaves. Stephen leans his head back and tries not to close his eyes. He has a feeling that if he does, he might fall back asleep.

"Ms Rushman is in the vehicle, Ms Potts." JARVIS informs them in the silence that had fallen since Natalie had left the room. It's only then that Pepper speaks up.

"So." Pepper starts off as she looks at Tony and he sighs as he shrugs his shoulders.

"I'm definitely the target then. What does she want though? The Iron Man suit? Corporate secrets?" Tony questions and Pepper looks annoyed but also concerned as she sighs and shrugs her own shoulders.

"I don't know. I'm not sure if it was a good idea to even let her into the company, Tony." Pepper says and Stephen pulls himself out of the spell to pay attention to what is going on. This doesn't happen in a lot of universes.

In most universes, Natasha Romanov is able to slink her way into Tony's company and his inner circle and sometimes his bed. She is able to manipulate him either into acting out or seducing him to be able to manipulate him through emotional and sexual blackmail.

So this? This was new and interesting. It was also disconcerting. Every time something changes, Stephen worries about the timeline. The events that are going to happen. The events that need to happen. He can't be certain that they will happen the way that it needs to.

The butterfly effect can most definitely be in play and Stephen is concerned. But it is also partially outside of his control. He can try to guide Tony and the others down the path that he knows most universes follow but he cannot know for certain that path is the correct one.

Most of the time, the Universe will correct itself, but Stephen isn't sure how far the universes can be pushed before it can no longer make the corrections and adjustments.

It is a forever, ongoing conundrum that haunts him.

"She managed to throw me without even seeing my hand. She's a pro, boss." Happy speaks up and Tony looks at him and nods.

Happy Hogan may seem silly and he is highly amusing at times and he can be bumbling, but he is not an idiot. He was a former boxing champion and he knew his way around a fight. On top of that,
Happy Hogan, at least in this universe, was a former Secret Service that knew his way around VIP protection. He really knew how to handle himself. They all knew that. Which meant that Natasha's abilities have definitely thrown another layer of suspicion over her. Having said that, considering the fact that Tony seems to like strong women like Pepper, the display would have been designed to get Tony's attention.

"So professional corporate espionage or government then. Great. Either way, it's going to be hard to figure out where and who. The shit that JARVIS did dig up shows a professional job." Tony groans out and he slumps into the chair, throwing his head dramatically into Stephen's lap and looking up at him.

"When Stephen's rested a bit more, we'll look into it. For now, Happy, you stick with Pepper and make sure that you keep her safe. As for you Pepper, let's make sure she doesn't get her hands on any confidential information. Keep it to schedules and mundane paperwork." Tony suggests. The two of them nod.

"Alright then. See you later Tony, Stephen." Pepper says as she bends down to kiss Tony on the forehead as if he is a child as he lays on Stephen's lap and she kisses Stephen on the cheek as well.

"You boys behave." Pepper tells them firmly with that mocking motherly tone that she likes to use every now and then. They chuckle as she leaves the room. Happy undoes his gloves and picks up his light jacket and throws it on.

"Don't worry about the boss lady, boss. I got her." Happy says before he too walks out. Stephen sits there, a little dazed, looking down at his lover's thoughtful face.

"You really do look shit Stephen. Why the hell are you even out of bed?" Tony asks but his tone is gently chiding and concerned. Stephen blinks at him. He isn't sure whether it's just because he's so very tired or it's something else, but he feels very much like he is out of the loop. Tony seems to notice.

"Pepper thought the woman was suspicious. So she asked JARVIS to run some checks and for my opinion and I agree. Everything about her screams bait." Tony says with a shrug and Stephen looks at him for a long moment and sighs.

"That's because she is." Stephen tells him and bites his lips and closes his eyes when he realised that he had said too much. Things that he shouldn't know and he shouldn't say. He's surprised that the geas hadn't kicked in to be honest.

"Yeah. That coy flirtatious kick? Along with the resume and the carefully curated modelling pictures of her in her underwear? A bit too much." Tony agrees with him easily enough. Stephen can't help but feel relieved.

There are others that Tony will come across that become lovers with in more universes than with him, but Stephen knows he has time until that happens. Besides, there was still the question about Tony's poisoning and his knowledge that they had to get through.

There were so many hurdles in front of them. Too many. Stephen isn't even sure how to deal with this one yet... Stephen blinks as a warm hand comes up to cover his face.

"Hey, you okay?" Tony asks him softly. Stephen leans into the hand and looks into Tony's warm, worried caramel brown eyes. He feels his heart clench and he manages a small smile.

"No." Stephen tells him honestly and Tony sits up quickly. Quickly enough that the dizziness hits
him and as it does, it hits Stephen too and it is bad enough in combination with his own exhaustion that Stephen moans and though he is already sitting, tries to hold onto something.

For a moment, both of them just breathes, trying to get their stomachs under control and trying to get their head to stop spinning. It's Tony that recovers first. He looks at Stephen and his eyes are narrow.

"You felt that. How?" Tony asks. He doesn't need to elaborate. Stephen breathes to settle his stomach and looks at Tony and tries to come up with something he can say that won't trigger the geas. Stephen looks at Tony and looks at him and bites his lips before he slowly breathes out and tries to speak.

"Wait. No. Don't- Is this one of those things?" Tony asks quickly before Stephen can actually speak. Stephen sighs.

"Yes." He says and Tony stands up, pulling away from Stephen and pacing for a moment before he stops, turns and looks at Stephen. He looks... devastated.

"So you know." It's not a question. Stephen nods slowly despite the fear telling him not to admit it. He has to be honest with his lover. The decision is almost easy at that point. Stephen sighs.

"I do. The palladium poisoning is effecting your health." Stephen tells him quietly. It is doing more than just affecting Tony's health but he can't say it. He just can't. He looks down at his own hands when he sees the anger flash in Tony's eyes.

"Why didn't you say anything?" Tony asks and his voice sounds bitter with anger. Stephen has to fight not to flinch. He takes a deep breath though because he does need to answer Tony's question. It's a reasonable one.

"Because I- I knew you would be angry Anthony. Because I didn't want to acknowledge it." He still can't, if he is honest. He knows its happening. He knew that it was happening. He'd known that it would happen. It doesn't change how difficult it is now.

"So I'm dying." Tony says, bitterly. Stephen snaps his head up at that. No. He isn't. Stephen would never allow that to happen.

"No. I won't let you." The vehement nature of his own voice actually surprises Stephen himself. Tony looks at him, his eyes narrow and suspicious.

"What do you mean you won't 'let' me?" Tony asks and Stephen can't help but look at the bracelet on Tony's wrist. The one he hasn't taken off since Valentines Day. Tony's eyes turn to it as well. As he does, he looks at Stephen, his eyes wide with realisation.

"Stephen, what the fuck did you do?" Tony's voice was angry and dark. Stephen doesn't want to, but he meets Tony's angry eyes with his own. He isn't quite sure what his eyes are expressing. It doesn't matter very much. He knows he can't hide the pain.

The anger hits him hard through the Connection.

"What I had to." Stephen informs him. The spell had taken so many days to weave. So many intricate spells and safety measures had been woven into the bracelet that it had almost drained him completely of magic for several days.

It would be worth it.
"Stephen, what did you do?" The heat in Tony's voice makes Stephen look at him and he stands up to move towards Tony because he can't stand the pain and anger in those beautiful caramel eyes. Stephen reaches out and tries to speak though he knows he probably shouldn't.

But as he was opening his lips to speak, he feels it.

All the shields in the Sanctum and the Kamar-Taj are connected to him. They use the power that he can pull from the dimensions along with the regular masters at the locations to sustain the spells.

The spells, in turn, provide the power to the Sanctums and the Kamar-Taj for the locations themselves to pull power from the dimensions to sustain the shield surrounding the planet.

The spells are thousands of years old and having had many a Master die to preserve them at various points in history, they were incredibly powerful. The spells of a dead being were always incredibly powerful. Their intention and desire to protect the Sanctums and the Kamar-Taj continue beyond death.

So when something breaks through it, all the Masters can feel it. None more than the Sorcerer Supreme himself. Stephen gasps as the shield breaks. The force of it alone is enough to make him curl up and clutch at the Time Stone for dear life.

He can't breathe.

"Stephen?!" Tony's alarm is obvious in his voice, but Stephen can't react to him. He keeps his eyes firmly closed. The backlash of the shield shattering will hit in just a few moments. He needs to focus to keep his mind from shattering with it.

"Anthony... don't- don't panic." Stephen manages to say just in time as the backlash does hit. Hard and fast. He feels it rip through him and all he can feel for a while is pain. Everything goes white with sheer pain and he knows that something broke inside of him.

It always does.

Most of the time when the Sanctums or the Kamar-Taj is attacked, the shields aren't affected. Mostly because it is almost always the London Sanctum that is targeted. The one where the shields are almost never activated or only very weak shields were in place.

For this very reason.

Stephen doesn't notice when his body falters. All he knows is that Tony catches him. As he does, Stephen feels the mans' worry as if it is his own.

Through the haze of pain, Stephen can't tell if it is just the dimensional energies inside of him going crazy or whether it is because of the strength of the emotion that it comes through the Connection.

He can't focus on that. He focuses on keeping his mind intact. Keeping his magic intact. Keeping his sanity intact. It is a challenge but it is one he has been prepared for. Still. The emotions warring inside of him does not make the process any easier.

It doesn't matter right now though. Stephen has to go. It's Hong Kong. He can feel it. He knows that the Masters and Disciples there can deal with a great deal. They are powerful and they would be getting reinforcements coming through to them.

But he can't gauge the scale of the attack without being there himself. And considering the fact that something or someone has managed to shatter the shields... Stephen is concerned.
He barely manages to pull himself up into a standing position, leaning heavily into the support that Tony was providing.

Stephen tries to open his mouth to say something to Tony. To offer some sort of explanation. To say something. He can't. The cough that comes is involuntary. It is also wet.

Fuck.

For some time, Stephen can't stop the coughs and the splatters of blood that escapes his mouth with each cough despite the hand he clamps over his mouth.

Blood splatters from his lips onto the floor, onto Tony, onto Stephen's own clothes. He hears Tony's panicked voice in echoing in his ears.

With some annoyance, he wipes the blood away from his mouth. Internal injuries then. Great.

"Oh my God. Stephen, you're- what's happening?" Tony asks him. Stephen looks at him and cups his face in his incredibly steady hand. Nothing like an emergency to get his hands to cooperate, Stephen thinks sardonically. At least he uses the hand that isn't covered in blood.

"Anthony, I need to go. We'll talk as soon as I come back. Okay? I'm- I'm really sorry." Stephen can't quite manage to keep the coughing down as he talks, and the blood that keeps coming up indicates that he really has fucked up something really bad inside of him.

"Stephen, you can't- You're hurt. You need to go to a hospital not." Stephen cuts off his lover by kissing him softly. Tony's lips open under the kiss almost instinctively.

"I love you." Stephen tells him softly before he draws on all of his strength to stand up straight and makes his way out of the gym and all but runs out of the mansion itself before he opens up the portal and moves.

Whoever or whatever is attacking the Sanctum better be fucking ready because Stephen is pissed. Pain does often lead to anger after all.

The portal fades behind him as the sounds of battle reach his ears. For a moment, as Stephen takes in the situation in the Hong Kong Sanctum and the violent confrontation that is occurring, Stephen looks to make sure that the Masters are safe.

Stephen starts to focus. In battles like this, the best thing he can do is to provide power. To be the raw battery to channel dimensional energies to the Sanctum itself and to the Masters and Disciples fighting within it.

As he tries to focus though, a voice that he thought he would never hear again echoes through the Hong Kong Sanctum's hallways from behind him.

"Long time no see Stephen."

Shit.

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Saturday

1 May 2010
All Tony can think about is Stephen.

The panic that he had felt when Stephen's face had completely drained of colour and his eyes had gone empty as if he wasn't even there anymore is still palpable.

He can feel the panic thrumming inside of him.

His first instinct had been to follow Stephen. The thing was, by the time he got his bearings together and followed him out of the mansion, Stephen had already been... gone.

Since then, Tony had been restless. Pacing about the workshop, trying to get himself to calm down and to figure out what's happening.

He has JARVIS running all the checks throughout the entire goddamned planet to see if they can figure out what's happening and where Stephen is.

There is nothing.

Nothing on the news. Nothing on the social medias, which is where he can expect to find out the more unusual things that are happening in the world and nothing from his own company's intelligence network.

He even tries to reach out to Rhodey to see if he can figure out if there are any odd things happening through the military intelligence network. Rhodey can't talk to him for long. He has to prepare the Senate Hearing. But he tells him that there is nothing that he knows about.

Nothing.

But Stephen wasn't answering his phone. All he got was a text message stating that he would be back as soon as he could and that he was sorry.

Tony doesn't want him to be sorry.

Tony wants Stephen fucking Strange here. With him. Safe. Yes. He is fucking annoyed. Yes, he is pissed off at Stephen. But when he thinks about it, it's not like Stephen had been in any sort of condition to talk about the poisoning when he got home.

It wasn't as if prior to that, they really had the opportunity to disclose what he knew about the poisoning to Tony. He also gets the feeling that if Stephen didn't try to prevent the poisoning by telling him what was going on, then there was probably a reason behind it.

He trusts Stephen enough and believes in his love for him just enough to know that the last thing that Stephen would do is compromise Tony's health and well being without a good reason.

That's something at least.

But what he feels the most is fear and concern. He doesn't like the fact that he has no idea where Stephen is. He doesn't like the fact that there is still blood on the gym floor. Stephen's blood. He hates the fact that their kiss had tasted of blood and it still lingers in his mouth though he has showered and brushed his teeth since then.

The analysis that he runs on the blood that Stephen had coughed up suggested that there was lung damage within the doctor. That is serious. Life-threatening serious. Tony can't stop worrying. Can't stop panicking. Can't stop the fear that tries to hold him immobile.
He has the suit. Surely he could have helped Stephen with whatever he was dealing with. But the doctor had opted to handle it himself. To leave Tony behind and he hates that the most.

Tony calls Clea. He had been calling her and Stephen throughout the night before and all day today so far, to try to figure out what was happening. He even thought about going to the address in New York that Stephen had provided JARVIS.

But he doesn't.

Because this is a matter of trust.

Tony understands that. This was Stephen's care and love for him. This is Stephen going off on his own in an attempt to protect Tony and to keep him safe and though that pisses him off, he is the first to admit that he would have done exactly the same thing in Stephen's shoes.

In fact, he does it every single time he goes out as Iron Man. Which he has been doing regularly. Not just the weapons or Ten Rings missions either. The little disaster scenes. The big fires with people that need rescuing. Tony goes to those as Iron Man. The nearby incident where an active shooter had been involved. Tony went to those.

On his own.

Even when the doctor had been in the mansion, he had never asked Stephen to come along. He had always left the doctor behind and he guesses its his turn to be left behind.

He hates it.

He also wonders how Stephen does it. How Stephen just waits for him to come back, waits for JARVIS to confirm that he was okay. He felt like he was going out of his mind with worry.

He wishes that he could call Pepper and ask her to come over and maybe just hold his hand. But she's busy. She needs to get settled in as the CEO of the company and she had Natalie Rushman to deal with on top of it.

"Sir, I have not found any anomalies, however, Ms Strange's phone has turned back on and is within service range." JARVIS informs him. Oh thank god, Tony thinks.

He really shouldn't have tapped into the telco network to make sure that he will know the moment their phones came into service range, but he had done it and he wasn't even that ashamed. He needed to know that Stephen was okay.

"Call her." If JARVIS had informed him that her phone was available but not Stephen's, it was likely that either Stephen's phone was still turned off or he was still out of range. But Clea will know what's going on.

"Tony, I can't talk right now." Clea's voice sounds clipped. Stern almost. It's not a voice that he'd heard from the woman before. She sounds strained. Stressed. Upset. Not like she had sounded when her grandparents died, but still strained and stressed. He doesn't like it.

"I just need to know if Stephen's okay." Tony almost begs. He doesn't like it but he is honest enough. Clea won't judge him. He knows that.

"Hes- he's fine. We're just in the middle of something Tony. He'll call you as soon as I can. I swear. We'll just need a few days and you need to deal with the Expo." Clea informs him and that is true enough.
"Yeah I- Can you just let him know that- never mind. Just keep him and yourself safe." Tony says after a pause and there is silence on the other line for a moment before Clea replies.

"I'll tell him that you're worried and that you care about him Tony. You look after yourself and keep drinking that chlorophyll. It'll keep your kidneys alive. Oh and don't be a dick during the Senate hearing." Clea hangs up before Tony can question her knowledge about the poisoning or the Senate Hearing.

Yeah. There's that too.

Tony sighs and looks over the findings that they have managed to gather so far as the poisoning is concerned. And the footage he obtained through illicit means in relation to the Senate Hearing that he knows will be coming his way soon.

"Sir, another core has been depleted." JARVIS informs him quietly in the silence after the phone call. Tony isn't quite sure how much time had passed since the phone call ended.

It does not leave him relieved.

"Yeah. Gees we are going through these fast." Tony says as he goes to the table to get out another core and replaces it. He looks at his chest in the screen that JARVIS turns into a mirror for him. The dark blue veins that had started to pop up around the Arc Reactor just last night is... oddly beautiful.

But it is a sign of his impending death and Tony feels the fear spike through him at that. He puts the shirt down. He doesn't want to look at it any more than he has to.

"Sir, I have finished running the simulations and computations in relation to the other elements. I am afraid that there is no element that can sufficiently replace the palladium core in the Arc Reactor." JARVIS informs him and Tony nods. He'd already known that.

"Yeah. I know buddy." Tony replies quietly as he strokes a hand down the Arc Reactor.

"I am afraid sir that the device that is keeping you alive is also killing you." JARVIS's voice sounds... a little sorrowful. Tony almost wishes that JARVIS had a physical body so that he can lay his hand over the AI's shoulders and comfort him.

"Yeah." Tony responds lamely because he can't think of anything else to say.

"Sir, I have also noted that continued use of the Iron Man suit seems to be speeding up the process of the palladium spreading through your blood and skin." Knew that one too.

The thing is, his kidneys, his poor, poor kidneys had been working extra hard to try to filter out the poison and for a while, it had been doing a great job. But when he kept using the suit and the build-up of poison was just too much for the kidney to handle, it had started to fail at its functions.

That's when the effects of the poisoning as well as the skyrocketing percentages when it came to the level of poison in his blood had really kicked in.

And was going to continue to kick in.

Tony goes to the table, sits down and gets out the checker he'd cobbled together to get his blood palladium levels.

"24% sir." JARVIS informs him with a scan of his body that JARVIS can get with the biometric sensors and the palladium reading on the side. Yeah. That doesn't feel ideal.
"You have all the protocols set up right J?" Tony asks quietly. It had been one of the first things that he'd done when he'd realised that the palladium was killing him.

"Yes sir. I do hope that it will not be necessary for me to run the protocols." JARVIS informs him. Tony manages a smile. It's a small one and it feels a little sad even to him, but he manages it and he hopes it is reassuring.

"Me too buddy. Me too."

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The Opening Party

Chapter Summary

The Stark Expo opens but without Stephen it isn't the experience that Tony had wanted.

The Senate Hearing is shit too, come to think of it.

Tony isn't sure if being without Stephen is something he can do anymore.

Chapter Notes

.... I am re-writing. Again.

I think I do that more when I start a new ARC more than anything else. Adding Loki certainly makes things more complicated because I keep changing my mind about how I want the story to go with him and his personality.

Loki is hard to write y'all!

It's also hard because I also keep changing my mind about what I want to do with Odin and Frigga. As well as Thor and his friends. It probably helps that I don't really like his friends XD

They remind me of like the typical frat boys thing and Sif makes me a little sad. In the MCU, she's this kick ass chick that goes against the grains of society to become a warrior... but she's super timid and isn't a go getter when it comes to going after Thor. I don't know, I find the dichotomy of her personality difficult.

Anyway, Loki is slowly driving me insane. I swear to god. I mean, I worked out how I want the relationship between the three of them to build and how that is going to work, but deciding how the plot is going to work out for Thor movies is another thing altogether.

*sigh*

Help?

Sunday

2 May 2010

Clea bites her lips as she looks down at the pale face of her uncle and the Sorcerer Supreme. He has always been pale, but this is a whole new level of pale that she does not like.

She holds his hand tightly.
She also doesn't like all the tubes and wires attached to his lean body. She doesn't like that the sheets on his bed were white. It makes him even paler than he is.

She hates the oxygen mask. She hates the IV drips. She hates the EKG wires and the electrodes attached to Stephen's head to try to read his brain signals. She hates all of it.

She just wants Stephen to wake up and to give her that fond smile as he usually does and tell her that everything was going to be okay.

She can barely feel him in the room and it seems so wrong because normally, Stephen's presence floods any room he is in. She should be able to feel the dynamic dimensional energies flowing through him and around him. She should feel his life.

She can't.

It hurts. The fear that she might lose him, that he might never wake up again, along with the guilt that she has failed him. It's impossibly difficult to bear.

She had felt the Hong Kong Sanctum's shields shatter. She had known that the backlash would hit. She'd known that Stephen would be affected. She knew enough about magic to know all of that, but she had been too slow.

She had been too busy dealing with an irate patient to immediately go to Hong Kong. She should have. It was her job to protect Stephen. It was a duty that was given to her by the Council.

She had failed.

By the time she had gotten there, Stephen had been- Clea closes her eyes and takes a deep breath. She looks down at Stephen and reminds herself that he is alive. He is breathing.

His hand feels warm in her's.

But the image of him laying there in a pool of blood, magic flaring around him wildly is something that she won't forget.

She also won't forget Nicodemus West.

Standing over Stephen, the bloodied knife in his hand, a cruel smile of satisfaction on his face.

She had seen red.

Clea isn't even sure where the power had come from. She isn't even sure what spell she had used.

All she knows is that magic had flowed from her as natural as breathing and had pierced Nicodemus in the chest and he had fallen back into the portal that one of his followers had created.

She is not sure if he is dead or alive.

It is the first time that she had truly used magic to try to kill someone. Her rage, her fury and her pain had created the magic that had flowed towards him and she isn't ashamed or upset by the fact that she may have killed a man.

In fact, she hopes he is dead.

Anyone else, she might have been horrified with herself. With Nicodemus? There was no horror. There was no shame. There was no satisfaction either, but she wasn't ashamed.
She had rushed over to Stephen. She had put her hands over the wound on his back and tried to apply pressure as she screamed for help.

Time seemed to have slowed down or sped up. She's not sure. All she knows was that eventually, there were warm hands prying her off of Stephen and that she had fought back against them, trying to hold onto Stephen and to pour her magic into him to keep his heart beating.

But the others took over the task. Yinn held her tightly and whispered over and over that it was going to be okay as the Kamar-Taj Healers got to work.

It was Grimshaw that came and finished the healing. Dr Grimshaw had looked outraged and furious. Clea had shared those feelings. Looking back now, it might have been worse for Grimshaw, given that they had been colleagues with both Dr Nicodemus West and Stephen at the Metro-General at one point.

It was Grimshaw that told her that Stephen was alive and that the wound was healed and that she needed to get herself together so that they can get Stephen back to the New York Sanctum.

It was Grimshaw that had whispered to her that they would do everything possible to ensure that the Sorcerer Supreme lived. That her uncle lived. That she should answer the phone ringing in her pocket.

It had only been then that she had realised that the phone had been ringing.

It was only when she heard Tony's voice that she had been able to take a breath. It had felt like a wake up call to hear his concerned voice and the fear in his voice. Hearing his fear and knowing that she should reassure him had grounded her.

It had reminded her that with Stephen out of commission, that it was up to her to look after Tony. That's what Stephen would want her to do. What he would need her to do.

So she had.

She had reassured Tony. She had used words that she did not believe in to tell him that it would be okay. As she said those words, she hoped and she prayed.

That was two days ago.

Clea kept up with the work. She kept up with the emails and she kept up with her reminders to Tony and her reassurances. She made sure that she contacted Tony at least once every few hours to make sure that he knew what was going on.

Not necessarily with Stephen, but at least with SI and the work situation. Stephen's number one concern was always Tony. It is Tony that Stephen would be worrying about and curious about when he woke.

So she had to keep up to date with Tony and what was happening with him so that when Stephen woke, she would be able to tell him straight away.

It gave her purpose and a focus.

But Stephen wasn't waking up. Grimshaw looked worried. The others looked worried. Anderson came and went. Cowell came and went. Yinn and Wong were almost always around.

The Council were holding emergency meetings. The New York Sanctum was flooded with Masters
from all over the world, gathering to provide raw power and protection for the Sorcerer Supreme.

There were quiet prayers and well wishes. The whole Order was holding it's breath, waiting for their Sorcerer Supreme to wake up. To be alright. To guide them.

They were all praying for Stephen.

Clea doesn't pray. She's not the type. She's the type to go and do something about the situation. She takes a deep breath. This isn't something that the Council would approve of.

But she also can't sit there and just wait.

"If I were you, I would at least check with the Time Stone." Dr Alex Grimshaw's quiet voice surprises her. Clea looks up with a start and sees Grimshaw standing by the doorway.

They were dressed as they usually were in that long, oversized shirt and cotton pants along with the doctor's white coat that they usually wear when they are in the office. The androgynous clothes make it difficult to tell what gender Alex Grimshaw was born with. Not that it matters to Clea.

"You're not going to stop me?" Clea asks with some surprise. She would have thought that someone that has been with the Order for as long as Grimshaw has and knew the Order before Stephen would be more... unwilling to allow her to step in the way that she was planning to.

"My job is to heal. Whatever my patients need to be healthy and well is what I am generally willing to do." Grimshaw says with a calm soft tone and Clea can't help but smile a little.

Of course, she thinks.

Grimshaw is fond of Stephen. She knows that... some time ago, before Tony, Grimshaw and Stephen had shared more than just their passion for medicine. Though it hadn't been love, there has been enough affection and friendship left after their sexual relationship has ended.

"I'll clear up the Sanctum and settle it down. Ensure that he cannot see nor hear too much." Clea is so very jealous of Grimshaw's ability to stay so calm and relaxed at all times. Even being around them makes her feel calmer, more relaxed and better. It's as if the Chief Healer exudes healing with every breath they take.

"Thank you." Clea says as she reaches forward to touch the Eye of Agamotto on Stephen's chest. It doesn't repel her. She didn't expect it to.

The Time Stone had chosen it's Guardian. It was connected to Stephen and it was willing to protect him and to do the best for him. Clea is his family and she only has the best intentions for Stephen.

The Eye doesn't need to open for her to feel the stone. it also doesn't take her a long time. yeah. It's a risk. She was going to have to be so fucking careful.

She can't read or feel the minutia of what the Time Stone was trying to tell her. But she gets the general gist. Tony Stark cannot know everything about the Order yet. He cannot know about magic. Not yet.

But the Time Stone and the Universe itself needs Stephen. So does Clea. They are in accord. Clea stands up and takes a deep breath. She's done with sitting around and waiting for a miracle.

It's time to act.
Sunday

2 May 2010

The Stark Expo opens with a big bang.

Tony's display with the Iron Man suit goes down extremely well as Gina had suggested. The crowd is excited and going wild and showing off the disassembly array and him stepping out of the suit in a tux has really been quite showy, but hey.

That was what the public expected.

The party atmosphere is nice and it really does well and truly feel like a celebration like Tony had wanted. But he doesn't feel like celebrating. At the back of his mind is fear and worry and he can't focus.

He can't enjoy the night that he had been eagerly waiting for. In Tony's vision of the night, Stephen would have been right there backstage. He would have greeted Tony with a smile. Tony might have risked kissing the man with elation after the welcome and the excitement the crowd had given him.

He would have taken Stephen to the D'Arte Penthouse. They would have spent the night celebrating. It would have been... wonderful.

But that's not what happens.

Instead of Stephen, he has Pepper waiting backstage for him and she gives him a warm smile and a hug and congratulates him on the success of the opening night. She reminds him of the meetings planned to prepare for the Senate Hearing. Tony agrees to attend the meetings.

Pepper questions him about Clea and Stephen and their absence. Tony makes excuses for them and excuses himself.

He can't stand the party atmosphere.

This isn't the celebration that he had wanted. This isn't the moment of triumph. Not when Stephen isn't here with him. Not when he hasn't heard from his lover since he had sprayed blood everywhere and had left with a bloodied kiss and a declaration of love.

Happy rushes Tony through the back doors.

There is Iron Man merchandise everywhere. It had been all too easy for him to strike up a deal with a reputable children's toy company and rush out the merchandise of Iron Man masks, gloves with the LED lights for the repulsors and even some dolls of Iron Man.

All the proceeds from the toy sales will go to Maria Stark Foundation. Pepper had outdone herself and so has the rest of the teams working to bring the Expo together.

The exhibit halls are filled to the brim with tech companies, big and small running their demonstration stands and it is more than what Tony could have even hoped for.

Already, the tech that was being displayed and the companies that were displaying them were starting to talk about working together on various projects to ensure that they make the world a better place.
This is his legacy.

This is what Yinsen had wanted him to do. This is the future that Tony had hoped for when he announced that Stark Industries would stop weapons productions. This is a good legacy to leave behind.

The Expo Park is completely eco-friendly. They did everything they could to reduce their carbon footprint. The electricity is all sourced from the large Arc Reactor at the centre of the park and the wind farm. There are plastic, photosynthesising plants throughout the park.

There are solar panels that run most of the lights within the park and the water usage is all recycled and handled within the park grounds. It is as sustainable and as eco-friendly as a business park can get. They even run free buses from designated locations to ensure that there is very little vehicle traffic going in and out of the park.

It is the most eco-friendly exhibit location on the planet. The Stark Expo Park was quickly becoming the blueprint for how eco-friendly business parks could be built.

Tony feels proud.

But he wishes that Stephen was here with him, by his side, to celebrate. But he isn't. Stephen was okay, Clea had told him.

Tony doesn't believe her.

If Stephen was okay, he would call. He would text. He would be here. Stephen knows how important the Expo is to Tony. Stephen would be here if he was able to. He's not.

So no. Stephen was not okay.

Clea won't tell him where they are. She won't tell him what is happening. She just tells him to be patient and to worry about doing his job and the expo and all that needs to be done.

He is done with that now.

The Expo is officially open and he did his part to open it and from this point, things would more or less run itself. Clea still sends him his schedule and organises what he needs for the day, but she isn't with him.

He is in New York.

1771A Bleecker Street, Greenwich, Tony thinks. This is the address that Stephen had provided to JARVIS. He can go there. It's close. Stephen may or may not be there, but it's worth a try. With that thought in mind, he moves with Happy to the car. He can't just twiddle his thumbs and wait any more.

He can't.

Along the way, he signs the posters the kids had brought. He smiles happily for the cameras and poses with as many of the children as he can because no matter what crisis he is going through, children deserve to be happy.

He also makes sure that he says hello to the several celebrities that had come to join the party. The after-party will be quite fun, but Tony won't be there. Pepper will deal with the rest of the media and all that drama.
He doesn't have time for that and he certainly isn't in the mood for that. He's not sure if he can keep the media persona going. He is tired of pretending that he is happy when he is not.

"You gonna go straight to the hotel?" Happy asks as they make their way towards the car. Tony shakes his head.

"Got an address I need to hit. I'm driving." Tony tells him and Happy is more than happy to hand over the keys. Just as they approach the car though, a red-haired woman stands, leaning against the car, looking so very seductive.

God. Another one, Tony thinks sardonically as he puts on his public persona and checks her out. She's pretty. Not beautiful like Natalie Rushman was but pretty. A year ago, he might have been interested enough to flirt with her. Maybe.

"Mr Tony Stark?" The woman asks, a coy confident smile on her face. From the way that she is dressed, Tony sees immediately that she has to be a government agent. Oh. Well, he had been expecting her. Tony nods easily enough.

"That's me." He says even as he moves towards the driver's seat and she moves out of the way. Good. He really, really doesn't want to deal with anyone right now.

It's getting harder and harder to keep the smile on his face when inside, he feels like he is being ripped apart by worry and fear. He needs to see Stephen.

"Good. You've been served." She tells him as she tries to hand him the paper she'd been holding. Tony doesn't take it. He doesn't take anything from strangers. He's been burnt one too many times from that shit.

"I will take that." The voice that comes out from behind the car surprises Tony. He turns around and finds Clea Strange standing there in a dark blue suit, her hair tied up in a ponytail and looking almost fierce.

"Oh, um..." The woman hesitates, but Clea has no compunctions. She takes the paper and looks at Happy.

"Happy, I'm going to need to borrow Tony for a little while." She tells him and Happy turns to look at Tony. He is the boss after all.

Tony is a little too fazed for a moment from seeing Clea when she was the last person he had expected to see at the Expo and trying to get a read on her that he misses the look for a moment before he nods slowly.

"Go with Pep Happy. I'll see you guys later." Tony says and Clea switches with Happy quickly enough. Tony doesn't spare the woman or Happy another glance. He drives. The solemn and quiet nature of Clea is... disconcerting.

"This is a subpoena for you to attend a Senate hearing tomorrow morning at 9:30am. I will have a private plane ready for you to go in the morning. For now, I need you to drive to Greenwich." She instructs him firmly.

Her voice is low and subdued. Tony doesn't like that tone. That's the kind of tone you use to tell someone that they are dying. Or that someone they love is dying. Fear that had been sitting in Tony's stomach since Friday sneaks back up his spine and firmly takes place in his heart.

"You didn't even open it." Tony tells her with an even look as they make their way out of the Expo
grounds. Clea doesn't look at him. She looks straight ahead if she is the one that is driving and Tony focuses his attention on the road as he waits for her to respond.

"Didn't need to. You knew already too. You also know why I'm here." Clea says and her voice is so matter of fact and so very tightly controlled that Tony knows that the dread that fills his stomach is justified.

He clenches the wheel tightly.

"What happened to him?" Tony asks and Clea takes her time. He doesn't hurry her. More because he's not sure if he is ready for the answer and more importantly because he knew that if it was difficult then the last thing he wanted to do was make it worse for her.

"Tony, you know there are questions that I cannot and I won't answer. So with that in mind, I just need you to listen. Okay?" Tony nods but doesn't take his eyes off the road. He is distracted enough and there are enough shit going through his head that looking away from the road is the last thing that he needs to do.

He can almost hear Stephen's voice asking him to be careful when he drives. It was one of Stephen's greatest fears. He remembers Stephen's shaking voice asking him to stop driving when he'd found out about Obadiah. Tony takes a deep breath to calm himself.

"Stephen is special. You know that. On Friday, there... was an attack. Stephen came to assess the situation and help out." Tony can already feel the fear trying to claw itself out of his throat.

An attack.

What kind of attack? What kind of damage was there? Who did the attack? Why? Where? Nothing in the media, local or otherwise indicated any big incidents happening around the world. JARVIS had been keeping a close eye on the situation.

"As you can probably guess, Stephen was... hurt." Clea says and the way that she says the word alone is enough of an indication that it isn't as simple as that. Tony nods anyway.

"The injury itself... we- we fixed that. But... we can't wake him up." Tony doesn't slam on the brakes. He doesn't speed up. He focuses his attention on driving and keeping his car on the goddamned road.

But his mind is racing.

"Has he been to a hospital? Is it something neurological or is it-" Tony doesn't even know what it could be. But his mind races as he tries to come up with what could be wrong and goes through the solutions to those problems.

He can have the best doctors brought in from all over the world within a few days. He can organise for the best medical care for Stephen. He doesn't care what it costs. But then if that was the case, he's pretty sure Anderson would have done it already.

Tony starts to think about all the experimental treatments, medications and procedures that his company was working on. Perhaps there was something that he could use to help Stephen out of that. Perhaps-

"Tony, I know that Stephen told you that he loved you and that he would do anything for you. That his emotions for you would never change." Clea sounds almost nervous as she speaks. Tony nods slowly.
"Most of that is because of his love for you. He really, well and truly loves you, Tony Stark, as a person and his attraction to you and your relationship is based on that. But there is... something also fundamental when it comes to you that Stephen has with you." Clea is choosing her words carefully. Like Stephen did when he was saying anything about the secrets that he kept.

"You need me to do something." Tony honestly doesn't care what the thing that she is talking about is. He doesn't even care at this stage if Stephen's love for him is something more or less than what he believed it was.

He doesn't even care what it is that he really has to do. He's dying anyway and he really can't stand the idea of Stephen- no.

"Your physical presence. To Stephen you're like... a stabiliser. Our doctors believe that with you nearby, providing physical contact and helping to stabilise him, he'll be able to focus enough and to be able to... heal enough to wake up." Clea tells him carefully.

"That's all he needs? Me being there?" That sounds ridiculous. It sounds like some mumbo jumbo bullshit that he just can't believe in but it doesn't matter.

He doesn't believe in teleportation and Stephen did that. He doesn't believe that it is possible to transfer one person's wounds onto another person and Stephen did that too. Not even Mutants had that sort of ability.

"Yes. I know that-" Clea starts, no doubt to explain herself. Tony doesn't care.

He interrupts her by putting his foot down hard on the accelerator.

He needs to see Stephen.

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**Monday**

3 May 2010

Pepper is worried, concerned and a little angry.

She'd been worried since Happy had turned up and informed her that Clea had taken Tony away somewhere in New York and JARVIS refused to tell her where Tony was.

No, that's not true. She'd been worried since Tony had arrived in New York. She had come a little earlier than him to make sure that she could sort out the last final details to make sure that the Expo opening would go smoothly.

But when Tony had turned up, she had known that something was wrong almost immediately. On a night where he should have been excited, should have been happy, should have been... with Stephen by his side, Tony had been subdued and alone.

In fact, Pepper had never seen Tony Stark that subdued, quiet and beaten down since Carlos. That worried her a great deal. She had wondered if perhaps something had happened with Stephen after she and Happy had left the mansion on Friday.

Tony denied that.

He explained that Stephen was unwell and that he was concerned for him and that Clea was with
Stephen. That explained some things but Tony's quiet, subdued nature worried her and continues to worry her.

The party atmosphere that had been almost heady even for her at the Expo should have helped to get Tony's spirits up, but he hadn't been excited. He hadn't been elated.

Sure, Tony had put on a fantastic show with his media persona coming out to play. He put on the smiles, the grand gestures. He had made a wonderful speech. But as soon as he had been done, he had gone right back to being quiet, subdued and worried.

So, Pepper is worried.

Clea has been in contact with her. But the contacts hadn't been like the usual ones that she gets from Clea, full of jokes and memes and emoticons. Instead, she had gotten short terse messages about Tony's schedule.

Then the message after Clea had taken Tony had been the one that had worried Pepper the most.

**I will make sure that Tony is there in time for the Senate Hearing. Sorry for causing any disturbances.** The message had read. No explanation, nothing.

Pepper had tried calling, she tried to text. She got nothing. When she called, JARVIS answered and told her only that Clea and Tony were unavailable. When she texted, she got no replies.

Pepper is very worried.

But she did trust that they would turn up for the Senate Hearing. With time to prepare for the hearing. Unfortunately, that doesn't happen. Tony never turns up at the D'Arte Washington where they were staying to prepare for the hearing.

Pepper runs through the prep work anyway with their legal and PR team. When they are done, she curates all the information and makes sure to send it via email to Tony.

They'd already done the prep work before. This is just another round of prep work to make sure that they are definitely ready. They are.

The response that Tony will give is probably going to be a bit flamboyant and dramatic, but that is who he is as far as the media is concerned and that is what they expect. That is what the Senate expects.

It's a good cover to make sure that no one suspects that there is a lot of things happening in the background. Like War Machine.

It isn't a flippant response by any means, but it isn't a serious response. But their legal butts are more than covered. Alex and Pepper had made sure of that.

Tony responds to the email with a simply thank you and that he will read over the material. Pepper is still worried. She is almost biting her nails by the time Tony actually turns up.

He had sent a message to say that he will meet her at the Senate instead of the hotel. She's glad that she's had the foresight to organise for one of his suits to be brought because he is still in the tux from the night before.

They manage to get Tony and his suit into the Senate without encountering the media through the use of a back door and distractions by Pepper herself.
Gina and Alex prep Tony for the Hearing whilst Pepper draws the attention away. When Pepper sees him next, Tony is at least dressed in the dark blue striped suit that she had prepared for him. Tony looks too exhausted and subdued for her to be angry at him. She feels so overwhelmingly concerned. She gives him a smile and tries to comfort him, but he simply gives her a tight look. He does manage to smile for the cameras at least.

That worries her.

She honestly doubts that Stephen would have done anything to hurt Tony. She really does. But there are things that can hurt someone without it being malicious. Like... Stephen being seriously ill.

If that is the case then Pepper has to wonder how ill the doctor is for Tony to have such a visceral reaction. She wonders how bad the situation is. Tony wouldn't be reacting like this if it is simply the case of a cold.

Pepper lets the worry settle in at the back of her mind because for the time being, they have a Senate Hearing to get through.

They walk in, confident smiles and strides and makes sure that the media get all the photographs and the shots that they want. It's easier if they just pander to the cameras now than trying to deal with them after.

The hearing itself proceeds just as they had suspected. Senator Stern isn't a huge fan of Tony Stark. He had never been. He'd publicly criticised Tony and his decision to abandon weapons production before and that trend continues in the hearing.

Tony handles it surprisingly well. He stays calm and collected for the most part until of course, Justin Hammer enters the equation. Tony effortlessly hacks into the television systems and displays the footage of the other countries and of course Hammer's own company trying to make the Iron Man suit.

The stir that it causes is dramatic, as intended. Tony is eloquent and he knows what he is talking about. They get the point across quite effectively. Besides, seeing Hammer's ego being knocked down was always something that Pepper could enjoy.

Since Stark Industries has stopped their weapons productions, Hammer has been taking all the weapons contracts from the Armed Forces, which wasn't a problem, but it was the way that they were doing it and the sub-par weapons they were providing that was causing Pepper issues.

On top of it, the amount of monies that they were charging the Armed Forces was ridiculous. Given the money that Hammer has thrown to try to get the contracts, Pepper isn't surprised that the Senate had chosen to give the contracts to him.

But Hammer represented everything negative about the Weapons industry and the reason why Tony had washed his hands of it.

Rhodey's presence isn't a surprise and neither is the way that he is forced to read only from a small section of the paper that he had written about Tony and Iron Man.

They had expected that. His frustration is obvious enough to the cameras and to Tony himself that Pepper isn't too concerned about their friendship. She also finds that she isn't angry about it either. Not at him at least.

"The Iron Man suit and I are one. The suit was invented by me but it isn't just my work. It is also the
work of Dr Stephen Strange, my collaborator on a number of projects. The government can't have the suit. It is our combined intellectual property.” Tony announces and that hadn't been on the books.

They had decided to keep Stephen out of it, but in all honesty, declaring Stephen's involvement does two things.

One, it raises the man's profile in the public even more. For another, it means that if the government really wants the suit, they are going to have to fight not only Stark Industries and their significant resources but D'Arte and their significant resources.

Tony's words bring pause to many of the senators. Pepper knows that the public nature of the hearing had been designed to try to discredit Tony and to put public pressure on both Stark Industries and Tony to hand the suit over to the US government for their use as a part of their military contingency.

But the suit is honestly... Pepper really, really doesn't want the government to get their hands on it. It goes beyond just the intellectual property issues or Tony's rights to retain control over his creations.

There is just so, so much danger inherent in mass production and the government's use of the suits that Pepper is almost terrified of the idea.

The last thing she wants is for the US to become a militarised, police state with Iron Man suits not just protecting the people, but subduing them.

That was the biggest reason they were fighting so hard against the US government on this matter.

"Besides, the suit requires the pilot to be able to process phenomenal amounts of information rapidly in order to both pilot the suit and also to use the defence mechanisms. The suit isn't a weapon. It is a personal flight machine that requires years of experience and expertise to pilot it efficiently.” Tony tells the Senate and the public.

"If and when another pilot is required for the Iron Man suit, I will choose a pilot that is capable of flying it and train them. Until that time comes, I am Iron Man and the suit stays with me.” Tony says firmly. Pepper makes it a point not to look at Rhodey. She knows that he is learning how to use the suit and how to put the suit together.

She knows that he will be going by the moniker War Machine and that in time, Tony will allow him to use the suit for military purposes. But that is some time later. It isn't now and the information sure isn't ready to go public.

Besides, they had to make sure that they could keep the rights over the suit even as Rhodey used it. It would be on loan to James Rhodes and not the US government or military.

"Unless the United States of America is to set the precedent that declares that any property that is invented and created by a private citizen using their own funds can be appropriated by the government, which, mark my words, would mean that companies with any intellectual property worth a damn would move out of the US and destroy trade, the suit stays with me and under my control.” Tony says and the murmur goes through the crowd at that.

Even more of the senators look uncertain at that. That was the thing, wasn't it. If the US government was able to take the Iron Man suit away, when Tony was working with the government on a number of missions and was out there in the world trying to do good... what else can they do?

If Stark Industries, one of the biggest companies in the world and one that was in the forefront of the
technological market could become a victim of the US government, what did it say about the smaller companies? The ones without SI's financial and political clout?

It was a dangerous precedent to set.

"You cannot deny that there has been a lot of good that I have done with the suit as Iron Man. I wouldn't say that I single-handedly brought about world peace, but give me time. I'll get there." Tony says with an arrogant tone, pandering to the cameras and to the media.

"As Iron Man, I am willing to work with local law enforcement and even branches of the government to protect the citizens of this country as I have been doing, but I will not hand over my personal intellectual property and invention to the United States Government. It violates my rights as a human being, a citizen of this country and an inventor working to better the technological world." Tony declares and with the crescendo of his speech, the media people clap and cheer and so does some of the senators.

The cameras flash everywhere and Tony finishes off his speech and leads Pepper out of the Senate.

It's a mad rush at that point. Between the right to bear arms and the legal protections in place to prevent the government from just taking Tony's inventions and the issue of even the cost, unless the Senate was able to turn the tide of public support against Tony to be able to create a legislation solely focused on taking the suit away from Tony, it was going to stay.

The public opinion, Pepper knew, was going to be hard to sway after that performance. Especially the fear of God Tony has put into all of the tech, science and medical world. If Tony Stark couldn't hold onto Iron Man without SI's backing than Joe Bloggs definitely couldn't hold onto whatever invention they can come up with.

It's a win.

Pepper doesn't even have to see the news reports to know that.

They make it to the car somehow and the sudden quiet after the crazy clicking of cameras and the voices is almost a shock to the system. Pepper sighs as she takes her heels off and massages her feet.

She expects Tony to be grinning ear to ear, pleased with himself. He isn't.

"I thought we weren't going to be mention Stephen." Pepper says quietly as Happy starts to drive them towards the Washington Private Air Field. The rest of the team follow in a separate car.

"He deserves the recognition." Tony says with a tight voice and he looks out the window. The concern that she feels for him is almost overwhelming.

"Is he okay? What's wrong Tony?" Pepper asks him quietly and Tony doesn't look away from the window. His face is pensive and his eyes are almost sunken in and they are filled with so many emotions that it actually surprises Pepper.

"He's- He's not well Pep. I need you to handle the rest of this. I- I want- No. I need to be with him." Tony tells her and it is the most vulnerable he had ever sounded and Pepper has nothing she can say to counter that. She nods.

"Of course. Don't- Don't worry about anything SI related. I'll take care of everything. Just focus on Stephen and let me know if there's anything I can do." Pepper tells him as gently as she can. She has never seen Tony like this, she realises. This vulnerable, this emotional and this invested in anyone.
She is both happy to know that he has found someone to care about that deeply and at the same time, she is worried about him. She doesn't like to see her friend hurting. To know that he was hurting because he was in love and the person that he loved was hurting? Yeah. That kind of sucks.

There are so many questions that she wants to ask. She wants to ask how Clea is doing. She wants to know where Stephen is and if there is anything that SI could do or she could do. But she can't ask.

Not when Tony looks so fragile and in so much pain. So she does the best thing that a friend can do. She pulls him into her arms and holds him as tightly as she could.

