Summary

Stephen Strange is a villain.

But a hot one.

Notes

Decided to post the oneshots from Tumblr on here as well as it's turning into a semi-coherent fic
Not sure where it will lead

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Stephen’s ropes lashed out, battlefield now devoid of any conscious bodies. Everyone was either knocked out or had been portaled away.

They tied around Tony’s arms and legs, keeping him in place no matter how hard he struggled. Hatred burned in his chest, sure it wasn’t subtle in the way he was glaring at the sorcerer.

The sorcerer stepped forward, growl around his lips, which immediately had him on guard. He stopped an inch from where Tony was suspended in front of him, so close Tony would be able to count each freckle if he’d had any, but Tony refused to look away from his eyes.

“Who did this to you?”

A simple question worth such a complicated answer.

“You did.”

Stephen tutted in disapproval, playful smirk returning for barely a second. “I would never. Not that pretty little face of yours.”

“It must have been an accident -“

The sorcerer growled, low and deep, making Tony's stomach twist as the sorcerer reached up his hand to cup his chin and tilt his head up to the light.

“You had this before the battle,” he ground out, thumb tapping the edge of the bruise adjourning his left eye. “You think your pathetic little make up artists could hide it from my attention?”

Tony fought the urge to roll his eyes. It could have been way worse, but he had controlled himself. With his enhancement there could have been a lot more damage. And Tony knew he had provoked him, had questioned his judgement one too many times and had made one reckless decision too many.

No he hadn’t. He wasn’t some battered housewife. He knew this wasn’t right, but what choice did he have? The team had seen it happen and thought he deserved it. He had to suck it up for the greater good.

“Don’t pretend I don’t already know,” Stephen ground out, digging his fingers into his skin as a warning. Even if he’d wanted to, he could never leave bruising, not with his wretched hands. “Who did this to you?”

“If you know, you know…”

He dug his fingers harder, ignoring the spikes of pain through his own hand and leaned forward into Stark’s space, foreheads barely grazing together. “I won’t do anything unless you tell me. You need to say it.”

“Then I won’t.”

Stephen hissed as if disappointed, pressing forward a little bit more. Tony could feel the sorcerer’s lips so close to his own and knew his heart was starting to speed up, hatred coursing through him. His body reached forward as if on instinct, even as he screamed at it to behave, but a second later,
the sorcerer had pushed away, retreating out of his personal space and leaving only his hand, still wrapped around his chin and thumb now pressed against Tony’s lips in a shushing movement.

“We’ll see each other again soon, Stark,” the sorcerer drew out, voice like liquid as he let go of Tony and glanced around the ruins of the abandoned building. Tony didn’t take his eyes off the sorcerer, but could see some of the bodies starting to stir with consciousness out of his peripheral vision.

A second later the sorcerer was gone, and portals dropped open to drop off their remaining team mates minus Steve. He always got back a little later, a little more bruised. The ropes faded from his arms and he dropped them, taking a deep breath as he let his faceplate cover him, his suit a preferred hide-out as his teammates were already complaining about having lost once again.

“What did he even want,” Scott groaned from where he was still lying on the ground, sprawled out in exhaust. “He just wrecked this building for no reason.”

“Stark,” Clint called out, readjusting his hearing aid as he favoured his left arm, “what did he say to you this time?”

“Nothing of importance.” He spit out, because after all, his well-being wasn’t of importance at all. Not to them.

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New York was always noisy, but up this high he could hardly let it bother him.

Just because he wasn’t allowed to put restrictions on his lab and everyone was too suspicious of him to leave him alone in there for more than three minutes, didn’t mean he couldn’t code FRIDAY to lie about his location to the team.

No one would dare mess with the AI, but even then, chances of running into someone inside were too high for Tony’s liking.

The roof had become an easy escape.

He had built this tower with so many hopes for the future, to be a beacon of … something….

He couldn’t even imagine what he had hoped for back in the day.

Instead it had grown almost into a prison tower.

He knew he could leave if he really wanted to. No one could really stop him from taking his suits and getting the fuck out of there. Yet his own conscience, the voice telling him he had so much to make up for, couldn’t let him walk away from helping however he could. It was his duty. He was iron man, and he had made the world dependant on him the second he’d outed himself at that press conference so many years ago.