"It's going to be okay." She reassures him.

And prays that she's right.

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May the Fourth be With You

Chapter Summary

There is nothing like quiet moments to think whilst his lover lays unconscious to think and reflect.

Death is a fear that Tony had come to terms with.

But that's when it is about him. Not when it comes to Stephen.

All Tony wants is to curl up with a wake and talking Stephen and watch some fucking Star Wars. Is that so much to ask?

Apparently.

Chapter Notes

Alright. The re-write is done. I have an idea of what I want to do with Loki. But gods he is a bit of a nightmare. The whole of Thor movies is so fucking difficult to re-write because I always want to be able to use some of the scenes directly from the film and it's hard to do when I'm trying to make sure Loki doesn't turn into the villain trope.

Sorta.

It really doesn't help that in the movies, Loki is more a comic relief character and he seems a lot more bumbling than the legends would indicate.

All of your comments have been extraordinary in helping me to form some views of Loki. I really did need some guidance so thank you. Especially from those of you that knows the comics.

I will be honest... as a non-comic reader, I'm probably not going to be able to bring that Loki to life, but I will do the best that I can.

Now... I am back to the grind of trying to get ARC 3 written! >__<

<3

Tuesday

4 May 2010

It's Star Wars Day.

Traditionally, it's the day where Tony would curl up in the living room with Rhodey and Pepper and they would spend all day watching Star Wars movies and the spin off animations and even the
They would be eating pizza and drinking beer and chatting and making whooshing sounds as they watched and talked about the movies.

They haven't been able to do that last year and apparently not this year either.

If Stephen had been awake and everything was okay and they were back home in Malibu, Tony knows he would have been curled up with Stephen in his arms as they sat and watched the movies.

Rhodey, Pepper and Clea might have been there too.

They would have lazed around on the sofas, watching all of the movies, talking between the scenes, discussing their impressions and memories of the movies, the technology and probably making jokes about Chewbacca and trying to speak like him.

Maybe.

But even if Stephen had been alright, he would have been in New York working and Tony would have been in Malibu doing his job as well. Given the situation, Pepper and Rhodey would have been too busy dealing with the aftermath after all.

But still, that is what he wishes he was doing more than what he was doing now.

Instead, Tony is laying on a bed, curled into his lover's still and quiet body. Tony rests his head over Stephen's chest and makes sure that he can hear the heart beating steadily underneath his ear.

He knows how to read all the instruments attached to the wires and the tubes connected to his lover. But he prefers being able to hear Stephen's heartbeat directly under his ear to remind him that Stephen is alive.

The New York Sanctum, as Clea called the mansion, was large. Not as extensive as Tony's mansions, but the building was massive. There were so many different rooms that it was hard to tell just how extensive the mansion really was.

Tony also gets the sneaking suspicion that the building may actually be far larger on the inside than it is on the outside. He can't be certain. But he has questions. Because if Stephen has a fucking TARDIS, then Tony definitely wants to know.

He doesn't ask questions.

Normally, Tony would be curious and he would be wandering about, poking his nose into places that he probably didn't belong. But he doesn't do that either. Instead, he focuses on Stephen.

As soon as he has seen Stephen the first time, laying on his bed, still and white as a sheet, Tony had felt the dread settle deep into his stomach and it was yet to fade, even with Stephen's warmth against his skin.

There is a fear inside of him at the thought that he may lose Stephen and that the last memory he would have of Stephen was an argument. That the last taste of Stephen's lips had been one that tasted of blood.

That Tony would never get the chance to tell him how much he cared about him.

Because he knows. He is dead set confident in his emotions now. There is no future that Tony thinks
about without Stephen. Even with his own future and indeed his own life up in the air and he is not sure if he will be even around to see another birthday, the idea of being without Stephen for that birthday is... no.

Stephen needs to wake up. He needs to be okay. That is just how it is. How it has to be. It is what Tony needs. He can't let that be the last moment.

Tony really can't remember how the senate hearing went. He had been focused enough on it to get through it, but even throughout that, he had been thinking about Stephen and wanting somehow to magically fix it.

Clea helps him. She really does. Though it is clear that she is in a great deal of pain herself, she is supporting him. She is stronger than he is. Tony realises that and he is ashamed and embarrassed.

She had just lost her grandparents. Her fear that she may lose Stephen too is palpable and he can see it weighing heavily on her mind. And he can see the strain of it on her. He hates that.

He also hates that Clea is still somehow strong enough, still somehow focused enough to be able to support him when she herself is suffering and he is the one that is in a mess. She is still working. She still goes through the correspondences for him. He can't.

She is the one that reminds him to eat and goes through Stephen's condition. She interacts with the doctors. She checks on Stephen and him. As do the others, including doctors, though no one really talks to him.

Tony knows one of doctors.

Dr Grimshaw, they had been a part of a huge scandal some years ago in relation to their gender and their skills as an oncologist. They were gender fluid or rather androgynous and as a result, there had been a lot of controversy in the health industry, not that Tony understood quite why that was such a huge issue.

More importantly, right now, he didn't care. Stephen needed medical attention and Dr Grimshaw provided it. That was good enough.

Tony didn't get any more answers. But he does see all those that he expected to see at the mansion. Anderson, Cowell, Yinn and Wong as well as of course, Clea. It is apparent that this is their home.

It's odd.

Before Stephen, Tony would have gone out of his mind with boredom if he had to lay around and do nothing. In fact, he would have confidently said that he was incapable of it. But he would be wrong.

He stays with Stephen all day. In the bed with him, holding him carefully through the cords, the tubes and shit that's coming from his lover. He doesn't find himself bored. He is too nervous and scared to be bored.

The situation is ridiculous.

He is dying and so is Stephen. Maybe. It's all so very fucked. God.

Things happen around Tony and people move in and out but no one tries to move him or ask him to do anything. They just let him be and he lets himself be. Just laying with Stephen in his arms and hoping that the man will wake up.
It gives him a lot of time to think.

About their relationship. About his life. About the future that they may or may not have. But the time gives him a chance to really solidify some of the thoughts in his head. It also confirms a lot of things he had been thinking about but hadn't... wanted to acknowledge.

Tony love Stephen Strange.

It didn't matter what he was, who he was and what he has done. Tony loved him and he wants Stephen with him for the rest of his life, however short it may be.

The realisation doesn't hit him or surprise him as much as he thought it would. It's easy enough to accept given the situation. He also learns without a shadow of doubt that he hates being helpless.

He wishes that he knew more about medicine or whatever that Stephen was so he can do something. To try to fix his lover. But he wasn't even capable of saving himself. He doubts that he can save Stephen.

They all said that physical presence, contact with Stephen would help. He hopes that they are right. Because Tony isn't sure if he can deal with a world without Stephen.

Not anymore.

"Dr Stark." The quiet voice surprises Tony and snaps him out of his thoughts and musing. He lifts his head from where it had been resting on Stephen's chest and looks up to see Dr Grimshaw standing there.

"Dr Grimshaw." Tony says with a neutral tone but he doesn't sit up. he doesn't want to let go of Stephen and he knows that everyone at the Sanctum already knows about their relationship. So there was no need to hide.

"How are you feeling?" Grimshaw is so very polite with him and there is a calmness about them that Tony can appreciate.

"Not bad." Tony says and Grimshaw gives him a nod. They don't hesitate to move directly over to Stephen and to check his vitals. They pay Tony no heed as he moves out of the bed to make sure that Grimshaw has the room to move about.

"His vitals are looking much better. We get rid of the oxygen mask, I believe." They say softly with satisfaction and the way they look at Stephen as they talk and the way that they cradle Stephen's head close as they take the mask off that makes Tony raise his eyebrows.

"Have you known him long?" Tony finds himself asking and he hates himself a little for the forced casual tone he puts on his voice.

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"There's no need to beat around the bush Dr Stark. You want to know if Stephen and I were lovers." They say with an amused tone and Tony feels a little defensive and he thinks about changing the topic or lying, but he crosses his arms and just raises his eyebrows.

Grimshaw settles Stephen back down onto the bed properly and gives him a smile.

"The answer is yes. For several years whilst we were at the Metro General." They say with that fond tone that Tony distinctly does not like.

Actually, there are several things that Tony does not like about this situation. The fact that Stephen
has had lovers before him isn't new or surprising. It's not even what he dislikes about the situation.

It isn't even Grimshaw per se. It is the fact that Grimshaw knows more about Stephen than Tony does. That there are no secrets between them. The huge secret that is between Tony and Stephen? That doesn't exist with Grimshaw.

That is what bothers him.

"You know everything about him." Tony says and god he hates how petulant he sounds. There are bigger things to be worrying about right now than his insecurities, isn't there?

"No. Yes, I am aware of the secrets that he keeps from you. But there are many facets of Stephen that I have not seen. He did not love me as he loves you." They say in a matter of fact way that surprises Tony.

"What do you mean?" Tony asks and they shrug their shoulders.

"Stephen loves you. He did not love me. Our relationship was that of friendship and sexual exploration. Nothing more." They say but Tony knows that they aren't telling the whole truth.

"But you loved him." Tony says and he knows he got it right when they look away from Tony for a moment before returning their gaze.

"Stephen is easy to love." They say instead of answering. Tony has to agree with the sentiment, though he isn't sure how he feels about his lover having had someone steady for years before him. Especially when it's clear that the other still has feelings for him.

"Dr Stark, my feelings for Stephen aside, there are other matters that I would like to discuss with you." Dr Grimshaw says and Tony has to snap back a little from his thoughts before he nods.

Eventually, Stephen was going to bump into Tony's former lovers. They were numerous and there was plenty of opportunities to bump into them all over the social scene. Given that, Tony should be prepared to deal with Stephen's lovers too. It was only fair.

"I know you have been drinking the chlorophyll and that you have been ensuring that you keep an eye on your percentages. But I would also like to bring a dialysis machine and cleanse your blood to help your kidneys. With the minimal activities you are engaging in, I'm afraid that the poison will start to settle in your blood." Grimshaw says and Tony finds himself sighing.

Great. So Grimshaw not only knew things about Stephen but about him too. He really isn't sure how he feels about that revelation.

But it makes sense.

Whatever was going on with Stephen, whatever he was, involved an organisation. A large one by the sound of it. And those that were involved in that organisation all seemed to know who he was and what his role was, even if he wasn't meant to be privy to that information.

"Why do you care?" Tony asks and he thankfully doesn't sound very bitter. They give Tony a smile.

"Because Stephen would. Because I'm a doctor and I have sworn an oath to help those that I can. Because you are important. Choose the answer that pleases you Dr Stark." They say and when Tony doesn't respond, they sigh and continue.

"Stephen is going to wake up Dr Stark. And when he does, he will want to make sure that you are
well. You can see me taking care of you as an extension of my duties to him.” Grimshaw says and Tony knows that they were speaking the full truth then. Tony nods.

He's not sure how he feels about becoming the patient of his lover's former flame, but beggars couldn't be choosers and Grimshaw was right. Stephen was going to be more worried about Tony than himself when he woke.

Because Stephen Strange is an idiot.

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**Thursday**

**6 May 2010**

Stephen is... dreaming.

At least that's what he thinks is happening. He looks around himself in the big, wide, empty, white space. He isn't standing there. He isn't floating either. He is simply... there.

There is something holding him in place. Something that is preventing him from either coming nor going. He is simply... existing.

Stephen reaches out with his senses. To the magic that is familiar to him as breathing. It doesn't come. Or rather, it does but it's sluggish and there is something wrong. He can't feel the Sanctums. The Kamar-Taj.

There is only one thing that he can feel very, very clearly.

The Time Stone.

It is what is holding him here, Stephen realises. It is what is holding him in place. Preventing him from coming or going. Except he isn't sure where he is going. Or where he had come from.

It is so very hard to focus and to think. His mind feels as empty as the space around him. There is no up and there is no down.

There is simply... space.

Stephen can see the Time Stone. Feel it. He wraps his hand around it like it calls for him to do. He feels it's warm energies coursing through him in a way it had never felt before.

It feels like the Stone is a part of him. It feels like the first moment he had laid his hands on the Stone and felt the power course through him and he had felt it cling to him as if it was a child holding desperately onto a mother.

But the Time Stone isn't the only thing that Stephen can feel now that he is connected to it. He feels the other Stones.

The ones that are connected to the Time Stone through the circumstances of their birth.

The Mind Stone with Thanos.

The Space Stone held within the Tesseract deep in the vaults of SHEILD.

The Reality Stone bound by the ancient spells in the space between the realms.
The Power Stone is hidden inside of the ruins of Morag.

The Soul Stone is hidden by the contract of ancient magic in Vormir.

Stephen can see all of them. He can see the connections that they are striving to make. To find their Guardians in the way that the Time Stone has managed to.

The Mind Stone in particular struggles against the bonds of the sceptre that Thanos has wrought upon it. Stephen can almost feel it struggling.

It doesn't feel very pleasant.

Stephen can feel the universe moving underneath him. He can feel the other Stones throughout the other universes.

He can feel them being born. He can feel the Mind Stone burning away under the Scarlet Witch's powers from Vision's forehead. He can feel the other Stones being destroyed in the snap of Thanos's fingers.

He can feel the way that all the connected stones shiver and shudder in sympathy as they are created and destroyed over and over again throughout the universes.

Stephen blinks.

Why is he feeling all this? Seeing all this? Why is he being held here? There are other things that he needs to do isn't there? There are other things that he should be worried about.

It's so, so very hard to think.

Instead, all Stephen can do is feel. He feels the universes flow. He feels the dimensional energies flow. He feels one universe die as another is born. As the universes die, he feels sadness that is not his. As the universe are born, he feels hope that is also not his.

He can't shake the feeling that there is a meaning behind all this. There has to be something that is causing him to feel all of this. Stephen doesn't know. He can't quite figure it out.

He can't think.

Amor Vincit Omnia.

That is familiar. Stephen knows that. That means something important. Love conquers all. He's not sure if it does. Or if it will. But it is important. That phrase.

He knows it's important. He just can't quite figure out why. Over and over, he remembers the phrase echoing in his head.

Why?

He doesn't know. All he knows is that it's hard to think, hard to focus. The Time Stone is pulsing in his hand and then at the corner of his mind, at the edge of his consciousness, he feels something else.

A connection.

Like the one with the Time Stone but this one is weaker. Faint. In the background more than in the foreground. But it's there.
Stephen focuses on it.

As he does, slowly but surely, he feels like he can think. Like he can breathe. Like he can focus.

Armor Vincit Omnia.

He remembers now. It's what the Ancient One had said before she passed. Her last message to him. He still wasn't sure if understands now why she had said that.

But now at least... he knows what love is.

Anthony Edward Stark.

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Friday

7 May 2010

Tony feels Stephen stirring immediately.

His vitals have been improving steadily and the doctors had looked relieved. They had removed most of the equipment that had been around Stephen and kept only the oxygen mask to help him breathe and the IV drip to keep him hydrated and ensure that he has sufficient vitamins.

This is the first time that Stephen had moved. Tony feels it and he is moving almost immediately to sit up. Stephen's hand clutches onto his though and tries to keep them where they are as if he is trying to simply snuggle in closer to go back to sleep.

"Oh no, you don't Stephen Strange!" Tony finds himself muttering as he moves and lays a hand over his lover's drawn face to try to wake him up. The dark eyelashes against his pale skin flutter and Stephen's grey-blue eyes appear for just a moment before they disappear again.

"Keep those eyes open for me Stephen." Tony asks him softly as he helps Stephen's struggles to remove the wires connected to him. Tony knows how annoying they can be. He's experienced it enough himself.

"Why... are you in the Sanctum?" Considering the fact that Stephen's only opened his eyes for a split second, Tony has no idea how the doctor knows where he is and who he is with that quickly or how he sounds almost normal, but that's hardly the most important thing right now.

"You got stabbed." Tony says drily and Stephen groans as he pulls at Tony until he can rest his head on Tony's lap. Honestly, right now, Stephen could ask him to do anything, say anything, give anything and Tony would do it, as long as Stephen stays awake.

As long as he is okay.

Holding the doctor's head in his lap whilst he ran his fingers through the doctor's hair and felt the warmth of the doctor's body and hearing his voice? Not a difficult task at all.

"Just so you know, I didn't get stabbed just to get out of our conversation." Stephen says. Tony can't believe the man is talking as if he hasn't been unconscious for almost a week.

His voice sounds weak, yes, but he seems almost normal. As if he had just woken up from a long nap instead of someone who had basically been in a coma for a week after getting stabbed in the
fucking back.

Initially, Clea had refused to tell him what had happened. Just that Stephen had been 'injured'. But when Tony had been washing Stephen, he'd see the still fresh scar and had questioned her.

Though she didn't explain the circumstances of the stabbing, it was bloody obvious. The way that Clea had bit her lips and her eyes are gone dark had been enough of a confirmation for Tony.

Tony feels so relieved that it almost feels surreal. He had thought about this moment, he had dreamt about this moment so often in the past week that it feels unreal.

But the warmth of Stephen's breath against the hand that he holds feels real enough and so is the way that Stephen's head moves in his lap. This is real. Stephen is awake and he is okay. Tony can breathe.

"Yeah well, just so you know, I'm going to be a little mad about that for a while." Tony tells him though he feels anything but mad right now. He might be later. He's not sure. He's still thinking about it.

"So how long was I.. asleep?" Stephen asks as if he had simply taken a nap instead of almost dying. Tony holds Stephen's head a little closer to himself and crouches over it to kiss Stephen's forehead.

"A week." Tony says and he can't hide the strain in his own voice. It really... really hasn't been an easy week.

In fact, it has been one of the most difficult times of his life. He hasn't felt this helpless, this useless, this afraid since Afghanistan. But that had been different. That had been his life on the line.

This time, it had been Stephen's.

It changed everything.

"Oh." Stephen breathes out and then he sighs and struggles to get up. Tony doesn't stop him. Instead, he helps so that Stephen can sit up and helps him until he can rest his back against the pillows on the headboard.

"Blood toxicity?" Stephen asks carefully as he squints. Tony gets off the bed to close the curtains to help the doctor with his light sensitivity. He should have considered that before. But then he hadn't known when or indeed if Stephen would wake up.

His hand trembles on the curtains.

"38%." Tony answers him quietly before he returns to the bed and perches on the side of it and helps Stephen to take a sip from the water bottle that had been by the bedside table. Complete with a straw. They had been prepared for Stephen to wake up.

Because the alternative had been unacceptable to everyone involved. Especially to Tony.

He hasn't left Stephen's rooms since he had been to the hearing. He'd showered in the en-suite bathroom. He didn't ask how, but Clea brought him his clothes. Wong or Yinn brings him food and chlorophyll.

Grimshaw had come by once a day to run checks on Stephen and to run the dialysis machine on Tony to clear his body of as much of the toxins as possible. It helped.
Tony isn't quite sure how he would have gotten through all of this without them. Without Pepper to hold down the fort at SI. Without Clea liaising with her to make sure that instructions and information that needed to be passed along was.

Tony's week-long absence didn't go unnoticed by the media. The lack of Iron Man's appearances also didn't go unnoticed. He had calls from Rhodey asking what was going on. He ignored the calls he got from Coulson.

It had been a very, very difficult week.

It wasn't over. Not yet. Stephen was awake yes, but Tony wasn't sure how well he was doing. He was talking and he seemed alright, but Tony is still afraid. Still worried.

"How are you feeling?" Stephen asks him softly and Tony looks at him, incredulous.

"You're asking me?" Tony finds himself questioning. Tony wasn't the one that got stabbed an inch from the heart. Tony wasn't the one that had been lying unconscious for a week. Stephen shrugs his shoulder and flinches when he clearly feels the fresh scar on his back.

"Your kidneys will start to suffer. There are a few measures that I can take to relieve you of some of the-" Fuck that. Fuck all of that. Tony is sure now. He is angry. He is mad. He is in fact, furious.

"No. No. No you don't fucking get to do that Stephen. You don't get to keep making that self-sacrifice play. I won't let you." Tony tells him and he can't stay on the bed. He can't.

He stands up and he is pacing and he is so angry that he knows his movements are jerky. When Tony looks at the bed, Stephen is looking at him with concern in his eyes and there is that fear. That stupid fucking fear again.

The fear that he put there.

Fuck!

"Stephen Vincent Strange. Listen to me.\" Tony can't help how harsh his voice sounds. He needs Stephen to hear this. He needs Stephen to understand this. Tony takes a deep breath and looks Stephen directly in the eyes and makes sure that the other man is paying attention.

"I care about you. More than I have ever cared about anyone. You matter to me. I need you with me. I need you alive and I need you to stop hurting because every time you're hurt, I don't know what to do," Tony hates how desperate and helpless his voice sounds.

He watches Stephen's eyes widen and the doctor looks confounded. Confused. Shocked. He also looks like he is about to try to get out of the bed. It's only then that Tony realises that he can feel tears tracking down his face.

Oh.

"I've been here since Sunday Stephen. Thinking that you might- that you might never wake up and I can't do that. I can't do that again. You can't do that to me again.\" Tony finds himself muttering as he angrily wipes the tears away.

All the emotional upheavals, all the fears, all the anguish and all the pain crash down upon him all at once with the relief and the realisation that Stephen was going to be alright.

Tony can't quite remember the last time he'd cried, but he is crying now and he can't stop. Before he
knows it, there are arms wrapping around him and holding him tightly and Tony isn't quite sure how but they end up on the floor, Stephen cradling him in his arms.

He shouldn't be out of bed. Tony needs to get him back to bed. He knows that. He can't think. He can only cry and let Stephen hold him tightly as if he was afraid that Tony was going to fall apart.

Tony feels like he is falling apart.

He's not sure if he has ever felt this emotional before. This confusing set of emotions that are both overwhelming and cathartic all at once to release. It's- it's too much.

"I won't Anthony." Stephen reassures him softly as he kisses Tony's tears away. Tony curls more into the doctor's arms.

"I am so sorry I made you worry, dearest. It really hadn't been my intention." Stephen whispers to him softly and Tony doesn't really care what he is saying. No, that's not true. He cares. But it's the sound of Stephen's voice that Tony really focuses on.

Gods. He has missed that voice.

"You are not allowed to die on me Stephen Strange," Tony tells the man fiercely. He makes it sound as firm as he can make it given the circumstances. He holds Stephen's head firmly in his and makes sure that their eyes are meeting, blue-grey to brown. Stephen nods slowly.

"I won't. But I also won't allow you to die either Anthony." Stephen tells him softly. Tony looks at him and strokes the doctor's fresh cheeks. Tony had cleaned up his goatee just this morning. Stephen's face feels soft and warm. Tony feels Stephen's smile through his fingertips.

"Yeah. We can work on that." Tony tells him. They sit for a long while in silence. They stay quiet, just holding each other. Tony isn't sure how long they stay like that, curled up on the goddamned hardwood floor, holding each other and just breathing.

All Tony knows that Stephen is firm and steady in his arms and his hold feels warm. Eventually, the tears stop and Tony can breathe.

"Come to Paris with me." Tony blurts out. It's a spur of the moment thing. Sort of. He just needs to get away. He doesn't want to go back to the mansion. He doesn't want to stay in New York.

"The Monaco Grand Prix on the 16th." Stephen says easily enough and Tony can't help but reach up and kiss the doctor soundly on the lips. He missed this. He missed this brilliance. This intelligence. This voice.

Everything.

"Yeah. But come with me to Paris first." Tony tells him softly. Asks him. No. Pleads with him. Tony kisses Stephen softly on the lips, then on the corner of his lips then over his eyes, his nose, everywhere that he can reach. Stephen lets out a soft chuckle.

"Of course." Tony gives him a smile.

Throughout the time that Stephen had laid there, unmoving, Tony had been thinking. One of the things that kept coming back to him was all of the things that he had wanted to do with Stephen. All of the things that he wanted to see with Stephen. Do with Stephen.

Things that he had put off because he thought that they would have time. But the week has taught
him that there was no time. That he shouldn't put things off. He didn't plan on doing that any more.

Paris had been the first thing to pop into his mind. Walking through the back streets of Paris with Stephen, eating croissants. Having sex with the French windows wide open heedless of passerbys hearing them or seeing them, even.

Kissing Stephen under the Eiffel Tower.

Tony doubts that is something that they can really afford to do but he doesn't care. He wants to experience Paris with Stephen. He just wants to spend some time with Stephen.

Forget about SI, about the poisoning, about the secrets between them. Just a little time for themselves and the beautiful city of Paris.

That is what he wants. That is what he needs.

A mental health break, as Michelle would call it. He helps Stephen off of the cold floor and leads him back to the bed. Stephen is obedient and gets back into it quickly.

"I'm going to go and get your doctor." Tony says but before he can go, Stephen grabs his arm and sighs.

"There's no need. The entire Sanctum knows I'm awake." Stephen tells him drily and as if they had been waiting for just that time, there is a knock on the door and Tony has to quickly wipe his to get rid of the rest of the tears from his face and calls them in.

Tony most distinctly does not run off into the bathroom to hide his tear-stained face.

He doesn't.

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Sunday

9 May 2010

Clea looks at Tony and tries to think calming thoughts because she really shouldn't strangle her uncle's boyfriend and the man that was really her boss.

Even if she really wants to.

Her restraint in this matter would also save the universe. Gotta think of the damned universe, Clea thinks as she breathes out.

"You want to go to Paris. With Stephen. For a week. Then go to Monaco Grand Prix on the 16th. Are you fucking kidding me right now? Do you know how many appointments, meetings, galas and events I've already had to move and cancel?!!" Clea asks as she looks over his schedule. She is glaring and she doesn't even care. Tony shrugs.

"Stephen needs some time to recover and a holiday might be exactly what he needs. You can come and hell, if you really want to, you can probably just teleport him back and forth if it's necessary." Tony says, shrugging his shoulders.

She really, really should not hit him. Or yell at him. He's gone through a lot of shit and he really, really was taking things really well and he'd been very understanding, kind and patient and it would
be really, really wrong of her to hate him just a little right now.

But she does.

Then it hits her that he'd just referenced their ability to portal with ease and comfort that she had never expected of him. She gapes at him for just a moment before she recovers.

"You do realise that means I have to cancel all of Stephen's appointments, your appointments and re-arrange everything on top of arranging for the trip itself and teeing it up with Pepper's schedules to make sure that she can be there on Sunday." Clea says almost flatly. Tony blinks at her and nods.

Clea wonders if Pepper is a saint. She has to be to have been able to deal with Tony and his craziness for almost 10 years. She just had to be.

But... she can't fault the sweetness of the gesture and the thought process behind it and she can't fault the man's need and want to have Stephen close and to have him for himself without any work to get in the way after the shit that they'd just gone through.

Not to mention the whole fact that Tony really was still... dying.

"So what do you say we swing by LA for me to pack my bags and go to Paris tonight?" And of course, he wants to go tonight.

There aren't... any serious reasons to argue against that. The threat of another attack? Sure. But the Order was on alert right now and it took all of them and their healers to be able to heal Stephen of his injuries. Considering the seriousness of the injuries to Nicodemus, they doubted that he would be able to recover at the speed that Stephen did.

Not to mention the fact that his magic was just... yeah.

It also wasn't as if Stephen was unwell to the point that he couldn't travel either. In fact, he was doing remarkably well for a man that literally had been stabbed in the back a week or so ago and despite the fact that he'd been unconscious for so long, once he woke up and started to meditate and actually get himself sorted, he was recovering very, very rapidly.

"I promise that you can have my credit card and go shopping to your hearts content?" Tony tries. Clea gives him a flat look and sighs.

"Let me guess, you don't plan to leave the actual hotel do you?" She asks and Tony chuckles softly and puts on his best 'who me?' expression on his face. Yeah.

Clea wonders how she ended up being a lonely single woman at the age of 25 acting as the third wheel for her uncle when he goes on what is essentially a honeymoon with his lover. The universe was really fucking unfair sometimes.

"Is Stephen okay with this?" She asks because she has a feeling that Tony might not have asked him. Tony nods slowly though, which is a surprise.

"Stephen and I... need to work on our relationship. Talk. As much I hate that shit." Tony's admission is honestly the last thing that she had expected.

If she was honest, she had been so, so very angry and upset at the situation between Tony and Stephen before her grandparent's death. After though? After seeing how much Tony cared for Stephen and the love that he showed him, she had been incredibly surprised.
But Stephen still had been uncertain, unconfident in their relationship and that had shown. There were just so many obstacles in the way of them having a healthy, normal relationship. For one, Tony wasn't normal. Neither was Stephen.

And that was just them as human beings.

From that start point, Stephen had far more knowledge and time of Tony, through which he had fallen in love with the man even before they'd met and it had created an unhealthy balance of power in the relationship. The Soul Connection and it's almost mandatory need it created within Stephen for Tony hadn't helped.

Then all the secrets that Stephen had to keep, the responsibilities on his shoulders? Whilst Tony couldn't even feel a twinge of the Connection as a mundane normal human being? Yeah. There was bound to be problems.

So for them to be even at this stage, especially with Tony knowing that Stephen knew about his poisoning, that Stephen was different and not normal in any sense of the word?

They were doing well.

But they weren't doing the best that they could be doing. She knew that. So some time to just... spend together without distractions was probably helpful. Aside from the fact that they had gone through a lot of shit in the past little while too. Yeah. A holiday didn't sound like a horrible plan.

Paris was probably a good place to do it too.

She sighs.

"Fine. But you two are on your own. Pepper is going to need some help and with you boys in Paris, I might as well as get some actual work done." Clea decides. Oh she wants to go to Paris. She really does.

But there is work to be done at SI and she really wants to make sure that Pepper is alright. Especially with all the extra work that was going to come her way with Tony declaring himself on holidays.

"Are you sure? I thought you would want to be near Stephen." Tony says and Clea shrugs her shoulders. She may be his bodyguard, but in all honesty, aside from someone getting so incredibly very lucky or it being a calculated trap like Hong Kong had been, it is very, very difficult to truly attack someone like Stephen and come out on top.

Besides, it wasn't as if she was going to leave them completely unguarded. She would speak to the Masters in Paris and the staff at the D'Arte and make sure that they fortify their shields and ensure that Stephen and Tony are protected.

"I do. But you're right. The two of you need time and if I'm there, I will be a distraction." Clea tells him softly and Tony looks surprised but grateful. He nods.

"Go and get Stephen ready. I'll get the transport and everything sorted." Clea tells him and he gives her another smile and he is gone before she could ask him to bring her back a Hermes scarf. Or ten.

She supposes that she should at least be grateful that Tony was accepting them for what they were and wasn't as angry with them as she had expected. She only hopes that trend will continue.

Clea picks up the phone. She's going to have to tell Pepper about the change of plans and... she knows that the new CEO of Stark Industries was most definitely not going to be pleased.
Shit.

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Welcome to Paris?

Chapter Summary

The boys are enjoying a spot of Paris whilst the rest of the world continues to move on and create chaos around them.

But for a bit, they need a break and they could not careless about the chaos.

Chapter Notes

Erm... so... I spent like 24 hours in bed. I caught up on a lot of Youtube videos and slept a lot XD It was amazing. But I'm back and so are the boys lol

I hope you guys didn't miss the boys too much. If you did... well, here is some lovely fluffy sex for you to enjoy =P

ARC 3 has honestly been melting my brain a bit lol unfortunately like most stories I write, I know it's just a matter of time for the ideas to click into place for the story to make sense enough that I know where it's going so that I can keep writing so it just needs to percolate in my brain a little.

It's like I want to know how the story wants to go and how the relationships should work out but it's another thing to know how to get there XD

The stereotypical confused writer rant... yay! >_<

Anyway, I hope you guys enjoy this chapter and please throw me any ideas! I need the inspiration! XD

Monday

10 May 2010

The D’Arte Penthouse in Paris is... if Tony could describe it with one word it would be... decadent. Opulent maybe. The 18th-century French decor is artfully done but luxurious and decadent and though the suite is far smaller than the one in New York, for example, it is still big enough and the view is fantastic.

They can look out into the Eiffel Tower and see it lit by the night lights from the bedroom. The bellboy brings in the bags and leaves them just inside the door and is gone before Tony could even tip him.

Stephen doesn't seem to notice nor care. He moves almost immediately towards the sofa and he is seating down and leaning heavily against the cushions.

Tony is a little concerned about him, but he knows that the doctor is just tired. Despite the fact that he
had been unconscious for basically a week, he was still tired and his body was still recovering from
the injury.

"If you need to sleep, go to bed Stephen." Tony suggests to the doctor as he pulls out the laptop and
the usual array of tech that he simply cannot do without and moves to the corner of the living room
area where there is a study set up to hook everything up.

"I rather not." Stephen says quietly and there is some heat in that voice. Just enough of a hint for it to
be a light suggestion. Tony puts the laptop and the cables and everything else down onto the table
and turns to look at Stephen.

He is lounging on the decadent chaise as if it is a throne, his arms spread out against the backrests
and his eyes flashing beautifully blue thanks to the dark blue thin cashmere sweater he was wearing.

Despite the fact that Stephen was still pale, he looks... delectable.

"Oh? And what would you prefer to do?" Tony asks playing coy as he walks back over by the door
to go back towards their bags. He sees Stephen's shoulders shrug.

"What you've been wanting to do since I woke up." Stephen says quietly. Tony fights back the
chuckle. he grabs the lube from the side pocket of his suitcase and tucks it into his pocket.

It really did pay to prepare.

"Oh, and what is that?" Tony asks as he saunters back over to where Stephen is sitting. Tony moves
to sit in the chair opposite Stephen's. It's a tall lounge chair covered with a dark blue and white
patterned silk and it is quite comfortable. Tony crosses his legs and puts his hands on his lap and
raises an eyebrow at the doctor.

"To punish me." Stephen says with a dangerous flash of defiance in his eyes. Oh. Well then, Tony
thinks as he feels the flash of heat go through his body.

That's not... exactly what Tony wants to do. But there is a lot that he does want to do with his lover.
To his lover.

"Why does it sound like to me you're asking for a reward?" Tony challenges him and Stephen shrugs
his shoulders. The way that the fabric rolls and pulls with the movement of his shoulders and clings
onto his toned frame is just...

"Why can't it be both?" Stephen asks back. Tony raises an eyebrow and lets his lips curl up in a
predatory smile.

"Because right now, I'm not sure if you deserve a reward Stephen." Tony tells him and Stephen
looks thoughtful before he stands up from the chair and moves until he is standing before Tony. He
bends down and gently kisses Tony on the lips.

It's a sweet, gentle, loving kiss. Tony takes control of it almost immediately.

Like every kiss they'd shared since Stephen had woken up, Tony is grateful to note that the kiss does
not taste of blood. It tastes of the dark chocolate Stephen had eaten in the hotel lobby. The bitter
cacao lingers on his lips long after the kiss.

When Stephen pulls away from the kiss, he steps out of his shoes and with one graceful movement,
he kneels by Tony's feet and gives him a soft smile.
"Then punish me." Stephen says, smoothly going back to the scene that they had been setting. Stephen lowers his head and his eyes, a perfect picture of submission. Tony sits and admires the picture that Stephen presents for a while.

He can't help but admire it.

Stephen, his lean, toned body encased in that dark blue cashmere sweater and comfortable black jeans, bare feet, kneeling in front of him, his normally highly held up head bowed low in a sign of submission, his dark brown lashes resting gently on his high cheeks. Offering Tony control. Giving himself up to whatever Tony's darkest desires were.

God.

Except Tony's desires aren't very dark this afternoon. They are many, but they aren't dark. Not when his lover had just gotten out of a sickbed. But Stephen is right. Tony had wanted to punish him. He had been angry enough with him. He is probably still a little angry with him right now.

The idea that he had almost lost Stephen was so absolutely abhorrent that Tony doesn't let his mind linger on those thoughts.

He reaches out and gently runs a hand through Stephen's hair and pets him gently. He looks down to notice that Stephen is already semi-hard. He's not surprised.

It had been Tony that had decided they wouldn't go beyond just kissing since Stephen had woken up. He had been a little too worried about Stephen's health and condition to indulge, even with the clean bill of health Dr Grimshaw had given him.

But this?

This he couldn't say no to. It would also be a waste to not fully enjoy the situation. So Tony continues to pet Stephen's hair until he lets his hand trail down so that he can caress Stephen's face. He feels the doctor's exhaled breath against the palm of his hand.

He slips his thumb between Stephen's lips and the doctor opens his mouth almost immediately. Tony caresses Stephen's tongue with his thumb for a moment before he caresses Stephen's lips with the wet finger.

He takes the time to formulate his plan.

"Go to the bedroom. Strip down and lay face down on the bed." Tony instructs him. Stephen is quick to obey. Tony doesn't immediately go to the bedroom to join Stephen.

Instead, he finishes setting up their computers. He throws out the mini-holographic display screen onto the table and he makes sure that the folded up Iron Man suit is nearby.

He makes sure to grab a few of the things he is pretty sure Stephen hadn't thought to pack from his suitcase and makes his way slowly into the bedroom.

The bedroom is as opulent as the living room. Stephen has taken the top cover off the bed. Good idea. Considering the embroidery, it really wouldn't have felt too good against naked skin.

The warm afternoon sunlight streams through the window and out of it, Tony can see the Eiffel Tower.

Stephen is laid out on top of the bed, laying on his front as Tony had instructed, his pale body laid
bare for Tony's hungry, hungry eyes.

Tony doesn't let his eyes linger for too long on the angry red scar on Stephen's back. he doesn't focus on the way that it stands out starkly against Stephen's skin like a brand. Tony doesn't climb onto the bed. He doesn't go near Stephen or speaks to him.

He goes to the bathroom instead and with warm water, cleans the number of toys he had thought to bring with him. Once he is done, he dries them thoroughly and brings them back to the bedroom and lays them out on the bed near the foot of the bed and slowly climbs onto the bed.

"I'm going to blindfold you. But I am not going to leave this room." Tony says quietly. Stephen nods slowly. Tony pulls out the heavy-duty blindfold he actually had to sleep on planes and puts it over Stephen's eyes. He helps Stephen to settle his head down back onto the pillow.

"I'm also going to tie up your wrists." Tony hears the soft gasp and the almost moan that Stephen manages to barely hold back. He smiles to himself as he ties Stephen's wrists behind his back with a necktie.

Tony makes sure that the knot itself is tight enough but the loops are gentle enough that they wouldn't hurt Stephen's wrists and hands and that there would be plenty of wriggle room to make sure his shoulders and thus his back wouldn't be strained.

It was going to be impossible to get the wrinkles out of the tie later, but hey. It's a well worth sacrifice of a good tie. Besides, the dark grey looks beautiful against Stephen's pale skin.

"You may speak but you will address me properly, Stephen." Tony tells him softly but sternly as he climbs on to the bed and runs a single finger slowly down Stephen's spine.

"Yes, sir." Stephen breathes out. Tony rewards him with a firm pat on his hair before he grabs a pillow and puts it underneath Stephen's hip. He encourages the doctor to spread his legs a bit so that his buttocks are raised up and his hole is exposed and he is laid out like the most decadent feast.

"Good boy." Tony manages to breathe out. This was definitely going to be a challenge, he thinks as he gets the lube out and coats his fingers.

He is slow to prepare Stephen. He takes his time to tease the man but he doesn't let his fingers stray towards the little nub inside of Stephen. Instead, he focuses on the silky feel of the inner walls wrapping around his fingers until Stephen is ready to take more than just his fingers.

"If you move or you come without my permission, I am going to spank you Stephen. Do you understand me?" Tony asks and he caresses Stephen's buttocks slowly.

"Yes, sir." Stephen all but moans out. Tony withdraws his fingers and moves to coat the first toy he had in mind with the lube. It's a vibrating plug that Tony had rather enjoyed using himself and he hopes that Stephen will enjoy it too.

He inserts it slowly and makes sure to check Stephen's expression to ensure that he isn't in any pain. He shouldn't be but Tony knows better than to push too hard.

Once the plug is completely in, Stephen's expression goes almost slack with pleasure. It's designed to sit perfectly against the prostate and it seems to be doing just that. Good. Tony runs a soothing hand down Stephen's spine.

"You're being so good Stephen." Tony praises him softly as he turns the vibrator on and the doctor's body shudders as the pleasure kicks in.
The litany of moans that starts to come through Stephen's lips keeps the smile firmly on Tony's face as he runs his hands down Stephen's body and he leans down to kiss Stephen's beautiful buttocks right on the rise of it.

He wants to prolong this. He wants to keep Stephen at that height of pleasure for as long as he can. As much as he wants to dive into Stephen's body and enjoy himself, this is another sort of indulgence.

Just knowing that Stephen's pleasure, his release, his body was completely under Tony's control and his desires and at his mercy sends a thrill of pleasure down his own spine.

"Does that feel good Stephen?" Tony asks softly and Stephen moans out his inarticulate response. He isn't too surprised that Stephen has already been reduced to non-verbal communications.

It has been a while for both of them and Stephen enjoys sex as much as Tony does. It's good to have a partner that has the same sexual appetite and drive that he does. That had been difficult in the past sometimes.

He knows that even with Stephen, he is the one that wants and needs sex more than Stephen. The doctor prefers more the intimacy of their sexual activities rather than the act itself, but he is not averse to it either. Not with Stephen.

"I really should have taken you home that first night we met." Tony says quietly as he runs a hand down Stephen's shoulder blades. His hand comes to a stop where the fresh, angry red scar is still healing on the doctor's back.

It is so incredibly close to Stephen's heart.

"I wasted so much time with you." He is in a reflective mood, Tony thinks as he gently runs a finger up and down the scar and the sensitive tissue he knows is there.

Grimshaw had assured him that through whatever it is that they did that the scar will not be very visible when it has finished healing, but for now, it is a long, jagged and angry thing that terrifies Tony.

He leans down to kiss it softly.

"For a while, I just want to enjoy this Stephen. Enjoy us, but we are going to talk. About where this is going. What I need from you and what you need from me." Tony promises.

He isn't really sure if Stephen can even hear what he is saying. Or whether in the haze of pleasure that he is in, he could even understand what Tony is saying. He doesn't mind.

The words are more for him than anything else. Tony increases the strength of the vibrations on the toy and Stephen's body shudders again and he throws his head side to side and the moans come faster between the pants and the doctor's body starts to shake with the difficulty of remaining still.

"Such a good boy." Tony praises him for keeping still. He's used the toy before. He knows how goddamned amazing the thing feels. He is actually surprised that Stephen is able to hold on so quite well despite it.

Tony would have been humping the damned pillow.

"If you're a good boy and you can keep yourself from coming, when you're all wet and loose and desperate to come, I'm going to fuck you into the mattress Stephen." Tony promises him. Stephen
only moans in response.

There is a thin layer of sweat over the doctor's body now and the afternoon Parisian sunlight streams through the windows and Stephen's skin glistens with it.

Tony gets off the bed and moves so that he can get a perfect view of his lover.

The dark blue of the bedsheets only make Stephen's pale skin stand out all the more and between the way that Stephen's body is shaking with need and his face is slack with pleasure and his lips are open to let out the pants and moans, Stephen looks... perfect.

There is a graceful bend of the elbows to where his hands are bound against his lower back. The stark contrast of the grey tie against the pale skin, the raised buttocks with the black handle of the toy vibrating inside of him.

God.

Tony can be patient. He really can be. He has held out for far, far longer with other subs before. He can with Stephen too.

It is getting a bit too hot though.

Tony takes his clothes off and lays it over the chair in the corner of the bedroom. He keeps his steps soft so that Stephen will be straining to try to hear him over his own moans and pants.

It's a part of the game. A part of not knowing where the other is, what they are doing. Imagining instead.

Tony takes the other toys and puts them away in a drawer in the bedside table. He only leaves the lube.

He also goes to the bathroom and grabs a towel to clean themselves up with when they are done.

He even goes out to the living room to grab a bottle of water and brings it back just in case Stephen will need it later.

By the time he has done all that, Stephen is ready to completely fall apart. His body was all but vibrating with desire and it was obvious that it was becoming nearly impossible for Stephen to stay still and he is almost sobbing with his desire and need.

Perfect.

Tony climbs into the bed and runs a soothing hand down Stephen's back and the doctor's body shudders underneath his hand. He is so very sensitised. Tony wishes he had something like a feather. That would work so well in a situation like this.

No matter. Next time, Tony thinks.

He turns the toy off but doesn't take it out. He waits until Stephen can feel that it has stopped and the doctor bows his head and his body goes limp after being so tense for so long with the pleasure that had been building. Tony waits.

It doesn't take long for a whine to escape from Stephen's lips.

Tony smirks as he shushes him.
"Don't forget Stephen. This is meant to be punishment, not a reward." Tony tells him almost sternly and Stephen does let out a sob at that point. Then a whimper before he lets out a shuddering breath and nods slowly.

"So-Sorry- sir." Stephen pants out slowly and his words are slurred and barely intelligible, but it sounds like music to Tony's ears.

"So you should be Stephen. You told me you were mine and you got yourself hurt. I don't appreciate that." Tony tells him almost softly as he runs his finger along the scar and Stephen's body arches into the touch like a cat, though it is clear that he is trying to control his reactions.

"I'm sorry sir." Stephen manages a little clearly this time. But there are more emotions in that voice and it's the kind of emotion that Tony doesn't want right now. Guilt.

Tony kisses Stephen's shoulder and turns the toy back on. Stephen's whole body reacts to that. He arches and moans and his arms struggle until Tony puts a hand down on Stephen's lower back to hold him into place.

Stephen's moans turn into cries and Tony holds him firmly into place with a hand on his lower back for a while until Stephen is so completely lost in the pleasure again and desperately trying not to come before he turns the toy off again.

This time, Stephen doesn't go limp. He is so desperate for release that it must almost be painful. Tony isn't cruel. Besides, he wanted Stephen to truly enjoy this. Tony smiles and he eases the toy out and lubes himself up.

Tony doesn't give Stephen time to figure out what is happening. Whether Tony is replacing one toy with another. He plunges right into the wet heat that is Stephen's body and Stephen cries out and buries his head into the pillows hard as Tony cries out too.

God.

He had been so focused on Stephen that he had almost forgotten about his own needs but they had been building as well and the feel of Stephen's walls tightening around him feels... amazing.

Tony moves carefully once or twice to make sure that there is sufficient lube and that Stephen is stretched enough for a hard fuck. Once he is certain of that, Tony doesn't hesitate.

He grabs the slim hips with both of his hands and he starts moving hard and fast into the doctor's body and the sound of flesh hitting flesh, the lube squelching, moans and pants and cries fill the penthouse suite.

Through the open windows, Tony knows that the sounds could easily be carried out into the streets. Penthouse suite it may be, but they were in the old quarters of Paris. The building is only five storeys.

Tony wonders if anyone could hear them from the streets. If anyone would care. He doesn't. He hastily loosens the bindings holding Stephen's wrists together.

He needs to kiss Stephen. Scene be damned.

He turns Stephen around and plunges back into him hard and fast and kisses him just as hard and sloppily as the doctor's long legs wrap around his thighs and Stephen's hands desperately move to try to find his face.
Tony draws them to him and kisses the fingertips that reach his lips. Tony wants to see the brilliant blue and grey eyes that are forever changing colours, but he knows better than to take the blindfold off so suddenly.

When he comes, it is with a shout almost and it catches Tony off guard. He hadn't known it had been building that fast. Stephen comes between them and Tony pulls Stephen into his arms and pulls him towards the not so damp part of the bed and carefully holds the doctor in his arms and kisses him.

"Bienvenue a Paris." Tony mutters into Stephen's hair and the doctor chuckles softly.

Objective One on the Bucket List complete, Tony thinks quietly as he looks out over the Eiffel Tower with Stephen in his arms.

City of love indeed.

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Tuesday

11 May 2010

Natasha Romanov doesn't fail missions.

She has never failed a mission. The Red Room had drummed into her the price of failure. That is no longer the price that she fears. Death and dishonour and failing the grand agenda of the Soviet Union is no longer her priority.

In fact, it hasn't been her priority since she had met Clint Barton.

No.

Now her fear of failure was the fact that she would not be able to take the red off of her ledger before she finished up her life. There is so much red in her ledger. It is dripping with blood and she feels it drenching her very soul every time she breathes.

She is tainted.

She is a monster. She knows that. She has always known that. She had known what she would be becoming during her time in the Red Room. The moment she had stepped out of the graduation ceremony, she had known that she would be a monster.

It was so easy to compartmentalise. Or it had been. More and more, it was becoming difficult. Clint's kindness and his friendship make her see that there is more than just the mission and the objective.

There are days that she wishes that he would have just killed her instead.

Today is one of those days.

It is hard to watch Clea Strange and Pepper Potts talking softly together. Their friendship. Their closeness and their ease with each other.

It's the kind of closeness and ease with another human being that Natasha will never have. She doesn't trust herself to do that. She doesn't trust anyone enough to let them in close enough to be that for her.

For a mission that Natasha had thought would be easy, Tony Stark was proving to be much tougher
a nut to crack and there was a lot more going on in the background that SHIELD hadn't been able to figure out. That SHIELD simply hadn't known about.

That is impressive.

SHIELD has agents everywhere. In every major world government, in all government agencies. They had spies strewn throughout the major societies and at different levels of societies. It was necessary.

But Stark Industries had been difficult for SHIELD to infiltrate. Initially, because they didn't see the need. SHIELD had worked enough with some of the higher ups within Stark Industries to obtain all the weapons and all the tech that they had needed.

When that wasn't possible, SHIELD had used the government contracts that Stark Industries had to get information, weapons and tools that they had needed.

So there hadn't been a need to waste an agent on Stark Industries.

All of that changed when Tony Stark came back from Afghanistan. When he purged the Board of Directors and the staff associated with the weapons trade that Obadiah Stane had been conducting, SHIELD lost all its contacts within Stark Industries.

Replacing those contacts had been a priority, but no one had been willing to work with SHIELD for one and for another, they simply haven't been able to get any new recruits into Stark Industries.

Their background checks were more thorough than even what SHIELD was capable of thwarting without extensive work. The approaches to Pepper Potts and James Rhodes have failed as well. Even the household staff and the lower level staff Tony interacted with had been impossible to recruit and turn.

It didn't make it easier when Stephen Strange came into the scene. He was a threat. A concern. Something that they had to be careful with. They didn't know which organisation he worked for and what he was capable of. Which was another problem.

They had tried harder at that point, but Tony's mansion was difficult to gain access to without showing their hand and Tony isolated himself in a way that they hadn't expected and it blocked off most of the approaches that SHIELD has had.

But knowing that the palladium core that he uses in his Arc Reactor is likely to be poisoning him gives them the weakness that they can exploit to manipulate him.

Once it becomes obvious to Tony Stark that he is dying, he will become fragile and vulnerable. Death does that to people. It was up to her to monitor his situation and given the chance, seduce him and manipulate him.

She had thought that she had done everything right to both get his attention and interest during their first meeting, but apparently, she had been wrong.

Instead of her, Clea Strange works as Tony's Personal Assistant and she is assigned to work with Pepper Potts. Which in itself isn't a problem.

Pepper Potts has significant power in Stark Industries and as the CEO, she has access both to the company and it's files as well as Tony Stark. It's not a bad position to be in. But Pepper Potts was turning out to be a difficult nut to crack as well.
Despite the woman's friendly, cordial nature, she does not open up to Natasha. She had initially thought that since Pepper was new to the role of CEO and would no doubt find it stressful and difficult, having a close female confidante in the form of a PA would be helpful.

Except, Pepper Potts isn't stressed. She is doing a lot of work and working stupid hours to make sure that she gets on top of everything, but she takes everything in stride. She seems confident, engaged and... enjoying herself more than having difficulties or being overwhelmed.

Which doesn't give Natasha the weakness that she can exploit. It also doesn't look like Pepper Potts has any interest in women either. So that option was out as well.

But Natasha figures that she has time to figure it out. Tony's poisoning situation wouldn't be bad enough yet for him to be desperate. He would need to be desperate and besides himself before they could really exploit the weakness properly.

According to the psych profile that she had, Tony Stark would most likely hide the fact that he was dying and that he would try to solve the problem himself. He would be desperate and alone and in need of a kind voice and support. She could provide that.

So she has time. At least that's what she thought. But that's of course when Clea Strange decided to turn up at the office.

She waltzes into the room as if she owns it and there is a quiet confidence about her that Natasha recognises from herself. The confidence of a woman that knows how to defend and look after herself.

If the woman didn't have some sort of combat skill. Natasha would eat her own arm.

That isn't what is most interesting about Clea Strange though. By all accounts, she is a normal middle-class girl born and raised in Pennsylvania with a degree in political sciences from Harvard of all places and a Masters that she’d just completed from NYU. Which is an odd choice.

But then she had also been working with Stephen Strange so the choice of university is probably influenced by him, Natasha believes.

What fascinates Natasha about Clea Strange is her... efficiency. Since she had come into the office, despite the fact that she had been working for SI for effectively, a week or two at the maximum and despite the fact that she had never worked from the office, Clea is familiar with everyone.

She laughs and jokes and makes personalised comments and compliments to every staff member that they come across. She easily picks up and works through the work that they have and offers up new ideas that even Natasha hadn't been able to think about before.

Within a day, Clea Strange makes allies throughout the company and quickly becomes very well perceived and liked. Genuinely. It's a feat that Natasha knows that she would not be able to accomplish.

She isn't open enough for that. She can't show enough of herself for that. Even at SHIELD, she is respected and she is feared. But she is not liked. She never would be.

Clea's friendship with Pepper Potts is obvious too. They are clearly close friends and that throws another wrench into Natasha's plans. With Clea involved, her plans to be Pepper Pott's confidant goes out the window very quickly.

Natasha knows that she can't usurp that position. But she does try to take the opportunity to get to
know Clea Strange.

And despite herself, Natasha finds that she actually... likes the younger woman. She is intelligent, funny and friendly. She is kind and warm and she is everything that Natasha is not.

Every time that Clea Strange is in the room, Natasha feels that sense of longing that she hasn't felt in a long time. She wonders if she hadn't been taken by the Red Room, whether she would have turned out to be someone like Clea.

With her bright disposition and demeanour, with her warmth, her openness and her smiles.

She doubts it.

Clea finishes up her conversation with Pepper and comes over to her desk. Their desks are set up in Pepper's office to allow for quick conversations and generally because if there are meetings within the office, Pepper usually requests that one of them take notes.

It's an arrangement that works well and more importantly, gives Natasha a close insight into the two women.

"Pepper, you have a meeting in five minutes with Camilla." Clea reminds her some time later and when Pepper nods and hurries out of the office after gathering the paperwork, Clea and Natasha are left alone.

It's the first time they've been alone. Yesterday had been crazy chaotic with all the meetings that Pepper has had to attend and Clea had smoothly inserted herself into the work and prepared for Pepper's meetings along with Natasha.

It had been surprisingly easy to work with the younger woman. Natasha is aware that Clea is doing a lot of Natasha's work for her and she appreciates it. Natasha knows how to be a PA but the workload was a lot more than she had expected and it takes some getting used to.

Clea seems a lot more familiar with it and she smoothly handles the work seemingly without a word of complaint or annoyance. Natasha appreciates it.

"Thank you by the way," Natasha tells her quietly as they work and Clea's typing stops for a moment and Clea meets her eyes and she raises her eyebrows.

"For helping me." Natasha clarifies and Clea gives her a warm smile.

"I don't mind. I would have gone insane without having something to do anyway. With Stephen and Tony on holidays, it's not like I have any work to do for them." Clea says and Natasha takes the opportunity.

"Oh? Where's Mr Stark and Dr Strange?" Natasha asks, keeping her tone casual and curious. Clea sighs.

"In Paris. I wouldn't be too surprised if the paparazzi catch them at the Moulin Rouge or something. Oh God. If they do, I am going to kill them both." Clea says dramatically.

Natasha thinks.

In a way, Tony's decision to go to Paris makes sense. It's close to Monaco and given that Tony's condition was likely worsening and he may want to stay out of the public's eye for a while after the Senate Hearing, it wasn't a terrible idea.
But why was Stephen Strange with Tony Stark? Were they really that close as friends or was there something more?

Natasha tries to remember the gym. She doesn't have a photographic memory, but she has fantastic situational awareness. She remembers that when she had been interacting with Tony Stark at the gym, Stephen had come in halfway through the interaction.

Then he had been watching, but she hadn't noticed anything odd other than the fact that he had looked extremely tired. Which wasn't surprising considering the work he'd done for the CDC.

If Stephen had a relationship with Tony, her approach should have made him jealous. Upset. She hadn't sensed anything like that.

"Do Dr Strange and Mr Stark travel often together?" Natasha doesn't even have to manufacture the curiosity she feels. It is genuine enough. Clea shrugs her shoulders.

"They are workaholics. Stephen works in New York Monday to Wednesday. Thursday to Sunday, he comes to Malibu and works with Tony on whatever project they are building next. If it wasn't for JARVIS, they would either starve to death or work themselves into exhaustion." Clea sighs.

"So no. They don't travel often. But Stephen's had a tough time at the CDC and needed a break and I think Tony was stressed after the Senate Hearing. So given the Grand Prix, the timing was right for a break I think." Clea explains and Natasha nods slowly and accepts the explanation for what it is.

Natasha wishes that she could get someone to keep an eye on them, but given that Clint was away on mission and the D'Arte was impenetrable even to most SHIELD agents, she's not sure if it's worth even trying to get someone to conduct surveillance on the two of them.

"Why didn't you go with them?" Natasha asks her. It's a genuine question. As both of their PAs, it would make sense for her to be there with them. Clea scoffs.

"Because being around them 24/7 when they don't have a lab available would be very detrimental to their health." Clea tells her and Natasha raises an eyebrow at her and Clea giggles.

"Last time we went on a trip together was Seoul. We spent an entire day getting lost because neither of them understood the concept of cash exchange. Then they went to one medical conference presentation for an hour." Clea sounds exasperated but her tone is playful and draws Natasha in. She waits for Clea to continue. She does after taking a sip of her tea.

"One medical conference. For one bloody hour. Ten minutes later, I'm sent to organise for a meeting, where the two of them go into business together, decide to build a genetics lab, turns their hotel room into a makeshift workshop and builds and programs themselves a freaking tissue printing 3D printer." It's the exasperation in the younger woman's voice that does it.

Natasha laughs as the girl goes on about the problems of trying to get a 3D printer and workshop equipment set up in a hotel suite and trying to get a business contract organise in Korean and in English that would work for all parties in the space of a couple of days.

"In another words, if they try something like that again, I figured I would end up throwing them both into the Seine and I really don't want to be charged with double homicide." Clea finishes her story and Natasha gives her a sympathetic look but she can't hide the amusement.

"Just be glad that you get to work with Pepper. She doesn't try to kill you with chilli hotpots." Clea tells her. Natasha knows better. Don't develop feelings and connections with the targets. But Natasha can't help it.
She likes Clea Strange.
Damn.

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**Thursday**

**13 May 2010**

Ivan Antonovich Vanko is used to the anger thrumming through him. He has been feeling it all of his life.

Every time he sees Tony Stark on the news, he feels it. The man that has everything that should be his. The wealth. The fame. The acknowledgement.

All of it ought to have been his.

But it is not.

It had been stolen from him. His father's invention had been stolen from him. Everything that had mattered to his father, stolen and taken advantage of by a man that already had far more than his father.

The younger man is more than Ivan is. He knows that. He is not stupid enough to underestimate his enemy. Tony Stark is a genius. Some way say that he is unparalleled.

Ivan isn't sure about that.

But the man is smart and he knows how business works. Tony Stark is wealthy, influential and powerful. Well known and acknowledged by the world.

Tony Stark needs that.

He needs the world to believe in him and believe in Iron Man. For a man like him, public perception is everything. For Ivan, being an unknown entity is his strength.

He can hide and he can blend into the rest of the world. Tony Stark can't.

It is a good thing that Tony Stark has so many enemies. It is easy to find those that hate him. It is all too easy to find those that would like to bring about his downfall.

Especially since those enemies are so very resourceful.

They are able to sneak not only him into Monaco but also his device.

The plan is simple in Ivan's mind. It doesn't matter if he succeeds or not. If he can kill Tony Stark, fantastic. If he cannot, it still doesn't matter. He will still have destroyed what matters the most to Tony Stark.

Ivan can feel the smile settle on his lips as he looks over the transport schedule and the pass that will get him into the race pits.

Perfect.

Just a few more days and he can put Tony Stark down like the dog that he was. It would be so easy.
So very, very simple.

Ivan starts to whistle as he packs his device carefully into the crates. He keeps the Arc Reactor on himself. He trusts that those that are providing him transport hates Tony Stark to help him out, but he doesn't trust them not to take the device he had managed to build.

A few more days, father, he thinks.