He could hate it, could regret the decisions he’d made, but he liked being Iron Man. He liked helping people and protecting them from harm. Just because he’d messed up a few times didn’t mean he should stop trying. He would learn and be better until eventually he could save everyone.

If only he wouldn’t have to rely on the Avengers for help.

Tony sighed and rolled his eyes as he felt a familiar gaze on him, annoyance coursing through his
veins as he gritted his teeth together. “Can I help you?”

“I’m content to just watch.”

The words made Tony’s head swivel back in exasperation, turning away from the city to glare at the sorcerer. He was floating a little farther back, cloak billowing and legs crossed in the air. He was watching Tony tentatively, amused smirk calmer than earlier in the day.

It was infuriating, the calm with which the sorcerer was watching him. He never understood how he could go from such anger and determined movements to the bored, easy expressions outside of battle. It was like every time Tony met him, he was someone else. Some other emotion dominating, some other character he was playing.

Some fights he was playful, almost flirting, and others he was merciless, able to drop half an army with a single breath. He still hadn’t figured out what made the difference.

He had been angry earlier. Tony was fully aware of the sorcerer’s obsession with him. He didn’t understand it, and it put him in trouble with the team on many occasions, but he couldn’t deny that it had worked in his favour plenty of times.

“Coming back for seconds?” Tony growled out, glaring at the sorcerer, “I think it was pretty clear you had all of us beat earlier.”

“No one got hurt,” he waved him off, cloak fluttering behind him as if agreeing.

“Most of my teammates would beg to differ.”

“Your ‘teammates’ are whiny little idiots.”

Tony silently agreed, but he was completely focussed on the sorcerer, watching for any sudden movements and taking an inventory of the weapon systems currently installed in his suit. Fighting magic was futile, he’d long learned, but perhaps if he got the best of him somehow…

“Just because I won’t kill you doesn’t mean I’ll let myself be captured.” He started dryly, as if reading his mind. Perhaps he was, he was magic after all. “If you feel like letting off some steam, however, I’m perfectly willing to fight you.”

He could. He could so easily yell and fight and let out his frustrations on the sorcerer. He was a villain after all, one they’d been trying to capture for months now, the mysterious organisation always managing to evade their grasp.

But he was tired. He felt like he’d been fighting all day, still sore from the hits he’d taken. He didn’t care anymore.

Besides the fighting would only draw out the Avengers below and he didn’t particularly feel like explaining why he was on the roof in the first place.

Instead, he focussed on the city sprawled out below them, the movements of the cars throughout the buildings and the lights from the bridges to their sides. He could feel the sorcerer’s eyes on him, but he ignored it in favour of breathing in deeply, the midnight air cutting through his lungs.

He didn’t know how long they sat like that, the quiet surprisingly calming even with the sorcerer’s presence. Eventually, a voice cut through the air, yelling his name.

Tony frowned, and could feel Stephen’s hands fire up with a spell behind him.
A glance over the edge of the building confirmed his suspicion and he rolled his eyes fondly, before turning to the sorcerer in a swift movement, blaster pointed at his face.

He wasn’t fond of Peter climbing the tall building, but the teen had become resilient after their first meeting. It was also hard to deny that he liked the vigilante’s excited blabbering, and it wasn’t like he could invite the kid inside. He didn’t want him exposed to the other Avengers.

The sorcerer met his eyes with a raised eyebrow at Tony’s protective reaction, infuriating smirk still across his lips, but he dropped his hands, winked and disappeared.
Champagne

His head swivelled back as he noticed a dark figure at the edge of the room, catching Stephen’s smirk right before he disappeared into the hallway. A tiny growl escaped his mouth, frown digging into his forehead.

He glanced back at his teammates as Natasha caught his eye with a questioning eyebrow raise. Faking a nonchalant shrug, he let a smile smooth out his features as he motioned towards the surrounding crowd. The ballroom was well lit, the amount of people daunting, but it still gave for a good escape. “Saw someone I recognised. Be right back.”

She smiled and rolled her eyes. It looked jovial, like a friend used to his antics, but his only friend here was Rhodey, somewhere on the side wooing officials. He managed to hide his scowl long enough to make his way through the room, taking some unnecessary twists and turns to hopefully get lost in the crowd before heading towards the door leading into the hallway.

He could have sworn he’d seen Stephen head in this direction, and whatever the sorcerer would be doing at the gala couldn’t be anything good.