Then revenge will be theirs.

~~~
The Conversation

Chapter Summary

The boys finally talk. What will be the outcome of it?

More importantly, what the hell is Clea up to and what the hell is Pepper meant to be doing about it?

Oh and does Tony really need a Tesla?

Chapter Notes

... it is freezing. I literally cannot feel my fingers. OMG. I hate winter. But I want to write and my keyboard is honestly not warm enough. Is there like a heated keyboard out there somewhere?

I tried gloves. Can't type with those. It's super annoying... and my heater just broke. Because of course it did.

I'm lucky at least I'm in Australia and even in the middle of freezing winter it's not like it snows so there is that at least XD

Random rant about the winter that I'm pretty sure most of you lovely readers are not experiencing because Australia is weird and so is our weather =P

I'm not super... confident with this chapter but hey. I can't fix it anymore than what I have so this is what we've got. I hope it's okay and that you guys enjoy! ^___^

<3

Friday

14 May 2010

"You know this is permanent for me, right?" Tony asks all of sudden.

Stephen stiffens a little with surprise in Tony's arms as they lay curled up together on the sofa.

It's late.

They'd just been to the Louvre and they are exhausted from all the walking. Too tired for even sex. But that might have something to do with the amazing blow job they gave each other in the car on the way back to the hotel, heedless of their driver.

The week itself has been absolutely wonderful. It had felt like a dream to go through the week, enjoying Paris and each other as they explored the city during the day and during the night, enjoyed
each other's bodies.

There have been no heavy discussions. They haven't talked about the poisoning. They haven't talked
about Stephen almost dying apart from the first day. They didn't come to a verbal agreement, but
both of them had known that this was a time out. This was a break from all the shit in their lives just
to... be themselves and enjoy themselves.

It has been... beautiful.

"I- I didn't want to presume." Stephen stumbles out his words. He hates the insecurity in his voice.
He hates the uncertainty he feels despite the dedication Tony had shown him.

If he thinks about it, from the time his parents had passed, Tony had been there for him. Had been
supporting him and caring for him in a way he had never expected.

Tony expressed to him over and over again that he was sorry. That the way that he had taken the
relationship to a purely sexual one had been wrong. That it had been a mistake. That Tony regretted
it and that wasn't what he wanted anymore.

Stephen was grateful. He understood it. In his head, but in his heart, the insecurity remained. There
was so many secrets, so many burdens that make their relationship difficult and strained.

Stephen doesn't know how it would work in a normal relationship, but between them... there are just
too many obstacles. So yes. Despite everything, despite Tony's actions and words telling him
otherwise, Stephen had been uncertain. He still was despite the words that Tony was saying.

"You should. I care about you. I want you in my life. Whatever I have left, I want to spend that time
with you." Tony tells him softly and it is clear that talking like this is uncomfortable for Tony.

He doesn't like being emotionally vulnerable. But he was sharing his words and his emotions with
Stephen and he knows that it is a big step. He appreciates it. He just wishes that he could fully
believe those words and believe the commitment that Tony was giving him.

"It's okay if you can't believe me. I haven't done anything to earn that trust. I just want you to know
that I want you in my life. I want you to be my partner in every sense of that word." Tony's voice
holds conviction and firm determination.

Stephen nods slowly as Tony holds him tighter. He wishes he could see Tony's face. The man holds
him too tightly for that. So instead, Stephen brings up Tony's hand in his trembling one and kisses
the palm of it softly.

A kiss of loyalty and devotion.

"I love you." Stephen tells him softly. It's the only thing that he can say under the circumstances.
Tony turns him around in his arms and kisses him and it feels beautiful. Perfect.

It's not a sexual kiss. It's a soft, gentle, loving kiss of love and promise. It expressed all the words that
Tony struggles to say. Stephen doesn't mind.

"Me too." Tony says quietly and Stephen is shocked but he can't help the smile that threatens to split
his face open. He kisses Tony again.

Then slowly, Stephen settles back into Tony's arms, resting his head on the man's chest as Tony runs
his fingers through Stephen's hair. Tony likes to do that. Stephen likes it too. It's calming and he
needs some calming.
"So this is my proposal Stephen." Tony's voice stays quiet and Stephen nods. He doesn't look up at him even though he wants to. He knows that Tony finds it easier to talk about things like this when they aren't looking at each other.

"I know you have secrets. I know that they are big and they are things that I won't understand until you are ready to explain them to me. I'm going to wait. You promised that you will tell me everything eventually. So I will wait." Tony says quietly and Stephen can feel his heart fill with emotion and hope and gratitude.

He fills the lump build in his throat as he nods slowly. Tony holds him tighter.

"I'm going to trust that you will share whatever you can with me and whatever of yourself with me. I will try to do the same." Stephen hadn't expected this. He had never expected this.

He thought that they would never be able to talk like this about their relationship. Or rather, that Tony would be able to talk like this with him about their relationship. He really ought to have trusted the man more.

"There's going to be things happening in the future that you are going to have to ask me to do isn't there?" Tony asks softly and this time, Stephen does look up. He sits up in fact and Tony lets him. They end up properly seated on the long lounge and Stephen nods slowly as Tony looks at him and waits for the response.

"Yes. There are... things that will happen and I- where possible, there are things that I could tell you to make things... safer." Stephen thinks about Monaco. About SHIELD. About Hammer. There are strategies in place to safeguard the people at the Expo.

There are safeguards that Stephen had put everywhere over the years in New York to do the best that he could to protect the people there.

Having Tony aware of what was going to happen and having his cooperation would make things... easier.

"Then tell me. When those things pop up, tell me and I will do what you ask me to do. I trust you." It's Tony's last sentence that does it.

Stephen feels so absolutely overwhelmed with emotion and he feels the first tear streak through and he wipes at it quickly but the second one follows and Stephen can't stop the flow of tears that irrationally fall from his eyes.

He should be happy that Tony trusts him and by gods he is. He doesn't understand why being so overwhelmed with that happiness and the other emotions rushing through him results in tears. He feels like an idiot.

"Oh Stephen, baby, please don't cry." Tony says with a warm voice as he moves closer and pulls Stephen back into his arms. Stephen buries his head on the genius's shoulder.

Stephen is secure enough in his masculinity that he isn't ashamed of the tears, he is more confused by them and he feels overwhelmed and vulnerable in a way that he hadn't expected.

"Thank you." Stephen manages to breathe out and Tony chuckles softly.

"It's better than having you trying to do things in the background without me knowing and getting hurt." Tony says and Stephen feels his heart warm even more.
Stephen takes a few calming breaths and when he is calm enough, he pulls himself out of Tony's arms and looks at the man carefully and thinks over his words.

"There is a solution for the palladium poisoning. You will get it hopefully... soon. If the parties that have it don't provide it, I will get it myself if I have to. You're not going to die." Stephen tells him almost vehemently.

In almost every iteration of the universe that Stephen had seen, Tony Stark survives this. He gets the new element ideas from SHIELD. He will make the new element and he will be okay.

Stephen knows that.

But if SHIELD doesn't look like they will bring it in time... Stephen remembers the structures of the atom the new element. he can provide it to Tony if he has to.

Tony Stark was not going to die on his watch.

"Okay. I'm guessing you can't tell me exactly who, why, when or what because it has to be my decision and my actions." Tony says and Stephen thinks for a moment before he nods.

Honestly, it's also because he doesn't think it is ethical to colour Tony's views when it comes to Natasha Romanov and Fury.

He wants Tony to meet them himself and make his own decisions and assessments about them. He doesn't want to pass on his bias when it comes to them over to Tony. That would be unfair on them.

After all, the Natasha Romanov and Nicholas Fury of this universe could be vastly different from the ones that he has seen. He can't be certain, but there is a chance.

It would be unfair of him to not even grant them the chance of getting to know Tony and to make their decisions accordingly.

As much as Stephen wants to stand in the way and become a shield and protect Tony from every potential hurt, he could also be depriving Tony of the opportunities to make friends and build relationships that he may need and want in the future.

There has to be a balance. An opportunity offered. So Stephen is going to keep his mouth shut when it comes to SHIELD and the Avengers. Give them a chance. Even for himself too. He may know the other versions of them, but he doesn't know this version.

He will give them a fair chance and hope that they don't disappoint him.

"Anything else?" Tony asks him almost casually. Stephen looks over to the suitcase suit and looks at Tony.

"Have that nearby during the Grand Prix." Stephen says and Tony raises an eyebrow. Stephen lets the genius think and when the calculations are done in his head, he nods slowly.

"There's going to be an attack." Tony says quietly. Stephen doesn't respond. He can't say more than that. Tony nods mostly to himself and sighs.

"You're going to stay safe though right? Keep yourself out of the fight?" Tony asks him. Stephen doesn't quite know what to say for a short while but he nods slowly. It would be better to reassure Tony.
"All of sudden, I'm not that excited for the Grand Prix anymore." Tony grumbles but he pulls Stephen back into his arms and they are in that tangle of limbs once again.

"I need you safe Stephen." Tony murmurs into his hair. Stephen doesn't know what to say so he just hums and holds onto Tony a little tighter. He doesn't let his eyes stray to the blue veins he can see popping out of Tony's skin.

He closes his eyes and for a long time, they lay there, in silence, thinking and enjoying probably the last bit of peace they would have for a while now.

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Saturday

15 May 2010

Pepper has no idea what Clea is up to.

She doesn't understand why Clea was being so kind and lovely to a woman that they know isn't who she appears to be. That was most likely in Stark Industries in order to spy on them.

The decision to hire Natalie Rushman had been out of their desire to ensure that they can keep an eye on her and to figure out who she worked for and what was she was after.

Pepper had shared that knowledge with Clea and had asked her to keep an eye on Natalie but it seemed more like the girl was trying to make friends.

Pepper doesn't understand why but she has a feeling that Clea was planning something or at the very least, acting with some sort of a plan. At least that's what she hoped for.

Pepper knows Clea well enough to know that she is smart and she is cunning. So there has to be something there.

Despite all of that, their arrival in Monaco is smooth and once Pepper has talked to the engineering team working on the car that they would be using for the race and have spoken to the driver, they haven't had much else that needed to be done.

Tony and Stephen were arriving tomorrow at the hotel and they were going to be staying at the Penthouse Suite as usual whilst Pepper, Clea and Natalie will be staying in the suite just below them.

It also meant that they had some free time and Clea had dragged the two of them out into the city for a girl's day out, according to Clea.

Not that Pepper minds. Monaco is a beautiful city-state and all three of them speak French fluently enough that there is no language barrier or discomfort for them.

The cafes are lovely, the streets are lovely and the shopping is divine. So despite the fact that she is worried about Natalie Rushman and what she may be planning and what Clea might be planning, Pepper finds herself relaxing.

"You have to try this one on Nat!" Clea declares when she finds a form-fitting red dress with a low square neckline. Pepper looks over and she has to agree that given Natalie's colouring, she would look lovely in the dress.
"Clea, I'm not-" Clea doesn't let her protest for too long. She all but drags the woman into the changing rooms with a couple of dresses and demands that she change into it so they can see how she looks.

When Clea comes back out, she sits down next to Pepper in the lounge area that the exclusive boutique has set up for their guests.

"I hope you know what you are doing." Pepper whispers quietly to Clea, who gives her a small smile and nods.

"I figured it would be nice to show her that we are human and that we are people that she could maybe even be friends with rather than just targets for whatever investigation she is running." Clea says and Pepper is surprised for a moment. She doesn't get a chance to reply when Natalie comes back out of the changing room.

Pepper takes a moment to think as Clea goes up to her and drags her over to the belts to find one that will go nicely with the dress.

She's right, Pepper thinks. In a way, Clea was absolutely right. Her approach to dealing with corporate spy or spies, in general, was unorthodox but then it wasn't as if there as a handbook on how to deal with people like that.

Humanising themselves and the spy and being warm and friendly may give them more of an in but at the same time, if you are already aware of what they were trying to do... it's a double layer of manipulations.

It's very like Clea, Pepper thinks.

The younger woman is smart and she's experienced the world and whilst she wasn't naive, she was an optimist. Clea wanted to see the good and the best in people though she could also be cynical and realistic. She liked that about Clea.

Throughout the years and all the shit that she shes in the corporate world, Pepper had become more and more cynical. Clea was a good reminder to try to see the good in the world and people.

Irrationally, Pepper feels proud of Clea as she presents Natalie with the red dress paired with a gold belt. Clea has a tongue in cheek expression whilst Natalie looks a little uncomfortable. Pepper gives them both a warm smile.

"Very on brand. On a more serious note, you look beautiful Natalie." Pepper tells her and Natalie looks pleased as she looks over herself in the mirror and she nods.

"Thank you. It's a good choice, Clea. Perhaps I can wear it for the race." Natalie says and Pepper nods as she looks over the dress she'd already set aside for herself.

Clea chooses for herself a white sundress with pale blue floral embroidery here and there that is incredibly elegant and works well with her colouring and youth. Pepper is almost jealous.

"Dinner?" Pepper suggests as she takes the three dresses and pays for them despite protests.

"Consider it a signing bonus. I'm allowed to spoil my friends." Pepper says and she sees Natalie's eyes widen a little before it settles. Perhaps Clea is right, Pepper thinks as Clea leads the charge out of the store.

Happy takes their bags and laughs when Clea mentions something about finding him a perfect dress.
Natalie seems a little subdued, but she recovers by the time they make it to dinner. It is a lovely meal and Pepper is really glad that they were able to make the time to arrive a day early.

It was good to be able to experience the city and to see Clea and Natalie enjoying themselves too. It's the first real day off she'd had since she'd become CEO and despite it being just a short time, it really had been busy.

She deserved a break and so did the girls. Pepper is probably going to regret it in the morning, but when Clea excitedly asks if they can go and hit up a Martini bar, she can't say no.

Girls day turns into a girls night out and Pepper was right.

She does regret it the next morning.

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**Sunday**

16 May 2010

"How was Paris?" Pepper asks with an almost tongue in cheek expression as she comes into the suite with Clea in tow. Tony raises an eyebrow at her and gives her what he knows is a filthy smile.

"They were right when they called it the city of love and lust." Tony says with a wriggle of his eyebrows and Clea and Pepper blush as they almost choke on the amount of innuendo he puts into that sentence.

"You are a menace to polite society." Clea tells him firmly, though it is clear that she is amused and happy for them.

"You ready for this?" Pepper asks and Tony nods as he looks over the schedule one last time. There is a lot packed into it. There are press conferences after the race where they will reveal that the car that Stark Industries ran had an Arc Reactor inside to power it.

It was going to be interesting. Then there were the other interviews that had been planned and the PR team had done a good job getting a shortlist of the journalists confirmed for the interviews and the questions that they had been authorised to ask.

It was going to be busy, but interesting and most likely quite fun.

"I have two cars prepared for us to take. Natalie is at Hotel de Paris now sorting out the last minute details for the race and for the interviews." Pepper informs him and Tony nods as he straightens up his tie.

Happy walks in a moment later and sighs when he sees the suitcase and recognises the colouring.

"Is that an Iron Man suit folded up?" The former boxing champion asks him. Tony gives him a grin.

"Yup!" Tony declares and Happy gives him a suffering look.

"I'm guessing it's my job to babysit it?" Happy asks and Tony gives him the same grin. The man sighs and grabs the suitcase as if to test the weight and looks somewhat surprised.

"Carbon titanium. Pretty light huh?" Tony can't help but be quite proud of the suit. Granted, it couldn't take as many hits as the other suits can but hey. It was more than effective at getting the job
done if push comes to shove. Which... according to Stephen, will.

Speaking of the devil, or rather thinking of the devil, Stephen steps out of the bedroom and his beautiful blue-grey eyes are more grey than blue thanks to the dark grey suit he is wearing paired with a pale grey shirt and a silver tie. He looks incredibly stunning.

Tony is honestly grateful that the conversation between them had gone well. That Stephen looks more... secure now. He looks more confident than he had been since... since Tony's fuck up.

That doesn't absolve him of his sins. Tony needs to keep reminding himself. He needs to make sure that he doesn't become complacent and make the same mistakes again.

"Stephen! You look wonderful!" Pepper gushes as she goes over to him and gives him a warm hug and straightens his tie right after.

Tony also likes the fact that Pepper and Stephen get along well. Pepper hadn't gotten along with any of his previous lovers before. Stephen was different in every way to anyone he'd ever slept with of course and Tony knew that he didn't need Pepper's approval, but it was good to know that she liked Stephen.

The friendship between Clea and Pepper was nice to see as well. He was a little terrified of just what would happen if the girls ever got truly mad at him, but he was sure that as long as he treated Stephen right and he made sure that he did the jobs that they asked him to do, he will be alright.

"As do you Pepper. How are you settling into being one of the most powerful businesswomen in the world?" Stephen asks her and she shrugs her shoulders and smiles.

"It's been busy but honestly, the work itself hasn't been very different." Pepper tells him and he nods and Clea looks over at the time before she sighs.

"Alright ladies and gents, it's time." Clea declares and Happy picks up the suitcase and walks out first whilst Clea and Pepper picks up their purses and gets ready to go.

Tony pauses for a moment before he pulls Pepper towards him and lays his hands over her bare shoulders and makes her look at him.

"You're doing great Pepper. I have every faith in you. Knock them dead Ms Potts." Tony tells her and he means every word. Despite the fact that he had been on holidays, he still has been getting the work emails and he still has been sorting through them.

Clea really was quite efficient.

He has been getting nothing but raving praise when it comes to Pepper and he wanted to make sure that she knew that he was proud of her. Besides. This was their ritual before large press situations.

Only... it's reversed now.

Pepper recognises it immediately and her eyes water a little as she smiles proudly.

"I will Mr Stark." She tells him fondly and he brushes off imaginary dust from her shoulders and gives her a wink before he follows Clea and Stephen out of the hotel suite.

It's showtime.

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Hotel de Paris is beautiful as always. It's not the first year they have come to the hotel. It won't be the last year either. Tony walks into the function room turned restaurant turned media circus and is immediately approached by Natalie Rushman.

"We have one photographer from the ACM if you don't mind." She says as the photographer comes along. Pepper and he get into position naturally and allow them to snap a photograph and Tony pulls Stephen and Clea into the frame for the second.

"Right this way Mr Stark." Natalie says as she leads the group towards the table booked for them.

"You look fantastic." Tony tells her because it would be wrong not to comment on the tight red dress the woman has clearly picked to best flaunt her features. She does look fantastic and he doubts Stephen would get jealous for just the comment.

"Thank you very much." She tells him with a warm coy smile and oh. Okay maybe not a good thing then, he thinks. But at least it makes her strategy obvious enough, he thinks as he backtracks.

"Not professional. My bad. What's on the docket for Ms Potts and myself?" He asks and she is quick to answer.

"Once the race is over, you have a press conference in relation to the engine and after that, a 9:30 dinner." She tells him and Tony looks at Stephen and Clea for a moment before he shrugs. It's one of those business dinners with all the people involved in the race. He's not interested.

"Perfect. We'll be there at 11:00. Is this us?" He spots the rather lovely looking empty table with enough seats for them in the corner. Corner walls are structurally the safest and it would also allow Tony a good vantage point to whatever is happening on the race tracks.

"It can be." Natalie tells him easily and he nods and moves to settle down when he spots and hears Elon Musk call out to him. Of course, he would be here.

"Mr Musk." Pepper is the first to greet him with a smile and a handshake.

"Ms Potts! Congratulations on your promotion." He tells her warmly. Tony has to admit that he quite likes Elon. Despite his stance on AI and the possibility of Skynet and all those alarmist theories, he was also a futurist and he had good intentions for the future. They were working rather closely as far as companies were concerned on a number of projects.

Between his electronic cars and space programs and Tony's Arc Reactor and the Iron Man projects, they were hoping that they could change the world.

He was also heavily involved in the Expo and the greener side of the science and tech and supporting the smaller companies on the rise.

"Thank you very much." Pepper tells him with a smile and Tony goes up to shake his hand as well and Elon talks to him about something about electrical planes before he sees Stephen.

"Dr Strange! What an honour." The man says and he immediately moves towards Stephen but doesn't extend a hand and gives just a warm smile. Tony decides that he likes Elon just a little bit more for his sensitivity.
"Mr Musk, what a pleasure to finally meet you in person." Stephen says warmly and the two of them quickly fall into a conversation about Artificial Intelligence and ethics and though Tony wants to stay and listen, he knows that he needs to work the room more than Stephen does.

Especially with Pepper.

They need to show solidarity and that she has his full support as the CEO and that he will still be working with the company as the President of the Board as well as the owner of the company. So Tony gives Stephen a small nod, which he returns before he moves on. He isn't too surprised to notice that Clea follows them.

"You want a drink? I want a drink." Tony says as he moves to the bar and Pepper nods as she and Clea follows. There's definitely something to be said about strength in numbers.

"You seem better." Pepper says quietly and Tony nods to her even as he leans against the bar a little and orders the drinks from the bartender.

"I am. Holidays do work won-"

"Tony Stark!" Of course, Tony thinks as Hammer makes his way over. Tony fights back the sigh and murmurs under his breath before he turns to smile for the photographer he knows would be lurking just right there.

"I'll deal with it." Clea tells him quietly and she is on the phone, walking slightly away so that she can most likely coordinate with Gina Park to make sure that the right narrative goes out to the media about the photograph and the relationship with Hammer. Which is to say that there is no relationship with Hammer Industries.

The thing is, Justin Hammer needs the positive publicity and he needs Tony. Tony doesn't. SI would have no benefit whatsoever by being linked to Justin Hammer and in fact, it could be damaging. Tony trusts that his PR team will handle it properly.

"Alright, let's get this over with." Tony says as he speaks to both Hammer and with Everhart. Her interest in him is obvious. It is slightly awkward bumping into her, if he is being honest. It's always awkward bumping into a former lover. He hopes that Stephen won't get upset if he notices.

He sits down with Hammer at his table because, despite the awkwardness, he knows what kind of journalist she is and making sure that she gets the right story will definitely help. Avoiding her would only cause more problems.

He talks to them for a minute longer than he really wants to until he notices Stephen pausing near the table long enough to grab his attention before going towards the bathroom.

It is only then Tony realises the time and the fact that he is feeling... not his best. He gives the two of them at the table his best media smile.

"The corner table is ready Mr Stark." Natalie comes along just at the right time and Tony gets up with that excuse and starts to move. But he doesn't stop at the table. Instead, he turns to Natalie.

"Settle Pepper down and make sure that Hammer doesn't go near her. Please." Tony instructs and Natalie gives him a firm nod and moves to find Pepper whilst Tony heads for the bathrooms in the back of the luxurious restaurant.

The Hotel de Paris Hotel's bathroom is lavish and it is divided enough so that there is sufficient privacy. Especially since as soon as Tony is through the door, Stephen locks the door behind him.
"You didn't drink enough chlorophyll today." Stephen says almost immediately. Tony has to agree with the assessment. The dizziness is annoying and so is the headache.

Throughout the week, Tony had been making sure that he is almost overdosing on chlorophyll if that is even possible. Given that the hotel staff brings him, pitchers of it, every day, Tony knows that Stephen's had to have made arrangements.

But they have largely ignored it. Tony drank the damned things, did his daily checks on the levels, but they hadn't talked about it. Stephen's eyes went dark and sad when he saw the blue veins around the reactor and Tony hated that. Hated seeing that pain and sadness in his lover's eyes.

"Yeah. Let me check the readings." Tony says and goes towards the sink and runs the water as he pricks his finger to get the readings and sighs.

54%.

It has been going up steadily despite the fact that he has barely been using the suit, but it also makes sense.

His kidneys are starting to fail.

They were being so heavily clogged up with the poisonous heavy metals that they were unable to filter everything out. which meant that more and more, the poison was settling in his body and clogging up the arteries.

Shit.

"It's going to be okay. I swear to you, I will not let you die, Anthony." Stephen tells him firmly. Tony lets his comforting words, his presence and his voice sink into him and lets himself show that moment of weakness. He turns around and lets himself lean against the doctor, who wraps his arms around him and holds him tightly.

"I love you Anthony Stark. I won't let you die. It is going to be okay." Stephen repeats and Tony nods and takes in a deep breath. He puts the checker away in his pocket and stands up straight. He straightens his tie and takes in another deep breath before putting on his smile.

"Alright, let's go and watch this race." Tony says and Stephen chuckles before he leans down and kisses him softly.

If there hadn't been a knock on the door at that moment, they may have gone for more than just a kiss, Tony thinks as he pulls away and pretends to wash his hands as Stephen opens the door.

"So you think that Elon's electric jet idea has merit?" Tony asks as he looks at Stephen through the mirror as another man walks into the bathroom. Stephen is quick to catch on.

If Stephen doesn't want the relationship known, then they had to make sure that they played their respective roles in the outside world.

"We'll talk about it later." Stephen tells him quietly, not quite hissed in warning, but the idea is obvious enough. The other man looks intrigued, but Tony quickly turns the water off, dries his hands and coughs lightly before he leaves the bathroom with Stephen.

Later, they will laugh about this. Tony knows it. But for now, he had a show to put on. Dizzy or not. Terrified or not. The world wanted Tony Stark, the billionaire, playboy, philanthropist businessman.
It's time to be Tony Stark.

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Chapter Summary

Vanko attacks and it is up to Tony to be Iron Man and for Stephen to decide the best way to help.

Oh and of course, there is the aftermath to deal with. God. PR NIGHTMARE.

But then that's what Pepper and Clea is meant to deal with... right?

Chapter Notes

Too bloody freaking COLD!!!!

Which is honestly the reason why I didn't upload yesterday. Didn't want to leave the safe warm cocoon of bed XD

It was so much warmer and pleasant in there. Even my cat refused to leave the bed. Which is saying something. She usually does her crazy cat running thing but she didn't even do that. We both decided it was too cold.

But it's warmer today so I'm actually out of bed~ yay XD

I will be absolutely honest. Arc 3 is turning out to be super difficult to write. There are so many things to work out and by god there just isn't enough resources in palladium/rhodium and silver poisoning for me to figure out what the medical things I need to do to properly fix Tony is going to take.

So if there is a doctor/medical student/genius in the readers that know anything about Chelation therapy... please hit me up. Or like treatment for heavy metal poisoning. Please help T___T

Sunday

16 May 2010

The attack comes suddenly.

Tony doesn't make the irrational decision to be on the track as he has done in most of the universes and Stephen had wondered whether that would change a great deal. It apparently hasn't.

The room is in uproar as the first car is slashed in half. Stephen looks for and finds Clea immediately and makes sure that she has Pepper in hand. Clea is already moving. So is Tony and so is Stephen.

"The suit." Tony says, his voice tense and solemn and Stephen is right there. As they make their way out of the room, rushing as quickly as they could, Stephen sees Clea getting Pepper and pulling her
quickly into the safety of the corner of the room where the structure is at the safest point. The walls are thick enough to protect her.

Natasha Romanov is oddly enough right there with the girls, pushing them into the corner and urging others to do the same as the first window shatters through the debris that flies up from the car.

Vanko had chosen his entrance well. It is in full view of the cameras and the world's elite.

Clea will keep Pepper safe. Stephen knows that. He focuses on Tony.

"Do you trust me?" Stephen asks as he feels his mouth go dry at the combat that he knows is going to come. Tony doesn't pause. Neither of them does, but he nods.

"With my life." Tony tells him and Stephen doesn't have a moment to feel gratitude. He simply reaches out and touches Tony's shoulder. He lets the intention, his need to make sure that Tony is safe, flow through with the dimensional energies into the man as they move quickly through the panicking crowd towards the entrance.

Tony shudders and almost falters as he runs. Even without being a sorcerer, he can probably feel the heat of the dimensional energy go through him. The shield spell settles around Tony.

Good.

Stephen moves them until they are at the entrance of the hotel and Happy is there, suit in hand, already unlocked and ready to go.

"Stay safe." Tony tells him and Stephen nods as Tony activates the suit and gets into it. The suit wraps around him and it is a thing of beauty to watch. The suit isn't designed to fly. There are no repulsors on the feet. As such, Tony gets on top of the Rolls Royce that they had arrived on.

"Happy, I'm so-" Tony starts to say, probably because he knows that he is asking a lot of the bodyguard come driver, but the man simply nods, gets into the car and starts to drive. Stephen jumps into the car before Tony can protest.

They are breaking through the barricade when the phone call comes through from the suit.

"What are you doing?!" Tony asks and he sounds angry and upset. Stephen understands but he can't just let Tony go into the situation on his own.

"What I need to. Focus on the threat. Happy and I will be fine." Stephen informs him grimly. He hopes Tony will understand what he is trying to say.

There are versions of the universe where Pepper and Happy are lost during this incident. In most of them, they survive, but not in all of them and Stephen knows how important Happy Hogan is to Tony and he is determined to ensure that the man survives.

"Fine. But if you get one fucking scratch on you, you're sleeping on the couch." Tony informs him with a grumble just as they make it to the part of the racecourse that is being destroyed by Ivan Vanko.

Stephen has to admit that if nothing else, Happy is an incredibly good driver. He dodges the race cars and pushes the Rolls to speeds that he's not quite sure if the normally tamely driven vehicle had ever been pushed to before.

Rolls Royces weren't meant to be on the race track, but there is something definitely to be said about
the craftsmanship and the power of the engine. Besides, Happy seems to really, really know how to drive under pressure.

"Doctor, please put your seatbelt on. Behind me." Happy tells him almost calmly and Stephen agrees and does as he asks. It's only then that he realises that he is shaking.

He had almost but not quite forgotten about his fears of being in speeding vehicles and when it hits him, he has to stop himself from hyperventilating. He will deal with it later. But for now, he just needs to breathe and he needs to get himself secured.

It's only then he realises that he is still holding the phone in his hand and that Tony can probably hear his erratic breathing. Even through that, Stephen lets the spell flow through him and focuses just enough to make sure that the car will be protected. That it will be shielded and that Happy will be alright.

"It'll be over soon. I promise." Tony says quietly into the phone before he is off. He bounds off the car and he is running forward towards Vanko just as Happy shouts at Stephen to brace himself and smashes the Rolls directly into Vanko, trapping him for a moment and dazing him before reversing quickly and getting them to a safer distance, away from the whips.

Not that Stephen notices.

The moment he hears the tire screech and he feels the G-force of the brake being applied, Stephen is thrown back into the memory of the crash and the loss of control he had felt and the certainty of knowing that he was going to die.

He can't breathe.

"Happy! Get out of here!" Stephen hears Tony's voice through the loud speaker of the suit and it cracks him out of the flashback. He bodily flinches and he thinks he might throw up. He's not sure.

Happy is quick to obey though. He drives quickly around the corner and back around to where he had managed to break into the course and he stops the car just as the commotion comes to an end.

Stephen reaches out for Tony through their Connection. He can't feel the other man being in any significant pain, but he can feel the other's anger, his dizziness and when it hits, Stephen barely has the moment to get the car door open before he is emptying his stomach.

"Oh God! Dr Strange!" He feels Happy's hand undoing his seat-belt from the other side of the car, rubbing his back and handing him a handkerchief when he is done throwing up.

The driver is quick to get his fingers on Stephen's pulse and he runs through the First Aid procedures with professional certainty that is both reassuring and surprising.

"You're going to be okay. I'll get a medic to take a look at you." Happy tells him in that soft reassuring voice and Stephen shakes his head.

"Not necessary." Stephen manages to mutter. Then before he an even react any further to that, Tony is there.

"Happy, grab the wrench kit and help me get this off." Tony says as he approaches the car and Happy pauses, uncertain. Stephen waves a hand and Happy nods after a moment and he is back out of the car, moving quickly to the trunk to grab the quick release kit for the suit.

Stephen calms himself and grabs himself a bottle of water and drinks it down before he gets out of
the car himself, using the other side of the car as well. His shoes can do without vomit on them.

When he sees Tony, he's glad to see that though there are parts of the suit missing, no doubt having been through the damage of the whips and the battle that had taken place. But there doesn't seem to be any serious injuries on the man.

He is running on adrenaline, that's certain enough, but he seems calm enough to be able to deal with the dizziness and the nausea. Perhaps because Stephen had taken the brunt of it, he's not sure.

"You alright?" Tony asks him quietly. They are aware of the media attention that they are getting. Stephen scoffs and shrugs his shoulders.

"As alright as I can be for the time being." Stephen says and when Happy gets to them with the case of tools, Stephen takes a deep breath and gets to work.

They designed the mechanisms to be mostly automatic. Which meant that they just needed to apply pressure with the right tools at the right locations for the suit to come off. Luckily, it also meant that Stephen could do the work with Happy even if with his shaky and weak hands. He can always apply pressure with his shoulders and the rest of his body after all.

"Tony!" Pepper's cry catches their attention as they start to pull him out of the suit and she almost rushes into his arms but Tony is quick to stop her with an eye on the jagged bits and pieces of the suit.

"Hey Pep. You alright?" Tony asks her and she nods grimly, her eyes almost filling with tears.

"Yeah. Clea and Natalie kept me safe." Pepper tells him and Clea stands back a little for a moment before she grabs a tool for herself and starts moving as Stephen instructs her to do with gestures to get him out of the suit.

"You're hurt!" Pepper cries out and touches Tony's face. It's just a scratch but she looks like she is on the verge of tears. Stephen can relate. He takes a deep breath to calm himself. Tony is okay. He's fine. He's not in pain, Stephen reminds himself.

"It's just a scratch Pep. I'm fine." Tony tells her softly and she nods and takes a deep breath.

It only takes them a moment even as Pepper's, Tony's and Clea's phones start to go off. Pepper takes charge of all of them and starts handling them quickly as the rest of the suit comes off and they are able to quickly put it away into the trunk of the car.

"Alright, let's figure out what the fuck happened. Pepper and Clea, make sure that our guys are safe and get the car locked down with the Arc Reactor. Deal with the press fall out." Tony is quick to straighten his tie and get himself sorted out. Pepper and Clea are also quick to respond.

"There are no civilian injuries. A few of the drivers are injured but no deaths." Clea tells him quickly and Tony nods just as Natalie Rushman also comes out and waits for her instructions.

"Natalie, you deal with the press with Clea. Make sure that they focus on the terror element and get me an appointment to speak to the Chief of Police here." Tony instructs and she is also quick to take instructions.

"Happy, get the suit back to the D'Arte. I want it secured. Stay with it at all times." Tony tells him and Happy nods solemnly and gets into the car and moves off immediately. Tony turns to Stephen and takes a deep breath.
"I'm guessing you want me in medical." Tony says and Stephen nods. He knows that Tony is okay. He can feel that Tony is okay. But he's not. The panic is still deep inside of him and Stephen needs a moment with Tony to calm down.

"Please." Stephen manages and Tony nods. He sighs but he walks a little stiffly towards the hotel again. Clea and Natalie make sure that the media stays away as they make their way towards the wing of the hotel set aside to be a temporary medical wing.

The staff are quick to gather, but Tony dismisses them quickly in French. He had always been fluent in the language. Stephen knows the language enough to inform them that he is a doctor and will require a room for an examination.

They get their room. As soon as they are inside, Tony locks the door behind them and turns to look at Stephen with a stern look.

"I told you to stay safe Stephen." Tony tells him almost bitingly as soon as they are alone. Stephen swallows but nods and he feels the trembles starting to overtake his body.

"I know. But I had to make sure that Happy would too." Stephen informs him quietly and Tony looks at him with some alarm in his eyes but bites back the question that had come to him.

Stephen wonders vaguely how many times Tony would be able to do that before he becomes frustrated and resentful of the secrets between them.

"You had a flashback." Tony says quietly and Stephen can't deny it. He can feel his shirt sticking to him with the sudden cold sweat that had come to him during the flashback. He knows his pale grey shirt would show off the dark stains well enough. He loosens his tie.

"Yes." Stephen says curtly tries to steady himself. He needs to focus on Tony and make sure that he is actually alright. He moves in to examine Tony. But before he could, the genius wraps his arms around Stephen and pulls him into his arms and just like that, Stephen feels like he can breathe again.

"I'm sorry you were in that position Stephen. I'm sorry this happened." Tony tells him softly. Stephen buries his head in Tony's shoulder for a moment. He breathes in and out and tries to centre himself.

The spell he had put on Tony to protect him had triggered. That said a lot. There was a lot more damage that Tony could have taken. The drain on his energies wasn't much and the spell didn't rebound. Which was good enough for now.

"It's not your fault Anthony. None of this is your fault." Stephen informs him quietly and Tony nods slowly as he takes a few shuddering breathes as well.

They remain like that for some time. Stephen takes the time to examine Tony head to toe with magic to ensure that the genius doesn't have any injuries. Oh, he is definitely bruised and battered, but he isn't injured. No internal bleeding, no head wounds. But the poison has seeped even further into his tissue and his blood.

Shit.

"The poisoning has been advanced. You know that." Stephen tells him quietly as they pull away from each other. Tony nods, gritting his teeth as he does so.

"There's going to be a massive media fall out over this, isn't there?" Tony asks and Stephen nods slowly.
"The Arc Reactor technology being available to someone else is going to be a problem. So is the fact that someone was able to weaponize it." Stephen guesses and Tony nods back and sighs.

"Shit. Alright. I need to figure out what the fuck this guy's problem is and how he got his hands on the tech. Then we'll deal with the media bullshit." Tony tells him and Stephen nods and he finishes up examining Tony.

They don't bother to measure the palladium levels. It is only bound to make them all the more aware of just how fragile Tony's health is right now.

"I wish I could just stay in here with you for a few days until all this shit blows over." Tony says with a sigh. Stephen has to agree with him but the realist in both of them know that it isn't possible.

"When this is all over, we can." Stephen tells him quietly. Tony chuckles softly and nods.

"That's a promise doc." Tony tells him. Stephen nods easily enough. If they survive all of this, then yes. They will most definitely deserve to have another holiday.

Until the next thing happens anyway.

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Monday

17 May 2010

The dark and grim nature of the prison environment doesn't surprise Tony. He doesn't like it, but he isn't a bleeding heart that would feel bad for the conditions prisoners that have hurt people in the world live in.

He doesn't quite like the entourage of people that follow their every move though as he moves through the holding cells with the Chief of Police by his side.

Tony is really grateful that his mother insisted that he learn French. She had called it the language of love and she had loved French poetry and wanted to share it with him. He had hated learning it as a child, but now, he was grateful to her.

"Five minutes." Tony says in French to the Police Chief as they reach the door to the cell.

The whole attack had a personal feel to it. The Arc Reactor look-alike had been pretty well made, Tony had to admit and as much as he would like it otherwise, he had known it a possibility that someone would copy the design. Only... this went beyond copying.

'You lose' the man had said. Tony had to admit that as soon as the fight had been over and done with, he had felt like he had lost. It had a lot to do with the fact that the man had not only managed to get into the secure event and had done a terrorist attack, but he had made it so incredibly public.

The world was going to realise that with superheroes, came super villains. They were going to think that by having Tony Stark and Iron Man around, they might have to deal with more danger rather than being safe from danger. That was something that Tony wasn't quite sure if he can live with.

It's a concern that he hasn't had thought about. He should have. He really, really should have.

There were three drivers in hospitals right now. World class Grand Prix drivers in hospitals along with 11 members of the pit crews and marshals. Some of them with minor injuries. Others with
serious injuries. Either way, they were in hospitals because of the maniac that decided to attack Tony.

That was going to be on him.

The media narrative was divided currently between it being a good thing and a lucky thing that Tony Stark had been there with the Iron Man suit to ensure that there was less damage and loss of lives, but at the same time, there were the other media outlets calling him the cause of the incident.

Tony himself thought it was the latter. Unfortunately.

Tony wonders if it would have been a better idea to have Stephen here with him. But Stephen had been in deep sleep when the call had come from the Chief of Police and he and Pepper had decided that it was best to let the doctor rest and Clea had agreed with him.

After all, the day had been difficult for the doctor. Tony hadn't wanted him involved because he knew that Stephen had issues with fast vehicles. With his trauma and the first accident he had experienced, that wasn't a surprise. So Tony hadn't wanted him anywhere on the track. Or near the track or indeed even really watching the race.

But Stephen had gotten into the damned car because of course he did. The doctor had slept pitifully throughout the night. Tony had only really managed to get him to sleep properly after fucking him long and hard and exhausting his body.

There was definitely something to be said about life affirming sex, Tony thinks. It made even drinking what felt like gallons of chlorophyll Clea had shoved down his throat almost worth it.

Maybe he will have more of that when he gets back to the Hotel, he thinks. Which meant that he really should get the conversation over and done with.

"Pretty decent tech. Cycles per second were a bit low. You could have doubled up your rotations." Tony says as he looks over the man. The tattoos, the hair, the heavily built muscles and the stern face of the man.

Tony sees all of it and it's pretty easy to come to a conclusion. Russian, he thinks. The tattoos scream that loudly enough. They were Russian prison tats.

A year ago, he would not have known that. But then a year ago, he hadn't been fighting weapons dealers, gangs and terrorists.

"You focused the repulsor energy through ionised plasma channels. It's effective. Not very efficient."

And that was the other problem wasn't it?

The repulsor tech and the Arc Reactor were almost designed to work together. The repulsor rays that the suit emits are concentrated laser beams that require power to the level that it is difficult to obtain by any other means than the Arc Reactor, which puts out stupid amounts of energy with each cycle.

It makes sense for the man to have chosen to use repulsor tech to work with the Arc Reactor. What is shocking is the fact that he had managed simply not to come up with the Arc Reactor itself, but the repulsor tech as well in order to be able to do what he did to make the whips.

Having said that, unlike the Arc Reactor, which hasn't gone through a lot of publications and explanations of how the technology works, the repulsor tech had been a thought experiment that had been highly publicised and highly reported on. So the fact that the man managed to do it isn't too shocking.
If he had the intelligence to make the Arc Reactor, then he definitely had the intelligence and the technical know-how to make the repulsor tech. Tony just doesn't like it.

"But it's a passable knock-off." Tony says as he sits down on the bench the man is restrained upon.

"I don't get it. A little fine-tuning, you could have made a solid paycheck. You could have sold it to North Korea, China. Iran. Or gone right to the black market. You look like you got friends in low places." Tony says as he makes eye contact with the man.

That's the thing.

People would say that he was a psychopath. A sociopath. Whatever the trending word is these days. But Tony did a lot of things that he did, even the dangerous and the stupid things out of curiosity. An intellectual curiosity and need to know that he just could not stifle.

Right now, he was curious about this man. About his motivations. Also, Tony just had a thing about creative, intelligent minds and even if didn't like the man for what he had done and the danger that he posed to the rest of the world, Tony still had to admire him for having the ability to create what he did.

"You come from a family of thieves and butchers. And now, like all guilty men, you try to rewrite your own history. And you forget all the lives the Stark family has destroyed." The man says and Tony has to disagree with that at least.

He hasn't forgotten his family's history and his family's legacy. He was doing what he could do to change it and to make amends for it, but he was more than well aware of what his family has done.

He had thought that he made it clear enough with the announcements he had made to the media and also through the Expo and the ideals behind the Expo. Perhaps he hasn't been clear enough, he thinks.

It doesn't matter. He doesn't need to be understood by this man.

"Speaking of thieves, where'd you get this design?" Tony asks because he's not quite sure if anyone could have come up with the miniaturised Arc Reactor without at least knowing about the Arc Reactor itself and how the design works.

"My father, Anton Vanko." The man says and Tony rakes his brain but he's pretty sure he has never heard of the name before. As far as he had been aware, Howard had come up with the design for the Arc Reactor by himself. He worked with other scientists and technologists throughout his time, but as far as he knew, the Arc Reactor had been a solo design.

"I've never heard of him." Tony tells him honestly. Tony has a good enough grasp on the scientific and technological field over at least the past 50 years or so to know the names of most of the people that had contributed to the modern society. This was a name he hasn't heard before.

The man scoffs.

"My father is the reason you're alive." Vanko, Tony assumes is his last name, says and Tony feels a flare of annoyance at that.

"The reason I'm alive is 'cause you had a shot, you took it, you missed." Tony says but he does manage to keep the flash of anger out of his voice at least and for that, he is a little proud.

"Did I?" Vanko says and Tony starts to get the realisation.
"If you can make God bleed, then people will cease to believe in him and there will be blood in the water and the sharks will come." Well shit. The man really was smart, Tony will definitely have to give him that and there is a bit of the grudging respect that he wishes he didn't have for the man form.

He's right.

After Tony's rather public announcement that the Arc Reactor technology and the repulsor technology in the suit was years ahead of what even the technologically advanced nations of the world could accomplish, he had just been shown by an unknown terrorist that the tech was out there. That it can be used to do harm.

The Senate was going to be up in arms and he knows that Stern was preparing his press conference and meetings as Tony sits in the cell with this man. The government's demand for him to hand over the suit was going to be greater. Privatisation of world security wasn't something any government was going to be happy about. Especially the US government.

There are also going to be others that attempt to do what Vanko did. There already were enough of the rogue elements that Tony had been fighting against with SHIELD and with the work he did himself. But none of it had been as public as this.

"The truth, all I have to do is sit here and watch as the world will consume you." He is a little wrong about that. Tony has enough supporters, enough legal and financial clout to protect himself. But as far as the copycats are concerned, yeah. There was definitely going to be a problem.

"Where will you watch the world consume me from? That's right. A prison cell. I'll send you a bar of soap." Tony says. It's not the best comeback that he could have come up with, but he has just enough intel that he doesn't need to stick around.

Tony gets up and walks away.

"Hey Tony, before you go, Palladium in the chest, painful way to die." The man says and Tony doesn't pause. he doesn't show a reaction. he simply knocks on the door to be let out.

Oh, he knows.

The daily headaches, the small bits of pain here and there were going to slowly get worse. In fact, he was doing a lot better than what most people would be doing under the circumstances and he has to say that the fitness regime that he had kept up with probably helped.

So did the chlorophyll and the dialysis. But eventually, his kidneys were going to fail and the poison will build. It will start to cloud his mind and his decision making. It will slow down his body and cause so much pain that he won't be able to function.

Then he will die.

It is as simple as that.

It was going to be a slow, agonising death when the palladium levels reached high enough. It was already getting there. The reading that morning alone had read 74%.

Anton Vanko, Tony thinks. When he gets back home, he was going to have to do some research. But for now, he just wanted to see Stephen and hold the doctor in his arms and pray that each moment with him wasn't going to be the last one.
Tony isn’t scared. He isn't.

He is terrified.

Tuesday

18 May 2010

Colonel James Rhodes wonders if he should just quit the Air Force. Then he remembers that he has spent half of his life in the damned Air Force and he really doesn't know a life outside of the damned thing and he really, really likes being a pilot and he really likes being an instructor to those fresh young pilots.

If it wasn't for all of that, he would just leave. The demands that his superiors are making is ridiculous. Their anger is pissing him off and it was making things so very incredibly difficult.

It doesn't help that Rhody is genuinely concerned about Tony. The fact that they had been more or less keeping him from being able to visit the Malibu mansion and to see his best friend had been annoying as well. It had meant that they hadn't been able to work on the suit as much as he would have liked.

He got the basics of how to fly the suit and how to build it, but he wanted more time to get used to it and more importantly, he just wanted to spend some damned time with his best fucking friend without the military breathing down his fucking neck.

Was that so much to ask for?

Apparently.

"Where is he?" Rhody asks as soon as he makes it to the living room and finds Pepper sitting with a woman he doesn't recognise but must be Natalie Rushman, on phones, fielding what appears to be multiple media call outs etc.

"He's downstairs. He asked not to be disturbed." The red head says. Pepper just gives him a look and nods. Yeah. Rhody doesn't care. He makes his way towards the lab and the door opens for him almost immediately, but he pauses when he hears voices talking softly.

"Howard did a lot of despicable things Stephen. How do I know that he didn't steal the designs as Vanko said?" Tony's voice sounds upset. Low. Angry. But not at the man that he is speaking to, Rhody thinks.

He is surprised to find that Stephen Strange is in the lab with Tony, he has to be honest. He has been dying to meet the doctor, but so far it just hasn't worked out. It wasn't that Tony was trying to hide the man away or anything, their schedules just hadn't worked out. Especially lately.

"Would it matter if he had? You are not your father and it is not your fault if you believed what you have been told, what the records state and what the world believes." The doctor's voice is soft, placating and incredibly beautiful.

Rhodey remembers Tony telling him things about Stephen Strange. Things that had honestly made him sound like a teenager with a crush that Rhody had almost laughed off, but when it comes to the doctor's voice at least, he is ready to agree with his best friend that he had that right.
"It matters! Of course it fucking matters! This all happened because my fucking bastard of a father decided that he would steal tech and ruin someone's life!" Tony all but shouts but near the end of it, Rhodey hears the breathlessness that worries him and he moves. It's wrong to eavesdrop anyway.

"Anthony!" Stephen's voice cries out and that encourages Rhodey to look for them even quicker. He finds them in the garage section of the lab that had been turned into a giant holo screen and sees them sitting in the 1932 Ford Flathead Roadster, one of Tony's favourite cars.

Tony is hunched over and Stephen was clearly trying to get him to breathe when he sees Rhodey. "On the desk, there's a wooden case. Can you bring it to me please?" Stephen says to him and Rhodey is quick to act. He is used to acting in emergencies and his friend having what looks to be a medical emergency is definitely on the list of those things.

He finds the box quickly enough and when he brings it over to the doctor, Rhodey can see that the man's hands are shaking badly. He knows that it's not because of the situation but knowing that the doctor would not be able to open the box himself, Rhodey opens it for him and recognises what is inside.

Palladium cores.

He had seen it when they had been working on the suit. Tony removes the Arc Reactor from his chest and Stephen holds him steady as Tony replaces the burnt-out core with the new one. Rhodey takes the old one in hand and looks at it numbly.

"You had this in your body?" Rhodey asks as he looks at the burnt-out chip and Tony just gives him a grim look. It's then that Rhodey realises that Tony... doesn't look too good. In fact, he looks almost ashen and there is a thin layer of sweat along his brows and the math goes through his head quickly. "Shit." Rhodey finds himself saying.

He had been prepared to give Tony hell about what had happened in Monaco and what he had said about no one having the technological capabilities to use to the suit like what Tony had for 20 years. He had spent the entire fucking day on the phone with all heads of the military calling him up at different times.

There have been so many threats for the government to use force to take the suits away from Tony and it had taken him all day to talk them down, reminding them of the legality of the situation.

He had come to the house after promising his bosses and anyone that will listen that he will talk to Tony and see what was going on.

The investigation was still ongoing in Monaco and they haven't released any information yet, but everyone in the know knew that Tony spoke with the offender. So Rhodey had volunteered, almost begged, to be able to come to the house and to speak with his best friend before the government or the military tries to do something drastic.

So he had been ready to rage but... Tony looked so unwell. And Rhodey had a sinking suspicion as to what was happening.

"Whatever you're thinking there Rhodey-bear? It's probably right." Tony tells him with a sigh and leans heavily against Stephen's shoulder and relaxes his whole body against the other man. Who wraps his arms around the inventor and kisses the man's hairline. It's such a intimate and comforting gesture that it almost feels wrong to be witness to it.
"Stephen Strange. I won't say it's a pleasure under the circumstances, but I have been looking forward to meeting you." Stephen says quietly towards Rhodey and he can only nod but try as he might, he can't manage a smile and he definitely can't stop thinking about what's happening to his friend's body.

"How long?" Rhodey manages to breathe out. The two of them stay quiet for a moment before JARVIS pipes up.

"At the current rate of progression, a few weeks, Colonel Rhodes.” The AI sounds sad. Rhodey hears it and he feels the heat of the emotion go through himself and then he needs to sit down. Luckily, there is a stool nearby. He sits heavily and stares at his friend.

"That's why you made me a suit isn't it? You're making me your successor.” Rhodey says and even as he says it, the horror and the fear of losing his friend hit him hard. He feels the panic rise and just as it does, Tony shrugs his shoulders.

"I'm not giving up Rhodey. It's not over but yeah. If anyone is going to wear a suit, I want it to be you.” Tony tells him and Rhodey doesn't know what to think. He isn't sure how to deal with the idea that he may be losing his best friend. That feeling is mixed in with the pride of knowing that his best friend had deemed him a worthy successor to the Iron Man suit.

"No. I don't want it. I don't- You can't die Tones. I can't deal with that." Rhodey tells him and the words trip over themselves in the emotional upheaval that goes through him. Tony gets out of the car and he comes over to him.

He seems a little better now. Perhaps with the core changed out, he is feeling less of the effects. Rhodey doesn't know. He doesn't care. He just- He doesn't know what to do, what to feel and how to express the pain that is lancing through him.

"Hey buddy, it's- it's going to be alright. But if the worst happens, I set aside stuff for you to make sure that you can take over for me. I mean, the suit's not as dangerous for you because-" Rhodey can't listen to that shit anymore. He can't.

He gets off the stool and pulls Tony into his arms and holds him as tightly as he can. He hears the breath escaping Tony's lungs before the man sighs and hugs him back just as tightly.

"Not gonna let you die buddy. I'm not." Rhodey tells him firmly. He's not sure what he can do, but there has to be something that he can do. He thinks rapidly. What can he do with his mechanical engineering? He's not sure.

What can he do with the military? Well he does have an answer for that. He sighs.

"Let me take my suit Tones. I can take that to the military with the rental contract that you have set up for me and that will appease them a bit. Get them off your back so you can concentrate on your health. I'll take on the jobs that you've been doing." Rhodey says and Tony looks at him for a long moment before he nods slowly.

"No." Stephen says and Rhodey looks at him with some anger. Who the hell does he think he is to interfere in this sort of decision? Rhodey knows that Stephen has worked on the programming for the suit, but the suit is Tony's. Not Stephen's.

Besides, this is about the two of them not about Stephen. But Tony turns to him and cocks his head side ways. Stephen sighs.

"Give- give me a minute please." Stephen says quietly and he walks away from both of them
towards the small bathroom in the corner of the workshop. Rhodey can't help but raise his eyebrows at the doctor and look at Tony, who simply shrugs.

"Stephen has his reasons. He's... a lot more than just a doctor and genius programmer Platypus." Tony tells him and leads Rhodey towards the kitchenette where he grabs a bottle of green water and hands him a beer. Rhodey sighs and takes it.

"What's going on with you and that man Tones? I've never seen you back down that fast before." Rhodey tells him and Tony shrugs his shoulders.

"Stephen is... everything Rhody. I trust him with my life." Tony tells him easily and when he puts the kettle on the boil, Rhodey watches with some amazement as Tony prepares what looks to be green tea for the doctor. Even taking the time to ensure that the tea leaves have completely seeped in cold water before he adds the hot water to prevent it from burning.

"Hey J? Can we get one of those temperature-controlled kettles delivered?" Tony says out aloud and the AI responds quickly.

"Of course sir, I had one already on the shopping list. Same model as the one in the kitchen?" JARVIS asks back and Tony smiles and nods.

"That will do. Get the suit ready for Rhody. Let's get some practice in whilst he's here." Tony suggests and JARVIS acts. The suit slides out of its display and recharge base. Rhodey raises his eyebrows and looks at Tony, who just shrugs.

"I'll go upstairs and deal with the drama in a minute. Let's see what Stephen has to say." Tony says just as Stephen comes out of the bathroom. Tony hands him the tea and Stephen takes it with a small smile.

"Colonel Rhodes, you are aware of SHIELD, yes?" Stephen asks out of the blue and Rhodey frowns a bit but nods and takes a sip of his beer. He has a feeling he is going to need it. Tony leads them towards the small sitting area in the lab and very naturally, the two of them take the love seat and leaves Rhodey with the lounge chair. He sits down.

"SHIELD has been monitoring Anthony. They believe that due to the traumatic events that have occurred, that Anthony may be unstable. They are looking for a weakness to exploit with him." Stephen says and Tony sighs and leans back into the seat and in doing so, into Stephen, who bears the weight easily and wraps an arm around Tony's shoulder in a gesture that is both sweet and natural.

"What do they want from Tony?" Rhodey asks because SHIELD has their job to do and most of them revolve around dealing with Mutants and the other... incidents that go outside of what normal government agencies can handle.

"His trust and cooperation." Stephen says quietly and Rhodey raises an eyebrow but Tony sighs.

"Figured it was something like that. Their offer to smooth over the government and shit was so that I would be grateful for their assistance right?" Tony asks and Stephen nods slowly.

"I believe that your offer to instead work with them on a contractual basis has surprised them. But they will attempt to further ingratiate themselves to you." Stephen's certainty is what confuses Rhodey. How the hell does he know so much about SHIELD?

"Okay, so what does that have to do with me taking the suit?" Rhodey asks because he honestly doesn't understand why it is that Stephen is saying this and how he knows so much about SHIELD's
activities. He feels his eyes narrowing.

"Before you throw the accusation, I am not a spy for SHIELD. In fact, I believe that should they have the chance, they would love to be able to throw me into a cell and interrogate me." Stephen says drily and Rhodey notices Tony tense at that and grip the doctor's hand that is over his shoulder with his.

"Over my dead body." Tony tells him vehemently. Stephen leans over to kiss Tony's hairline in that same sweet gesture and smiles softly.

"Not necessary dearest. Back to the discussion, I believe that it would be a good idea to... give them the opportunity on Anthony's birthday." Stephen says and both Tony and Rhodey cock their heads in question at that. Stephen looks a little apprehensive as he speaks.

"How? And why?" Rhodey asks. He is honestly finding it difficult to read Stephen Strange. It wasn't just that the man was difficult to read, it was difficult to get a grasp on his personality, his motivations and more importantly, how he knew so much information. But Tony's trust in the man was obvious, which was what kept Rhodey in the room and listening.

"Because once they believe Anthony is vulnerable enough and that they will be able to gain an upper hand, they will take the opportunity to approach him." Stephen says and Rhodey raises his eyebrow. Tony looks intrigued and he turns towards Stephen to ask the question.

"What do they have?" Tony asks and Rhodey can tell that the question is asked carefully. It is obvious that there is a great deal of something between them that goes beyond just emotions. The level of trust is great but there is a reason for that trust and there is a reason why they are careful with each other too.

Rhodey wonders if that has anything to do with the way that Tony had treated the man before. He can't be certain but there was a lot that wasn't being told to him between the two of them. Something that would make whatever was happening make sense.

Because right now? Rhodey is outright confused.

"Your father's research." Stephen says quietly and Tony looks surprised. Shocked even. Then disgusted. He is up and moving before Stephen can stop him.

"Why the fuck would SHIELD have- JARVIS, look into my father and SHIELD. See if there's a connection between them." Tony commands to the AI as he moves and Stephen sighs as he cradles in his tea in his shaking hands. Rhodey gets the feeling that even if the doctor really wanted to drink it, he really couldn't with how his hands were doing.

"Anthony, your father was a part of SHIELD. He helped to establish it after the incidents with Steve Rogers, otherwise known as Captain America." Stephen says and Rhodey once again has to wonder how the fuck Stephen knew that. It makes no sense of for the man to know things about Tony that even Tony doesn't know.

"What?" Tony questions, his voice flat, as he turns to Stephen but Rhodey realised that his best friend wasn't questioning the doctor about how he knew anything. He simply accepted what the doctor said as fact despite him denying connections to SHIELD himself.

"Sir, I am afraid that Dr Strange is correct." JARVIS says and the AI flashes the information on the nearby TV screen and Rhodey and Tony look mesmerised at the screen for a long moment before Tony sits back down near Stephen and sighs.
"Well fuck me. So yeah. SHIELD has my father's research. Why can't I just ask for them? Why do I have to wait?" Tony asks and Stephen looks at him with pleading, helpless eyes and Tony immediately puts a hand over Stephen's mouth.


"I'm guessing I need to decide what to do. Fine. If what they are after is a moment of weakness, getting trashed at the party and maybe wearing the suit and doing stupid would do it. JARVIS, it's a go on the party. Let's say this Saturday. Send out the invites and organise everything for me buddy."

Tony says and Rhodey feels like he has missed some sort of discussion that happened between Stephen and Tony.

"If I do that, I'm going to be out of commission. I probably have one more prolonged use of the suit left in me." Tony says grimly and Rhodey feels his heart jump to his throat and he watches as pain fills Stephen's eyes. Okay. Well. The man's care and love for Tony is at least real enough, Rhodey thinks.

"I- I can take the suit. After the birthday party. I can take the suit and take it to the military. Buy you time." Rhodey says and Tony looks at him and then at Stephen for a moment before he nods.

"You're right. That way if something happens, you're available. But... Rhodey, we're going to have to put on a show." Tony says and Rhodey raises an eyebrow at him and Stephen gives them both a small smile as if he knows exactly what Tony is going to say.

"I'll be upstairs and leave you to hash out the details." Stephen says and he moves to stand up, but before he could, Tony moves and pulls the doctor into his arms and kisses him softly.

"Please make sure that demon child that is your cousin doesn't add any coriander to the next drink she makes for me." Tony tells him as he hands the bottle over to the doctor, who chuckles softly and leaves. Rhodey raises an eyebrow at his best friend.

"That serious huh?" Rhodey questions. Oh there are so many more important things for him to be talking about right now. But this is easier. Talking about this is so, so much easier than the reality of the situation that he doesn't want to face. Tony nods.

"Yeah. It's serious." Tony tells him and Rhodey sighs. When he gets back, he is going to definitely have a serious look into the good doctor, but for now, he's happy to see his friend in love and despite it all, sitting there with that ridiculous, fond smile on his face.

"So Rhodey-bear, how do you feel about a smackdown?" Tony asks with a sudden mischievous smile on his face. The sudden shift of tone and expression and even the atmosphere has Rhodey... confused.

"Huh?!!"
Chapter Summary

The Bifrost opens. What does that mean?

Tony has his birthday party. Is it going to go all according to SHIELD’s plans? Or will their plans be subverted?

Nothing seems to be going according to plan so well. It really isn't SHIELD's day is it?

Chapter Notes

I have to say that I love all the comments that you guys leave. They help me to stay motivated and encouraged to continue writing so thank you XD

Like most people that try to write, I have my days where I really can't write, like when the story just doesn't work in my head and I don't know where to go. Sometimes it just takes a little while for things to click again so I can continue to write.

But I honestly haven't been getting into the writer block territory with this story like I have with others, which is both probably due to the fact it's a fanfic and there are already some guidelines as to where the story needs to go, as well as the encouragement I'm getting from you guys.

So thank you and please keep it up XD

<3

Thursday

20 May 2010

Stephen wakes up with a gasp.

For a moment, he can almost see it. The bright flash of light, the vibration that it sends throughout all of the shields throughout the planet. It's not a break of the shields. But it feels like... a violation.

"Stephen?" Tony's voice is groggy but he seems concerned and Stephen breathes heavily as he tries to focus and to figure out what he should do.

The Bifrost had opened.

The Thunder God had been exiled onto Earth and Odin, the King of the Gods had sent his powerless son along with Mjolnir.

Shit.
Stephen hadn't realised that those events would overlap so much with the events that happen with Tony. He ought to have known.

God damn it.

"Stephen!" Tony calls out to him again and Stephen can feel his lover's hands on his shoulders, shaking him out of his thoughts and Stephen focuses his eyes on the worried caramel brown ones in front of him and tries to give him a reassuring smile just as Clea bursts into the room.

She is dressed only in the oversized shirt she'd worn to bed and her hair is dishevelled but she looks alert.

"What the fuck was that Stephen?!" She asks as soon as she is in the room. Stephen runs a dry hand down his face. If she had been roused, that meant that most of the Masters in the Order would have been roused as well.

Which means that there was likely to be an emergency meeting. Which means that he really needed to go. There was a lot that they really ought to discuss when it comes to Prince Thor and Prince Loki that they hadn't discussed yet.

They had thought that they had more time.

More and more, they were having to question their decisions and change their approaches. Not that it was necessarily a bad thing. They had known that it would happen. With the unforeseen changes that had been made in this universe, they needed to make sure that they kept up to date with all the discussions and all the precautions that they could take.

"That would be the Bifrost." Stephen says quietly in response to Clea, who looks alarmed. She leans heavily against the bedroom wall and sighs.

"Shit." She mutters and Stephen has to agree with her sentiment. He turns to Tony and tries to give him a reassuring smile.

"I have to go dearest." Stephen tells him softly. Tony looks at him and at Clea and he looks very, very worried.

Given the last time he'd just disappeared on Tony, he had been stabbed in the back, Stephen isn't surprised and given Loki's tendency to stabbing people, he's not sure whether he could completely tell Tony that he would be fine.

The last time that they had discussed the issue with the Council as far as Loki was concerned, was in identifying a moment that might provide Stephen with an opportunity to speak to the God of Mischief before he commits the atrocities.

To get a measure of Loki, if you will.

The thing is, with the Time Stone so focused on Tony Stark and telling his story throughout the universes, Stephen doesn't know what happens in Asgard during most of the incidents.

He doesn't know exactly what leads Loki to bring about the Chitauri army to Earth or what happens in Asgard between the events. What leads to the bringing of the Asgardian refugees other than what the snippets of conversations Tony has with the various people reveal.

So there is a need to gather information.
Stephen needs to meet with the Council. They need to discuss what their plan of action is going to be. What safety precautions they can take and should take.

He also needs the Cup.

"Stephen, it's- you're going to be safe right?" Tony asks him. The worry is naked and obvious in his eyes and his voice. Stephen gives him a soft smile.

Moments like this, he can't believe how lucky he is that Tony loves him back. That this isn't a one-sided thing anymore. That Tony considers him to be important in his life and that place by Tony's side is permanent to the man.

It sends a flood of warmth through him.

It also makes him all the more determined. He needs to make sure that the universe survives. That Tony survives. That he does everything in his power to make certain that everything will go as smoothly as possible for Tony and for the universe itself.

God, he hopes he can.

"I promise I'll be fine." Stephen promises him and kisses him softly before he looks at Clea.

"Go and get things organised for me. I'll be there soon." Stephen informs her. He is rather reluctant to get out of bed considering the fact that he is stark naked underneath the sheets.

She looks pale and worried, but she nods and she is gone out of the bedroom. He feels the swirl of dimensional energies and knows that she has gone back to the Sanctum.

"I'll call you." Stephen tells Tony as he gets out of bed and hastily dresses. Tony gets out too and he helps by handing Stephen various bits of clothing and makes sure that Stephen takes his phone from the bedside table.

"You better." Tony tells him with a voice that is thick with worry. Stephen gives him another reassuring smile and kisses him softly and deeply.

It's a lingering kiss, but Tony lets Stephen pull back after a moment or two and smiles softly.

"If you get hurt this time, I'm never going to let you out of my sight again Stephen Strange." Tony informs him. Stephen chuckles softly and before he can stop himself and before Tony can convince him otherwise, he leaves the bedroom.

He walks down the stairs and as he does so, he speaks softly to JARVIS.

"Make sure you keep good eyes on him for me JARVIS." Stephen reminds the AI, though he knows there is no need.

"Of course Doctor. I do hope you will stay safe and well." The AI informs him. Stephen nods and smiles at one of his cameras before he portals to the Sanctum.

As soon as he walks through, the dark blue robes wrap around him and the Cloak of Levitation welcomes him enthusiastically and wraps around his shoulders and holds him tightly as he opens the second portal to the Kamar-Taj.

It is time to be the Sorcerer Supreme.

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Since Stephen had left, Tony honestly hasn't been able to sleep. So instead, he had exercised, drank his chlorophyll and distinctly did not ask for JARVIS to show him the footage of Stephen and Clea's disappearances because he knows that would be a breach of their trust.

Instead, he asks JARVIS to delete the footage. He isn't too surprised when JARVIS informs him that they are already gone. The AI really was growing up to be quite independent and thoughtful. Not to mention protective of Stephen and Clea.

Tony is surprisingly happy about that.

But then, with Stephen Strange, the more responsible and considerate one between them in charge of the AI's education, Tony isn't surprised.

He is surprised when Pepper asks if it would be alright for her to come over. Or rather, announces that she was two minutes away from arriving at the mansion.

Tony runs up the stairs just in time to see her walking in through the glass doors and hears her greet JARVIS. When she sees him, Tony notes that though JARVIS gets a warm friendly greeting, he doesn't.

Rhodey the little shit.

"Justin Hammer wants a slot in the main exhibit hall to show off his new military project." Pepper tells him as she walks into the living room and almost flops onto the couch. She takes off her heels and lays down on the couch, using one of the cushions to lay her head on and sighs heavily.

"Give it to him. Let's see what he's got." Tony says with a shrug as he trails after her. It's not as if the Expo had been designed just to show off Stark Industries. It was meant to be a show that shows off the best of the inventions throughout the world.

"Are you sure? This is the guy that tried to make an Iron Man suit Tony." Pepper says as Tony moves over, puts her feet on his lap and starts to massage what had to be very sore toes and feet from the ridiculous high heels she has been wearing.

Bribery will get him everywhere. Right?

"Well, yeah but it would be bad form to block him from the expo when we declared that any technological advancements to better mankind would be shown." Tony says and Pepper moans as he hits a particularly sore spot on her foot.

"Fine. I'll get Natalie to organise it." Pepper says and grabs her phone to send the email through.

"You know... Rhodey told me what was going on." Pepper says quietly and Tony doesn't stop massaging her foot. Yeah, he figured.

Honestly, he hadn't planned on telling Pepper and Rhodey. He had hoped that he would be able to find a solution to the problem before he had to speak to them about the whole 'I'm kinda dying' thing. He'd seen how much they cared and had worried about him during Afghanistan and really didn't want to put them through that again.

He really hadn't wanted to see them hurting. But he's not sure whether it was just because he didn't...
want to see their pain and acknowledge the pain that he'd cause when he died or whether it was because he was truly worried about them being in distress.

It's probably a combination of both.

"That's why you made me CEO, isn't it? You were entrusting me with your legacy." Pepper says softly and Tony doesn't quite know what to say so he keeps massaging her feet in silence until she sits up and rests a hand on his and stops him. It's only then that he looks at her.

"Thank you for trusting me, Tony. And I won't let you down. I'm going to make sure that your schedule is clear for the rest of the month until we can figure out how to get you better." Pepper says with determination in her eyes and Tony can tell that it had probably taken Pepper some time and a lot of difficulties to be able to speak to him like this.

To decide to come to the mansion rather than going home after a long day at the office. The media fall out over the Monaco Grand Prix incident was still ongoing.

The public was divided pretty equally. Some believed and supported Iron Man, saying that he had saved countless lives during the incident and that superheroes like him were necessary to ensure that men like Ivan Vanko could not hurt the world.

Then there was the other side saying that he was a vigilante and if he hadn't even been there at the Grand Prix, then the terror incident wouldn't have even happened.

Having met Vanko, Tony agreed with the latter party. But then it would always have happened somewhere public. So in a way it happening in the race track, where though it was highly public, the damage could be mitigated by the high protective fences... in a way had been almost a good thing.

Ivan Vanko has escaped from prison. The Interpol was on the case trying to figure out what has happened and how Vanko had managed to escape and more importantly, where the fuck he is now.

He has to admit that he is worried. He has JARVIS looking for any information on Vanko and he also had JARVIS working to get into the SHIELD servers.

So far, all the information he had about Howard Stark and the relationship with SHIELD had been in the very deep parts of the SI server that had recently been uploaded with all the paper documents. Nothing more solid than that was available for the time being.

If Stephen was right and SHIELD had a solution to the palladium problem, he needed to know what the fuck that was so that he can work on a cure for himself.

He was already sitting at 76% and it was seriously starting to affect his health. His kidneys were all but failing and he was genuinely terrified.

It doesn't help that Stephen can't be with him and that Tony is worried that something will happen to Stephen. It had the last time the doctor had rushed off like that. What was to stop something from happening again?

"Pep, you know what we are planning for the party right?" Tony asks and Pepper sighs as she nods. The plan was simple. Tony was going to get 'drunk' at the party and start behaving recklessly.

Considering the situation with the poison and the fact that he was dying 'secretly', it wouldn't be too much of a leap if he were to suddenly start behaving like an idiot. If he didn't have Stephen in his life and his love... then maybe that is what he would be doing exactly.
"I know. It's Natalie isn't it?" Pepper asks and Tony blinks. That... that makes sense. He thinks about it and she's right. Natalie Rushman's introduction into his life had come with some suspicious timing and the almost too perfect paperwork that she had come with... and her ability to throw Happy Hogan like that?

"Yeah." Tony breathes out and Pepper sighs and flops back down onto the couch.

"She's been trying to get into your server and your emails for the last few weeks. She tried to come with me to the mansion today and asked several times if there was anything she could help with when it came to you to take the workload from Clea." Pepper says and Tony has to admit that when it came to people, Pepper was much more of a genius than he was.

"Make sure she's at the party." Tony tells her and Pepper nods firmly, lifting her head up so that she can do so before lying back down again.

"Keep massaging my feet Mr Stark. You know I deserve it." Pepper tells him and he is more than happy to comply. They sit in silence for a long moment before she speaks up again.

"I know that Clea is more than what she appears to be but for some reason, I can't dislike her." Pepper tells him and he has to agree. He nods slowly.

"Clea and Stephen are good people Pep. I don't know everything that they can do and what is going on, but I believe them when they say that they are just trying to protect people." Tony tells her and Pepper sighs.

"Yeah. I just wish that they could trust us enough to tell us everything." Pepper says and Tony has to agree. But he bites his lips and thinks about what Stephen had been saying and the 'preventive measures' that they have to make sure that they don't spill all the beans.

That kind of extreme measure shows their determination and dedication.

"You know, in a way Clea and Stephen are kind of like Natalie. But it feels different with them." Pepper says and she seems confused. Tony chuckles.

"It's because they aren't trying to manipulate us Pep. They didn't approach us. We approached them." Tony says quietly and Pepper blinks at him.

"Huh. You're right. They- They aren't after anything are they?" Pepper asks and Tony scoffs.

"If Clea is after anything I would say that it would be my car collection and your shoe collection." Tony says drily and Pepper giggles.

"True. Clea knows about Natalie already doesn't she. Who she is and everything." Pepper doesn't ask. She knows. She is a clever woman. Tony nods slowly.

"I think so." He says and Pepper looks thoughtful as he switches from the right foot to the left and she relaxes into the touch.

"Clea said something odd when we were in Monaco when I asked her why she was being so nice to Natalie when she knew that Natalie was a spy." Pepper says and Tony is intrigued. Pepper continues.

"Clea said that she wanted to remind Natalie that we weren't targets but people. Human." Pepper's voice speaks of her admiration for the younger woman.
That's certainly an interesting approach, he thinks. Does that mean that Natalie wasn't going to go away after whatever is going to happen happens? Is there going to be something more with her?

Tony isn't sure.

"Are you... happy Tony?" Pepper asks him with some hesitation and Tony looks at her with some surprise at the question and thinks about it for a moment.

The thing is, despite the secrets between them, the relationship with Stephen was going better than ever. Even when he had been with Rhodey, Tony had seen the walls that Stephen has. The way that his expressions closed up when it came to Rhodey but it had never been like that with him.

With him, Stephen shows everything. He hid only the things that he had to hide and Tony believed that. He believed that Stephen loved him. He believed that Stephen just wanted him safe and happy. He felt that with every interaction he had with the man.

He didn't know everything that Stephen was hiding but it was clear enough that having secrets from him was something that the doctor found both difficult, distasteful and painful. Knowing that, Tony finds that he can't be angry at it anymore. Not when Stephen gives his everything to him as a person. As a lover.

"Yeah. I think I am." Tony says quietly and Pepper looks at him with sorrow in her eyes.

"Good. You deserve to be happy Tony. More than anyone else I know, you deserve to be happy." She tells him firmly. He gives her a small smile.

"So do you Pep." He tells her because he wants the best for her. The CEO position is working well for her. He can tell that she is enjoying the challenge, the authority to make changes that she has wanted to make in the company that he hasn't had the time or the forethought to consider.

She was going to be a formidable businesswoman in the future and she was going to turn the world upside down with what she can do. He saw nothing but amazing things in the future with her and Stark Industries. He was so proud of how well she was doing and he was glad that he had made the decision to make her CEO.

"I love you Tony and I need you, so don't you dare die on me." Pepper tells him fiercely and he can't help but give her a smile and a nod.

"I'm Tony fucking Stark Pepper. I don't give up." He tells her and he tells himself. He won't give up. Not now. Not when he has so much to live for.

There is still so much that he wants to do. For both the world, for himself and with Stephen. He wants to know what Stephen is hiding. The doctor had told him that he would eventually be able to tell Tony everything and when that time comes, Tony wants to be prepared. He wants to be able to accept whatever it is that Stephen will tell him.

Even if what he tells him is impossible. He wants to spend more time with Stephen. He wants their relationship to grow. He wants to go back to Paris and heedless of the eyes of the public, kiss the doctor in front of the Eiffel Tower. He wants to see JARVIS grow and become a fully self-aware, self-functioning and governing Artificial Intelligence.

He wants to see what Pepper will accomplish as the CEO of Stark Industries. See how good Rhodey was going to get with War Machine. How the taco is going to taste at the Expo. How scary Clea was going to be when she was more experienced in the PR world.
Even with the horrors of the world and the bad things that might come his way, Tony wants to experience the good and for that, he is going to survive. He has to. If his father was right about one thing, it is that Stark men are made of iron.

And Tony Stark is Iron Man.

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Saturday

22 May 2010

Tony Stark's birthday party is as extravagant as it could be. The DJ is set up in the living room, there are bars set up both inside and outside, the pool is heated and there are plenty of bikinis and swim trunks for anyone that wants to jump into the pool.

It is the organised chaos of a good party and Natasha has to admit that if nothing else, Tony Stark does at least know how to party and party well at that.

Pepper sighs as she looks over the party. She has a champagne glass in hand and when the waiter goes past, grabs another and thrusts it towards Natasha.

"You're going to need this to deal with Tony." Pepper tells her and with a blink, Natasha takes the drink and when Pepper offers her glass, clinks them together before taking a deep drink. Natasha can handle her alcohol well enough.

"Is Clea and Dr Strange not at the party?" She asks because Clea should be the one that deals with Tony. She was his PA. As much as Natasha had worked to change that up.

Pepper sighs.

"No. They're in New York. Stephen had an emergency consultation that he couldn't put off." Pepper tells her and Natasha nods slowly. That's good news for her. It will give her a chance to talk to Tony and see if she can get an in.

The mission really hadn't been going smoothly.

There were some hints that it might go the right way in Monaco but it hadn't worked out the way that she had expected. The attack had broken whatever hope that she had of being able to slip into Tony's bed. And when they'd come back to the States, she had been too busy working on trying to deal with the crisis of media and government calling Tony out that she hadn't been able to focus on getting to Tony himself.

But this was another chance at least. The last chance to push his buttons to see how he would react, she thinks. He was most likely running out of time with the poisoning by now.

The thing was, SHIELD needed Tony Stark to work with them. That was, unfortunately, the truth. Iron Man was powerful but it went beyond just Iron Man. Tony Stark with his genius, his funds and his influence could be very beneficial to SHIELD going forward.

There was the whole issue of the Avengers Initiative and the Avengers were going to need weapons, funding and PR management and Tony Stark was the perfect man to be able to handle all of that on his own. SHIELD had limited funds. But Tony Stark didn't.

So with that in mind, SHIELD needed to... make sure that he would follow their directions. That he
would strive to prove himself to them. That he would be grateful to them and be willing to take on
the burdens of the Avengers when the time came.

Despite her skills though, the Black Widow wasn't quite sure if she could manipulate Tony Stark to
that extent. The way that he handled Monaco's incident was actually surprising.

She hadn't considered Tony Stark a leader, if she is honest. She believed that he surrounded himself
with good people to be able to get the job done and give good advice so that he can run the
company, but she had thought that he was more a manchild than anything else.

Just a playboy billionaire enjoying his wealth and yes, a genius, but only in the technical and
scientific sense. But she had been wrong.

It wasn't until she realised that Pepper, though she had been helping Tony out, had not been making
most of the decisions in SI and that Tony really didn't surround himself with the people from SI but
dealt mostly with Pepper and the R&D Department, it had changed a lot of her perspective.

The other thing that had surprised her and convinced her had been the number of emails that were
sent through to Tony from Clea and how quickly he worked through them and responded to them
and made sure that the instructions, though brief, were passed on.

Tony Stark seemed like a billionaire playboy with a lot of time because he was just... efficient. Super.
Efficient. And far, far smarter than anyone at SHIELD could actually grasp.

Then when the Monaco incident happened and she saw how quickly he took charge of the situation
and directed Pepper, Clea, Stephen and even herself to take on the roles that he needed and how
quickly he dealt with the media after ensuring that his people were safe, she realised that he was a
leader.

He was also more responsible than she had thought. The way that he behaved publicly made him
seem like an idiot that slept with anyone that he wanted to and that showed off his wealth. But the
way that he had run SI had been incredibly responsible and it was a tight-ship with better security
than most governments.

Especially since he had come back from Afghanistan. Which was... surprising to her. Natasha hates
to admit it, but she has a grudging bit of respect for the man and she wished that she didn't because
it's harder to manipulate someone when she genuinely liked them. But it was her job.

"Okay he's hidden long enough. Can you go and get Tony please?" Pepper asks and interrupts her
thoughts. Natasha nods and gives her a smile.

"Of course Ms Potts." She says and makes her way towards the spacious bedroom that she knows is
just upstairs. He's not in the room but when she goes to the dressing room, she finds him.

Tony Stark is sitting on a chair in the dressing room and he looks forlorn and thoughtful. He has a
drink in hand and the shallow cut on his face from the fight makes him look even more haggard and
tired than he seems to be.

"Mr Stark, Ms Potts was wondering when you would be joining the party." She tells him as she
comes into the room and he looks almost startled by her appearance in the room. He gestures towards
the case where his watches are and she goes over to look over the watches.

"I should probably cancel the party huh?" Tony asks all of sudden and Natasha looks over to him
and the answer comes easily enough. With the media fall out over what happened in Monaco and the
fact that this party would be covered heavily by the media, Tony was going to catch a lot of flak for
In fact, she is surprised that the party hadn't been cancelled already. But then Tony Stark and parties. That was a well enough known fact in the world. He loved them and he loved it, even more, when the party was about him. That was the narcissistic tendencies within him.

"Probably." She tells him softly as she brings the box of watches over to the little bar he has set up and sets it down. She goes over to him and takes the empty glass over to the bar and instead of the scotch, mixes up a martini.

"Yeah. Because it's um..." Tony hesitates and she gives him a soft coy smile.

"Ill-timed." She tells him. As she walks back over to where he is sitting. Only he stands up to get the glass from her and they are close. Flirting close. Good.

"Right. Sends the wrong message." He says and she can tell that he is already quite inebriated and more importantly, he is ogling her and appreciating the tight grey dress she is wearing.

"Inappropriate." She tells him with that soft tone of voice whilst she lets him see the appreciation she has for his handsome face.

Make no mistakes, Tony Stark is a handsome man and mission or not, she can't deny that. In fact, out of all the targets that she's worked with, he is probably the one that she would be most comfortable getting into bed with.

Besides, according to all the research that SHIELD had put together for her, he is meant to be really good in bed. She kind of wants to test him out, if she is being honest. She watches him with intent eyes as he takes a sip of the martini.

"Is that dirty enough for you?" She asks him with a coy tone and she can tell that he is tempted. By gods, he is tempted. She lets her lashes cover her eyes for a short while. It's never a good idea to push too hard when it comes to seductions. Sometimes, just being a temptation is just enough.

"Uh, gold face, brown band. The Jaeger. I'll give that a look. Bring them over here." Tony says and sits back down in the lounge chair as he had been when she had arrived. She does as he asks.

"I'll take that. Why don't you-" Tony starts to say as he takes the box of watches from her and Natasha can almost feel the vulnerability. It's not a signal that she misses all that often. This is her chance.

She doesn't even have to seduce him into the bed. Not really. The situation is volatile enough with the military and the dramas that all she needs to really do is make sure that Tony will make one mistake. That is all.

Then SHIELD can swoop in and fix all the hurts and his mistakes and make him grateful for the help that they will provide. Make him indebted to them.

She sits down on the armrest near him and gets out her foundation compact and starts to dab the makeup onto the cut on his face. It's close and it's intimate. It's the kind of contact that she had been looking to make to get into Tony Stark's head.

She can't help the slight niggling feeling at the back of her head telling her that this is wrong. That she shouldn't manipulate an emotionally vulnerable man who is dying. Who is in pain.

She squashes that voice down.
"I gotta say, it's hard to get a read on you. Where are you from?" He asks her and it is obvious that he is uncomfortable. Which makes no sense. It's not as if he has a romantic partner or is in any sort of committed relationship.

She did initially think that perhaps there was more between Tony Stark and Stephen Strange than just friendship, but Tony had been flirtatious enough with her and Stephen had never shown jealousy. Given that, she doubted that they were in a relationship.

Besides, he was Tony Stark. A playboy. Someone used to casual sex and known to indulge in threesomes and more even when he was in a relationship.

Was it because she was an employee? That hadn't stopped him all that often before, according to the tabloids. So why the hesitation?

"Pittsburgh." She tells him easily enough. It's a cover story that she has memorised all too many times. He looks unsatisfied with the answer, but he doesn't question her. He instead takes a moment and looks away before looking back at her as she continues to apply the make up.

"Can I ask you a question, hypothetically? It's a bit odd." He says and she leans back a little on the armrest and shuts the compact. With the lighting at the party, no one would be able to notice the cover up.

"If this was your last birthday party you were gonna have, how would you celebrate it?" Tony asks her and in that moment, she feels sympathy for him at a level that she hadn't felt before.

The man was dying. He knew that he was dying and he was trying to hide it from the world and the strain was showing. She feels almost bad about the things that SHIELD was planning with him and what they were doing to him.

Yes, they needed Tony Stark under their thumbs but did they have to break the man to do it? She's not sure. But Fury had been. Stick to the mission, Natasha, she reminds herself. She has a job to do. It's not the right time to change up the playbook.

"I'd do whatever I wanted to do. With whoever I wanted to do it with." She tells him and she makes sure that he can look into her eyes and know that she was very, very much interested in being that whoever. Tony looks at her for a moment and the heat in his glance is almost delicious. It feels like a promise.

He nods and gestures and she gets the message clearly enough. By the end of the night, he was either going to do something so stupid and crazy that it would cause another media outrage, or she was going to have him in the palm of her hand.

She hesitates for a moment and she turns to watch him. She almost opens her mouth. She shuts it immediately. This isn't the time for compassion. For mercy. To make a different call. She has a mission to do. This was necessary.

It sounds like a lie even her ears.

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Sir, Please Exit the Doughnut!

Chapter Summary

Well, the party was a disaster but was that the moment of weakness that SHIELD had needed?

And just what is it about sitting in a doughnut that was so bad anyway?!

Chapter Notes

Erm... so.... I forgot to upload the chapter on time because I got on a roll lol I am finally up to chapter 10 in Arc 3 and it's kinda working out a lot better than it had been. I mean there might have to be some time skips here and there, but I'm kinda happy with how it's going so far at least.

Not all the characters are behaving the way that I expected, which is kinda normal for me so there's that but yeah! Kinda happy with the progress at the moment.

I really want to get ARC 3 finished up before I'm done posting ARC 2 but we will see how that goes. It would be really nice to stay an entire ARC ahead, considering the fact that I will be reading and re-writing as I go as usual XD

But yeah~ I just wanted to share my excitement over the progress (because I wrote 4 chapters in like five hours y'all!) and apologise for forgetting to actually upload because I was preoccupied with the writing bit XD

I am seriously loving all the comments, encouragements, reviews, criticisms and everything! Thank you and um I do reply to all the comments after I upload the new chapters so... sorry for flooding your inboxes =D (if you really don't want me to reply back just let me know in the comment and I will leave you alone... though it will make me sad T__T)

Sunday

23 May 2010

Well, that was a disaster and a half, Tony thinks as he looks up and around. The living room is definitely trashed. Three of the windows have been shot out and shattered and he's just glad that he lives in Malibu and the weather is lovely enough that it's not a huge issue to have it coming directly through the windows like this.

There are upturned tables, chairs, spilt drinks and shattered glass almost everywhere throughout the room, but that's what happens when you start firing off repulsors in the middle of a loud, crowded party full of drunk idiots, he guesses.
Tony is laying flat on his back with the suit on him and it feels heavy and he is so very, very tired suddenly. Not just physically but mentally.

The public attention and the negative attention, as well as any attention, really has been a monster of not just his creation but an inheritance of his birth. He wishes that hadn't been the case. It hadn't stopped him from perpetuating that image. From playing up to it.

But he can already see the headlines that would be all over the news by tomorrow. The traumatised faces of his 'guests' posted all over social media and their stories. He knows that there will be law suits incoming. He will deal with them later.

Pepper has left, feigning her disgusts and anger and she will deal with the media as soon as she is back home. She will get Gina and Alex onto the problem. They will play it off as some sort of media stunt to show off the new suit that hadn't quite gone according to plan. But that's for later. After whatever SHIELD was supposed to do happens. At least that was the plan so far.

Not his most brilliant one, but then Stephen hadn't given him a whole lot of information to work with. Still, this ought to have been dramatic enough and chaotic enough to draw SHIELD's attention, right?

Tony hopes so. He's not sure what else he can do. Let the paparazzi follow him whilst he goes into a barber shop, take a buzzing razor and shave his head in a cry for help? Surely not.

Tony looks up and sees Rhodey with his faceplate up looking at him and sighing.

"You alright bud?" Rhodey asks as he reaches out a hand and Tony takes it. Rhodey helps him to stand up and it is apparent that he is quite comfortable with the suit, which is good. Rhodey was going to need to be comfortable with the damned suit since he was going to be spending a long time in it day to day.

"Alright, was that loud and dramatic enough you reckon?" Rhodey asks him and Tony nods slowly. Definitely, he would say. They had drawn enough of the attention between Rhodey bursting into the upstairs room with the suit on and the blasts of repulsor rays.

It had cut through the 'drunk' DJing he had been doing in the suit. Through the terrible behaviour he had been showing.

"I would say." Tony says with a chuckle. Stephen hadn't said have a fight or create mayhem at his birthday party, but it made the most amount of sense and it would give a good way for Rhodey to take the suit.

"Sorry about the windows man. I need to really figure out the whole aiming thing a little better." Rhodey tells him and Tony chuckles as he lifts his own visor and looks at his best friend grinning at him.

"Worry about the aiming thing after you figure out the flying thing Rhodey-bear. It's gonna be a wild ride for you, bud." Tony tells him and watches as his best friend grins. Then all of sudden, he seems to remember what has just happened and sighs again.

"I guess this means I can't come to the mansion for a while huh?" Tony nods as he sighs too and looks around. He deactivates the suit and gets out of it and when he stumbles, Rhodey is quick enough to respond to catch him.

"You alright, man?" Rhodey asks him after a moment when Tony has caught his breath. He hasn't used most of the powerful weapons on his suit for a reason.
He had known that the palladium core would deplete faster with higher power usage and he has been restraining himself, but he knows that the levels would definitely have skyrocketed for having stayed in the suit for awhile.

"Yeah. Feel shit but I'll be alright." Tony tells him but Rhodey doesn't look too convinced. In fact, he looks worried. Panicked even.

"That Stephen dude better be right Tones. If he's wrong and there isn't- I can't lose you man."
Rhodey tells him firmly and Tony smiles at him and hopes it's reassuring.

The thing is, Rhodey's concern and his worry are obvious and it does remind Tony that he is lucky to have a friend like Rhodey.

A friend that is going to be willfully lying to the military, that has agreed to put on this show even though he is well aware that he is going to catch public flak for it. The man that was willing to go with the crazy plan based simply on Tony's trust in his romantic partner.

It's a lot.

Rhodey's friendship was definitely something that Tony was never going to lose. No matter what he does. For that, Tony was always going to be grateful. But... Rhodey has to go. It would be suspicious if he remained at the mansion for too long when they were supposed to have had a giant fall out.

"It's gonna be fine. You go and do your thing but if you let Justin Hammer touch that suit, I will never forgive you." Tony tells him and Rhodey chuckles as he puts the visor down. He raises his fist for a bump and Tony is more than happy to bump it. It really wouldn't be a comfortable hug with a suit.

Tony steps back to watch Rhodey take off and he isn't too surprised to see that the Air Force pilot has no problems flying the suit after the initial fumble.

He wonders for a moment how Rhodey was going to take the little gift he and JARVIS had put together for the man. He hopes that Rhodey will appreciate it. He guesses he won't know for awhile.

It's gonna suck not being able to see his best friend for awhile, but he guesses that's the price he has to pay for the stunt.

He shakes his head a little and gets back into his suit so that he can take it back downstairs. He could get JARVIS to do it, but honestly, a few more minutes in the suit wasn't going to make that much of a difference. Besides, being in the suit is like being hugged and he can use a hug.

The party and everything was obviously an unmitigated disaster. But Tony knows that if anyone was looking for a moment of weakness, then he had just provided the biggest one possible.

He just had a public fall out with two of his best friends. He had shown that he was being reckless and making shit decisions. He was drunk, sick and vulnerable. He's not sure if there was anything more he could have done.

He just hopes that Natalie Rushman has seen everything she needed to see and will report back to her superiors.

When he makes his way back down to the lab, he pauses when he sees Stephen standing there. Oh thank god, Tony thinks. Stephen looks tired and he looks a little stressed, but he doesn't look hurt.
Tony wants to rush to him, but he knows better. He walks to the garage, takes off the suit and lets it go back to the charging station before he turns around to look at his lover.

"I'm guessing you saw the news?" Tony says casually as he walks over and grabs a bottle of the chlorophyll he is honestly sick of drinking. Stephen remains where he had been, leaning against the wall.

"Something like that." Stephen looks hesitant. Worried. Tony goes over to the couch and flops down on it and when his lover doesn't immediately move, he sighs.

"I can't stay long Anthony. I- I came to check on you to make sure that you were okay." Stephen tells him. So whatever was happening on his end was serious then, Tony thinks as he looks over the man. He raises a hand and holds it out towards Stephen.

"Come here Stephen. I believe I am owed at least a cuddle." Tony gestures and Stephen moves until he is near the couch and Tony takes the opportunity to pull the doctor on top of him and there is definitely a moment of adjustment until they are both comfortable, but they eventually find the right spots and tangle of limbs.

"I'm sorry you had to go through that." Stephen says into his shoulder. Tony hums his response.

Laying like this, entwined with Stephen, it all doesn't seem that bad. Oh, it is. It is massively bad but this isn't nearly the worst thing that he had ever done. No one was injured. Rhodey and he put on a good show but no one was injured. They'd made sure of that. All that really got damaged was three of the large windows in the living room. That was it really.

Once the dust dies down, Tony and Rhodey will make their public announcements introducing War Machine and explain that it had been a stunt to introduce the suit that hadn't gone quite according to plan. It's not a solid plan but it had been the best that Tony could come up with.

"'Needed to happen right?" Tony asks though he doesn't expect an answer.

"In the morning, go to the nearby doughnut shop off the highway. The one you like." Stephen says quietly and Tony knows better than to question it.

"I'm guessing in my suit? Reckless last hurrah style?" Tony asks and Stephen hums. Tony notices that Stephen seems very tired. Very worn. He lays a hand over the doctor's forehead and strokes his hand through the hair when he realises that the doctor doesn't have a temperature.

He wants to ask what the doctor has been up to and whether he is alright. But he doesn't. Because right now, he knows there are other things that they need to focus on. Even if they are so very tired and so very in need of just... comfort.

"SHIELD has what they need. A perceived moment of weakness where you have isolated yourself from your friends and allies." Stephen says and Tony hums.

He is tired too. It had been an exhausting couple of days, if he is being honest. The kind of couple of days he really hadn't enjoyed. With Stephen in his arms, he feels relaxed. Calm. Sleepy.

But there is a question that he needs to ask.

"Who is she?" Tony can't help but think that Natalie Rushman is far more than she had appeared. Every little gesture that she had made, every single thing that she had said had been a calculated move. But so well calculated and so well thought ahead that it all looked and felt so incredibly natural.
The only thing that had put him off had been her eyes. She hadn't held the heat and desire that he recognises now as real. Stephen had shown him that more than enough for him to know the difference now.

"You'll find out soon." Stephen tells him but his voice is hardly audible and it is obvious that the doctor was struggling to stay awake. Tony finds himself smiling and pulls the doctor a little closer to himself.

In the morning or whenever he wakes the fuck up, he was going to dearly regret sleeping on the goddamned sofa, but for now, he was warm, comfortable and content enough.

He hopes whatever Stephen had to go and do isn't time-sensitive because he is not willing to let the doctor go right now. He needs this. He needs this time with Stephen to comfort himself. Besides, Stephen is exhausted and he needs the rest.

Universe be damned.

He doesn't even care he is still in a suit and that Stephen is in a wrinkled business shirt of his own. They can figure things out when they wake up. He's just grateful that it wasn't really his birthday.

On his real birthday, he hopes he will have a better time. He has plans. They involve Stephen and sex. Lots of it.

He needs something to look forward to.

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Sunday

23 May 2010

The morning sunlight is warm against his face and the fresh doughnuts are really quite delicious, Tony has to admit. He really ought to bring a box back to the mansion when he is done consuming the ones that he has because Stephen could probably use some too, if he is still at the house.

He doubts it.

The doctor had woken up in a panic pretty much as soon as the sun rose and had sighed and told Tony that he needed to go and that Stephen himself needed to go.

So yeah. Definitely not at the mansion.

"Sir, I'm going to have to ask you to exit the doughnut." The unwelcome interruption but a completely and utterly expected one doesn't catch Tony off guard. He looks down and sees Fury standing there, despite the heat, in a freaking leather trench coat.

The man is really quite invested in the image of the tough spy, Tony thinks as he arches an eyebrow. Stephen had been right on the money. He isn't even surprised by that. Not anymore. He is curious, but he will wait for the explanation to come from his lover when he is well and truly ready.

He does exit the doughnut. It's easy enough to hold the helmet in one hand, the box in the other and jump down. The suit can take the impact of the fall quite easily. His joints don't even feel the impact of it.

Whatever Stephen had done in the morning to relieve the dizziness and the nausea has really helped.
He knows Stephen did something.

The doctor hadn't said anything, but the way that his face had gone green and he had all but fallen over sideways onto the sofa as he told Tony to go and that he would be okay was... enough of an indication.

Tony hadn't asked. He hadn't stayed because that's not what Stephen had wanted. With the disparity of control and power in their relationship, Tony was more than well aware that when his lover asked him to do something, he really ought to do it.

He is worried though. Still, JARVIS had told him that Stephen was alright. So there was that.

"I told you I don't want to join your super-secret boy-band." Tony says referring back to the contract that Fury had tried to renegotiate with him as soon as they are seated in a booth. He doesn't have a hangover, but he has experienced enough of them to know how to fake it.

The headache he has is real enough and he shields his eyes from the sunlight and looks at Fury with annoyance in his eyes. Fury looks amused. His last response to Tony refusing to work with SHIELD for the last little while since Coulson's visit with Stephen hadn't been pretty. Hence the escalation, Tony thinks.


"I'm sorry, I don't wanna get off on the wrong foot. Do I look at the patch or the eye?" Tony asks as he looks over the Director of SHIELD and the very pirate-like eyepatch he is wearing. His whole outfit and his mannerisms scream shady. Literally.

"Honestly, I'm a bit hung over. I'm not sure if you're real or if you're-" Tony starts to say. It's easy to play into the character of Tony Stark, the billionaire playboy idiot who doesn't give a fuck what other people say or think.

"Oh, I am very real. I'm the realest person you're ever gonna meet." Fury tells him with a hard tone and he is leaning forward and getting into Tony's face and Tony has to fight himself not to scoff at the man.

Yeah. Real. As real as someone hiding in the shadows of the government and behind authority and fear-mongering to try to manipulate the world, politics and the media in order to 'protect' the people with ignorance. Tony hates that sort of 'I know better than you' sorta bullshit that government organisations like to spout.

People aren't sheep. They aren't idiots. Yes, sometimes confidentiality and secrets are necessary in order to protect people and assets. But that is a rare occasion and some things, such as mass surveillance and blatant violation of human rights like what SHIELD was involved in should be made public so that they would be accountable not only to the government and to their 'funding' but to the public.

They should know what is being done in their name.

But no. SHIELD hides and they have tried to get him to do their dirty work. He has refused and now, they were trying once again to manipulate him. Tony... hates it.

"Just my luck. Where's the staff?" Tony questions. He can use more coffee. And maybe more doughnuts. He doesn't need the empty calories but he can definitely use the sugar at the very least to help deal with the headache.
"That's not looking so good." Fury says as he reaches over and looks over the palladium induced raised veins that are standing out stark against his collar. Tony doesn't flinch away from the touch, but he does move back a little. Didn't the man know the definition of personal space?

"We've secured the perimeter, but I don't think we should hold it for too much longer." Tony isn't too surprised by the familiar voice of one Natalie Rushman coming through. This is what Stephen must have meant then, he thinks as he looks at her with a raised eyebrow. She doesn't look at him.

Well, that explains a lot. She must have been plan number 3 then. First being to approach his friends under the guise of patriotism to try to get them to spy on him. Then to approach him with Coulson to try to get him to work with them voluntarily. Then using her as a honeypot?

The thing is, Tony Stark before Stephen would have fallen for it hook line and sinker. Before he had known what love was really about and what it meant to be in a truly loving relationship, though they were still working out the kinks, and he learnt to trust someone so completely with everything that was himself... he would have fallen for the shallow seduction and false promise.

God.

It's deplorable, Tony thinks and he feels the coffee in his mouth go bitter as he swallows it down and looks at the woman.

"Huh. You're fired." Tony mutters as he looks at her and she looks down at him and for a moment, he sees a brief flash of guilt flash in her eyes. Just a brief flash. But it's there and he is almost happy to see it. Good. She should feel bad about manipulating people to get what she wants. What SHIELD wants.

From the corner of his eyes, he can see Fury smiling and his enjoyment of the situation is obvious. It's not the first time anyone has shown an expression like that around him. People seemed to get a kick out of it when they manage to get an upper hand or what they perceive is an upper hand on someone like Tony.

It tends to greatly stroke their egos. Tony files away that information for later. Fury, it turns out would not be unnecessarily impossible to manipulate. He has a big enough ego to make that easy enough. Besides, if they were going to play the manipulation game, then Tony wasn't going to try to keep his own hands clean.

He wasn't a good man.

"That's not up to you." The woman tells him and Tony raises an eyebrow at that. Oh right. They believed that Tony has had a falling out with Pepper and that he wouldn't be able to make any decisions when it came to the situation with the woman. He'll see about that.

"Tony, I want you to meet Agent Romanov." Fury says as he wraps his arm around the woman and lays a hand over her arm. Tony feels his eyebrows go up a little at that. A little inappropriate, considering the workplace relationship that is between them but hey it's up to them to decide what is appropriate when it comes to their relationship right?

There is also something possessive and proud about that gesture that Tony doesn't like. The way that Fury sits, the way that he presents her is like saying, 'hey, look what you fell for' towards Tony. He is almost tempted to point out how she had actually failed to get a foothold at all into Stark Industries or himself or Pepper but hey. For now, it worked in his favour to play dumb.
Besides, thanks to Stephen and whatever he had done, Tony was level headed enough and calm enough to be able to think over his decisions and thought processes as he reacts or doesn't react.

"Hi." Tony says with a flat tone. Definitely going to have to talk to Pepper about getting the woman removed, he thinks. Definitely. There's no need to keep someone around in the company that was working actively against the interests of the company.

"I'm a SHIELD shadow. Once we knew you were ill, I was tasked to you by Director Fury." She tells him. She doesn't make direct eye contact with him.

The thing is, he isn't sure if the little bits of guilt that he can see in her eyes and her face is even genuine. Once bitten, twice shy, they say. Tony was pretty sure that he was never going to be able to trust this woman again. Unless she showed herself trustworthy in the future and even then, he would have doubts.

He knows that Pepper, for one, was going to be furious. Oh, she was going to be spitting fire. He almost can't wait for that to happen.

"I suggest you apologise to Pepper." Tony tells her sharply and for a moment, the agent actually looks genuinely and truly guilty. She nods curtly. Fury either doesn't notice the gesture or doesn't care.

"You've been very busy. You've made your girl CEO, you're giving away all your stuff. You let your friend fly away with your suit!" Fury says and Tony leans back and raises an eyebrow at him. God, he wishes he could get out of the suit but he doesn't trust fucking SHIELD people anywhere near the suit when he isn't in it to be able to use it to defend himself.

Hell, he doesn't even trust them with himself at this stage.

"Hell, if I didn't know better-" Fury says and Tony cuts him off.

"You don't know better." He says and leaves it at that. They can come to their own conclusions. Rhodey didn't steal the suit. He was given the suit and as soon as he figures out what SHIELD has in store and he is able to get whatever information packet that he was supposed to be getting from them according to Stephen... then he was going to tell Rhodey to make the contract that they have public.

Or at least let the government know about it.

"Well, you've become a problem. A problem that I have to deal with. Contrary to your belief, you are not the centre of my universe." Well, they were certainly making it seem like he was, Tony thinks with a sigh. And if Stephen was right? Then apparently he was at the centre of the universe or at the very least in the plan to save it.

Still, the hyperbole was annoying, the high tone was annoying and the blatant disrespect and strong-arming were annoying. Tony just wants to get to the point. He wants this conversation over and done with. He just wants to go home. He wants to maybe go to New York. Where he thinks Stephen may be.

But most of all, he just wants Fury to get to the fucking point.

"I have bigger problems than you in the southwest region to deal with!" The man says and Tony hides his eyes with his hand a little as he listens carefully. Southwest region. He was definitely going to have to get JARVIS to take a good look with the satellites to see what the fuck was happening.

He was also going to have to see if he can make sure that a new satellite or a few dozen actually, is
launched soon with better cameras, better detectors for energy signatures than before. He had some weather balloons he was using for that sort of thing, but more and more, he was starting to get the feeling that he was going to need something a little more accurate. Faster.

"Hit him." Fury says and it's only then that Tony realises that the Romanov had returned and had snuck up behind him and by the time he realises that, he feels a needle jabbed into his neck. He feels the cool liquid enter his body and he is terrified for a moment. He feels the panic rise.

"Oh God, are you going to steal my kidneys and sell it?" Tony says to hide the genuine terror and horror he feels. Romanov moves in close and she grabs his chin and turns his head to look at the veins in his neck for a long moment before she lets him go, nodding as if satisfied.

"Can you people just not do anything awful for like five seconds? What did she just do to me?" Tony asks not to the redhead but to the director of the spy sitting across the table from him.

"You mean what did we just do for you?" Fury says and his tone changes. As if he cares. As if he is worried. As if he expects Tony to be grateful. As if he is talking to a fucking child that just hasn't been assaulted by a spy that he didn't trust, with a needle, injected directly into his fucking neck.

As if all of it was done to help him. As if it was impossible or so very incredibly difficult to have just asked for fucking permission before they just decided to do whatever the fuck they felt like and injected him with an unknown substance.

Tony feels the anger boil up at him and he swallows it down hard and looks at Fury hard in the eye instead as the spy continues to play the sympathetic character.

"That's lithium dioxide. It's gonna take the edge off. We're trying to get you back to work." The thing is, whatever they injected him with, it is working. Tony can feel the heaviness that had settled into his bones lift and if Stephen hadn't done whatever he had done, then he suspects that the nausea and the headaches etc would have lifted too.

Lithium dioxide.

Not unfeasible for it to work but it's not a permanent solution to the problem. It's a temporary gap to alleviate the symptoms he wagers. The only thing was that he was trading one poisonous substance for another. Which is why he hadn't used it himself.

But he should have considered it as a stop-gap. But the long term side effects of having that in his body... he's not sure if it's worth it. Especially when there are so many other poisons in his body already.

"Give me a box of that and I will be right as rain." Tony says sardonically. He really wants this to be over. He is so angry, tired and he hates the way that these people are treating him. He wants out. But he can't. He knows he can't.

"It's not a cure. Just abates the symptoms." Tony knows but when she looks at him, there is that flash of guilt again. Tony gets a feeling that they are going to take soon about those 'feelings' that she may or may not have soon. Depends on her moral compass, he figures.

"Doesn't look like it's gonna be an easy fix." Fury tells him. Tony knows. If it had been easy, he would have fixed it already.

"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." Tony says with some seriousness. It's the first time during that conversation that he is being honest and real.
"Well, I'm here to tell you, you haven't tried them all." Fury says with some smugness. This is where his father's research is going to come out then, Tony thinks. Stephen really, really knew what he was talking about. It's not that he distrusted the man, but by gods, it was another thing to be presented with evidence like this.

"Why don't you go home and we will meet you there in a few hours. We can talk then about getting you fixed up." Fury says almost kindly. Great. More condescending talks.

He's being perhaps a little unfair. He doesn't care. He has just been assaulted, he is angry and he feels tired. He wants to go home and he wants to talk to JARVIS and he wants to wrap his arms around Stephen and maybe just have the man fuck him now that he is feeling a little better.

In fact, he wonders if Stephen is feeling better now too. He suspects that whatever has been effecting him has been effecting Stephen in almost the same way and he wonders if it has something to do with the fact that according to Clea and the others, Tony was able to 'ground and focus' Stephen.

What is their connection?

He doesn't know. But he is worried. He nods stiffly and Fury nods too and he slides out of the seat and starts moving off. He pauses for a moment as if he is expecting Romanov to follow, but she doesn't. She gives Fury a nod instead and he shrugs his shoulders and he moves on.

Romanov keeps Tony trapped in the chair. He can just push her out, he knows, but it's not something that he would do to a woman or to anyone actually. For one, it's rude and there is no need to stoop to their level of just assaulting people and for two, he gets the feeling that he wouldn't really be able to avoid this conversation.

"I just wanted to tell you that I am sorry for all of this." She says and Tony raises an eyebrow. Yeah. No. He doesn't believe it. Not for a second. The manipulation is too well ingrained in her for it to be a knee jerk response. She had planned her approach with him and she had dressed, groomed herself in accordance with what she believed he needed and wanted to see.

That wasn't a mistake. It had been a plan and she had stuck to that plan the entire time.

"I was just doing my job. I needed to monitor the situation with you in order to ensure that we would be able to help you." And that is the biggest bullshit she had said so far. Tony looks at her flatly. He holds back the anger and he holds back the criticism that he wants to lash out on her.

This is a part of the manipulation. He can tell.

"You could have just talked to me. You didn't. There is no apology that you can make that would undo the break of trust. Too many lies and too little to make up for it Agent Romanov. Now, if you will move, I would like to leave." He says and he expects her to argue, but she doesn't.

She does bite her lips as if to hold back whatever else she was going to say, but she nods firmly and moves out of the seat.

"Fury is going to ask that I stay at the company for a little while longer until everything has been resolved. I would ask that you let me stay at the company until then and not inform Ms Potts." She says and Tony scoffs at that.

"Pepper already knows you're a spy, Agent Romanov. If you think you were able to get past our screenings and get past Pepper's intuition, you have seriously overrated yourself. Good luck with your future endeavours. Oh and don't be too surprised when you find your notice and a lawsuit at your door." Tony tells her and walks out of the diner.
He is quick to put the helmet back on and isn't too surprised to see through the rear cameras that she is standing there for a long moment, biting her lips and sighing before she walks out the other entrance where Fury had gone.

Good riddance, Tony thinks as he walks out.

"Hey JARVIS, please tell me that the house is empty." Tony says and JARVIS responds quickly by showing him the internal cameras and he has to sigh.

"When did they get in?" Tony asks as he starts to take off and sees the black suits that are all over his home. Some of them are cleaning up and the others are trying to gain access to his lab. Yeah right. Fuck that.

"They gained entry through the broken windows 20 minutes ago Sir. They have attempted to disable me. I have muted myself to ensure that they will not try again. They have not been able to gain access to the labs or the servers at this stage. I am also transferring the more sensitive data to our secondary servers just in case." JARVIS inform him.

Stephen isn't at the house. Tony hadn't expected that he would be.

"Connect me to Stephen please." Tony says. If he wants to talk to the doctor in private, this may be his last opportunity to do it. He has a feeling that SHIELD was going to keep him under surveillance for some time.

"Anthony." Stephen's voice holds relief but there is also exhaustion and Tony feels worried. Whatever was going on with the doctor, it didn't seem to be good.

"You alright baby?" Tony asks. He is flying high enough and he is flying fast enough that he knows that no surveillance would be able to hear what the conversation is about. He is going to have to overshoot the house and just fly for a little while, but it's not like that was going to make that much of a difference to his whole dying thing.

"I- I'm fine. It's- there's just a few things going on that I need to work on." Stephen says and Tony can read between the lines well enough. Stuff that Stephen can't talk to him about. Stuff that Stephen wishes that he could share with Tony but can't. Burdens that he has on top of whatever is going on with Tony, his own company and his own practice.

"You were right. About everything. Shit Stephen. They fucking injected me with Lithium Dioxide. Without the right level of palladium in my body that shit could have killed me." Tony bites out because the calculations had been running in his head and the realisation is horrifying and he doesn't realise until he speaks the words that just talking to Stephen brings him a measure of comfort.

"I know. I am so sorry Anthony. I- I couldn't tell you about it. I- I wish that I could have. Go over your father's research that Fury is going to bring you. When you are done with it, make sure you go to Pepper's office. You're going to find things there that you will need." Stephen tells him and it is clear enough from the instructions alone that Stephen wasn't going to be around for awhile.

"You won't be able to come to the house... will you?" Tony asks quietly and Stephen is silent for a moment.

"I don't believe so. There- I mean, aside from what is going to be happening at the house, there are- I have problems that I need to deal with." Stephen says and there is a lot of hesitation but most of it, Tony can tell, isn't because Stephen is trying to choose his words, it is just that he is that tired that he is stumbling over his words.
"Stephen, you need to go to sleep. You are exhausted." Tony tells him and Stephen sighs heavily into the phone.

"I can't. Not yet. But I will. I promise. I'm going to be sending Clea over to Pepper. She can help Pepper and protect her whilst all this is going on and liaise with you." Stephen says and Tony is a little worried about the idea of Clea coming when he knows that she is meant to protect Stephen, but he can't fault the man's judgement.

Pepper was going to need a PA to help her deal with the situation and since Natasha Romanov was no longer an option, Clea was the best suitable replacement.

"Thank you. I'll let Pepper know. Hey Stephen?" Tony says as he nears the mansion. He hears a soft hum from Stephen. Tony pauses. He stops flying and hovers midair, high up enough that no signals should be able to catch the conversation.