The hallway was empty of course, any sign of life long gone, but that didn’t deter Tony. He walked through, slowly making his way passed the different doors to the heart of the building.

The ballroom for the party had been close to the front hall, but the interior was getting darker, less polished, clearly not part of the event any longer.

He opened another door, leading into a room that looked like it came straight from 1835.

The loveseats in front of the fire looked so old it looked like they belonged in a museum, but they looked sturdy enough, as did the little desk under the window a little further away and the bookcases lining the far wall. It was a strange sight, the room, but he didn’t think about it much longer, attention caught by the man leaning against the fireplace mantel.

It was startling seeing Strange in what appeared to be a normal suit, red tie poking out that seemed vaguely familiar somehow. One arm was crossed over his chest as his other hand held up a glass of champagne, the dark glove delicately holding on to the flute. Where he’d gotten it, he wasn’t sure; he could have sworn he hadn’t left the ballroom with it.

He smirked at Tony, clearly not surprised by his entrance. Tony watched, frozen in place as the sorcerer took a delicate sip of his drink before pushing away from the fireplace and stalking over towards him.

Tony didn’t know what to feel or do, watching the sorcerer’s moves without understanding them, nerves on edge, every cell in his body screaming of danger.

“Champagne?”

It took Tony a minute for the question to sink in. Stephen was watching Tony with a quirked eyebrow as he shoved the flute at him. He took it, sense finally kicking back in as soon as the cold glass touched his skin.

He narrowed his eyes at Strange, taking a step back to put some space between them.

“What are you doing here?” He hissed, cursing that Captain Dickwad had made him leave the suit
at the Tower. Sure, he wasn’t walking around with his shield either, but he was still enhanced. Nat had most likely snuck a small arsenal under her cocktail dress, anyway.

“Auch, Stark, and here I thought we were having a moment,” the sorcerer lulled, voice low and smooth. “Aren’t you glad to see me?”

Tony didn’t answer, still glaring at Stephen as his hands clutched around the glass in anger.

“Oh, I don’t believe that.” Stephen tutted, strutting over to the old chaise lounge and draping himself over it in a delicate movement. Tony was surprised the furniture didn’t creak and snap in two. “I couldn’t help notice you don’t have a date, after all. Couldn’t leave you on your lonesome now, could I?”

Tony rolled his eyes, fury coursing through him, and he took a swig of the champagne without thinking. Too late he considered the idea of poison. Sure, Strange had drank from it earlier and he had been pretty adamant about not hurting him, but he was still a villain. It tasted alright, however, so he took another swig and leaned his back against the door to watch the sorcerer.

“Bring a date next time. Noted. Was that all?”

Something flashed in the sorcerer’s eyes. Tony found satisfaction in the way his smirk fell into a growl for just a second, the sorcerer’s poker-face wavering slightly. It was always exhilarating getting under someone’s skin, but Tony found he especially liked getting under Stephen’s. Perhaps because the sorcerer could so easily get under his.

“Bring a date and they won’t survive the night.”

Tony frowned and couldn’t help rolling his eyes. His stomach twisted uncomfortably at the sorcerer’s clear jealousy.

It had been a bluff either way. He didn’t have anyone he’d want to take with him.

“So, you’re just here on a social call? Pretty sure you weren’t on the guest list.”

“I crash building on a daily basis, crashing parties is child’s play.”

“Didn’t seem like the party type is all.”

“Oh, au contraire,” Stephen smirked, sitting up a little to catch Tony’s eyes more easily, “I love them. Though the requirement is that I’m in the centre of attention, and with your presence the spotlight falls to you. Not that I blame them, mind you, that ass of yours is one to behold, but I get grumpy in the shadows.”

Tony blamed the alcohol for the heating of his cheeks, forcing his face into a scoff as he glanced away towards the window. It looked out on Central Park, the trees barren as winter neared.

He could feel Strange still watching him, and when he turned back, he was closer than he had expected, making him gasp slightly in surprise.

The sorcerer had stood up from his seat and stalked closer, merely a foot apart from him now and smirk so clear from this close.

“Good to see your face is fully healed.” Stephen let out, turning a considering glance towards where the bruise had been, “I don’t think Rogers would have liked my reaction if he’d left a permanent mark.”
“I still haven’t told you what happened,” Tony challenged, fire returning to his veins, “or are you going back on your word?”