"Stay safe. Okay? Stay safe and promise me that when this is all over, we're going to have some fucking amazing birthday sex that I truly deserve." Tony finishes off with a light tone and hears Stephen chuckle softly.

"Definitely. I love you." Stephen ends the call before Tony has to hesitate. Because he is still not sure about those three words. Oh god, he knows that he loves Stephen. But he's not sure about saying the words. It's... the words just seem so permanent and he knows that he wants permanence but gods, he was being a child.

An immature child that just can't say three fucking words. Having said that, he wants to make a moment of it. When he says those words, he wants it to really make an impact. He was going to have to plan something special, Tony thinks.

It's better to think about that than the shitstorm that was going to hit him as soon as he drops down to the mansion. Tony wants to avoid it as much as possible, but he is also a grown arse man that knows what he needs to do.

Tony sighs and flies down.

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Chapter Summary

Tony and Fury continue to talk and by gods, Tony is really getting sick of the talking, the mind games and the bullshit.

But hey. It's not his first rodeo.

On the other hand, Stephen has problems of his own to deal with.

Isn't there always?

Chapter Notes

OMG I went for a walk and I think I might now be dying.

Because of course I had to go near a shopping centre and of course that led to me buying too much groceries to carry back easily and now my arms feel like they are falling off. Seriously.

On another note, I'm now a little addicted to some awesome new podcasts that talk philosophy in the context of movies >__< It is also destroying my childhood but hey, learning is always good.

So. One of the commenters suggested a Discord Server. I have one that I can use for this but would anyone be interested? It would give me some opportunities to pick brains >__<

let me know in the comments! <3

Sunday

23 May 2010

Rhodey can't help the bitterness that is in his mouth as he looks over the suit that he has brought over from Tony. He wants to announce to the world that Tony Stark had given him that legacy. That he didn't betray his friend. That he didn't beat his friend up to take the suit away from him.

That he wasn't a thief.

That Tony Stark was a good man and that he had done it out of his own desire to do good and to spread the good that can be done. That Rhodey was trusted with Tony's legacy.

But that's not what the media was saying.

The media was in uproars saying that Tony Stark had lost his mind and that he was drunk on the
power of being Iron Man. That he had displayed deplorable behaviour during the party that had put other people, the guests invited to celebrate his birthday, at risk by wearing the suit and using the 'weapon' that is the suit against Rhodey.

That wasn't true. Obviously.

But that was the current narrative and they needed to stick to it. As much as he despised it. It is only temporary, he tries to tell himself. The media is scrambling over themselves, trying to get him to be interviewed as a hero.

The Generals tells him that he has to get Justin Hammer to arm the War Machine suit. A suit that he and Tony had named. The suit that Tony had given to him as a gift and he was going to put Justin fucking Hammer's weapons into it. He hates the idea of it.

But Tony had known that it was going to happen. Rhodey had known that it was going to happen. It doesn't mean that he has to like it. All he can do is to make sure that Justin Hammer doesn't get to touch the suit.

He makes sure that the hanger is empty and that no one is nearby. He walks up to the suit and touches the sensor he knows will activate the iris scanner and the suit opens up easily enough. Rhodey steps into it.

If he is honest, he will admit that the suit makes him feel powerful and free in a way that nothing has ever done before. Not even flying the fighter jet for the first time. The first time he had been inside of the suit, it had been overwhelming. But he had also felt safe in a way that he had never been before.

But he also felt the heavy responsibility that was on his shoulders. He knows that Tony feels the same responsibility. They had the power to do both good and to harm. Rhodey knew that he would never do anything with the suit that would harm anyone. That wasn't what he was about. That wasn't the oath of office that he had taken.

Inside of the suit, Rhodey wishes that he had JARVIS. That he could talk to his friend's child, even if he couldn't talk to his friend. Just as he is thinking that, a little screen pops up in front of his eyes. A screen he hadn't seen before.

"Activate JOCASTA?" The suit asks him. Rhodey raises an eyebrow. What the fuck was JOCASTA? He knows that there is a simple AI system in the suit to help him with navigation, information gathering and also making calculations. But last time he had been in the suit with Tony, there hasn't been anything like this.

"Yes?" Rhodey says because he knows and trusts Tony enough to know that the man would do nothing to hurt him or the military. Tony was too good for that.

"Hello, Colonel Rhodes. It is a pleasure to finally meet you. I am JOCASTA. An Artificial Intelligence system designed by Mr Stark and JARVIS to assist you." The AI says and Rhodey can't help but gasp. The fucking genius, Rhodey thinks. Tony fucking Stark had not only built him a suit but made him an Artificial Intelligence system to go with it. After telling him that he wouldn't have JARVIS.

Which was right. He didn't have JARVIS. He had his own AI. Holy mother fucking shit!

"Holy shit." He manages to breathe out. JOCASTA chuckles and by gods that is amazing enough as it is. An AI that can express humour. Well fuck.

Oh, he knew that Tony and Stephen had made a lot of progress on JARVIS and giving him
sentience but this- this is- Oh wow.

"Colonel, if you would let me know a form of address you would prefer, I will refer to you as such. You may also assign a name to me if you wish." JOCASTA says. It's a female voice. Nice a calm and her accent are slightly Southern. Rhodey smiles. Tony really did know his preferences.

"Jim is fine and um... is Jo okay?" He asks the AI.

"Hm, Jo. I like it. Yes, I believe Jo will do quite well. Now, would you like me to run you through the capabilities of the suit as well as diagnostics to ensure that you know which weapons would be compatible with the suit?" Jo asks him and Rhodey can't stop the large smile on his face. It does take him a while to respond but he does respond.

"Hell yeah. Um, why the hell didn't Tony tell me about you? Or activate you before?" Rhodey asks because he just needs to know. He is going to give Tony his biggest thanks and his biggest hug when he can, but by gods, the idea of the man going out of his way to create this AI for him is just... wow.

"Mr Stark wanted to ensure that you would have an AI that was dedicated completely to your welfare and your health. Mr Stark had wanted me to be a surprise for you, Jim. I was programmed only to activate when the suit is activated outside of the Malibu Mansion. I work exclusively with one of the satellites Mr Stark has appropriated for me. With your permission, I would like to connect to your phone and tablet. Would that be okay Jim?" She asks so very politely as she explains. Oh dear Lord. She sounds so real and so alive. Her voice has all the right intonations and she doesn't sound mechanical as JARVIS had done when he had first been turned on.

"Ah yeah. That- That would be fine. You're- wow." Rhodey doesn't even know how to speak to her until he realises something really crucial.

"Wait, wait, wait! Does that mean that you're basically a baby AI?" Rhodey asks because he's not sure how he is supposed to raise an AI. He hysterically thinks back to Tamagotchis and how many of them he managed to kill. He's not sure if he is a fit guardian for a baby AI system.

He knows that Stephen Strange has spent months teaching JARVIS and that was a man that both had the time and knowledge that Rhodey most distinctly doesn't have. He's pretty sure he has a good set of morals and ethics and he grew up with some good values but he's really not sure if he has the ability to teach that to an AI.

"The moral and ethical training that JARVIS has received has been passed onto me. I am a self-learning and self-aware Artificial Intelligence system that will be able to grow to ensure that I become accustomed to your needs and meet your requirements. All you need to do is basically approve or disapprove of my actions on your behalf." Well. That's a relief, he thinks.

"Well, Jo, how about we start with the diagnostics and let's figure out how to make you a BAMF." Rhodey says and Jo giggles.

"I'm not sure if that is possible with the quality of weapons you will receive but I look forward to becoming a BAMF as you say, Jim." Rhodey is so, so very glad that the suit is insulated enough that the full-bellied laughter that escapes him probably doesn't seep out through the suit. God, he hopes at any rate.

"Just make sure that you don't let anyone know you're in here Jo and make sure you keep yourself safe. I don't want anyone to mess with you." Rhodey tells her as soon as he is able to calm the fuck down.
"Of course Jim." The AI says solemnly and once Rhodey sees the programs running, he gets himself out of the suit and smiles. He can't help it. Tony fucking Stark, he thinks. He had the best of best friends in this world.

He wishes he could tell the world that.

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**Sunday**

**23 May 2010**

As soon as she gets back to the mansion, Tony makes his way into the workshop and makes sure that SHIELD hasn't been able to get into the workshop. He figured that they wouldn't unless they had been willing to break through the bullet-resistant, explosion-resistant glass that surrounds the workshop. Which they wouldn't. It would show that they had been in the workshop and that wasn't kind of how spies work.

Tony gets out of the suit and makes sure that JARVIS is okay. That they haven't been able to damage him and his servers in an attempt to shut him down. They haven't, luckily. They fell for one of the traps that JARVIS and Tony had set up just in case.

Then Tony locks down the workshop properly and makes his way to the bedroom and takes a long and hot shower and it's only after that he feels calm and relaxed.

He slinks down to the living room, making sure that he is wearing best dressing gown and slipper set and has the sparkling water before he settles on the porch where he finds Fury waiting for him.

"That was a quick few hours." Tony says though he isn't surprised by the director's presence. He had expected it.

"Yeah well like I said, I got other stuff to do deal with." Fury says and this time, his tone is different. Trying a different approach then, Tony thinks.

The thing is, once bitten twice shy. There was going to be very little that Fury could say or do that would ever convince him that this man wasn't manipulating him. It will take a hundred times of knowing for certain that the man isn't doing anything nefarious for Tony to maybe believe him one time.

Maybe.

Tony knows how to work with people he doesn't trust. He puts up his own front and his own walls and his own defence mechanisms. He lets that persona deal with the idiots. It's not that difficult.

He has a lifetime of practice in that act.

"Alright. You wanted to talk, let's talk." Tony says as he leans back into the deck chair. Fury starts.

"That thing in your chest is based on unfinished technology." Fury tells him. His voice is calm and he sounds certain. Tony frowns a little as he thinks carefully.

"No, it was finished." Tony tells him. It's never been particularly effective until I miniaturised it and put it in my-" Tony starts to say. He remembers when the Arc Reactor was first built. It was built to power the factory in LA and it did its job quite effectively but that was about it. It really hadn't drawn a lot of power until he had tweaked the design and made it compact.
Now even the large reactor, like the one at the Expo, was highly effective.

"No, Howard said the Arc Reactor was a stepping stone to something greater. he was about to kick off an energy race that was gonna dwarf the arms race. He was only something big." Given how long Fury has been with SHIELD, Tony figured that there was a good chance that Fury and Howard had been friendly.

Figures.

As if it isn't painful enough being reminded of his father and his abuse in general, more and more of late, he was being told more and more things about his father he wishes he didn't know.

The thing is, Tony Stark is still Howard Stark's son. He may not have happy memories of his father. He may never have been loved by his father nor loved him back, but he was Howard's son. There is a certain... amount of love there, even if Tony wants to deny it.

There is a certain amount of approval that he had always sought from his father and he never got. So yeah. Tony isn't enjoying this conversation in the least.

"Something so big that he was going to make the nuclear reactor look like a triple-A battery." Fury says with some enthusiasm and amusement as if he is recalling a memory. Perhaps he is. Tony doesn't care.

"Just him? Or was Anton Vanko in on it?" Tony asks as he pours himself a glass of the sparkling water. He finds that he is genuinely curious about the answer. There has been very limited information on the man.

"Anton Vanko is the otherwise of that coin. Anton saw it as a way to get rich, when your father found out, he had him deported." That doesn't sound like the Howard that Tony knew.

Howard was a brilliant man. Of that, Tony has no doubts and no arguments. He had been a genius, a brilliant thinker and inventor. But he had been a mean drunk and near the end of his life, he had been all about the alcohol. The more alcohol consumed, the more violent he had been.

This Howard Stark that had morals and ethics? Tony had never met him.

"When the Russians found out he couldn't deliver, they shipped his ass off to Siberia and he spent the next 20 years in a vodka-fuelled rage. Not quite the environment you wanna raise a kid in. The son you had the misfortune of crossing paths with in Monaco." Fury says almost as if he is sympathising. Tony doubts the spy cares.

"You told me I hadn't tried everything. What do you mean I haven't tried everything? What haven't I tried?" Tony asks him because as nice as the history lesson was, he really would rather that they get to the fucking point.

Tony hates the fact that there are black suit clad men and women crawling through his personal home right now. The Malibu Mansion is supposed to be his sanctuary and they were stepping all over it and he... hates it.

"He said you were the only person with the means and knowledge to finish what he started." Fury says as he looks over at Tony as if that is meant to mean something. Tony scoffs.

"He said that." Tony can't keep the disbelief from his voice. He wonders what Howard Stark that Fury had met and had known. It couldn't be the drunk, violent fuck that used to beat his mother and him black and blue. It couldn't be the bastard that screamed at him to find a solution to get the missile
to go faster when he'd only been 8 years old.

"Yup. Are you that guy? Hm? Are you?" On the mocking to try to get a rise out of Tony and an attempt to appeal to Tony's need for approval. God. If he hadn't taken so many goddamned therapy sessions with Michelle and had been made aware of his tendencies to do that, he would have fallen for this too.

SHIELD had read him well. Just not well enough. With Tony's awareness that they wanted something from him, it is all too easy to see the manipulative tactics. But to someone unaware...

They are reprehensible.

"Cause if you are, then you can solve the riddle of your heart." Fury tells him as he sits up properly. Tony doesn't let his annoyance show. He spent his whole life perfecting that poker face. He knows how to keep it up.

"I don't know where you are getting your information from, but he wasn't my biggest fan." Tony says, slipping in a tone of anguish into his voice. Two can play at the game of manipulation. If they want him to seem like he has a weakness that they can exploit and they are certain about it? Then it is best to let them continue with that assumption.

It is the best way to make sure that they don't look elsewhere and find an actual weakness that Tony could be vulnerable to.

"What do you remember about your dad, huh?" Fury asks him. For one, Tony never called him dad. Not since he'd been 8 and he solved that goddamned book of 'puzzles' that his father had given him. Since his father found out about his IQ and decided that he was more valuable as an employee than a son.

"He was cold, he was calculating. He never told me he loved me or even that he liked me. So it's a little tough for me to digest when you're telling me that he said the future was riding on me and he's passing it down. I don't get that." Tony says. It's all true enough.

"We're talking about a guy whose happiest day was when he shipped me off to MIT." Tony tells Fury. He can't keep the anger quite completely out of his voice, but the insecurities that he slips through into the voice and his expression should sell his 'vulnerability' well enough.

"That's not true." Fury tells him. Yeah. Probably for Fury. Tony doubts that good ol' Howard would have shown his drunk, violent side to SHIELD of all people. He always hid it from the public well enough. It was the side that just his mother and he saw.

"Then clearly, you knew my father better than I did." Tony tells him as he leans back into the deck chair and settles in as two agents come along with a box between them.

"As a matter of fact, I did. He was one of the founding members of SHIELD." Tony knows that. He had known that thanks to Stephen and he's grateful that he had the heads up. It would have really shocked him to find out from Fury.

"What?" Tony pretends he is shocked and surprised. He recalls the memory of finding that out the first time and lets it slip through. When it comes to putting on a show, it is all about recalling the right moments and the right emotions after all.

"I got an appointment." Fury tells him and stands up and Tony does as well. The role he needs to play is simple. Play the boy looking for another father figure, a mentor. Fury is clearly positioning himself to play the role. Let him think that it's working.
"Wait, wait, wait, wait. What is this?" Tony questions as he sees the agents putting the box down and Fury seems distracted and busy. It's a show. Tony knows it. He plays along.

"You're good right?" Fury asks dismissively. The way that his father used to. Fury is even copying some of Howard's mannerisms. He is good, Tony thinks.

"No, I'm not." Tony says as Fury nods to the agents.

"You got this right?" Fury asks as he starts to pick up his ridiculous leather jacket.

"Got what? I don't know what I'm supposed to get." Tony tells Fury as he turns around and sees Natali- nope, Natasha Romanov walking through the mansion towards the porch.

"Natasha will remain floating or at Stark Industries with her cover intact and you remember Agent Coulson, right?" And that was not going to work. Tony raises an eyebrow and looks at Fury with a cold hard stare.

"No." Tony tells him firmly and Fury pauses between putting his jacket on and turns back around to look at him.

"What do you mean no? You don't get to have a say Stark." Fury tells him and Tony raises an eyebrow and looks at him.

"Oh, you would be surprised about that. Ms Rushman was fired from her position effective as of an hour ago. The moment she tries to step back into Stark Industries, our security staff will detain her." Tony tells the man and he looks outraged for a moment. The flash of annoyance is real. Good.

"All outside communications had been shut down. How did you manage to get the message out?" Natasha asks her and Tony gives her almost a pitying look. It's almost cute how clueless they are. Really.

"I'm Tony fucking Stark, Agent Romanov. Or have you forgotten just what I can do with technology?" Tony asks her flatly as the house lights all turn up. JARVIS, the drama queen, Tony thinks fondly. The agents look around with some alarm and Tony gives Fury and the two other agents a smile.

"JARVIS, make sure you make a copy of everything that has been happening and save it somewhere nice and safe." Tony instructs the AI.

"Already done sir. Ms Potts would like to inform you that you are required at her office tomorrow morning to discuss the public statement in relation to the incident last night." JARVIS informs him. Tony thinks for a moment before nodding and looks at Fury, Natasha and Coulson.

"Because I'm a generous guy and I'm not absolutely awful, I'm going to extend my hospitality in this house to Agent Coulson. Everyone else can leave. Or I release the footage of what has taken place in this house in relation to your unauthorised access and search of my home as well as your attempts to imprison me in my own home without cause public. "Tony tells Fury.

The man looks very much like his own namesake for a moment before he looks at Tony with narrow eyes.

"You're treading on a fine line here Stark. We are trying to help you." Fury says and Tony nods and gives him a predatory smile.

"I know that and I thank you for it. But some common courtesy and maybe less violations of my civil
"rights might be a good start, don't you think?" Tony asks and Fury looks thoughtful for a moment before he nods.

"Fine. But Natasha stays too. You're vulnerable right now and after that fiasco, you might be attacked. You have enemies Stark. We're trying to protect you." Fury tells him and Tony raises an eyebrow.

"Next time, lead with that and don't touch my tech." Tony tells him and Fury nods slowly, though he doesn't look too happy about it.

"I'll consider it. Oh and Tony, remember, I got my eye on you." Fury says as he walks away and Tony scoffs at him before he turns to look at the two agents.

"There are going to be workers coming around to cleanup and fix the windows. They are vetted Stark Industries staff. Don't mess with them and don't try to mess with the tech. If you do, JARVIS will know." Tony says as he picks up the box.

"But feel free to raid the fridge and use the spare bedroom. J, lock everything else down and keep your eyes on them." Tony says as he carries the box into the house and down the stairs.

Tony doesn't miss the sharp looks the two agents share with each other. He doesn't need to worry about them. He is almost amused by how certain that they had been that they had disabled the tech in his own home.

God, the idiots.

Tony focuses on that amusement as he enters the workshop and settles himself down.

"Hey J, let's make sure that they clear out the house and give me camera on them at all times." Tony says and JARVIS is quick to throw up the images of what the agents are up to throughout the house.

Tony makes sure that the workshop is locked down and he blacks out the glass wall too.

When he is comfortable and he finally feels alone and able to breathe, Tony sighs and looks at the box.

Property of Howard Stark.

The box reads. That along with SHIELD's logo. Howard Stark, his terrible, terrible father working for a shady government organisation. He shouldn't have been surprised really. And in a way, he wasn't. But it's something else to see the proof right there.

Tony rips through the tape and opens the box. It's not the time to deal with his daddy issues. It's not the time to be angry.

He has so much to be angry about, but there is no time for that right now. For now, Tony just needs to focus on the work. On saving his life.

Before it's too late.

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**Sunday**

23 May 2010
Stephen looks over at the Cup of Jamshid.

For awhile, the Cup shows him what it wants to show him. As always, it is visions of Tony. Stephen watches as Tony looks through his father's belongings and tries to figure out the answer hidden in plain sight.

Tony looks annoyed and a little furious. That might have a lot to do with the two SHIELD agents in the mansion. It might surprise most of the public to know, but Tony does not like having people in his home.

To the extent that despite his wealth, Tony doesn't have live-in help like most people of his affluence would do. It's not a matter of trust either. Eliza and Finn are trustworthy and Tony is fond of them. But he doesn't want them in the house for more than a few hours of the morning at a time.

Stephen raises a trembling hand over the Cup to erase the image. As much as he could spend all day watching over images of Tony, that's not what he needed to do right now.

Focus, Stephen reminds himself.

He takes a deep breath. He isn't sure if this is a good idea. It was his idea. Of course, it was. The Council agreed that it might work but they were worried and to be honest, so was he. But this was the only idea he had so it's not like there was anything else he could do.

Stephen wishes that he could talk to Tony. He can't. The man is busy and he needs to focus on working out the solution to the palladium poisoning with his father's research. That is important. It is also something that Tony needs to focus on, something that Stephen can't help with.

At least the Lithium Dioxide has worked. Stephen had felt the effects of the poisoning lift in the morning. It had made the rest of the emergency council meeting a lot easier.

It really helps thinking and talking when you don't feel like throwing up every two seconds.

*Focus,* Stephen reminds himself.

Stephen is jittery. He is nervous and excited about the spell that he is about to perform. He reaches for the dimensional energies. He has transferred all the spells that he usually runs over to the other Masters. They have locked down the Kamar-Taj and in particular, the library.

This was probably the most ambitious spell he has done in a long time now and Stephen feels the nervous excitement go through him.

It was going to be difficult to control.

No. That's a lie. The difficulty isn't in controlling the spell or the power. The difficulty was going to be in controlling himself. The amount of power that he would be channelling to make this spell work is far greater than what he usually pulls.

It is going to be difficult not to lose himself to the power and to the feeling of such power coursing through his veins. Stephen is self-aware enough to know that.

Power can be addictive. It can be exhilarating. It can be corrupting. Stephen will have to be careful. Stephen takes another deep breath. He performs the gestures and focuses on the Eye of Agamotto until it opens and the Time Stone is revealed.

Stephen can feel the power surge through him with just the Stone being unveiled. Since he'd been
attacked and since he'd had that odd... dream or whatever it was, Stephen had felt a deeper connection with the Stone.

As if there was a true Bond between them like he has with Tony. It's anchoring as well as... seductive. So much power to tap into. So much that he could do.

He has to make sure that he will not abuse it. That he will not be swept away by it. He takes a deep breath and thinks about Tony to ground himself.

He steps up towards the Cup and starts the spell. The Cup activates almost immediately and Stephen's eyes glaze over with the faint green glow of the Time Stone and the faint golden glow of his magic itself.

Stephen lets the magic wash over him and loses himself to the visions that flow.

He sees Asgard in all its glory.

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History is Written by the Victors

Chapter Summary

Just what is it that Stephen is trying to do with the Cup of Jamshid and the Time Stone?

What is Tony going to do about Natasha Romanov and more importantly, what the hell is he meant to think about his father?

Chapter Notes

Hello!

... I was a good girl. I went to the gym. Then a dropped a dumbell on my thigh and now have a massive, massive bruise and it really hurts. Cause that's what happens when I try to lift. Duh.

Anyways, sorry the update is late ... I seem to keep apologising of late. It's honestly because I've been re-writing the first 12 chapters of Arc 3 so that it works and I think it works. I don't like to keep writing when I feel like the story is going in a weird direction, which it was because somewhere along the line I got distracted by something. Don't know what yet. Possibly my cat screaming at me.

Anyways, so Discord Server? Yes? No? I got a few answers but not a lot and as I said, I do have one and regardless, I might start using it when the Arc finishes and whilst I try to finish up the Arc 3 so that it's mostly written before I get it published.

let me know what you think. Please.

<3

Sunday

23 May 2010

The power is overwhelming.

The combination of the ancient scrying spells built into the Cup of Jamshid and the impossibly infinite powers of the Time Stone is... so very dangerously powerful and so incredibly seductive. It's terrifying.

But the spell works beautifully.

Stephen's mind fills with the visions of the past. Asgard is... incredibly, utterly and stunningly beautiful. Wondrous.

Stephen gasps as he learns.
He isn’t quite sure what he had expected, but Stephen can confidently say that he had not expected to see Odin and his first wife, Angrbooa.

He also didn't expect the knowledge to flood into his mind so that he can understand what he is seeing.

It is... amazing.

He understands without knowing how, that Angrbooa is a Frost Giant. That Odin himself was half Jotun by birth. That he had chosen to marry Angrbooa because he knew that she would produce him a strong heir.

The Jotun were strong, warrior-like people. He believed that given that he was half Jotun, further adding Jotun genetics would grant him an heir that he could raise to be a strong right arm for his conquests.

He does not love Angrbooa.

She is a means to an end. She is a strong Jotun witch. Her magic mixes with Odin's and produces Odin's first child.

Hela.

Stephen is confused as to why he was seeing this. He had wanted to know about Loki. Not about Odin and the rest of Asgard. But the Time Stone is insistent and Stephen knows better than to direct the Stone. He watches.

The time moves quickly as Stephen watches.

Odin does not interfere with Hela's upbringing. He is not interested in children. He is only focused on the wars that are coming from all direction throughout the Nine Realms.

That does not last long.

Hela grows up quickly. A lot quicker than Stephen had expected. He had believed that Asgardians would age a lot slower, but they seemed to grow up at the speed of a normal human child.

Angrbooa is a loving mother. Hela is her sole reminder of the home. A fellow Jotun. Angrbooa is the one that teaches Hela the beginning of magic. Hela starts to show her power over the dead.

But Angrbooa's loving influence does not last very long. The Asgardian Court is cruel and shuns her. She becomes reliant on Hela and focuses solely on her. But eventually, it isn't enough.

Angrbooa fades away and dies early into Hela's childhood. Odin does not grieve for her, but Hela does.

Odin takes over Hela's education and starts to teach her the art of combat. The Time Stone speeds up as Odin raises her in the battlefields. She becomes a powerful mage. No. A Necromancer and a powerful warrior.

She becomes Odin's right hand and she slaughters through the armies of the Nine Realms. Her command over the dead allows her to have perpetual access to bodies and to armies.

Odin uses her to bring the Nine Realms under his control. But when he wants to stop the wars, Hela becomes wilful. She enjoys the wars. She enjoys the bloodshed. Hela knows no life outside of the
battle and the killing. Peace is not something she has ever been taught.

She wants to continue their conquest outside of the Nine Realms.

Odin does not.

There are two reasons for his decision. Going beyond the Nine Realms would stretch the resources and the control of Asgard. He does not believe it to be wise. For another, Odin falls in love.

Frigga, a sorceress and prophetess from Vanheim comes to Asgard to form a part of the new Asgardian Court consisting of some of the nobles from each of the Nine Realms.

She is beautiful.

But more than that, she is powerful and wise. Odin takes to her and as he falls in love with her, she counsels him against the bloodshed. That he should be a kind and wise King instead of a warrior one. That he should govern the lands the Realms with peace and protection in mind.

She tells him that he will be praised and forever remembered as the King of the Gods, the Protector of the Nine Realms.

It works.

But Hela refuses to stop. She also has grown too powerful for Odin. When she realises Odin’s intentions, she goes to Jotunheim, to her home and she unites them and declares herself the Queen of Jotunheim.

Odin sends the Valkyrie.

The slaughter is- Stephen shudders and wishes that he could close his eyes as he watches. The other battles have sped through his mind but this one is- If Stephen could have, he would have screamed.

The Valkyrie are beautiful but their slaughter is not. But by the end of the battle, standing in the fields of the dead Valkyrie, Hela is weakened enough for Odin to imprison her in Nifelheim. Her prison forever tied to Odin's life force.

Then the Time Stone finally speeds up again.

Odin changes history. He wipes all stories, sights and memories of Hela out of the history books, so to say. He changes his image to that of a benevolent King. A king that rules with diplomacy.

Stephen is impressed at the extensive PR campaign and the drastically changed image. There is peace in the Nine Realms.

Jotunheim is the one Realm that Asgard does not rule over. But they are broken by the events of the previous wars and Hela's war. As such, there is peace.

It is during that time of peace that Odin and Frigga marry and Frigga becomes the Queen of Asgard and becomes pregnant with Thor.

But by the time that she is ready to give birth, Laufey, the King of the Jotuns rise up. In an attempt to gain resources, Jotunheim goes to war against Earth.

Odin and his army stops them and takes the war from Earth to Jotunheim itself. There, Odin makes two decisions.
One, to take the Casket of Ancient Winters, the source of Jotunheim's powers. By taking the Casket, Frigga had counselled him that he would be able to bring about peace.

The Casket is what allows for the Jotun King to control the wild winter storms that rage throughout the Realm. Moreover, it is what allows them to control their transformative magics.

Given that the Jotun are dual sex and they decide their sex through transformative magic, it makes it difficult for the less magically gifted Jotun to procreate.

It’s a way to ensure that the Jotuns cannot rise up against the Asgardians again for a long time.

The second decision that Odin makes is the one that surprises Stephen the most. Though the war is almost over already, Odin pushes past the palace walls to the temple.

There, Stephen learns that the Crown Prince of Jotunheim, Laufey's son, Loki Laufeyson is placed for safety.

He is but a babe.

The priestesses, the priests, the mages and witches fight to protect their prince. They are slaughtered.

It is a brutal sight to witness.

It is too much. Stephen watches with horror as they are cut down, one by one until Odin reaches the inner chambers of the temple and takes the babe into his arms.

As he does, Stephen can see the wheels turning in his head.

When he comes out of the temple carrying the babe in his arms, Laufey drops his weapons. So does the rest of the Jotuns.

To them, Loki is sacred.

Stephen is awed at the understanding that forms in his mind. Loki isn't just Laufey's son. He is born with magical powers that are beyond most of the Jotuns. He is important to the Jotuns and their beliefs.

Odin declares that he will be raising Loki as his child, as his son, as a Prince of Asgard. With that declaration, he changes Loki's appearance to that of an Asgardian babe, laying the permanent disguise spell over Loki.

With that, the war ends.

Frigga isn't pleased by Odin's actions. Whilst he had been at war, she had given birth to Thor. She does not believe it right that a child be torn from their family and their birthplace.

But she loves Loki.

The Time Stone speeds up as the children grow up. Thor and Loki become very close brothers. They are raised together in the same chambers until they reach their age of majority.

Frigga takes charge of their education.

She teaches them magic, diplomacy, history, politics and about the Nine Realms. She is patient, kind and loving. She instils in them strong values, morals and ethics.
Frigga sees the futures that await her children and she is concerned for them. She cannot see everything. But she sees enough.

She knows that they will come into conflict. She hopes that by teaching them to love each other, by teaching them morals and ethics, it will tamper their actions and allow their relationship to survive through it all.

Odin mentors the children in what it is meant to be King. He teaches them responsibility. But he is a Warrior King. He talks to them about the battles that he has fought. He tells them that it is the burden of a good king to know the battlefield.

That is the image that Thor clings to.

He enjoys combat. He enjoys those lessons the best and Thor romanticises the idea of war and battle and the glory of it all.

Loki does not.

Loki focuses instead on the lessons that Frigga provides in magic. She teaches him everything that she knows about magic and when he has exhausted her knowledge, he experiments and teaches himself from the extensive library.

Through it, Loki learns to teleport between the dimensions and through the dimensions. It takes a great deal of power, but Loki learns to travel and to find the right doors throughout the dimensions.

It allows him to experience the Nine Realms in the ways that Thor and his noble group of friends cannot.

Watching Loki and Thor is... fascinating.

Aside from their close friendship and love for each other, Loki and Thor are vastly different. So is the treatment of the Asgardians when it comes to the two princes.

Thor is universally loved. He is loud, but kind and considerate. He is always smiling and laughing. He enjoys his drinks and his parties. He is light-hearted, quick to laugh and warm.

His bright blue eyes and long golden mane along with his strong build is a split image of Odin in his youth. His physical strength and prowess in battle is the epitome of perfection as far as the Asgardians are concerned.

Same cannot be said for Loki.

He is tall and lean, long black hair with bright green eyes. His colouring is uncommon in Asgard. Loki is followed by rumours. Those that have long memories remember that Frigga only gave birth to one son.

Though the official story was that of Loki and Thor being twins, it is not a story that most of the Asgardians believe. Most of the royal court knows that Loki is Jotun. It is a secret that no one shares or speaks of, by the order of Odin himself, but it is knowledge that he cannot remove from their minds.

Others remember Hela and her appearance. Loki reminds them of her. They believe that Loki may be an illegitimate child Odin has had with another Jotun.

Whatever their beliefs may be, Loki is not welcome in the Asgardian Court. His powerful magic
causes them fear. Unlike Thor, Loki, though proficient in combat, isn’t the epitome of the traditional Asgardian warrior.

He is agile and quick and prefers to use magical daggers rather than swords, hammers and axes. Loki’s combat style is disdained as being feminine in nature.

Loki's deep interest in history, culture and magic is yet another weakness, as far as the Asgardians are concerned.

Those biased views, their cold attitudes and their distinct preference for Thor shape Loki's personality.

Loki, the warm, loving, inquisitive child grows up to be cold, distant, haughty and aggressive. He becomes mischievous as a defence mechanism. He learns to build masks and he wears them constantly.

Loki plays up the traits that the Asgardians deem unacceptable. He flirts with men. He keeps his hair long and he dresses in tight clothes. He changes himself into a female form and causes uproars. He creates illusions. He puts on shows.

Loki becomes the God of Mischief.

It is only Frigga and Thor that defends Loki and supports him in the pursuits that interests him.

Frigga ensures that Loki knows that she loves him and that he ought to be whoever and whatever he wanted to be. She ensures that he can travel. She ensures that she allows him to learn what he wants to.

With Frigga's help, Loki travels extensively both in the Nine Realms and outside of the Nine Realms. Through his travels, his magical knowledge and knowledge overall, grows. He becomes more and more powerful.

Loki also explores his sexuality. He experiments with sex with every civilisation that he comes across. He is young, beautiful and enthusiastic.

Unlike Asgard, which is sexually conservative, the other Realms aren’t. Loki experiments with both genders. He learns how to pleasure his partners and he learns his own preferences.

As Loki and Thor reach true adulthood, they are given roles. Thor becomes a general with men of his own to lead. This includes the Warrior Three and Sif.

Odin assigns the role of diplomat to Loki.

Loki thrives in the role. He is clever. He is knowledgeable. It also gives him opportunities to travel. He begins to earn respect in the Asgardian Courts.

Then... Loki falls in love.

Well and truly in love with a representative of Alfheim, Svaolfari. The intellectual curiosity in the magic of the Light Elves brings Loki to Svaolfari and love.

But it doesn't last.

When Odin discovers that Loki was indulging in sex that he viewed as unnatural and he becomes worried about the influence of Alfheim over Loki, he arranges for Svaolfari to be killed.
Loki breaks.

It is the first loss that Loki experiences and his grief is immense. Thor and Frigga comfort him, but when Loki learns of the circumstances of Svaoilfari's death and the reasons behind it, Loki becomes enraged.

Loki does not confront Odin.

He... stews in his rage instead. The death of Svaoilfari is the last straw. Loki learns and understands that he has a role to play and that he must remain within the guidelines that Odin sets for him.

He is given the respect of a prince without love and affection. He is given a job, power and wealth without the freedom to make his own decisions.

Loki learns that he is a pawn for Odin's games and politics.

As he realises that, he learns what Odin wants from him. Needs from him. He is being groomed to be Thor's adviser.

Though he is told that he was born to be a King, he learns quickly that he was never meant to be the King of Asgard.

Loki becomes resentful of Odin and his games.

As he does, he begins to plot. Loki launches his own PR campaign. He becomes serious, humble and obedient. He takes on the wife that Odin assigns to him. He does not love her.

But she does give birth to a child.

Odin names the girl Hel.

Stephen is outraged by that. The girl certainly shares features with Hela but for Odin to name her thus, Stephen finds is disturbing.

Loki may not love his wife, but he does love his daughter. He dotes on her and teaches her everything that he knows about magic.

When she is about 10 years old, Hel develops the ability to see and control souls. Odin becomes fearful of the child. As he does, he plots.

He banishes the girl with a small court of noble girls and maids to Helheim and declares her to be the Queen of Helheim.

Loki is devastated.

Sigyn is disgusted by the power that her daughter displays. She asks for and receives dissolution of the marriage between herself and Loki.

Loki begins to well and truly resent Asgard and Odin. The plot begins to form in Loki's mind. He plans to put Thor on the throne of Asgard as a puppet King.

To become the power behind the throne and make sure that the Asgardians would be aware of it.

He also plots to kill Odin and take his soul to Helheim and let his daughter rule over his soul for eternity. It would be the ultimate humiliation for Odin.
As Stephen watches, he wishes that he does not understand the God of Mischief and his plots. But he does.

Odin's cruelty and plots have taken away a great deal from Loki. The disparity in the way that Thor is treated and the way that Loki is treated in Asgard with the lack of a support system for Loki other than that of a very young child that is banished to another Realm and his mother means that Loki is isolated and resentful.

Loki hides all of his pain and anguish.

It is difficult to watch his pain. This isn't what Stephen had expected at all. He hadn't seen much of Loki through the visions that the Time Stone had shown him before.

The Loki that he had seen had been a mad and cruel god. A being that was hell-bent on killing humans and taking the Earth to become its King. A being that would destroy the city of New York with the Chitauri army.

But that isn't the Loki that Stephen sees.

The Loki that he sees is the one that hides in his bedchambers and cries himself to sleep. The one that hurts himself to feel something other than the pain inside of him.

The one that puts on a facade of snide intelligence outside of his own bedrooms. The one that visits his daughter as much as he can and smiles lovingly at her and holds her tightly and gently.

The one that grieves for the death of his lover. The one that fights for respect and power to control his own destiny and to be who he is.

A young soul still, despite his godhood that still seeks approval. That knows that somehow, he does not belong, but he does not understand why.

Stephen finds himself admiring Loki and his beauty as well as his intelligence and magical prowess. At the same time, Stephen finds himself feeling sorry for Loki. Sympathising with him.

That is not what he had expected.

On the other hand, Thor is exactly what Stephen had expected. A loud, brash youth of great physical abilities and strength. He is a lovable rogue type that is a very typical male of Asgardian background.

But the Thor that Stephen sees is a child. He is immature, he is entitled and he does not understand the value of life. He is reckless and brash. Not someone that is fit to be a King.

Yet, Odin decides to pass the throne onto him.

It is time for Odin to go to Odinsleep. A ritualistic sleep that allows him to rest and to extend his life. As the time approaches, Odin makes the preparations.

He tries to pass on the last of values and skills that Thor would need as a King, however, Thor is unwilling to listen.

He is arrogant and believes that he has every trait and skill needed to be King. He is a good general. He is decisive, charismatic and strong. But Thor cannot see the big picture. He doesn't have the diplomatic skills that Loki has.
It is Frigga and her visions of the future that pulls Loki aside. She informs Loki that the Coronation must not be allowed to happen. If Thor was to be King now, he would bring about death and destruction throughout the Nine Realms.

Loki plots.

Stephen watches as Loki goes to Jotunheim and entices a few of the Jotuns to come to Asgard and to steal back the Casket of Ancient Winters.

Given the importance of the Casket of the Ancient Winters, the Jotuns are more than happy to agree to the plot. Especially as Loki approaches them in the disguise of a Jotun.

Stephen wonders how the god will feel about his deception once he learns that he is Jotun. He wonders whether Loki would regret turning the wrath of Asgard onto his birthplace.

The Time Stone shows him the Coronation and the interruption by the Jotuns. As it happens, Stephen sees the rage go through Thor. He believes Jotuns to be the arch-nemesis of Asgard and that they are monsters that need to be destroyed.

Odin informs Thor that this is not an attack that deserves action. It is just the actions of a few individuals. Nothing more.

But Thor is enraged by the interruption to what was supposed to have been his moment of glory to be crowned the King of Asgard. Thor's rage blinds him.

Loki is quick to step in.

He plants the idea of going to Jotun. He paints the image of Thor becoming a hero. Thor is quick to take up on the idea.

Stephen can see Loki's plans coming together.

Thor gathers the Warrior Three and Sif. With them and Loki in tow, Thor travels to Jotunheim and from there, they are attacked by the Jotuns.

To the Jotuns, the Asgardians are their most hated enemies. They have taken their source of power and limited their procreation. They have taken a part of their identity away in the form of the Casket of the Ancient Winters.

On top of it, Asgard has taken their Crown Prince.

The Jotuns are quick to attack Thor and his party. The battle is brutal. Stephen watches as Thor and his friends slaughter the Jotuns that attack. But they are overwhelmed by the numbers.

During the battle, Loki is grabbed by a Jotun and Stephen can see him preparing for pain. However, instead of pain, Loki's skin turns the blue of Jotuns.

As that happens, Stephen sees recognition in Laufey, who had just arrived. Laufey lets out a shout. The Jotuns begin to fall back and as Loki looks up to see Laufey, Stephen sees the moment of recognition in Laufey. He wonders if Loki has seen it too.

Odin arrives to take the party away.

Stephen watches as Thor argues with Odin. As he is banished. As Odin spells Mjolnir to return to Thor when he becomes worthy.
Loki’s satisfaction is obvious.

But so is his suspicions and his awareness of what he may be. He does not get the chance to think about it too deeply. Frigga requires him. He spends time consoling him.

Stephen takes a deep breath and prepares to pull away from the spell.

He has seen everything that he needed to see. He knows who Loki is now. He has seen the god’s motivations.

He still doesn't know what would happen to bring the God of Mischief to Earth with the Chitauri Army. But Stephen does know that the god is clever and capable of being reasoned with.

He is a diplomat.

Stephen isn't. But he is the Sorcerer Supreme and he knows that Loki would know what his role is. Stephen has the power to negotiate with him.

With that decision made, there is no need for Stephen to continue to watch.

But as Stephen tries to pull away, the Time Stone all but drags him to a vision of Thor on Earth. New Mexico then, Stephen thinks.

It is the moment that Thor had arrived on Earth. Just four nights ago.

Stephen watches as Dr Jane Foster runs out of her car after Thor crashes into her front screen. As Thor stirs and opens his eyes, Stephen watches with shock as Thor Connects with Jane Foster.

Shit.

Stephen recognises the look of Thor's eyes filling with wonder and immediate understanding. The amazement, the wonder and the sheer joy is something that Stephen is familiar enough with.

He sighs.

This was definitely going to complicate things. Jane Foster is often Thor's lover. But this is the first instance out of all the universes that he has seen that Jane Foster is Thor's Soulmate.

Thor reaches up and touches Jane on her face and Stephen can almost feel that Connection settling as he cuts off the spell.

The Cup's visions cuts out and so does the Time Stone.

For a moment, for a split second, Stephen is tempted. There is more that he wants to see. The history of Earth. The history of the other planets. The very birth of the universe itself.

He can.

But he can't. If he does, he will drain all the magic from the dimensions and himself. He can't do that. He needs to stop himself.

He focuses.

Anthony Edward Stark, Stephen reminds himself. He reaches for that Connection and lets go of the Time Stone and the connection that he feels with it. The spell breaks.
As he does, Stephen feels the drain.

Stephen stumbles and barely manages to catch himself on the stand that the Cup had been sitting on. He lets go of all the magic that he can. He stops pulling from the dimensions. He closes the Eye of Agamoto with some difficulty.

When that is done, Stephen slumps against the stand and breathes harshly. He needs to go back to the Council and show them what he has seen. He has to get the Memory Stone.

Stephen tries to walk away from the stand. He doesn't manage before the darkness claims him.

The Cloak of Levitation catches Stephen's falling body and lays him gently on the ground before flying out of the library to find Clea.

She will know what to do.

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Monday

24 May 2010

'My greatest creation has been and always will be you'.

The only thing that keeps Tony from driving too fast and too recklessly as the thought swirl in his head is the reminder of Stephen and his pain and his trauma.

Tony tampers his need for speed and for stupidity with the reminders that if he hurts himself or if he even ends up with a minor car crash, there was a chance that he could hurt Stephen.

That is not something that he is willing to risk. Not anymore.

But his father's words echo in his head and so does the conflict of emotions that clash within him. He isn't sure what to think. Or what to feel. Or anything... really.

It is so hard to think past the initial anger and backlash he feels against the man that had never said anything positive to him other than in relation to his work when it was good enough. Even then it had been just that. Good enough.

Even in the most abusive relationships, it is not all bad. Tony knows and can acknowledge that. He still remembers his father teaching him how to weld his first bit of metal together. He remembers his father teaching him how his first computer worked.

He remembers the warm hugs that Howard used to give him when he'd been a child. But those memories pale in comparison to the rages that Howard used to go into.

The beatings that he would give his mother and himself. The acts of violence that had no place in a home. The constant fear he had felt when he was around his father.

It is difficult. No, it is impossible to forget and thus it is impossible to forgive. More and more, Tony realises that the reasons why he had so much difficulty in letting people into his life had been because of Howard.
The way that he treated women and men in his life had been as a result of fear that he might turn into Howard himself and hurt them in the ways that he had been hurt. He always had to double-check himself and his words and he put distances between himself and others, not knowing that doing that could also hurt people.

Until Stephen, he had allowed himself to be hurt instead.

With Stephen, he had thought that if there wasn't physical violence, then he wasn't hurting anyone. He had been wrong about that. He had hurt Stephen without physical violence.

Talking to Michelle had helped him to work past a lot of those issues, but they didn't heal everything. Even Michelle had informed him that she wasn't sure if she could help him heal everything because that's not how psychological and emotional wounds worked.

He can patch them up and they can be healed but the scars can be re-opened. They are most definitely reopened now.

Tony considers stopping by the strawberry stand on the way to the office but remembers that Pepper has allergies to strawberries and instead stops at the nearby flower stand. That's a more fitting gift anyway.

Until he realises that he has no cash. Tony shrugs off the watch he had worn out and gives it to the lovely young woman that was manning the stand.

She recognises him and the watch almost immediately.

"This is a Jaeger. It's stupid expensive." She tells him and he shrugs her shoulders. He has gotten sick of the watch at any rate and yes, he knows that it might be irresponsible of him in a way considering the fact that he was 'wasting' expensive things but it's not like he couldn't afford another one and more importantly, spending money was a part of his responsibilities.

"It's fine. Make it a gift, sell it, I don't mind." Tony tells her with a smile and she nods gratefully as she readies the bouquet that he'd requested.

"You got a smartphone?" Tony asks her as she bundles up the dark red roses along with the baby's breathes that Tony knows Pepper likes. She nods enthusiastically as Tony snaps her fingers.

"Well, get your phone out. If the pawnbroker wants to know how you got the watch you can show him the photo." He tells her and her eyes widen for a moment before she scrambles and grabs out her old Nokia phone and snaps a picture of them together holding the watch up.

She hands him the bouquet and gives him a warm smile.

"I believe in Iron Man." She tells him softly and he gives her a warm smile back and thanks her. He makes sure that the covers are back up in the car and when he gets in and the drive is much quieter now, Tony directs JARVIS to call Stephen.

Hearing Stephen's voice will help, Tony thinks. Having him around would be better but given the scrutiny of the agents in his home, he's not sure if he wants that. For now, at least Stephen's voice is what Tony needs.

It's not what he gets.

"Hey Tony." And it's not Stephen that answers the phone but Clea. Of course. She sounds... almost apologetic. Tony isn't sure whether he is angry or exasperated.
He's worried. That's a given but the rest, he's not quite sure about just yet. He grips the handle a little tighter.

"What's wrong with him?" His voice is tight and there is corresponding tightness in his chest. Clea gives him a nervous giggle.

"He's fine. He's not hurt or anything. I swear to you. He's just um... exhausted himself. Did something kinda stupid but kinda important. He's fine. I swear. He'll be awake in a few hours." Clea tells him and he can tell that she is desperate to reassure him and that chances are, things were fine because she doesn't sound panicked or upset.

"Tell him to call me as soon as he's awake." Tony bites out. He's angry, he decides. He is so very angry.

It mixes in with his anger over what has happened with his father's message and SHIELD and everything else. He feels overwhelmed with all the bullshit that had been happening and he needs all of this to stop. He just needs-

"I will. I will I promise. But Tony, he- I don't think Stephen realised just how big what he was trying to do was until he did it. Once he's awake, he's going to have to be in some meetings for awhile. Once that is all done, he will come and see you." Clea tells him and oddly enough her words are comforting and calming.

Tony may not understand what it is that Stephen does or can do is per se, But he has learnt at least a few things. There is an exchange of energies. From what he has seen, Stephen or Clea or whoever it is, uses basically a part of themselves to make whatever it is possible.

When that exchange happens, it leaves them tired and exhausted and sometimes, apparently, unconscious. Tony was starting to think more and more that this was more complicated and crazy than he had initially imagined, but that's what he knew.

"You're on your way to see Pepper?" Clea asks him quietly and Tony hums his reply. He's not sure what he is going to say if he opens his mouth. He's pretty sure it might be unpleasant.

"Good. Can you tell her that I'm really sorry I can't be there for a little while? I'm managing everything via the phone and tablet and stuff but yeah." Clea says and she does sound like she is sorry. Tony sighs and releases some of the tension from himself.

"Yeah. I will and Clea?" Tony calls to her just as he nears the LA offices.

"Yes Tony?" Clea asks softly as he passes through the security checkpoint.

"Do you believe in redemption?" He finds himself asking as he sees a figure he hadn't expected. He hears a sigh on the other end of the line.

"If you are talking about Natasha Romanov? Maybe. If you're talking about your father? I don't know Tony. But I can tell you this. You're not the only one that will be thinking about redemption today." Clea tells him and Tony doesn't have the time to question her.

He hangs up the phone and gets out of the car and throws the keys to the valet staff that his company employs.

"I thought I was clear about you staying out of my company." Tony tells her darkly as he walks up. He had thought that it was a little too easy to get out of the house with just Coulson distracted. He should have kept better eyes on her. She gives him an even look.
"You told me to apologise to Pepper. Since I cannot go into the company grounds on my own. I figured I should come with you." Natasha tells him.

The thing is, he can't know, ever, whether she is trying to manipulate him or not. Or whether she is lying or not. He was never going to be able to fully trust even what his eyes and what his head was telling him because there was always going to be a layer of doubt that will always go over all of her actions and her words towards him now.

But he does at least appreciate the fact that she hasn't tried to go into the company alone and that she hadn't tried to get to Pepper outside of 'supervised' visit. Tony nods curtly to her and starts to walk through the open doors.

The security team is gathered and ready to go and Happy is standing with them, his eyebrow raised at Tony.

"She's with me for now." Tony tells them and he leads them up to the elevator. He isn't too surprised to notice that Happy follows along with two of the other guards. The two most specialised guards in SI. The ones with specialised military training.

Good.

They are probably more capable of fighting against Natasha than Happy himself, but combat isn't why Tony has Happy on staff as his chief bodyguard. It's his situational awareness and his leadership skills.

"Is Coulson pissed?" Tony asks to pass the time in the elevator and Natasha giggles before she cuts herself off and clears her throat.

"Yup." She tells him and he thinks she is still amused. It's hard to tell.

The receptionist doesn't even bother to try to stop him. hew barges through the door and smiles at Pepper, who starts to smile back only for the smile to become a questioning look when she sees Natasha.

Tony instructs the security team to stay outside and approaches Pepper's desk to put the flowers down in front of her whilst he waits for her to finish her phone call. Which she does. Quickly.

"To what do I owe this pleasure?" Pepper directs the question to Natasha and Tony takes the opportunity to look at the display that catches his eye in the corner of the office.

The diorama of the Stark Expo park, the one that his father had built. Tony takes the coverings off of it as he waits for Pepper and Natasha to actually say something.

"I- I wanted to apologise Ms Potts." Natasha says quietly after some time. Tony turns just in time to see Pepper sitting back in her chair and raising an eyebrow.

"For lying about who you are and approaching our company or for attempting to access our servers, my emails and Tony's emails illegally or for underestimating us?" Pepper asks and her tone is cold and calculating. It's actually quite impressive to watch from this angle, Tony thinks.

"For all of it. I don't understand why you hired me when you knew something was amiss." Natasha says and Pepper shrugs her shoulders.

"Keep your friends close and your enemies closer. I really loved that movie when I was young." Pepper chimes up and Tony can't help but chuckle a little as he looks over the diorama a little more.
"So Pep, Hammer's doing his thing on Friday?" Tony asks as he steps back and tries to get a view of the diorama fully in his head.

"Ah yes. Are you going to be there?" Pepper asks him and he frowns a little as he looks over the diorama over and over again. There is something that is bothering him about it.

The way that the camera had panned over to show the diorama during his father's reel. There has to be something there. He shrugs his shoulders.

"Not sure yet. Hey, you mind if I take this home with me?" Tony asks as he looks back over towards Pepper and she nods with a curious look in her eyes.

"Of course, what are you planning to do with it?" Pepper asks him and Tony isn't quite sure yet either.

"Don't know yet. But I feel like I am going to need this." He tells her and she is more than happy enough to nod.

"Agent Romanov can help you carry it out to the car. After that, she is no longer welcome in the building." Pepper informs her and Tony. He nods to her and for about half an hour, they lose track of the time as they work through their plans for the press conference that they were definitely going to have to explain Monaco.

Pepper outlines the plans that Gina and Alex have managed to come up with. Tony listens carefully and adds his input.

When the meeting is done, Tony almost forgets but remembers just in time.

"Clea told me to say sorry about not coming into the office. She's handling something with Stephen. I swear that man is more popular than I am." Tony grumbles and Pepper smiles and nods.

"I know. She sent me a text message. She'll be back in LA as soon as she can." Pepper tells her and Tony nods as he goes over to the diorama and starts to move it. Natasha moves to help without having to be asked.

"Also, Agent Romanov, the person that you should really apologise to is probably Clea. Despite knowing who you were, she still wanted to be your friend." Pepper tells her and Natasha almost drops her part of the diorama for a moment before she catches it and herself.

"I- Of course." Natasha says and before Tony can question it, Pepper gives him a small shake of the head and they leave the office.

Outside of the office, the security people help them with the diorama and they manage to get it into the car before Tony drives off, leaving Natasha standing there, waiting for her own car.

She looked like she needed some time to think anyway.

But then, so does Tony.

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The Question of Morals or Utility

Chapter Summary

Odin act as the ruler of Asgard and the Nine Realms. His decisions are based on what he believes is the best for his people and for his Kingdom and of course... for himself.

Natasha acts for SHIELD and expects them to be acting on the best interests of the country and people that they protect.

But more than that, she works to reduce the red in her ledger.

So... what's more important? Doing what's right or doing what would benefit the greatest amount of people?

Chapter Notes

Alright!

I set up the Discord Server. There seems to be enough interest and um... I looked over the last couple of chapters and figured that it was probably going to um... help to have people to comfort you guys as you read. *cough*

So! For those that don't know, Discord is a Text/Voice chat application/program that you can get on your phone/computer that allows for real time chatting and voice calls and group chats.

Generally each server is private and you will need invites to get into the servers. So here is the Link:

https://discord.gg/sN8Fyyz

You will need to download the app/program but once you do, you will be able to join in all the chats ^__^ 

I will be there and hanging about between writing/sleeping/eating... which is kind of the only thing I do these days.

Please do remember the read the rules once you get there.

See you there! <3

Monday

24 May 2010

Thor has not yet returned.
Loki has not expected him to return quickly. There is much that Thor must learn before he can earn the rights back to Mjolnir.

To be worthy of Mjolnir, to earn the rights to be Thor, the God of Thunder back, Loki knows that Thor will need to learn a great deal.


Those traits will be difficult for Thor to learn.

There are lessons that Loki can plan that will allow him to speed the process along. But he does not wish to unless it is necessary for him to intervene. Loki cannot see that far, but he can travel to Midgard quietly to ensure that his brother learns the lessons he has paid a dear price to ensure that he gets.

Especially if the price is what Loki believes it is.

Loki strides with purpose through the Weapons Vault of deep within the palace of Asgard. The guards bow to him as he sweeps his way past them. They open the doors wide open for him and he walks through, his strides not changing for a second.

He has put this off long enough.

He must know. It is about time that he knows. He has his suspicions. But he must confirm them. There is only one way that he can. Only one way to be certain.

He has spent the last couple of days speaking with Frigga. They have done what they can to ensure that Thor will be safe and yet be thrown into the path of those that can teach him the lessons that he must learn.

When he comes back to Asgard, Frigga and Loki hope that he will be ready for the throne. Odin must sleep soon. Thor must be ready to take the throne, even temporarily as it may be.

Loki does not desire to sit upon the Throne of Asgard, temporary or otherwise.

Once upon the throne, he will not be free to travel to Helheim to see to his daughter. He will be freed from the bounds of Odin's commands, but he will be bound by the responsibilities of the throne.

He does not wish it.

There is only one reason he might want the throne. That would be to show Odin that he can be the King that Thor cannot be and to free Hel from Helheim.

But... Hel is surprisingly content in Helheim. She has her lost souls to rule over and she is comforted by them. As long as Loki can visit her and ensure that she is happy, then Loki does not need the power and authority of a King.

Loki sees his target at the end of the corridor. He strides forward until he can see it.

The Casket of Ancient Winters.

The war prize that Odin has brought back from Jotunheim. A thing so powerful and so cold that no Asgardian can wield it. It is a powerful magical artefact that only a Jotun can wield.

Loki takes a deep breath and slowly grasps the handles of the Casket.
The moment his hands touch it, Loki can feel it. He feels the winter stir deep within him and he can feel it cascade over his body and seep into his very soul.

It feels as if it belongs to him.

"Stop!" Odin the great liar's voice echoes through the chamber. Loki stops pulling at the magic of the Casket. He breathes deeply. It is time for answers.

"Am I cursed?" Loki asks, gritting his teeth to stop the tirade of angry words that he knows will not be useful.

"No." Odin answers, his voice firm.

"What am I?" Loki asks quietly. He already knows the answer that Odin will give. It will be the same answer that he has given before.

"You're my son." Odin replies. Loki closes his eyes. He remembers that answer. He remembers that tone. It is that kindly, fatherly tone that Odin used to talk to him and Thor with.

It's the voice of the father that Loki had loved once.

"What more than that?" Loki asks as he turns around and allows Odin to see the blue of his skin. He knows that he will be blue. That is is the skin of the Frost Giants that stain him just as it had with their touch.