“Don’t think I gave you my word per se,” Stephen hummed, smirk playing on his lips. Tony felt the anger returning, balling his hand into a fist as he took in the sight of the sorcerer leaning closer still, crowding him against the door. His hand still holding the champagne flute felt useless.

Stephen, either noticing the twitch of his hands against the glass or reading his mind - he still hadn’t ruled it out - plucked the glass out of his hand, taking a sip before making it disappear into thin air. “I can be creative, but if you’ve changed your mind and want to confess I’m all ears.”

He didn’t. Rogers was a dick, but he’d never let anyone be tortured and killed on his watch. Not after Afghanistan, not ever. He still had morals after all, contrary to popular belief.

He placed his palm against the door, leaning closer still and trapping Tony in place. Tony could feel his breath hitching, chest burning with lack of oxygen as he tried to control the urge to punch the sorcerer away.

Or pull him closer.

Before having to choose, however, the distant sound of screams reached his ears, and he immediately growled, grabbing the sorcerer by his shoulders and throwing him away, pushing him against the chaise which finally broke under the weight of the two men thrown onto it.

The wood creaked and snapped, but Tony didn’t care, eyes solely on the sorcerer’s body in the middle of the ruins, his own arms on his throat and keeping him down.

“I’m quite enjoying this turn of events,” Stephen had the audacity to purr, riling Tony up even further and making him yank the sorcerer back up a little to slam him down once more for good measure.

“What did you do?” He growled, the smile still on the sorcerer’s face making his blood boil. He had been played and he hated himself for having made it so easy.

“Me?” Stephen asked, feigning innocence as his blue eyes flashed with mirth, “I have an alibi, your honour.”

He checked his watch, confused as to why he hadn’t gotten any distress messages only to find it had somehow been silenced.

“You were just distracting me. Should have known,” Tony spit out, angrier at himself at this point.

“Why didn’t you?” The sorcerer asked, voice getting tight with how hard Tony was pressing into his neck, yet his eyebrows cocked smugly. “Could it be you were finally warming up to my company?”

“Fuck you,” Tony spat, pressing down further before releasing and stumbling away from Stephen, getting up and heading towards the door, ripping it open to run back to the event hall.

It was mostly empty by now, though remnants of a fight were clearly visible. Some walls had crumbling holes in them, and more than one of the chandeliers were lying shattered on the floor. Steve and Nat were talking in the middle of the room, faces grim and angry, and they turned towards him as he entered the room.
“What happened?”

“What happened?”

“Sorcerer’s infiltrated, trying to steal some artefacts from the vault downstairs. Thor recognised one of them and a fight broke out.” Nat explained, eyes piercing his. Her expression seemed calm, admittedly a little harder than usual, but Tony knew she was angry.

“Where were you?” Steve levelled at him, anger clear in his voice as he glared at Tony as if all of this was his fault. He hadn’t wrecked the room. He hadn’t picked a fight with the sorcerers in the middle of a crowded ballroom. He would have known better.

“Strange ambushed me in the hallway earlier. Kept me busy.”

“Why didn’t you notify us?” Steve asked accusingly, and Tony had to fight from rolling his eyes at him. He would have to roll over again and show his belly, accept the lecture and hopefully get home soon.

Fuck all of them. He was too angry, fire still boiling his veins.

“I said he kept me busy. As in kept me from alerting anyone, obviously. You think he’s an amateur? He’s been handing us our asses for months but now suddenly I should have been able to defeat him on my own?” Tony ground out, uncaring about angering the captain anymore.

“Someone made me leave behind my suits.”

Steve scoffed, annoyance flaring behind his eyes at the accusation, but apparently Tony had made a point, because he shut up for once and turned away, walking towards the door. Natasha sent Tony one last considering look before following him at the heels.

The other Avengers that had been in the room watched him before heading out as well. He almost preferred their suspicious glances over the pitying look he received from Scott. Rhodey was no where to be found, probably outside talking to whichever authorities had showed up.

As soon as the earth was safe, he would burn the Avengers Initiative to the ground.
Didn’t post this on Tumblr but decided I might as well add it here as a bit of extra context

Tony didn’t like losing, but he knew when to admit defeat.

The Avengers were strong, but the sorcerer had mere strength in numbers; enhanced weren’t made every day after all, and the sorcerer’s could recruit anyone they’d want. Magic and power, a strong incentive for anyone.

Wanda had already moved to the other side. Willingly, however much the team liked to claim she had been taken.