Odin stands in the middle of the stairs leading down into the Weapon's Vault. Ever the dramatic King. Always knowing the perfect position to stand, knowing the right tone to use. To convey the right message with the right tone to the right person.

But always hiding his true intentions and secrets behind the mask of benevolence and wisdom. A cunning old fox. Loki will not fall for it any longer.

"The Casket wasn't the only thing you took from Jotunheim that day, was it?" Loki asks as he walks towards the god that had called himself his father.

"No." Finally an honest answer, Loki thinks. But he expects better to than to hear the truth as Odin opens his lips to continue to speak.

The mask of concern and pain his voice doesn't fool Loki. Not anymore. It had once. It had then. When he had lost his lover and when he had lost the rights to his own child.

Odin had told him that it was for the best. That he was too young to raise a child and he was too young to be in love. Odin never admitted to killing Svaoilfari. But Loki knew.

Odin had been disgusted. But he had pretended to be concerned. That he had been doing what was best for Loki. Loki hadn't believed him then. He does not believe him now.

"In the aftermath of the battle, I went into the temple and I found a baby. Small, for a giant's offspring. Abandoned, suffering, left to die. Laufey's son." Another lie, Loki thinks. Odin is speaking quietly and softly but Loki knows better than to believe his words.

Laufey is the King of Jotunheim.

Loki of a few centuries ago would have believed it possible that the heir to the throne of Jotunheim could be found abandoned in a temple, left to die.
But Loki has spent time in Jotunheim. He has travelled there in secret through his ability to teleport between the dimensions.

He has explored Jotunheim disguised as a Jotun. One of the Elders that he has met throughout his wanderings had told him that the Jotuns were not what Asgardians knew them to be.

That he ought to visit. So he had.

He knows that yes, the Frost Giants are savage and they are bloodthirsty. But there is order. There are Courts. There are nobles and mages. There are priests and priestesses. If Loki has indeed been found in a temple, then Odin has cut through them to find him.

"Why? You were knee-deep in Jotun blood, why would you take me?" Loki asks though he thinks he already knows the answer. The one that Odin won't say of course.

He was to be a prize. A threat.

The Casket of Ancient Winters would take power away from Jotunheim. Without it, the Jotuns cannot perform the magic that is most natural to them. That of transformation.

Taking Laufey's son would ensure that Laufey would not rise up against Asgard once again.

Not when his son was at risk.

It explains so much. How it was so easy for him to learn transformation magic. How it was possible for him to change genders.

"You were an innocent." Odin says. There is regret in his voice. Loki wonders why that is there. Perhaps Odin was getting soft in his old age. No, he doubts that.

Odin is a ruthless, old, sly fox.

"No. You took me for another purpose. What was it?" Loki asks. He knows the answer but he wants to hear it from Odin's lips.

"I thought we could unite our kingdoms one day. Bring about an alliance. Bring about a permanent peace." Odin says. That is a lie.

What Odin had wanted was submission.

That is what he demanded of all the other Realms. He conquered them. He overpowered them. Stripped them of their most powerful resources and artefacts and made the Realms fall under Asgard protection and purview because there was no other choice left.

Jotunheim hasn't submitted.

It never will. Not when Laufey's son is being held prisoner. Not when they are being forced to bow down to their knees. They will remain quiet, but they will never submit.

Loki knows that much.

Because he will not. He will not submit. Loki feels the rage burn deep within him. Everything makes sense now.

All of the disdain that he has seen in the Asgardian nobles as he has grown up. The odd, ill-fitting sensation he has felt throughout the centuries. He understands all of it.
His poor, poor child. A child that hadn't understood the gift that she possessed. The power over souls and the dead is something that some Jotun priestesses and priests are capable of. But her power is so much more than that.

It is no wonder that she has such power, given who Loki is. Given that Sigyn is a powerful witch.

A child that he got to see only half of the year and not even that with the responsibilities that Odin had thrown upon his shoulders.

A child that never understood why she never felt cold in the wastelands of Helheim would finally have her answer.

"That is why you never allowed Hel to come to Asgard." Loki finds himself saying. He didn't quite mean to. Odin looks truly regretful.

"You were too young to raise a child. It would have raised questions about your origins. Her powers is that of Jotuns." Odin says and there is a faint note of disgust that he cannot hide.

Loki holds back the bitter laughter that bubbles.

"You should have told me. You should have told me what I was. Why did you not tell me?" Loki can barely hold back his anger.

If he had known, he would have understood why he did not fit in. He would have known that it was useless to try. A thousand years.

A thousand years spent seeking approval and trying to be accepted when it never would have been possible.

"I wanted to protect you. I only wanted to protect you from the truth. From yourself." Odin says and he sounds tired. It is time for Odinsleep.

He has been putting it off for far too long to wait for Thor to become ready to be King. But he wasn't ready. He was far from ready.

"But you failed." Loki tells him, his voice cold as the Casket of Ancient Winters itself. Odin recoils as if it is a physical blow.

"Instead of protecting me, all you have done is destroy me." Loki tells him bitterly and he sees the shock in Odin's eyes. Surely, he would have known. Was he so naive and blind that he did not notice?

"Or did you not care because I am not your son? Just a child you brought back from the battlefields to be a relic to be stored away until there is a use for me?" Loki cannot help the mocking tone in his voice.

Odin sits down heavily.

The sleep is overtaking him, Loki notices in a detached manner. Once upon a time, he would have been worried to see him in such a state. He had loved Odin as a father once. Not any more.

"That is not what you are. You are my son and I love you." Odin says. Loki does not believe him. That is not what love is. That is not the love that he feels for Hel.
"No. You found me useful. That is all." Loki tells him and sees Odin's eyes widen as he tries to fight back against the sleep.

Perhaps the old age was making him soft. It matters not. It is too late for amends. Not from him.

"Loki-" Whatever Odin was going to say is cut off as he slumps over as he falls into the deep Odin's sleep.

Loki stands over him for a moment, just watching the deep, steady breathes.

It would be so easy.

With a single strike of his knife, he can take away Odin's life. He can end it all. Right here. Revenge would be his. Odin deserves no less. Loki's fury deserves no less.

But he cannot.

If he plunged his knife into Odin right now, there would be far, far too many questions. He will need to be clever. Stick to the plan that he has created.

There are other ways to get his pound of flesh.

Loki takes a deep steadying breath and wipes the cruel smile that he knows is on his lips away. Instead, he puts on the mask of concern and fear.

"Father! Guards! Guards!" Loki shouts as he kneels over Odin. The guards rush in and they are quick to kneel and assist. Loki pretends to be shaken as he orders them to take Odin to his bedchambers.

As they go, Loki turns to look at the Casket of Ancient Winters one last time. A useful relic he may be, but like the Casket of Ancient Winters, he will refuse to be wielded by Odin.

Not any more.

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Tuesday

25 May 2010

Re-discovering the element doesn't take long.

Tony's brain makes the connections and finds the oddities in the design before he is able to get it to make sense but he does it. His father, if nothing else, thought very much in the same way that Tony's does now. So that isn't the problem.

The problem is building a particle accelerator inside of his workshop. That is a two-pronged problem. For one, he has to design it. Quickly. He is running out of time and there is only so much lithium dioxide he can inject into himself.

For two, it is a matter of actually getting all the things that he needs to make this work delivered to the house. He gets Pepper to help him with that. She gives him carte blanche to use the company's personnel as well as their resources to get that achieved.

They don't have a lab that he can easily access and halt the work on to make the particle accelerator a thing. Besides, he needs government approvals etc and he doesn't have time to do that. Luckily, his
home is designated as lab space and research space as well for private research so at least that's one less hurdle.

The workers come and break down the walls that he needs to be broken to start off with as Tony designs the accelerator and works out the math to make everything... work.

He is in the midst of that when JARVIS flashes up a warning and shows Tony what is happening upstairs. More precisely, who is upstairs.

"Sir, Dr Strange has arrived." JARVIS informs him, though there is no need.

Shit.

The last he'd heard from Stephen had been that he to go to a meeting but he was fine and that he will talk to Tony when he could.

The doctor hadn't mentioned turning up at the fucking mansion with SHIELD agents in it.

He rushes up the stairs just in time to see Stephen standing there with Natasha Romanov and Coulson pointing their guns towards him whilst Stephen stands with his hands raised but seeming very calm and relaxed despite the situation. Tony sighs.

"You didn't call me" Tony says as he casually walks up between them and the guns, putting himself firmly in the line of fire. His back is turned to them and he feels the itch on the back when he realises that but he can only see Stephen.

If there were no others in the room, he would have grabbed the doctor and kissed him. As it is the most he can do is look. Not touch. It sucks. The doctor looks tired, but he doesn't look hurt. Good. Stephen shrugs his shoulders.

"I told you I would be in contact as soon as I could. In person contact is still contact." Stephen says casually. Behind them, Tony can hear guns being lowered, or at least that's what he hopes is happening as he sighs and crosses his arms. It's a sign of his annoyance as well as a means to stop himself from reaching out and touching the man.

"Yeah well if you called, I could have told you about the welcome you might receive." Tony says drily as Stephen shrugs his shoulders again.

"Yeah, that might have been a good idea. So. Particle accelerator?" Stephen questions. He sounds interested, intrigued and excited not that Tony is surprised. Still, Tony looks up at one of the cameras in the room before he sighs.

"JARVIS?" Tony questions with a raised eyebrow. Stephen gives him a warm smile and a nod.

"Who else?" Stephen asks back and Tony can't help but chuckle despite the situation.

"He's playing favourites. I thought you taught him better." Tony complains to him as he starts to move slowly towards the living room.

"I did. He just believed that I ought to know what you were up to. He was concerned about your state." Stephen informs him and Tony knows why but he knows better than to stop and question him.

"So participle accelerator, you interested?" Tony asks him though he already knows the answer.
"Oh most definitely. I can handle the programming and the detection and speed side of it whilst you deal with the physical labour?" Stephen says with a tongue in cheek expression and Tony laughs as he leads the doctor or at least he tries to lead the doctor into the lab. Natasha stops him.

"Tony, he isn't who he says he is." Natasha tells him and Tony shrugs her hand off of his arm. Coulson is right nearby, clearly concerned and tense and eyeing Stephen as a threat.

"Oh I know. But that doesn't change the fact that I need him to be able to do the work or that I trust him far more than I can trust you." Tony tells her casually and continues to move past them towards the workshop. He isn't too surprised when Natasha follows.

"So the new element, what is it?" Stephen asks as they walk down and Tony can barely hold his excitement in place.

"It's the most flexible yet stable element. Pretty sure it doesn't exist on this planet. Perhaps off-planet? Maybe. But there is magnetic pull and the stability means that it won't burn up like the palladium does but from my calculations, the energy that it will give off is going to be massive." Tony tells him excitedly as they reach the workshop and Stephen raises an eyebrow when he sees the missing walls.

"I'm going to trust that you know your structural engineering enough that the house isn't about to fall into the ocean." Stephen tells him drily. Tony chuckles.

"I got engineers to double-check. It's fine. Now, you ready to work doc?" Tony asks and Stephen moves towards his computer but Tony pulls him back and points to the computer right at the centre of the lab.

"Sorry. Gonna need you to work from this one. I'm isolating the rest of the systems." Tony tells him and Stephen gets it immediately. He raises an eyebrow.

"Just how much power are we going to be using for this?" Tony shows him the figure from the calculations he had just finished running. Stephen blinks for a moment before he sighs.

"JARVIS, let's get the house disconnected from the LA grid and let's see if we can use the power from the generators for now until I can figure out how to connect us to the spare Arc Reactors Anthony has around." Stephen says quickly enough and Tony wants to kiss him. He really does. He takes a deep breath instead and beams at the doctor.

"And this is why I need you around. You catch the shit I miss." Tony tells him and Stephen rolls his eyes before he settles before the computer and Tony fetches the keyboard and mouse he designed for Stephen.

"The materials?" Stephen questions as he looks over the data on the monitor so far. The doctor's comprehension of the situation and the work that is needed is scary fast.

"Being transported as we speak. The components will be here in a few hours." Tony adds and Stephen nods slowly as he sighs.

"You do realise that I am going to have to build an entirely new program to make sure that we can keep the power flow steady for this sort of structure right?" Stephen points to the screen and Tony gives him a grin.

"I'm sure you are up to the challenge. Besides, I will owe you one." Tony tells him though he has to keep the filthy tone out of his voice. He already owes the doctor more than one sexual favour from just that catch in relation to power.
"You're going to owe me more than one if we can pull this off, Anthony." Stephen tells him and there isn't a hint of seduction in that voice but Tony sees it anyway when the doctor turns to look at him, ensuring that Natasha can't see him. The bastard, Tony thinks as he feels the sharp heat of arousal go through him.

"Yeah well, put it on the tab for now." Tony tells him gruffly as he turns back around to hide his reaction from Natasha's all too sharp and observant eyes. She prepares to settle into the chair when Stephen speaks up.

"Agent Romanov, Dr Stark will never come to harm by my hands. I am here to help. If you wish to be of assistance, I would highly advise you and your agents ensure that we are properly disconnected from the LA grid by tomorrow and that there are enough fuel for the generators we have on the grounds." Stephen says without even turning to look at her. Natasha Romanov looks shocked for a moment but as she opens her mouth to say something, Stephen continues.

"If the house is still connected and if we are able to start experimenting with this by tomorrow night, which I assume we should be able to, the LA electrical grid will collapse." Stephen informs her. That has her narrowing her eyes as she reaches for the earpiece and starts to speak quickly to whoever is on the receiving end of it.

She doesn't quite leave the lab but she is distracted. It's not like it matters. They have work to do and when they are working, they can keep their hands away from each other and they can focus. Tony can focus. He can. Right?

"So how much of this do we need to create?" Stephen asks him as he settles into the work and starts coding almost immediately. Tony is impressed by how quickly the doctor settles in. JARVIS helps with the coding as usual.

"Just 0.15 milligrams to replace the core I have now. After that, we might have to produce more, but yeah." Tony tells him and Stephen nods as he looks over the calculations.

"That is going to get expensive fast." Stephen informs him and Tony bites his lips as he nods. He knows. But from the calculations that he has done, the core shouldn't deplete for... years. Decades, even if he was to pull crazy amounts of power from it.

But Stephen was right. They were going to be using two ionised particles to create one element. Between the actual process of isolating and creating the ionised particles, the transportation of it and the actual sheer amount of power that is required to make the accelerator work?

This was going to cost him millions and millions of dollars.

"Well, at least money isn't an object for either of us." Stephen says easily enough as he continues to type. Tony nods. He is honestly grateful for that. If money was an object... this wouldn't work. None of this would.

"The power grid around the mansion has been isolated." Natasha informs them and they both nod as Tony gets back to his calculations and Stephen continues to program.

They talk as if Natasha isn't there in the room anymore. It is easy enough to talk about the various projects that they have going.

"Oh, I spoke with Dr Miles by the way." Tony pipes up and Stephen turns around to actually look at him, his interest was obvious.

"Was she able to get the neurological readings from her patients for me to look at?" Stephen's interest
and excitement bring a smile to Tony's face. Though the neural interface had started as a way to make the flight and the systems easier on the Iron Man suit, it was really the PTSD treatment that Stephen had been invested in.

"Yeah. She's sending the data over from her current patients. Once we have that, we can parse out how the neural interface would work with the VR headsets." Tony informs him and Stephen looks pleased as he turns back around to work.

"Good. It's going to revolutionise PTSD treatment." Stephen says excitedly. Tony chuckles as he nods.

"Definitely. Miles is looking forward to meeting with us to get the rest of it sorted." Tony informs him as they continue to work. Natasha is paying attention to them, carefully watching them to see what information she can gather about Stephen no doubt and about Tony himself, but he's not sure what she is seeing.

He hopes that she doesn't see too much, but he can never be sure about that can he? It's not like she is easy to read.

"Once the components arrive, I'll build the structure and we will need to make sure that everything is level and that it is ready to go. In the meantime, I'm going to run more calculations on this thing and make sure that it is actually going to work." Tony says as he starts running the numbers again and Stephen nods as he absently speaks.

"It'll work." Stephen tells him firmly. Tony grins but doesn't turn to look at him. God, he wishes Natasha wasn't there. That he could just hold the other man. That he could kiss him. That he could maybe do something more.

He hates the scrutiny he can feel. He hates that he can't be himself. But the last thing he wants is to show SHIELD what they were like and who they were. There was no need for them to know. It was a part of themselves that was private for now. A part that they should be able to enjoy and have without SHIELD or anyone else for that matter, judging or using that information against them.

"Clea's going to come over in the evening. She said something about bringing tacos." Stephen says and Tony notices from the corner of his eyes that Natasha stiffens a little. Good. She should feel uncomfortable about being confronted by those that she has tried to deceive and manipulate and use.

"Tell me it's the fish tacos." Tony says. He can almost taste the fluffy goodness that are the fish tacos from the nameless taco stand under the highway.

"It will be. You got her addicted to them." Stephen tells him distractedly. This is Stephen at his best, working and focused on the work so much so that he is talking to Tony or anyone else with just a fraction of his brain. Tony likes this distracted Stephen.

But he also knows that it's dangerous to talk to Stephen when he is like this. Not when Natasha is in the room. Stephen can let more information slip out than he had intended to and that is dangerous when they weren't alone and safe.

Tony takes a deep breath and focuses completely on the work. So does Stephen.

Neither of them notices the spy leave.

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Thursday
Stephen has to go.

The particle accelerator was working well and they were producing the new element, though it was slow going but they were getting there so there was that. All Tony has to do now is monitor the power levels and make sure that nothing moves and that everything is going smoothly. That is it.

It was more babysitting the damned thing than anything else. Then he would have to rework the reactor to fit in the new element into the core. With the way that the element worked and the way that he was going to be designing the Arc Reactor, there wasn't going to be a chip anymore.

The element was going to sit in the core of the Reactor and be able to put out the power that it seemingly can and as it does so, the arcing energies will be able to feed off of it in a perpetual loop.

It was going to be brilliant.

It is also just in time because the lithium dioxide's effects were starting to fade and Tony was starting to feel horrible. Stephen instructs him to lie down on the medical bed/chair thing they'd been using before to check the shrapnel and runs the checks on his chest with the ultrasound first before he takes a measure of the palladium in Tony's blood.

The toxicity is at 92%.

Stephen looks a little green around the edges as he takes in the number and he takes a deep breath before he looks at Tony.

"You're going to need more chlorophyll. Once you replaced the palladium with the new element, we're going to have to run through courses of dialysis to remove the poison from your blood and chelation therapy." Stephen informs him and Tony nods slowly.

"Yeah. Figured. How um... how bad is that going to be?" Tony asks him carefully and Stephen gives him that is filled with some apprehension.

"It... It isn't going to be pleasant Anthony. There are side effects that will come with it and you will need some time for the treatment to take place. With your level of toxicity, it will take... a couple of weeks at the very least." Stephen informs him and Tony bites his lip as he gets that Stephen is trying to say.

"Tell me I don't have to be in a hospital for this shit doc." Tony tells him and Stephen gives him a helpless look.

"I can conduct the therapy here but you really should be in hospital for it. The lithium dioxide is helping you to feel better but that has it's own side effects and once it is no longer effective... your body is going to break down. Once the new core is in place of the palladium and we have removed the source of the poisoning, we have to support your body to ensure that it can clean out the rest before it settles into the extremities or your organs." Stephen says firmly and Tony sighs.

Natasha Romanov looks horrified as she listens.

"If that happens?" Tony asks and Stephen looks grim as he continues.

"If the metals settle into your organs or your extremities like your feet and your hands, the nerves will be damaged and so will the skin and muscles. In the worst-case scenario... there might have to be amputations. I won't- I won't let it get to that. I promise. But- though the poisoning has only
accelerated over the past few months, it has been in your system for almost a year now. I need you to know and prepare for the worst." Stephen informs him and Tony nods slowly.

He had been aware of all this. He has. Wu had told him about all of that. But it's another thing to hear it from Stephen and with his concern. It is also another thing to ensure that Natasha Romanov hears it and knows just how much of a risk she and SHIELD had taken with his life.

If he hadn't been able to solve the riddle that was the diorama, if he hadn't been able to figure out how to create the new element in time, if there had been any accidents along the way, then Tony would have died.

His brain would have been so heavily affected by the poison that he would not have been able to think rationally and he wouldn't have been able to work out the solution. His kidneys would have failed completely and even if he was able to find the solution, he would have needed kidney transplants or something dramatic to stay alive.

Or he would have died.

"The chelation therapy in itself isn't without risk. There might be pain, drops in blood pressure, nausea, dizziness and vertigo as well as fevers and breathing difficulties. All of the things that you have been feeling so far. But it might be worse depending on how well your body handles it." Stephen tells him and Tony nods slowly. That was going to suck.

"We will need to get onto it as quickly as possible once the new reactor is completed. You- You know that there isn't much time." Tony knows. He wonders if Natasha does. Or SHIELD does.

"How- how long did he have left?" Natasha asks, the horror in her voice raw enough that Tony believes it to be genuine. Stephen looks at Tony and waits for him to give permission before he speaks.

"A week at the most to keep his brain functioning. A month or so before his body failed completely." Stephen says quietly and Tony can hear the horror in his voice as well. Tony doesn't care if Natasha is watching. He reaches out and touches the doctor's arm and gives him a soft smile.

"It's fine. I'm okay." Tony tells him. He isn't. Not yet, but he will be. Stephen nods slowly as Natasha moves.

"I didn't know. Tony, I swear to God, I didn't know it was that bad. I knew that you were ill, but I didn't know what could happen. What can still happen." She says and she looks upset and guilty enough but Tony doesn't believe her. Not really.

"Yeah if you had known would you have done anything differently?" Tony asks her bitingly. She looks taken aback but after a long moment, she shakes her head slowly and looks horrified with herself. Good.

"I- I need to go." She says and she doesn't wait for a response and all but rushes out of the lab and up the stairs. Stephen gives Tony a careful look before he leans down and kisses him softly.

It's the first kiss they have been able to share since Tony's fake birthday party incident. It feels wonderful.

"I won't let anything happen to you. I swear it Anthony." Stephen tells him fiercely as he stands back up and cleans up the ultrasound gel. Tony gives him a smile and a nod.

"I know. I trust you." Tony tells him. He does. Both as a doctor and as the man that he loves. Tony
trusts him.

"I- I need to go. I have meetings I need to attend to and there's... there's someone I need to see."
Stephen says quietly and Tony nods. Stephen had mentioned something about an appointment. But there is something about the way that he is saying it that has Tony pausing and feeling the concern rise up again.

"Is this dangerous?" Tony asks him quietly and Stephen looks at him for a moment before he sighs.

"I don't know. Maybe. He- He's a little insane and dangerous right now. I just don't know how badly and whether... whether he can be convinced to see reason." Stephen says and Tony feels fear go through him as the questions form.

Like why Stephen has to go and see a madman if he thinks it might be dangerous? Who was the man? Why was Stephen the one that has to go and see him? Why now?

"Stephen why- if it is going to put you at risk, I don't- I don't want you to be in danger. I don't want you hurt." Tony tells him and he means every word he says though they come out all jumbled and confused. Stephen gives him a soft, appreciative smile.

"I know and I thank you for that. But I have to try. If- If I can talk to him and maybe get him to see reason, there is so much good that can come out of it that I have to try." Stephen tells him and Tony nods slowly.

This is Stephen's risk to take. It is his decision. If he feels that strongly about it, then it is up to him to support that decision and let Stephen do what he needs to do. That is what partners are supposed to do. To put his foot down and say no that Stephen can't go and can't do this and all that is controlling and it isn't right.

It is what Carlos used to do.

It is what Michelle had warned him against doing with Stephen. It takes effort. It makes him feel helpless and concerned and scared, but he knows that it is the right thing to do. Stephen is his equal. His partner. His lover. He should go into whatever horrible situation he may be going into with the knowledge and understanding that Tony will be supporting him and helping him where and when he can.

"Okay. If that's what you need to do, then you go and do it but just be careful. And let me know if there is anything I can do to help." Tony tells him firmly and Stephen gives him the most beautiful smile that Tony had seen in a while. Stephen kisses him again, warm and soft and so loving and kind that Tony almost feels overwhelmed before he backs off and clears his throat.

"I will. I promise. I love you." Stephen tells him firmly before he takes a deep breath and leaves the lab.

Tony doesn't follow him and doesn't leave the bed. If he sits up or gets up, he will. So he doesn't. Instead, he watches from the monitors to make sure that Stephen isn't bothered by the two SHIELD agents still in the mansion as he leaves. He isn't.

Coulson is in the kitchen with Natasha and they are in deep discussion. They both look quite upset. Good. They should be.

Perhaps it will teach them something about having a conscience and whether the greater good is worth sacrifices. Tony isn't even sure what the 'greater good' would have been in his situation at any rate. It doesn't matter.
The accelerator beeps at him. It's time to put in the new particles.

Time to save his goddamned life.

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**Thursday**

27 May 2010

Natasha Romanov is one of the strongest women that he had seen. She is an excellent spy and an asset though there had been questions about that initially.

She had overcome a great deal of her training in the Red Room to integrate into SHIELD as an agent. Coulson doesn't know Natasha extremely well, but he knows her well enough and to see her this upset is surprising.

"Did you know?" She asks him as soon as she storms up from the workshop, leaving the doctor and Tony Stark unsupervised. Coulson is caught off guard by the question, but he is quick to respond.

"Know what Agent Romanov?" He asks her back and she is pacing around the kitchen as she talks. She is agitated and upset and it isn't like her.

"How bad Tony Stark's condition was." She clarifies and Coulson puts down the sandwich he had been preparing to eat.

He isn't quite sure what she means. He knows that Tony Stark is suffering from palladium poisoning. Their scientists have taken months to work out how the reactor works and how the palladium is likely to be expelled from the core as well as the byproducts that are likely to be entering his system as a result of the reactions.

Coulson looks over her carefully as he thinks of the answer. The diagnosis from the doctors and the scientists, the experts at SHIELD, had been grim. They had also given the likely life expectancy.

"That he was dying? Yes." Coulson says. It seems cruel. He knows that. But they had to make sure that Tony was suffering before they could intervene and more importantly, that he was going to be vulnerable enough for their intervention to be seen with gratitude.

They had to ingratiate themselves to Tony Stark so that he would be interested in working with them and working for them properly rather than the contractual agreement that he had made with SHIELD.

That wasn't going to be enough with the possibility of the more dangerous things that could be coming their way.

The Avenger Initiative was set up because of the Kree and what had happened with them. There are extraterrestrial threats that they have to deal with and when that threat comes to Earth, they need to be prepared.

Tony Stark was a part of that preparation. Getting him on board with their plans was important. They would need his inventions, his funds, his fame and position with Stark Industries to ensure that SHIELD could grow and arm itself to face the threats coming their way.

It may have been cruel, but it had been a necessary measure. Fury believed that and based on the assessments and his dealings with Tony Stark, Coulson believed that. He wonders if Natasha
believes otherwise.

"When did we have that information?" She asks and Coulson shrugs his shoulders as he eyes the camera in the corner of the room.

"Natasha, perhaps we can talk outside." He tries but Natasha blocks him when he tries to leave the room.

"When did SHIELD know?" She asks him again and her voice is deadly and cold. Coulson sighs. In a fight, he knows that there is no way that he would be able to best her.

"Six months ago." He tells her and she goes pale.

"Did you know that he only had maybe a month left to live?" She asks and Coulson shrugs his shoulders again. She knows the answer well enough.

"Why wasn't I told about this? Did SHIELD know how badly the poison was effecting him and what the consequences and possibilities of permanent damage was?" She asks and it's a fair question. To be honest, he had thought that she was perfectly informed.

Perhaps she hadn't received the report. He can't be certain about that.

"Natasha. Agent Romanov, you were provided with the information that was necessary for you to conduct your threat assessment and the character assessment of Tony Stark. The rest of the information was irrelevant." Coulson tries to tell her.

She doesn't buy it. She looks furious.

"You sent me into a situation without full disclosure of information. I would have hurried my objectives if I had known that we could be risking his life or permanent disability. You did not give me the chance to make that assessment." She tells him and Coulson nods slowly as her words work their way through his mind. That is true enough.

She is right. If they were looking at the situation properly, then yes, if Black Widow had been fully aware of how bad the poisoning was and what the likely effects of it were on his body and mind, she might have taken a different approach. Or a quicker approach.

"You risked that man's life after telling me how important he was going to be to the future of this planet's defences Coulson. That is not acceptable." She tells him harshly and he nods slowly.

"I will inform Director Fury of your views." He tells her to calm her down. Her green eyes flash angrily at him.

"After this is done, that is it. I am not working another case where Tony Stark or anyone involved with him is a target. You can consider me irrevocably compromised when it comes to him." She tells him and that surprises him. She gives him a hard look.

"I chose to work for SHIELD to wipe the red from my ledger. He is trying to do the same. You put me in a position where I could have expedited or risked his life when it was utterly unnecessary. I may not like the man, but his life didn't deserve to be put on the balance like this." Her voice is sharp and angry and Coulson has to admit that he agrees with her.

To a point.

He still doesn't believe that given the stubbornness of the man that he would have listened. Not that
they have tried. But he had been hostile towards them from the start and it had made working with him difficult.

The missions that SHIELD had given him had been designed to test both the suit and him. In doing so, he knows that perhaps they have also expedited the poisoning that had affected him. He had read the reports on how the poison would affect him, the side effects and the long term effects.

Perhaps he should have considered them more when he made his recommendations to Fury. He will have to think about that.

"Your complaint is received and understood Agent Romanov." Coulson tells her and she nods sharply at him before she leaves the kitchen.

Coulson looks down at the sandwich he had made before he sighs and wraps it cling wrap and puts it back into the fridge.

He isn't hungry anymore.

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One of Those Days

Chapter Summary

Loki and Stephen meet and it doesn't go according to anyone's plans to no one's surprise.

On the other hand, Tony is dealing with the Expo and Ivan Vanko...

And yeah. It is definitely those days.

Shit.

Chapter Notes

Evening~ <3

Alright, just in case you don't know, the Discord Server is up.

LINK: https://discord.gg/sM53acf

Feel free to join or not, it is all up to you ^^

Honestly, the reason I put it up is because I know that it's about to start getting quite angsty.

So this is your warning. From this chapter till probably a few chapters into the next Arc is going to be angsty and I am going to give my apology for it now.

So. Sorry for hurting you and please prepare the tissues and um try not to hate me too much. Please.

<3

Friday

28 May 2010

Thor believes their father- no his father is dead.

Good. Perfect. Loki feels the vindictive, cold burning anger within him. By the Norns, the grief that Thor displays is heartbreaking. He doesn't care. He doesn't. He really, really doesn't.

He does.

It's cruel. It is the first time that he has lied to his brother like this. But are they even brothers? Loki is
a Frost Giant. A Jotun. Born to be the King of Jotunheim. Born to rule.

Thor is Asgardian and born to rule Asgard. By the nature of their birth and their very beings, they were meant to be enemies. Loki does not know how he feels about that.

'You were both born to be Kings', Odin the great liar had said. That is at least one truth that he had spoken. But he was not born to be a King of Asgard as he had been led to believe. He had been born to be King of Jotunheim and had been stolen from Jotunheim.

God of Lies they called him.

The title ought to be Odin's. He is the liar. He is a greater liar than Loki himself. A thousand years. A thousand years had Odin called him his son. Had called him his child. Had called him a Prince of Asgard.

He was not.

He is a monster. He is the thing that his father had told bedtime stories about. He is the monster that every Asgardian child fears. He is the very thing that he was raised to hate. To abhor.

He is a monster.

Frigga tells him no. That she loves him. That he is no monster. He does not believe her. He is. But by the Norns, so are they. They are monsters too. For the lies that they have told, the facade that they had perpetuated.

How could he fit into a world when they knew what he was?

It explains so much of the cold attitudes he had received from the older Asgardians as he had grown up. He had seen their disdain and heard the thinly veiled insults. The cruelty that had been in their eyes as they stood back and allowed their children to single him out and to hurt him.

Now he knows why. They had known. All along, they had known and all along, they had kept the secret from him. All because of Odin, the great Allfather had forbidden them from telling the truth. Because of their loyalty to him and the throne.

Well.

He sits upon that Throne now. It was temporary of course but it is his throne. Thor is banished upon Midgard, having lost his rights to be a prince, to be an Asgardian. His powers and his magic bound by the spell cast by the Allfather himself, a great mage that hides his magic under the pretence of physical might.

Who has disdained Loki's usage of magic and yet uses it freely for himself.

Oh, the hypocrisy.

Odin, the great betrayer and liar. He has cast his own son out onto Midgard in hopes that he will learn humility. That he will learn the values that all Kings must have. To learn that he is fallible, that he requires help and assistance and advice. To be humble and to care for his people and to know that lives matter.

That death and glory are not what leads to Vahalla. It is honour. And honour does not come from being a good warrior. It comes from the heart and having the right intentions. Thor does not have those.
He is a warhound. A child desiring only of the glory and excitement of battle without considering the consequences of battle. That for every life lost, there are children, wives, husbands and family that will mourn and that lives will be destroyed as a result.

Thor has never stayed to find out the aftermaths of his 'adventures'. Loki has. He has seen the devastation left behind. The lost homes, the lost fathers and mothers. Loki has seen the horror of Thor's actions. Thor has not. He was a child looking for the newest toy to interest him.

He is not fit to rule.

Loki isn't sure whether Thor can learn all that from Midgard. He hopes he does. Even now, even angry and even as cruel as he feels, he can't help but love Thor.

Thor is his brother.

Loki wants to deny it, but his heart cries out for his brother. To have one of the only people that accepted him, that laughed with him as they learnt magic that praised him for his skills in the arts and that had defended him when Loki had been pushed down and hurt by others.

But Svaolírí and losing him has created distance between Loki and Thor. Thor could not accept Loki's choice of a lover. Loki's responsibilities have also taken him away from Asgard often.

During that time, Thor has been poisoned by Sif and the Warrior Three. They encouraged him to be recklessness. To seek adventure. They lorded him and obeyed his every whim, never pointing out Thor's faults. Only praising him and stroking his ego.

It has made Thor ruthless, aggressive and arrogant. His good nature has been tainted by their need and desire for glory and power.

Power that they sought to have through Thor.

From the start, when they became Thor's companions, it had been so that they could manipulate Thor. It wasn't a bad plot. But they have chosen the wrong way about going about it. They too, at the end of the day, were children and clumsy.

It's no matter. Loki has plotted and planned around them. But his plans have changed. He no longer wishes to remain in Asgard. Once he has ensured that Thor has his rightful place upon the throne after he has learnt the lessons, he will go to Helheim.

Loki cannot abide by the thoughts of living amongst the monsters no longer. In Helheim, he will have Hel, his beautiful daughter. He will have her company and her love. Her unconditional love.

She is still young. She needs him. He hasn't been able to be there for her, so caught up in his plans. But he sees it now. He will not be a father like Odin. He will be a true parent that loves their child for everything that they are.

But for now, he must ensure that Thor learns his lessons. For now, he must ensure that he will have his revenge.

For Loki thirsts for blood.

He will not go quietly to Helheim. He will drag Odin's unworthy soul kicking and screaming with him to Helheim where it will remain forever under the rule of his daughter. The child that Odin had so ruthlessly exiled to the cold wastelands.
Loki can't help but wonder. Will Thor love him as a brother once he learns that Loki is a Frost Giant? Will Thor fear him or will he do as he had vowed to do, destroy him and wipe him out along with the rest of the Frost Giants?

Will Thor accept Hel as his niece once he learns of her existence?

What about the Frost Giants? What about his real blood father? What about Laufey? What does he think of what his child had become?

The child that had led the Jotun into a trap within the weapons vault of Asgard. The child that had come with a party of Asgardians with a mission to kill as many Jotun as possible. What does Laufey think about that, Loki wonders.

Unfortunately, he already knows.

He had seen the hesitation in Laufey's eyes. He had seen the recognition in Laufey's eyes when he had seen Loki with the others. He had seen the way that he had pulled the Jotun back from the fight when he had seen Loki's skin turn blue. Moments before Odin had arrived to claim them and take them back to Asgard.

Laufey, despite not knowing what kind of monster he was, cared about him. Perhaps not about him as an individual, but still as a prince of Jotunheim. The one and only heir to the throne of Jotunheim.

It has been several days now and still, Loki cannot understand, cannot believe all that has happened. It is nay impossible to process what has happened.

The discovery that he is Jotun destroys everything that Loki has known and had believed about himself. He is the very thing that he had hated as a child. That his brother hates.

The rage and the emotional response is easier to deal with rather than the actual realities itself. The pain is raw and Loki feels as if he is being ripped apart from the inside and he just wants it all to stop.

But by the same token... so many things make sense now. All the questions that he has once had are answered and there is a sense of finality that he can concentrate on. It does not make it any easier.

He wonders if this is what his lover had felt when he had been forced to reveal his gender and form to him. Perhaps. Most likely, Loki thinks bitterly.

Thor will be the new King of Asgard. Loki will see to that. He will spend every last bit of his energy to manipulate him into being a good enough King.

But for now, he needs time to seize that power. To ensure that he will have the approval of the court and to prove to Asgardians that he can be a wise king that Thor cannot be.

But Thor will come back.

He will be able to win Mjolnir back. Loki does not want to steal the throne. That was never his plan. Nor his desire.

When Thor comes back, he will find Odin dead. Loki will cut all ties with Asgard. Once Thor finds out who he is and loathes him, Loki will become the villain. It doesn't matter.

He will have Odin's soul and he can make his way to Helheim. He can spend the rest of his life with
his daughter. He does not need Asgard. He doesn't need his brother or his mother. He doesn't. He really doesn't.

It is a good plan. It is a solid plan.

He has already organised the assassins to enter the chamber where Odin sleeps. He will need to ensure that Frigga isn't there so that she isn't in danger, but he will ensure that Odin dies and that his soul will be captured.

He cannot be allowed to live for the crimes that he has committed against Loki. He will not have it. Loki cannot. He cannot forgive him. The anger is so hot and the need for revenge so very great that Loki burns with it.

He will have the penance from Odin in the form of his blood being spilt, even if he has to take it himself from the sleeping Allfather.

Loki teleports himself to the site where the sigils are burned into the ground from the Bifrost. When he arrives though, he finds a tall lean man dressed in dark blue robes and pants with leather boots and armbands along with leather gloves. A long red cloak flutters behind him despite the fact that there is no wind. A magical artefact, then.

The first thing that Loki notices about the man is that he is powerful. Stupid powerful. There is a force surrounding the man that makes Loki seem inconsequential compared to him. Magic swirls around him and he is focused and calm and it immediately puts Loki in a defensive mode.

The second thing that Loki notices is that the man is beautiful.

The power that surrounds him makes his hair sway softly and there are strands here and there that fall forward from his oiled hair and they look soft as they flutter gently. His eyes are pale blue grey combination that is mysterious and enigmatic.

The moment he meets the man's eyes, everything stops.

All thoughts stop. All emotions come to a complete standstill as his entire universe rearranges itself to focus on the man before him. The man gasps and he looks at Loki as if he can feel the same thing. They Connect.

This- This is impossible. This cannot be. Loki is amazed, he is stunned and he is too shocked for words. Instead, he acts. His body acts and he moves forward without thinking, without intention. He moves until he is standing right in front of the man.

They are of the same height. They are of a similar build of lean muscle and Loki knows his hands are trembling as they reach out to cup the face of this man that he does not know but also knows intimately.

He knows the man's soul if not his body and his mind.

The moment Loki's hand touches him, the man gasps and almost falls forward into the touch and Loki catches him. Though he does not know this man's name or who he is and why he is here, Loki’s body moves without question.

He covers those gasping lips with his and they fall open for him as automatically as Loki's body is reacting to him. The man's lips are soft under his and his tongue tastes of something that Loki does not know. Something bitter and yet sweet.
He plunders the man's mouth and his body fills with elation and joy and gratitude as he moves even closer until they are tangled together, standing in the empty fields.

Loki hopes that the shields that he had created to hide himself from the view of Heimdall are holding up because he does not want anyone to see this. He does not want to share this with any being.

His Soulmate.

The one being in the universe that will accept him for what he is and who he is without question. That will be devoted to him and only him and be loyal to him and only him. Loki pulls the man closer and holds him as tightly as he dares.

The man is mortal. He must be careful, Loki reminds himself. He is fragile compared to a Frost Giant or an Asgardian. It doesn't matter. All of his anger and all of the pain vanish as if it had never been.

He has a Soulmate.

He wants to kneel in front of this man and worship him. He wants to make sacrifices to the Norns to thank them for this gift. All the pain and anguish that he had experienced, perhaps this is to be his reward for all of that. It is worth it.

He will be worth it.

The Asgardians praise the Soul Connection. It is a rare occurrence but when one is Connected, they are to be treasured, loved and protected above all. Those that are Connected must never be separated and must be protected by all of Asgard.

It is a sacred bond that the Norns have formed between two souls. It is a blessing and a reward from the universe, the Norns themselves. It is the highest of the honours one could ever receive.

Those with the gift can see the bonds that stretch between two beings. Loki does not have that gift. But Frigga does. She can see when two are bonded. When two Souls are born to be Connected. She can help beings make the Connections.

Thor has that gift. He is her son after all. He had never used that gift, but he has it. He would see this. Loki realises. When Thor sees him again, he would be able to see that Loki is Connected. That he is worthy of being loved.

He wonders if that would change anything.

It doesn't matter. Loki pushes aside the thoughts in his mind and concentrates on the man in front of him. On this beautiful, powerful being that his world, his universe and his everything must now revolve around.

The man pulls away from the kiss and though Loki wants it to continue, want it to lead to something much, much more, he allows the man to back away. When he does and he opens his eyes, he sees the man's eyes fill with confusion and amazement as they are surely in his own but then he sees the last emotion and it stops everything once again.

Pain.

The thought of anyone causing his Soulmate pain is abhorrent. He feels anger rise until he sees and understands that pain. It's internal. It is a conflict deep within the man himself. Loki doesn't understand. Not until he hears the man's soft voice muttering.
"No. No. No. This- This can't be happening." The man's voice is difficult to hear in the clearing. It is also... breaking.

Does his Soulmate not want him? Surely since they are both Connected and magic thrums through their blood, his Connected would know of the bond that they share. Surely he feels the universe move as Loki does. Surely he understands that this bond is sacred.

Loki is taken aback and confused but not as much as the man in front of him. He paces and he is running his fingers through his hair and he looks like he is about to break.

Loki doesn't understand. He wants to console him, he wants to touch him and give him comfort. Their Connection is so fresh and new that he can't even feel anything coming through it. Not yet. He doesn't understand.

"This can't be real. This can't be happening." The man says and the denial hurts, but the Connection pushes Loki to think past his own feelings and his own thoughts and think of the man. To feel concern for him. It is how the Connection works. He does not understand why for this man it is not working that way.

"Why? Why do you deny this? Why do you deny me?" Loki does not mean to sound so broken by what is happening. The denial causes pain. The fear that he is being rejected hits him and he wants to curl into himself but again, the man's pain and his anguish is what focuses Loki.

He steps in front of the man and catches him as he paces and holds him so that he can look into those grey blue eyes and try to figure out what is happening inside of his mind.

The man looks devastated.

"I have a Soulmate. I am already Connected." The man says and oh. Well. Loki looks at him and his eyes are wide and he is confused for a moment, but he centres himself quickly.

"It is not unheard of for a being to be Connected to two souls." Loki tells him, his voice soft but firm. It is a matter of fact. It is rare, but it happens. Sometimes the Norns deem it necessary for more than one souls to be Connected in order for them to be whole.

The Connection is about balance. About the souls and the beings balancing each other out. Ensuring that they are whole, that their weaknesses and their faults can be covered by another to ensure that they can be the best version of themselves that they can be.

It is about healing and it is about becoming stronger. The Connection allows them to do that. Surely the man must know. The man's eyes widen as he looks at Loki and he looks confused and lost.

"But I love him." The man breathes out, his words soft and his confusion obvious. Loki feels his heartbreak and the anger lashes out from him before he can even think past it. All of the pain and anger that had dissipated just a moment ago returns in full force.

Loki sees red.

"Even this! I don't get to have even this!" Loki all but shouts and they are so very close and Loki is so very furious. The magic that is within him lashes out before he can stop himself.

The mortal's magic clashes with his and Loki feels the flash of warning go through him that this was bad and that he needs to stop but he doesn't.

He can't.
The clash of his gold and green magic with the man's orange and gold explodes across the field. Loki doesn't even notice the blood that falls from his lips as the magical backlash hits him.

Loki lashes out.

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**Friday**

28 May 2010

It is the late in the afternoon when Tony finally finishes the new element production and he is able to insert it into the new Arc Reactor he has built.

The excitement is amazing and so is the knowledge that he was going to be okay now. The relief that floods him is amazing. He wishes he could share the moment with Stephen. But he is busy.

The doctor had said that he would not be available and that he was sorry but that he would contact Tony as soon as he could or come back to the house as soon as he could.

Tony had wanted him here for this moment.

But that's okay. Whatever Stephen was doing, Tony knows, is important to him and that it may be dangerous. The last thing that Tony wants is to interrupt the doctor or to risk taking away his focus with worry.

So Tony lets JARVIS run the tests on the Reactor as he celebrates a little with some AC/DC and unfortunately, chlorophyll. He really shouldn't stress out his kidneys with alcohol on top of all the shit that it was already trying to clear out.

"Sir, Ms Strange is on the line. She asks for privacy. I am encrypting the phone call to ensure that the agents cannot listen in." JARVIS informs him and Tony grabs the physical phone and nods to the camera in the corner.

That is odd.

Clea has called him at the lab before, but she had never asked for the phone call to be encrypted before. So... it has to be something about Stephen then. Something about what they were and who they were. Tony feels his stomach drop.

"Clea? What's going on?" He asks almost immediately as he makes his way towards one of his cars and gets in. The car would further insulate the sound if there was anyone trying to listen in with one of those sonar devices.

Between the solid concrete walls and the car, he doubted those would work. It was the best he can do given the situation.

"Tony, Stephen's- He is supposed to be here to help out but he can't make it. So I need you to listen to me and do as I say." Clea says and there is panic in her voice that he distinctly does not like.

"Where's Stephen? Is- is he alright?" He asks. Stephen needs to be okay. Tony can't- He can't deal with the idea of Stephen not being okay. The man is important.

He is everything.
"I don't know. Tony I'm really sorry but I don't know. He's he went to see someone. Someone dangerous. It was just supposed to be a short meeting but Look." Clea breathes out as she reigns in her own panic by the sounds of it.

"I hate to say this, but right now, Tony, we don't have time to worry about Stephen. You have other things you need to worry about." Clea tells him firmly but Tony wants to rail against that.

There is nothing else that he needs to be worried about right now. Only Stephen. He is what matters. He is what is important. Not whatever else that Clea wants him to be worrying about.

"There's going to be an attack." Clea says and well. That draws his attention well enough.

"Attack where?" He asks. Just because he has the Iron Man suit it doesn't mean that it is his job to save the entire fucking world and there are attacks happening everywhere, everyday. There was very little that he could do to keep the world safe on his own.

"At the Stark Expo." Well. That changes things. Tony is out of the car and moving before he even really thinks about it.

"Talk to me." He says sharply and Clea does.

"Justin Hammer has androids as a part of his presentation. They are going to go rogue. You will need to make sure that they can't kill people. I don't I don't have the knowledge that Stephen does. But I know that they are going to attack. Is there anything that you can do to stop them?" Clea asks and Tony is already on it.

He checks the surveillance cameras at the Expo and sure enough, he watches the androids being set up for the presentation under the stage.

Shit.

Tony rakes his brain. Yeah. Stephen would definitely been helpful for this, he thinks. He needs to get there. The presentation is less than twenty minutes away and if he flies full speed he might just make it on time.

It is also not enough time to safely evacuate people and Tony isn't sure how to go about fixing this. Solving this.

"I'm really sorry I left it to last minute. Stephen- He is the one that is supposed to be making these decisions. Not me. But Tony, you need to do something." Clea sounds desperate and upset and scared. Tony speaks before he even thinks over the words.

"It's okay Clea. I got it. You- You keep Pepper safe for me alright?" Tony says and before she can even confirm it, he hangs up the phone.

JARVIS is getting really good at reading his needs and listening in on phone calls, Tony thinks when he turns around and finds that the suit is already standing there, ready for him to step into it.

"Hey J, we need to hack into the Hammer servers and see if we can take the droids down. Let's work on the weapons system exclusively first to make sure we can shut them down at the very least." Tony says and the AI is more than happy to comply.

"Of course sir. I will do what I can. I will ask if JOCASTA is willing to assist." JARVIS says and Tony is grateful because he didn't even think about JOCASTA. She could definitely help.
"Good get-" Just as Tony is about to speak, Tony hears the phone going off and Tony looks at one of the cameras and JARVIS seems a little alarmed when he speaks.

"Sir, that call is coming through the house phone line and I am unable to interfere with the signals." JARVIS tells him. Well then.

"Answer it." Tony says and he honestly isn't even surprised when he hears Ivan Vanko's voice come through the phone.

It is definitely one of those days.

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Friday

28 May 2010

Clea gets the message from Anderson.

It's direct and to the point. It almost always was in situations like this. Besides, Clea already knew what his directions were going to be. Save lives. Protect Pepper Potts. It's not a difficult ask.

The thing is, Stephen has spent almost a decade preparing for this moment. Or rather, preparing for all the events that he has seen through his visions.

Which means that the Order has also spent decades planning. They have action plans for every single incident that can occur. Once they figure out when the incident is going to take place, the Order can move their members into the crowd, into the buildings, into the hospitals and the emergency services to ensure that they can help, protect and save lives.

It is what they trained to do.

The call went out to the Order. The members are in place. They are ready. It does not mean that she isn't nervous. She may be prepared, but she is nervous as fuck. This is the first of their major plans going into effect.

They are testing new spells. They have tested them before, obviously, but not at this scale. The wards are in place and all they are going to need to do is activate them. All of the members involved in this are those that can work magic covertly. They are able to hide themselves and their magic and still do what needs to be done.

Clea takes a deep breath.

Hammer takes to the stage and he starts his presentation. Pepper is on the phone the moment she sees the designs.

"Alex. Get onto our patent lawyers. Justin Hammer's 'new robots' are a complete rip off of Tony's designs. I want them to investigate this." Pepper says angrily into the phone as she watches. Clea doesn't pay attention to the conversation.

Instead, she takes the opportunity to move Pepper closer towards the backstage. Pepper is focused enough on the phone call that she does not mind being moved.

Throughout the crowd, Clea sees the members of the Order that she recognises and nods to them as she passes. She sees their hands waving in discrete manners as they prepare the spells that they will
They have created spells for situations like this. To ensure that they can hide their magic whilst saving as many lives as they can. It's a fine balance but they will manage. They have to.

Tony arrives at the show.

His entrance isn't flashy, but he does make a point. This close to the stage now, Clea can hear the conversation between Rhodey and Tony.

"We need to get these people out of here. They are in danger." Tony's dead serious voice says and Rhodey is quick to turn to look at him, even as they stand shoulder to shoulder to wave to the crowd of excited people.

"What do you mean?" Rhodey asks back. Their voices are kept quiet, but Clea can hear them and so can the first few rows of people. Most likely.

"I think he's working with Ivan Vanko." Tony tells Rhodey and the other man's alarm is obvious. Then his suit flashes a red colour through the helmet for a moment before it flashes white again.

"Mr Stark, Jim, I'm afraid someone is trying to hack into my systems via the weapons that have been installed. Do I have permission to disconnect the weapons barring the repulsor rays?" It's a voice that Clea does not recognise. But she assumes that it must be an AI system in the suit that Rhodey has.

"Yes!" Both Rhodey and Tony exclaim and a few of the guns from Rhodey's suit falls off. Clea is rather surprised by that.

But then, in other universes that she had seen through the Memory Stone, no one had never been able to warn Tony about what was going to happen and thus ensure that he would at least be able to hack the mainframes that Hammer has set up for the androids or something.

Unfortunately, without the Cup or Stephen's knowledge, Clea can only guess at what is going to happen and what is happening. It's a snap decision and it may be rash, but Clea makes the decision anyway.

She sends a text message.

To Natasha Romanov. It's to her Natalie Rushman phone number and she's not sure if the spy would have kept the phone, but she sends the message anyway. She's surprised when she gets a message back.

I got it. Look after Pepper Potts. I am sorry for my part in all of this. The message reads. Clea is surprised but she is grateful. Good. They could really use some help and the Black Widow was the perfect person for a job like this. For a situation like this.

I sent Black Widow to Hammer's facility to shut the androids down. Clea sends the message to both Tony and to Stephen. She doesn't get a response back. She hadn't expected to. It's fine.

She is so worried about Stephen and what is happening with his conversation with Loki. But thanks to the spells that Stephen had put into place to ensure that the conversation wouldn't be seen by Heimdall, the all seeing god and Odin, she cannot know what is going on in the field in New Mexico.

She can only pray that everything is alright.
She misses some of the conversations that happen on stage. She can only focus on so much.

The androids activate and Tony flies off with them. Rhodey does too. The androids focus on following the two of them as they fly. A few of the guns fire, but the fire only lasts for a few seconds before they are stopped.

Whatever was happening with their systems, they were not functioning the way that Vanko intended. The way that they had in all of the visions that she had seen through the Memory Stone.

Fantastic.

But it does not mean that there is no damage. The androids break through the glass, they break through the structures holding the glass. The whole thing doesn't collapse, but there is glass being shattered and falling on everyone.

The Order mobilises.

Clea feels the pull of magic everywhere as they form the shields to protect people as they run and ensures that at the very most, people end up with only small cuts and bruises. The Order members also direct people to safer areas and buildings as Tony flies with his suit.

The wards hold the debris in place just long enough so that they aren't falling on the people that are running and fall just moments after space is emptied out.

The spell is a resounding success. Not that she really has time to celebrate as she rushes with Pepper through the crowd, shielding her and protecting her as they go.

"What the hell did you do?!" Pepper is yelling as she goes onto the stage and grabs Hammer and drags him towards the back of the stage. Clea is... kind of impressed by that. She follows as the rest of the androids starts to move.

The Order members will disable them and make sure that they cannot self detonate. She focuses on Pepper and Justin Hammer.

"Stop them!" Hammer shouts at his crew members as he goes back stage and he shakes Pepper's hold off. She's not interested in holding onto him for much longer at any rate.

"We can't! They're- they been hacked. Our mainframe has been compromised and someone else has control of them!" One of the guys at the computer shouts back and Hammer is pacing and clearly upset.

"Who hacked the mainframe?" Pepper asks, her fury obvious. Clea watches the argument unfold between Hammer, the tech guys and Pepper for a moment. But when Hammer pushes Pepper, she loses it.

It takes just a second for her to have Hammer's arm twisted behind his back and his face pushed hard against the table.

"Don't you fucking touch her. Now tell me. Who did this? Who is in control of the androids?" Clea asks as she pushes his arm to almost breaking point. She doesn't care. She has a fantastic team of lawyers she's pretty sure will defend her from an assault charge.

"Ivan! Ivan Vanko! He's- He's the one behind all this!" He shouts in pain and Pepper is already on the phone.
"Where is he?" Clea asks though she already knows the answer. The Black Widow is already heading there. She will handle the situation there and ensure that they will be able to get control of the androids back.

Though it also seemed like JARVIS was maybe on it already.

"My facility! He's at my facility!" Hammer screams out in pain and it's only then that Clea lets him go and he immediately moves to try to stop Pepper from her call when she pushes past him and puts Clea between him and herself.

"Alright, I have the NYPD on the phone and they will coordinate to secure the facility and to ensure that the people here are safe. Now, tell me everything that you know." Pepper commands of the support staff as Hammer tries to intervene. Clea crosses her arms and raises an eyebrow at him.

"One more word, one more step and I will break your arm Mr Hammer." Clea informs him quietly and she makes sure that he can see just how serious she is. He gulps and nods slowly.

"Sit down and shut up." She tells him and he obeys, sitting on a small chair nearby.

"You, out of the chair." Clea says as she pulls the chair out and takes a deep breath as she looks over the code that is appearing all over the screen.

"I'm not a hacker and I'm not a coder but I have been watching Stephen do this for years now and I have perfect recall. I can do this." Clea says mostly to herself. She can do this right? Something or someone has to do something so... She takes a deep breath as she looks over the code. It looks familiar enough. She hears a chuckle and a voice that she recognises. Thank the fucking Gods.

"How about you let the professionals handle it?"

~~~
Choose Me

Chapter Summary

Loki and Stephen's confrontation continues and it is a confrontation.

A god that has lost everything wants just one thing. The one thing that Stephen cannot give and cannot be.

On the other hand, Natasha is forced to ask, is the greater good worth the sacrifices?

Chapter Notes

PLEASE READ THIS BEFORE READING THE CHAPTER.

There are going to a graphic non-consent situation in this chapter. It is not in this story for dramatic effect. There are reasons behind it and there will be discussions on the serious nature of what takes place and the psychological effects and the harm such actions causes.

I don't take the issue of consent / non-consent lightly.

It's in the story because it makes sense for the characters but please know that this is not normal nor healthy nor romantic.

I do apologise for anyone that is upset by this and as a writer, I have thought long and hard about including it into this chapter but I believed that it was necessary and a sailent point in the story.

Once again, I am not at any point saying that this is okay. It's not.

If you do need to discuss what happens in the chapter or just need someone to talk to after reading it if you are disturbed by it, please visit the Discord Server: https://discord.gg/XqzU6Y4

To talk it out with me and the other readers.

<3
It has to be.

Because Stephen cannot handle having two Soulmates. He cannot. Especially when the other is Loki fucking Odinson or Laufeyson or Liesmith... whatever his preferred last name may be.

He cannot be Connected to the being that would bring the Chitauri army to Earth and would seek to rule it as King. That is not- Stephen takes a deep breath. He needs to calm down. He needs to focus.

He cannot lose control.

Thinking about Tony and feeling the Connection between them helps Stephen to breathe and to focus. Even then, it is a struggle.

He can still taste the god's kiss on his lips. It had felt so right. It had felt so perfect. But it wasn't. It was wrong. He cannot kiss someone else when he was in a committed relationship with someone. That is not right.

Stephen feels disgusted with himself that he had allowed that to happen. But his body had reacted and if he is honest, he enjoyed the kiss. He hates himself for that. He feels conflicted. Confused.

Loki's anger is obvious and it burns through their fresh Connection like fire and Stephen has a moment of recognition of the anger and the rising magic to react.

He throws up the most powerful shield he can manage just as Loki's magic is thrown hard against him. It burns through the shield and Stephen throws up one after another, but the onslaught of the magic and the anger that burns through him is too much.

With the last shield failing, Stephen is thrown clear across the field. The Cloak of Levitation manages to catch him but that doesn't stop the pain lancing through him.

Stephen is completely and utterly disorientated for a moment. He can barely breathe through the pain of it all. By the time that he can focus himself and his eyes, Loki is on top of him.

The god is strong and powerful. He holds Stephen down onto the ground and his lips are right on Stephen's and Stephen can't breathe.

He tastes the blood on Loki's lips.

Stephen is dazed. He is dizzy and the kiss is forceful but it feels both wrong and perfect at the same time. Stephen is lost. The Connection is pleased with the contact. Stephen isn't.

This is his Soulmate.

This sort of violence between Soulmates is unheard of. He gasps. Loki is ruthless. He takes the opportunity to plunge his tongue into Stephen's mouth and he feels the violation of the act deep within him and he struggles against it, turning his head. He tries to get up, to push Loki off of him but he can't.

The god is so much stronger than he is.

Loki pushes at him and pulls at him until Stephen is faced down on the cold grounds of the field and Stephen can feel the god's lips closing around the back of his neck, right where the hairline is.

"You are meant to be mine." The god growls out against his neck and Stephen feels primal fear go through him as the Cloak is ripped from him and he feels the god's hard cock against his buttocks.
Stephen is a 6 foot tall male. He may be lean, but he is toned and well-muscled. He is experienced in combat. Both physical and magical.

He has never been overpowered like this and never thought it even a possibility that he could ever become a victim... like this. It just isn't something that most men consider possible. It's not a fear that he had understood, internalised and normalised like most women. He had forgotten that anyone could become a victim.

He had been an idiot.

The fear and the terror that goes through him makes it impossible for him to focus. The God of Mischief is heavy on him and he struggles, by the Vishanti, he struggles.

But Stephen can't fight the god off of him as he pulls Stephen's pants down and when he feels the cold night air hit his exposed skin, Stephen feels his body stiffen with the fear and panic.

He is trapped.

"God- Loki please! Please don't do this!" Stephen begs. He feels the hot shame go through him, but he begs. In that moment, all he can think about is Tony.

He isn't sure how the fuck he is meant to explain to Tony that there is someone that he is Connected to other than him. He isn't sure how he is going to explain it to Tony that someone else has managed to-

Shame fills him. With it, comes the tears and that brings on further shame. He is not weak. He is stronger than this.

Stephen feel Loki's hard cock against his buttocks. There is a primal fear that he feels that he isn't used to. He feels the horror and the terror of the situation cut through him.

He feels his body shake with the fear and it shocks even him when he feels the sob escape him as he feels Loki's cold fingers against his buttocks. The shame that goes through him leaves him shaken.

"Please- Please don't- Please don't do this." Stephen begs through the sobs that shudder through him. He is ashamed and panicked and afraid. He knows that the god can feel all of that. God, he hopes that he can.

The god snarls.

"Even when you deny me, I cannot deny you. The shackles of the Connection triumphs." The god's voice is so bitter and harsh that Stephen feels the words cut him like a knife. He stiffens and stops.

The thing is, Stephen understands. He wishes that he didn't but he understands. Given what Loki had gone through and the life that he has had, finding out that he had a Connected must have felt amazing. Well and truly amazing in a way that Stephen most likely won't be able to fully grasp and understand.

Stephen hadn't spent most of his life being rejected and being shunned for what and who he was. Loki had. Realising that he had a Soulmate, someone that was meant to be loyal and devoted to him and someone that would accept him for everything that he was must have felt wonderful.

To realise that Stephen had someone else Connected to him and that he loved that someone else must have felt like a blow.
Combining that with all the other emotional upheavals, betrayals and pain that Loki was going through, lashing out with anger and the magic that follows, along with the need to be physically close to him leading to action without thought is... unfortunately something that Stephen can understand.

Understanding doesn't make the situation any less horrifying.

Stephen feels Loki's lips on his neck and he feels Loki's hands caressing the side of his face and Stephen flinches at the intimacy of the touch. He can't stop shaking and he feels like he is about to break apart.

The god's fingers feel cold and they feel as if they are branding him. Even the god's lips feel cold as they rest where his head meets his neck.

"A moment. Give me this moment." Loki's voice isn't cold and angry. It is desperate and sad and Stephen can't deny him either. Stephen nods slowly and tries his best to relax and tries to breathe and to calm himself down.

Even in a moment of fear like this, Stephen knows that it isn't Loki's fault. He was seeing Loki at his worst. This is Loki barely holding onto his sanity and being swept away by anger and hatred.

Loki's hold goes from forceful and holding him down to simply... holding him close as possible. Stephen feels Loki's arms move so that he is cradling Stephen as close to the god as possible.

He tries to ignore the fact that his pants are loose and there is a strip of his waist and buttocks that are exposed to the air. He also tries to ignore the feel of the god's hard erection against his thigh.

It takes effort to breathe and to calm himself. He focuses solely on the Connection to try to settle his emotions.

They stay like that for a long time. Stephen isn't quite sure how long. It is difficult to think and to measure time. He just knows that Loki holds him as if he is the most precious thing in the world.

And that despite the coldness of the ground underneath him and the Loki's body, eventually, he feels almost calm and focused. It is only when Stephen finds that he is almost centred that Loki speaks up.

"What is your name?" Loki asks him softly as he kisses the back of Stephen's neck and the kisses trail down to the side of his neck until his clothes prevent the god from going any further.

The need to touch and the need to physically be close is a part of the Connection. The god's state of emotional instability doesn't lessen that. In fact, it makes him more desperate for the Connection than Stephen had ever been.

Stephen has had the support and love of his friends and family as well as the Order. Loki has not. Does not. His mother is focused on Odin and has also lied to him. Thor is... being Thor and his daughter was too young to be emotional support for Loki. He has no one to hold him back, to anchor him.

Despite everything, that hurts.

The situation doesn't lessen the way that the Connection sings at the touch either. Stephen is conflicted from fear and disgust to pleasure and desire.

Either way, Stephen wants this to be over.
"Stephen. Stephen Vincent Strange." He answers. He cannot stop himself from answering. He also cannot stop his voice from shaking. The god hums softly.

"Stephen Vincent Strange. You know who I am." Loki's voice purrs against his ear. The god's intentions are obvious enough. Loki is the God of Lies. He is called the Silvertongue. He is a manipulative god.

Loki isn't being used to being told no. He has felt the rejections from society, but his position has ensured that though he was welcomed nowhere, he was also denied nothing.

Anything Loki had wanted, he had gotten. Whether it be through hard work or through bribery and usage of his position or through manipulation. He doesn't know how to be otherwise. Stephen understands that. He hates that.

Between the Connection, the inherent attractiveness of the god himself and that voice, Loki knows how to use seduction as a weapon. He was using that against Stephen. Stephen knows that it's most likely also a way for Loki to try to help him calm down. Loki doesn't understand Stephen's fear.

The conversation does help Stephen to think past the fear and the horror of the situation. At least a little.

"Loki of Asgard and Jotunheim. Born of King Laufey of Jotunheim, raised by King Odin and Queen Frigga of Asgard. Brother of Prince Thor of Asgard. Father of Queen Hel of Helheim."

Stephen says quietly and Loki stiffens a little above him.

"How do you know the circumstances of my birth and about my daughter?" Loki asks and his voice is a purr again and his breath curls around Stephen's ear and he can't help the small shudder he lets out. His ears have always been a bit on the sensitive side.

Loki is suspicious. Stephen can tell from the way that the god's hold had tightened a little around him.

"Please let me go." Stephen says instead of answering. Loki will want to know the answer. It's a good bargaining chip. His stomach rails. It is clear that his body has decided to go for fear and disgust rather than arousal and desire. Stephen is grateful for that.

He isn't sure if he could have dealt with it if his body opted for pleasure instead. Given the circumstances, the force and the horror of the situation, he knows that it might have been just enough to shatter his mind.

"You beg with such a pretty voice beloved. How would you sound when you beg for pleasure, I wonder." the god says and for a moment Stephen is terrified that the god was going to go right back to what he had been doing before, but to his infinite relief, Loki moves.

He doesn't hurry. Loki lingers. He kisses a trail down Stephen's neck and he caresses the parts of Stephen that he can touch, but he doesn't cross the line... anymore.

Loki is calmer now that he was curious and searching for answers. He was focused and the power of the Connection and the way that it enforces some of its traits is apparent.

When he is completely off of Stephen, the relief makes Stephen's hands tremble harder than they normally would and he feels freezing cold in the late spring night air of New Mexico.

Stephen bites his lips with both the relief and the knowledge that he can't pull his own pants up. His hands are shaking too badly for that and he himself is too shaken for that. Stephen breathes and
focuses instead.

He waves a hand and uses a little magic to straighten his clothes and with a gesture, calls the Cloak back over to him to help him stand up. He's pretty sure that his legs were mostly useless.

The Cloak flies over and curls around his body and all but hugs him. He knows that the Cloak couldn't protect him from Loki. Not when as far as magic and the Cloak would be concerned, Loki was a part of Stephen. Stephen lets the Cloak hold him up.

He wants to be standing. He does not want to be in a vulnerable position with the god. He is grateful that he has a moment to himself with his back turned to the god to centre himself. He is going to need to be focused.

Loki stands a foot or so away from him. It's still too close. Stephen takes a deep breath and gathers himself. He is the Sorcerer Supreme. He is the Guardian of the Time Stone. He has a duty to perform.

This is about Tony.

It was always about Tony. This mad god, after wreaking havoc in the small town in New Mexico, will return to Earth. When he does, he will return with an army. When he does, he is going to throw Tony out of the window of the Stark Tower.

That is unacceptable.

"If I promise to behave, will you answer my questions?" The god asks and Stephen looks at him with distrust, but he nods.

The Connection should have ensured that the god doesn't hurt him. Hurting Stephen should have been tantamount to hurting himself. But the god's instability of emotions and mentality, as well as his lack of self preservation and desire to love and care for himself, can override that.

That means that Stephen is more vulnerable than he had ever been. Because he isn't like Loki. He can't hurt the god. The Connection prevents that for him.

It doesn't for the god.

Adrenaline is coursing through his blood. Between the flight and fight response, Stephen's body screams for him to run.

He can't.

It makes him feel more vulnerable and terrified than he had ever been. Stephen feels his mouth dry out as he opens it to answer the god's question.

"I am the Sorcerer Supreme." Stephen says slowly. The god's brilliant green eyes that seem to change shades with each movement, widens.

"Midgard has a Mystic Order." The god breathes out. Stephen isn't too surprised that the God of Mischief knows. Alfheim has an Order and a Sorcerer Supreme. He would have learnt of the Order from them. Aside from there, the God has travelled to other realms and worlds. He would have met others like Stephen.

"I am also the Chosen Guardian of the Time Stone." Stephen says though he does hesitate a little. He slowly moves his hands so that they are over the Eye of Agamotto.
He had prepared the clearing before the god had arrived to ensure that they would be well shielded and protected to make certain that the usage of the Time Stone would not be felt or seen by anyone throughout the universe.

That had been a contentious point. The shield that Stephen puts would also ensure that the other sorcerers of the Order would not be able to ascertain what takes place in the clearing. It had been a risk that Stephen had believed would be worth it. He is not sure if it had been.

The Eye opens.

"An Eternal Guardian. A mortal being. Well, I never would have thought that a possibility," Loki says with some surprise. Stephen closes the Eye with another intricate set of hand movements. Even though his hands are shaking, the spell works effectively enough.

Stephen can't help but feel cold. Even with the Cloak wrapped around him now and even though he knows that he ought to be warm enough, he doesn't feel it. He misses Tony like he is missing a limb. He needs the comfort of the inventor and he is not ashamed to admit it.

"You can see the future." Loki conjectures and Stephen is almost jealous at the breadth of the Trickster God's knowledge. He knows more about the Connection than Stephen does and he knows about the Infinity Stones and the power of the Time Stone in a way that Stephen hadn't when he bonded with the stone.

"I have not seen my future. But I have seen... what occurs in the other universes." Stephen says and Loki raises an eyebrow at that. Stephen can almost see the god thinking.

The anger that had been palpating through the Connection is slowed down now. The god is distracted and thoughtful instead.

"The Time Stone connects with the others in the various universes to show you visions of what occurs there." The god surmises. Stephen nods. His assessment that the god would be intelligent and sharp at the levels of Tony himself has been correct, apparently.

That simplifies things somewhat.

It shouldn't surprise Stephen, but it does, for him to realise that the god really is very similar to Tony. He is intelligent, sharp and intuitive. He has the same inherent curiosity that Tony has. The kind of curiosity that can overcome and override many of the other instincts and thoughts.

"The universes that survive what will depend on one thing. The survival of one being." Stephen wets his lips to continue speaking and he watches Loki's eyes laser focus on his tongue as he does so.

The god's lust travels through the Connection.

"And who is this so very important being at the centre of the universe?" Loki's voice purrs the question at him. Stephen represses the shivers that travel through him at that voice. It is a voice that is both seductive and beautiful. It is such a pleasant voice and the lilting tones that reminds him of a British accent make the god's words all the more... sensual.

"My Soulmate. Anthony Edward Stark." Stephen says simply and watches the god's eyes widen as he snarls.

"The man that you love. The one that you choose over me." Loki says harshly and Stephen feels the anger thrum through the Connection again and he bites back the moan of pain.
He had felt anger from Tony before. Of course he has. But he hasn't felt like this. It hadn't felt this painful and harsh. This feels like it is ripping directly through his soul and it hurts.

"Did you come here because of him? Did you hope to save him from me?" Loki asks angrily and Stephen can only nod. Even now, even in pain and even with his Soulmate raging against him, the Connection and the instincts he has a result of it demands that he answer honestly and truthfully.

"Yes." Stephen bites out as the god laughs. It's an empty, hollow and angry laugh. Stephen doesn't even think too long and hard about what he needs to do. He simply does it.

"Please. Please don't harm him." Stephen finds himself begging. He has no pride, no dignity he needs to protect. Not when it comes to Tony's safety. The god gives him a cold, hard look as his expression curls into a cruel mask of fury.

"You would ask that of me. You would dare to ask?" The god asks. Stephen nods slowly. He does feel bad for asking. He knows that the god won't be able to deny him.

"And what will you give me in return?" Stephen is taken aback by the question. He hasn't heard of Soulmates negotiating like this. The god's eyes look predatory as he moves in a little closer. Stephen has to fight himself not to take a step back.

"You ask that I spare the life of your Soulmate. You would, no doubt also ask that I spare the lives of the people on this planet. So I ask you, Stephen Vincent Strange, what price are you willing to pay to guarantee their safety?" Loki's purring voice and his words indicate the answer that he wants. Stephen closes his eyes and bites his lips.

He can't. He can't give Loki what he wants. To do so would be to break the one thing that he needs in his life. The most important thing to him.

"I can't give you what you want, Prince Loki. I can only offer you my devotion and loyalty. But he comes first. I loved him first." Stephen informs him quietly.

He is not shocked by the backlash from that. The emotions rush through him and Stephen has to fight against the need to curl up to protect himself when it is impossible to shield himself from pain coming directly from his soul itself.

"You ask for a great deal for very little in return. This is not a bargain, Sorcerer Supreme. What you are looking for is extortion." Loki says coldly. Stephen opens his eyes and looks helplessly at the god.

"What you want and desire from me is something that I cannot give. I cannot give you my heart when it is promised and belongs to another. I will learn to love you regardless, but I cannot give you what you want." Stephen informs him as clearly as possible. The god raises his eyebrows and his anger is obvious.

"It is just sex, Sorcerer Supreme. I am not asking for everything." The god says drily but Stephen can't. He just can't.

He is attracted to Loki. Of course he is. Who wouldn't be? But at the same time, his need and his love for Tony overrides any of the attraction that he feels for the god. Not to mention the fact that the attraction is tainted with fear and horror.

"I am so sorry." Is all that Stephen can manage to say. The god snarls at him before he takes calming breaths. If nothing else the god has fantastic focus, Stephen thinks blankly.
"I will allow the issue the rest for now. I will tamper my actions on your planet to ensure that I uphold your wishes. That is what I am required to do by the binds of the Connection." Loki says and Stephen feels relief go through him at that.

Thank the Vishanti that the god is seeing reason, Stephen thinks.

The thought doesn't last for very long.

"But when I return after dispensing with my obligations in Asgard, I will have you. It's a very reasonable price, Stephen Strange. Your body in return for the safety of your Soulmate and your planet." Loki's voice purrs as he says those words.

Stephen feels his spine stiffen with even the idea of it.

Loki was asking him for a transaction of sex in return for things that are so important to Stephen that he would be willing to give up his life for it. It would be easier to give up his life, Stephen thinks.

His stomach rails at the thought of even- he swallows hard and he looks at the god, the twinkling green eyes glinting with amusement and glee. They are cruel.

This- This Loki isn't the ones he had seen in the visions with the Cup and the Time Stone. This Loki is broken and angry and he is railing against the world. He is at the cusp of madness. Stephen knows that. It doesn't make it any easier.

"Loki I- I-" Stephen tries but Loki moves until he is standing directly in front of him and he reaches out to touch Stephen's face. The cold fingers curl around his cheek as the god's thumb runs along Stephen's lips.

"It will be pleasurable, beloved. I will make you feel pleasure as you have never felt it. You will want it. You will want me. Do not lie to me and yourself. You desire me." Loki purrs almost against his lips and Stephen closes his eyes.

The thing is... he does.

He hates that he does. But he does. Even with the revulsion, the anger and the terror, there is a thrill of desire and lust. Stephen feels everything being so conflicted inside of him and he can't think straight. Damn the Connection and its enforcement and perversion of his feelings and desires.

Stephen takes a deep breath.

Loki isn't going to come back tomorrow. From everything that he has seen, the god will return to Earth next year with the Chitauri army. He has time. He isn't sure what happens during that time with the god, but he doesn't return immediately.

Surely that would buy him time. To think. To prepare himself. He isn't sure if he will ever be prepared to be blackmailed into sex and how it is going to work with his relationship with Tony but he will at least have some time.

Stephen hates this.

He hates all of this. He wants to go home and curl up in his bed and throw up as many shields as he can to protect himself, curl up and cry. He feels shattered and broken and he- God he wants Tony.

As he thinks about Tony, he feels the thrum of energy go through him through the Connection. Tony has put in the new reactor. He can feel the power coursing through Tony and he gasps out.
He has to go.

He doesn't have any more time. He nods and looks at the god with wide eyes as the adrenaline and focus he needs to deal with the situation at the Expo kicks in.

"I will know when you return and speak to you then about the arrangement." Stephen says and he is hurrying and the god's eyes are narrow. It's not the promise that the god wants but it is as close to the promise that Stephen is willing to make.

"I will claim you. I will have you." Loki promises him darkly. Stephen gives him a weak smile.

"I won't have a choice but to submit. You are bargaining with the things that I have vowed to protect. You will have what you desire of me, Loki Laufeyson. Even if it will destroy me in turn." Stephen tells him and he can't stay any longer.

He can't stay in this situation any longer.

He opens the portal to New York Sanctum and he walks through, closing it firmly behind him.

As soon as he is out of the god's presence, he falls to his knees at the Cloak reacts just in time to make sure he doesn't hurt his knees against the hardwood floors. Stephen curls into himself and gives him a second.

Just a second.

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Friday

28 May 2010

Natasha runs through the corridors of the Hammer facility. She has dealt with the guards. It is all about finding the room that they were trying to guard.

She has to open three doors before she finds the one that she is looking for. She knows immediately when she opens the door that she has the right location.

The man hanging by wires in the rope, the computer set up as well as the bed tells her that she has the right room. She rushes to the computer and is about to type into it when she gets a phone call.

"Agent Romanov." The voice is familiar. She isn't too surprised that Stephen Strange was able to contact her. She was using the phone that she had been using for Stark Industries.

"Dr Strange." She answers as her fingers waver over the keyboard. Somehow, Rhodey's suit was free from tempering and he was working with Stark. The weapons have been mostly disabled. But the androids were following Iron Man and War Machine and self-destructing when they get close enough to try to damage them.

So far Iron Man and War Machine were doing a good job avoiding them but she has no idea how to stop them from self detonating. All they could do was to try to fly into areas and high enough so that the explosions don't hurt the crowd of people.

"A screen is going to pop up on the screen you are standing near. When that pops up, I need you to type in the code that I am sending you via text. It will allow me to take control over that computer without spending the time to hack it." Stephen says and though Natasha would hate to admit it, there
is a certain amount of relief that she feels when she hears that.

The SHIELD Agent within her and the information that she does have on Stephen Strange worries her about trusting him to actually allow him access to the computer but at the same time, she remembers the compassion and concern he had shown to Tony Stark.

She is also more than aware that this is beyond her skill set. She is good. But she usually goes into a situation with geek prepared USB drive with all the tools included and generally a way into the system mapped out. This is beyond her expertise.

"Send the code doctor." Natasha decides. The phone hangs up without another word. Natasha hadn’t expected him to continue speaking. The incident is still ongoing and serious. If he is there, then he is busy.

So is she.

The code comes through just as the input box comes in. Natasha puts the code in and watches through the camera and the set up that allows her to see the backstage area, Stephen type away on the computer, his shaking hands moving quickly despite the doctor clearly being in pain.

Stephen Strange may be a man that SHIELD is concerned about and does not understand, but as far as Natasha was concerned... he was at least moral and ethical compared to them.

It might be necessary, but Natasha isn't sure if what they were doing was the right thing. But then, it hadn't been up to her to decide that. Perhaps she should have thought about it more. Either way, she is sure of one thing.

Her ledger continues to bleed red.

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The Marks Left Behind

Chapter Summary

The Expo hell is one thing but today is Tony's fucking birthday and he's determined to enjoy the day. With Stephen by his side and the promise of endless sex, that is most definitely an achievable goal.

On the other hand... Stephen is still reeling from his confrontation with Loki and Fury is plotting quietly.

So. Where will that leave everyone?

Chapter Notes

PLEASE READ THIS BEFORE READING:
As with the previous chapter, there will be discussions of non-consent situations with Stephen dealing with what has happened. As such, please be aware of possible triggering effects.

If you need to talk to someone after reading or just want to discuss what happened and what might happen in the next Arc, please feel free to join the Discord Server at: https://discord.gg/sM53acf

So. This is the last chapter in ARC 2.

I am amazed by all the love and support that you guys have given me throughout this ARC and I am incredibly grateful to all the commenters that took the time to read and to comment and to the community we are growing in the Discord Server.

So thank you.

ARC 3 will start tomorrow (most likely) and the posting schedule will remain the same. I hope to see you all in ARC 3 and I hope you will enjoy this end to ARC 2.

Thank you.

ALSO! If ANYONE is interested in Betaing this Project... please hit me up @ kiratsukimoto@gmail.com ... thank you!

Saturday

29 May 2010

Tony wakes up to the feeling of lips curling around his semi-hard cock.

It's a pair of lips and sensation that he recognises extremely well. He is smiling before he even opens
his eyes. In fact, when he sees the glorious picture of Stephen dressed in that slinky and gorgeous dark blue cashmere sweater that clings to him like skin and the soft curls of the doctor's hair bobbing above his hips, Tony closes his eyes again.

Watching the doctor and his gorgeous head bobbing over his cock was going to make the experience incredibly short. Tony wants to savour this luxurious wake up call.

"Happy Birthday dearest." Tony hears and the smile on his lips stretch even further as he slowly moves his hands until they come in contact with the soft hairs of one Dr Strange as his lips go back to work on Tony's cock.

It really was the best way to wake up on his birthday.

He isn't quite sure what time it is and he frankly doesn't give a fuck what the time is. He is exhausted, he feels luxurious and the lips around his cock are doing the best that they can to help him forget the horrors of his night.

The thing is, the chaos at the Expo had taken hours to clear up. Pepper, Clea, Gina and Alex, as well as their assistants and the support staff, had been all hands on deck trying to sort out the media, the police, the FBI and SHIELD to make sure that they can control the narrative that went out and ensure that there wasn't going to be a public backlash.

Honestly though, the process was made easier by three significant factors. For one, someone, leaked the whole Anton Vanko situation to the media and Ivan Vanko's misguided revenge for the sins of the father onto the son to the media. That helped to get them on Tony's side.

For another, Natasha Romanov and Coulson came and dealt with the SHIELD situation effectively. They knew what had been happening and what had happened better than the agents sent to ask the questions. Tony was pleasantly surprised at how helpful they can be when they wanted to be.

Then there was Rhodey. Of course there was Rhodey. After helping to clear out the situation with Ivan Vanko and frying him along with his suit, the man had gone back to the military and revealed to them the nature of the suit and the contract that was between them.

So the military was handled.

Still, despite all of that, it had taken hours and throughout that time, Stephen hadn't been there, though Tony knew that the doctor had been behind disabling the androids halfway through the fight and ensuring that they didn't self detonate.

He was grateful for that. But once that had been sorted out, Stephen had disappeared and Tony hadn't been able to figure out where his lover had gone. He had been, unfortunately, a little too busy to look for Stephen.

There were also no casualties from the civilians, which was just amazing. Oh, there were plenty of cuts and bruises along with the more serious injuries like concussions and glass sticking out of places that glass shouldn't be but no one died.

That was a miracle.

It wasn't. It hadn't been. It had been Clea's warning asking him to ensure that he hacked into the Hammer servers to try to get them disabled before Tony even arrived at the scene. The thing was, he and JARVIS had tried. Even JOCASTA had tried to help.

But though they had been able to prevent Rhodey's suit from being hacked and they had been able to
disable the weapons of some of the androids, it hadn't been all of them by the time the fight had broken out. JARVIS really had done his best and Tony was grateful for the work that the AI has done to prevent the harm, but it really had cut close.

Then Stephen had been able to handle the rest.

Tony wasn't sure how he felt about being touted a hero for his actions considering the fact that he blamed himself for what happened still, but hey. he was grateful that at least it was mostly handled and it went better than he had expected.

So there was that.

It was Clea that had dragged Tony out of the meetings with the mayor, the emergency services, the FBI and all, when it started to get too late and put him and the suit on 'time out' as she called it.

She had all but shoved him into the D'Arte's Penthouse Suite and told him that if she saw him before Sunday, outside of the suite, she will do something horrible to his testicles. Testicles the good doctor was currently sucking on as if they were some deliciously sweet candy. Oh, God yes.

It takes a little effort, but Tony does manage to clear his head of all other thoughts and focuses his attention on Stephen and his talented lips.

He has no idea where the doctor had been throughout the night. He isn't sure if Stephen has even slept alongside of him. He had passed out as soon as he had gotten out of the suit and he isn't too ashamed to admit that.

Even superheroes get tired sometimes.

Besides, though the Arc Reactor has been replaced with one that doesn't give him any harmful effects by all the tests that they had conducted thus far, since the element was so incredibly stable that there was basically no byproduct and it burned cleanly in the reactor, the poison that had been coursing through his blood was still there.

He still had the effects of it and the lithium dioxideo was all but gone.

"How did you know this is exactly how I wanted to wake up on my birthday?" Tony pants out at the doctor as he does open his eyes finally. The room isn't too bright. The curtains are drawn and Tony wonders what time it is. There is no convenient clock to tell him that and there was no JARVIS either.

Not that he really cares. This is more important. This time with Stephen. This pleasure. This need to reconnect with the man that he loves after going through one of the most harrowing nights of his life.

"Merely fulfilling a promise I made, dearest." Stephen says after he pops off of Tony's testicles to look at him with the most sexed up eyes that Tony had ever seen. God he is beautiful, Tony thinks as he smiles.

"Oh does that mean we can fuck all day long?" Tony asks him. He can do with a break and so can Stephen. A day spent in bed without having to worry about prying eyes in the safety of the Penthouse Suite sounds... delicious.

"If that is what you want for your birthday." Stephen informs him as he pops off of Tony's cock to
answer the question. Tony watches with hooded eye as the doctor's completely dilated blue grey eyes close before he swallows all of Tony's cock into his mouth and down his throat.

"God yes!" Tony all but shouts and his head is thrown back with the pleasure of the sensation. Stephen is really good his mouth, Tony thinks and he can't help his hips from bucking up a little.

Then when the doctor multitasks in a way that Tony is truly impressed by and manages to lube up a finger and start stroking Tony's prostate on top of the delicious way that he is sucking down Tony's cock?

It feels so fucking amazing and luxurious and Tony can't help but moan and pant as he clings to the sheets with one hand and holds the doctor's hair with the other. He knows that his grip is tight to the point that it might hurt the doctor a little. He also knows that Stephen doesn't mind. In fact, he likes it.

He comes.

Hard and fast and unexpectedly into Stephen's throat and he tenses around hard around Stephen's finger. The doctor strokes his prostate through it and Tony is overwhelmed with sensations for a little while before his body goes limp and he is just a panting, sweating mess.

"Sorry." Tony breathes out as he watches Stephen wipe the excess cum and saliva from his lips with the back of his hand and wipes his hand on the wet wipes he has prepared on the bed. The doctor really was quite thorough, Tony thinks.

Stephen does make his way up Tony's body until he can rest his head on Tony's chest but Tony pulls him up further so that he can kiss the doctor's abused lips. They are swollen and the doctor's jaws are clearly suffering, making the kiss sloppy and wet but Stephen's lips open obediently under his and Tony tastes himself on Stephen's tongue.

Tony can feel the doctor's hot, heavy cock against his thigh as they lazily kiss. It really is the perfect way to wake up on his birthday, Tony thinks. The doctor's warm naked body on his, the feel of the doctor's lips against his and the luxuriating feeling of the afterglow.

There is one thing that can make that even better though.

"Fuck me." Tony whispers into the doctor's mouth as he lets his hand wander down his lover's body until he can hold the doctor's beautiful cock in his hand. Stephen bucks into the touch but he sighs as his eyes flutter.

"In a bit dearest. You need to rest." Stephen suggests but Tony strokes him a little harder and pulls Stephen closer towards him.

"Now. I want you to fuck me whilst I'm still sensitive and loose from coming." Tony all but demands and Stephen raises an eyebrow but chuckles.

It's a kink that some people have. The desire to be used for their partner's sexual release even though they aren't aroused or needy. To know that their body was being used by their partners for only their pleasure.

"Are you sure?" Stephen asks but all Tony does is raise his legs and let the doctor's fingers trail back to his lubed hole. Stephen chuckles again before he is moving.

"It is your birthday dearest. Whatever you want, you will get today." Stephen reassures him. Good, Tony thinks as he smiles.
Tony likes the idea of having his partners fuck him when he is still sensitive. Sometimes he can be so sensitive that it hurts, but he isn't like that today. Today, he wants to be overwhelmed with pleasure. Overwhelmed with Stephen and his presence.

He doesn't want to think about Vanko and Hammer and the fact that he has killed another man... again. He doesn't want to think about all the interviews and the media circus he knows he will have to be involved in come Monday. He doesn't want to think about... anything. He just wants to feel.

He relaxes into the bed as Stephen raises his legs up and places them over the doctor's shoulders. A pillow is placed under his hip and Stephen works him open with long thin fingers. They are shaking as usual, but they aren't doing too badly by the way that they were expertly opening Tony up at least.

Good.

It really doesn't take that long for him to be prepped. He is so relaxed after coming so fucking hard that he is limp and pliant. When Stephen enters him, it is soft and gentle. Tony moans in protest but the doctor has a wicked smile on his lips.

"You never did say how you wanted it, Tony. I'm going to fuck you nice and slow until you are hard again and you're begging me to let you come." Stephen says and Tony can't help but moan at the intent he can hear in that voice.

At the same time, he also can't help but feel all the stress he has had on the previous day, or the previous week really, dissolve as his body and mind focus only on the pleasure the doctor is giving him. It was going to be a fan-bloody-tastic birthday, Tony thinks as he sinks into the pleasure and Stephen's presence.

He doesn't notice the pale red kiss mark on Stephen's neck.

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Saturday

29 May 2010

Well.

This is certainly not the report he had been expecting, Fury thinks. It doesn't even marry up with what his impressions had been of Tony Stark and his tendencies and personality, in fact.

Still.

The thing is, if nothing else, Fury had always trusted Natasha Romanov to be professional and to stay detached from any situation she found herself in.

Both her training in the Red Room, as well as her training as a SHIELD agent, should have ensured that. But even from her own admission, Romanov has become compromised.

He had kept her on the field. He hadn't had much of a choice. Clint, his other best agent was stuck in New Mexico watching over the purported Norse God of Thunder and all of those dramas, for one.

For another, Coulson was already with Romanov helping out and the problem had gotten bad enough that he needed to stay. Then there was the issue of Maria Hill being unavailable on another mission as well because of Dr Bruce Banner.
All in all, it had been and still was one of the busiest periods SHIELD has had to deal with in a while with big crisis happening everywhere and Fury really could do with a break from all the chaos and to have some fucking normalcy for once.

He has a feeling that normalcy was a word he wasn't going to be able to apply to his life for some time to come.

He reads over the report one more time.

Tony Stark is a genius of unprecedented levels. He had one of the highest recorded IQs in the world. That was nothing new. Him having a highly developed moral compass and ethics is new. Stating that he suffers from anxiety and depression isn't surprising but him being without a diagnosis of something more severe is surprising.

Fury would have expected the man to be at least diagnosed with something like narcissism considering how much he loved to talk about himself to the public and how much of his work and the world seemed to revolve around himself and his ego.

The man's announcement to the world that he was Iron Man when that only put himself at risk and put those that were around him at risk was definitely a sign of that. He wonders if he should get another psychologist to review the documents and the reports to make another assessment.

Fury sighs.

It doesn't matter what they are going to say at any rate. The fact of the matter is... SHIELD and Fury needs Tony Stark to work with them. No. Tony Stark needs to work for them. They need unfettered access to his technology, his weapons, his ability to invent materials and weapons as well as his funds.

Iron Man and the suit is almost secondary to that.

Having said that, Fury can only imagine how effective Natasha Romanov or Clint Barton would be with a suit like the Iron Man suit. Colonel Rhodes wasn't a bad option for a suit, but his agents could do even better in a suit than Tony Stark, a fucking civilian and a fighter jet pilot would be.

But it's not his choice to make.

Fury knows that much. He has spoken to legal and their PR and he knows that if he even tries to get Tony Stark to bow to pressure and to try to get access to the suits taken away from him, there would be legal and PR hell unlike anything SHIELD had ever seen and that it was very unlikely that SHIELD would survive the confrontation.

What has the world come to that an organisation like SHIELD, an organisation that works to defend the goddamned planet and the people of the planet from all the threats that they are blissfully ignorant of, is left at the mercy of one fucking individual and a company?

The 70s had been much simpler.

These days young people all believed they were special and important and everything had to be so fucking politically correct and it was bullshit. Using the right gender pronouns or being racially and socially polite didn't change the fact that there were threats out there in the world that needed to be dealt with.

Okay. That's slightly unfair. There were people like him and people like the men and women in the armed services that sacrificed their lives and their youth to ensure that those idiots could have their
freedom of speech and their rights to be whoever and whatever they wanted to be.

Fury has to remind himself sometimes that is what he has fought so long and hard for. There is no point in preserving humanity if they were only to be enslaved by a dictator or to be oppressed by the government.

It is all about the checks and balances after all.

It would be so much easier if it wasn't. Despite that thought in mind, Fury moves his cursor to the document on the computer in front of him.

This may not be the best approach. It is most definitely not the honest approach. But it is the best approach that he has got.

He types slowly as he tries to focus his one good eye on the document in front of him. He hopes that this will be the ticket he needs to make sure that Tony fucking Stark will finally become the pawn that he was meant to be.

'Iron Man, Recommended. Tony Stark, not recommended'.
How he was supposed to explain that he agreed to have sex with a god in order to protect Tony and the people of the planet. That he had agreed to whore himself out.

Fuck.

Loki was going to come back. He will have to. He will be compelled to come back. Even if it wasn't with the Chitauri army, Loki will come back and Stephen will be just as compelled to spend time with him.

The Connection between them is not like the Connection he shares with Tony. It isn't a one-sided thing. It isn't something that just compels a little extra trust and ease in building a relationship. It is a full and true Connection between two souls and two hearts.

Stephen knows that.

He knows that with time and with contact, he will feel love for Loki. He won't be able to fight against it. Not when they are so compatible. Not when his soul wants for the Bond to be completed and for their souls to be intertwined properly like the Connection is meant to be, like the Bond is meant to be between two magic users.

He has heard enough stories from the other sorcerers that are Connected to sorcerers to know that. But he also knows that he can resist it. At least for some time. Cowell and Anderson had. For years. Right now though, Stephen can't think about that.

The emptiness is so vast and real and it feels almost like a gnawing hunger that he can't satiate with anything other than contact with Tony and having him nearby, having him inside of Stephen to fill the emptiness.

Even with Tony fucking deep inside of him right now, it feels like it isn't enough. The pleasure is enough to have him moaning and writhing on the bed, his hair sticking to the forehead with the heat that their activities are producing and his breath hot against the bedsheets he rests on.

"Oh God Tony please!" Stephen begs as Tony stops moving inside of him. He is buried to the hilt inside of Stephen and Tony is lazily licking the side of Stephen's neck and Stephen can't help but squirm.

He is overheating in the dark blue sweater that he was wearing. It was thin and the material was good quality so it did let him breathe, but the sweat from all their activities made it cling to his skin and it feels uncomfortable.

But Stephen doesn't want to take it off. He knows that there are bruises underneath it on his arms where the god had held him down. He doesn't want Tony to see that right now.

Luckily for him, Tony likes the sweater and the way it looks on Stephen. He likes the way that it feels against his own skin.

Until just a second ago, Tony had been fucking him hard and fast and for him to come to a stop just like this is maddening. Tony looks down at him and his eyes are dilated and there is just a ring of caramel that Stephen can barely see through the bright glow of the new reactor in Tony's chest.

The inventor's chests are gleaming with sweat and he is so beautiful and sexy and Stephen forgets everything for the time being. He forgets about Loki, their deal and all the complications.

Tony leans down and kisses him hard. Tony pants into Stephen's mouth as he curls his tongue around Stephen's and Stephen can't help but moan into the kiss as he moves his hips to try to get the
man to move.

The genius smirks against Stephen's lips.

"Uh ah, you're going to be a good boy for me, Stephen. On your hands and knees." Tony says as he pulls out and Stephen is quick to obey after getting a hot kiss.

When Tony wanted to fuck him hard and fast, being on all fours with his knees spread was honestly the best option. With how wide Tony was, it put a lot of pressure on Stephen's hips and it helped to be stretched out like that.

Stephen moves into position but he can't keep his head up and on his elbows when Tony buries himself deep inside of his body without hesitation. Stephen is wet enough and he is most definitely stretched enough to take it.

The heat is too intense and so is the pleasure of the thick hard cock inside of him. Stephen cries out and he curls his fingers around the bedsheets to stop himself from screaming with the pleasure of it all.

It is overwhelming.

"Good?" Tony asks and Stephen can hear the smirk and he whimpers out a response as Tony starts to fuck into him hard. Tony always knows just how to move his hips perfectly. He pulls mostly out and slams back in, making sure that Stephen can feel every single thrust and that Tony's cock drags over Stephen's prostate with each and every single stroke.

It's the third time they were fucking.

After Stephen had woken up Tony with a blowjob, he slowly made love to Tony until he had been desperate and writhing on the bed and hard. It's only then that Stephen had well and truly fucked the birthday boy and it had been amazing.

When they were done, they managed to lay on the bed and just relax for some time, curled into each other and enjoying the soft kisses and caresses.

They even managed to eat a few things from the room service menu and had curled up lazily back into bed when they were done and it hadn't taken long for Tony to push him down onto the bed and opened him up with brutal efficiency before he started to fuck into him.

Stephen's knees start to tremble as the physical load of all their exertion after what honestly had been a difficult night for both of them, hits. Tony notices almost immediately and his hips gentle.

"Come on baby, let's get you comfortable." Tony says and he puts a pillow underneath Stephen's hips and moves him so that he is mostly laying on his stomach.

Tony lays himself on Stephen and starts to rut into him softly as he covers Stephen's back with his chest and starts to take Stephen's sweater off.

Stephen is so lost in the pleasure that he forgets that he didn't want that sweater removed for a reason. All he can feel is Tony's body over his and the overwhelming pleasure that keeps coursing through him. Tony doesn't stop moving.

Then the sweater is off and Tony is holding him down and fucking into him hard and the familiarity hits him like a truck.
Tony's hands are over the bruises Loki has left behind.

Stephen can't help but think of the moment that he had feared that this is exactly how Loki would take him, how he would force himself onto him. Just as Stephen feels the cold sweat break out across his body, Tony stiffens above him.

"Where were you yesterday?" Tony asks him and Stephen hears the odd tone in his voice almost immediately. It focuses Stephen. It is always so easy to put the genius and his emotions and well being before his own.

Stephen shuts down the panic and tries to raise his head so that he can try to see Tony's expression and figure out what he is saying, but Tony's hold on him is firm and Tony's lips are firmly on the back of his neck.

The Connection between them pulsate with anger.

"I- I had to see someone." Stephen pants out as Tony pulls almost out of him and before fucking into him hard. It's almost a harsh movement and Stephen feels his breath being knocked out of him as Tony hums above him.

This is Tony. This is Tony. This is Tony.

Stephen tells himself over and over again to stop the fear from overwhelming him. From his mind to going back to that moment in the clearing with the god above him and being unable to fight back. Being unable to stop him from- Oh God.

"Is it someone that I need to know about?" Tony asks him, his voice cool and calculating. For a moment Stephen is raking through his brain trying to figure out why Tony was asking him such questions and why he seems so upset. It's so very hard to think past the fear.

This is Tony. This is Tony. This is Tony.

But when he feels Tony's tongue licks along the back of his neck where he can still feel the cold touch of the god's lips upon it, Stephen feels the dread and the fear overwhelm him.

No.

"It's-" Stephen doesn't know what to say. The guilt that he feels for having even felt arousal in the presence of another and the kiss that had he had allowed to happen not just once but twice as well as the mark and the love that he knows will start to blossom inside of him towards another when he is with Tony is... impossible to deal with.

Added to that is the bargain.

Sex for the safety of Tony and the others on Earth. God. He doesn't know how to tell that to Tony. He doesn't know if he can. But like all secrets, he knows that it will eventually come out. He knows that he is going to hurt Tony.

It's too much.

Stephen bites hard onto his lips and he tries to think but Tony's weight is heavy against him and the hard cock inside of him moves slightly as Tony raises himself up a little against Stephen's body and Stephen feels his thoughts scatter for a moment before he can gather them again.

Then there is the fear and the dread and the revulsion. Stephen feels like all of his emotions and his
thoughts are spiralling out of control and he can't-

He can't do this.

"At least do me the courtesy of not lying to me Stephen." Tony says quietly and Stephen feels everything come to a stop and a laser focus inside of his own head. He can hear his own blood thrumming in his head and Stephen feels his body go cold and his mouth go dry.

"Who marked you?" Tony asks, his voice low, angry and hard. At the centre of the storm of emotions and thoughts in Stephen's mind is just one word. Just one thought.

"Dormammu."

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