She hadn’t actively fought against them, just disappeared into their organisation. Tony wanted to hate her for it, but could he really blame her? They could teach her how to control and hone her powers, and being a villain wasn’t anything new to her.

The thought of ever facing her on the battle ground again made his blood run cold, but this far she hadn’t shown herself. It was but a small relief, as it only haunted his nightmares thinking of how powerful she would return.

He was glad, that at least he wasn’t forced to be around her. The few weeks she had been at the tower had been torture, no matter how much she tried to avoid him and he her, he could still feel her presence. Of course no one had listened to his protests about her joining the team, and he knew somehow somewhere Steve blamed him for her betrayal. Didn’t he always?

Yet he couldn’t just give the sorcerers everything they wanted. Their goals and plans weren’t always clear, but he needed to try. Every time they had to battle the sorcerer’s they lost, but the team still had the naive idea that someday their strength would win against their literal magic.

Tony didn’t actually mind though. It was a great distraction, a good reason to get out of the compound, and the way his teammates were a little more humbled at the end of the day, a little less smug and a little weaker.
It still always fell on him.

Somehow always the last one standing, the best protected, yet never managing to finish their opponents off. If he could just deliver the final blow, exploit their weaknesses,…

“Mr. Stark?”

“Yeah, kid?” Tony asked, looking away from the trees sliding by to glance at Peter next to him.

“Exactly how smart is Harley?” The teen asked, visibly worrying his lip even as he tried to look casual.

Tony had spoken at a conference in Nashville. He hated speaking for a bunch of stuffy business men, avoided them if possible with excuses of varying degrees of ridiculous. He even especially hated Nashville, dreadful city, but he had chosen this convention purposefully.

It got him a pass out of the tower and away from the team for a while. Something he very much needed.

Even better; he could skip out on part of the conference and head down to little old Rose Hill to meet up with an old friend.

He was excited to see Harley again after all these years. They had kept in touch, Tony helping him work out his ideas and teaching him more about the suits and AI’s. He had probably been one of the only people besides Rhodey and Pepper who had actually cared about JARVIS’ death.

He liked the kid - teen now - but he hadn’t actually had a time to visit. Contact in general had watered down a bit after the Ultron fiasco. He missed his snark and quips as much as he missed Peter’s excited rambling when he wasn’t around, and it gave both teens a great opportunity to meet.

“Well he was pretty brilliant when we met and he’s had a few years to work in a real top of the art lab, so pretty smart I’d say,” Tony smirked, watching the worrying ripple through the rest of the kids face. He rolled his eyes fondly, reached up his hand to ruffle Peter’s hair. “Don’t worry, kid, he’s excited to meet you. Wants to know about your webs so you’ll have something to talk about.”
Relief smoothed out his features, but Tony could still see his hands twitch slightly. It was just regular nerves however, and Tony was certain the worry would disappear as soon as the teens would start rambling about who knows what.

They stopped in front of the familiar house before long, smile already plastered across his face before he’d even stepped out of the car. Peter followed a little more subdued, and Tony’s grin only widened when he noticed the teen already waiting for them in front of the garage.

“You’ve grown, squirt.”

“You’ve shrunk.”

“Haha,” Tony rolled his eyes, already reaching out to envelop Harley into a hug. The teen seemed surprised by the movement, but wrapped his arms around Tony in turn.

When he pulled back he motioned Peter over, the fifteen year old watching the older teen nervously. He placed a comforting arm around his shoulder as he pointed towards Harley.

“Peter, this is Harley.”

Peter sputtered out a nervous ‘hi’ and shook Harley’s hand, the oldest teen looking at the spider in amusement. He had grown quite a lot, almost as tall as Tony by now, but he still looked like Harley. Curly hair a little darker than a few years back, and shorter around the ears, but eyes just as blue.

They moved into Harley’s lab. Another reason why Tony had decided to make the trip now; he needed some decent lab time with people that didn’t get on his nerves every five seconds. He didn’t mind Bruce, but he wasn’t considered good supervision so a third party was still always present. He hated it. They always were so subtle about it as well, pretending to just hang out instead of obviously keeping an eye on him.

Every time he complained about it they pretended he was paranoid and that they just wanted to spend time in the lab themselves.
Being in the lab with Peter and Harley immediately helped clear his mind, relaxing him to his core for the first time in a while.

As expected, both teens quickly grew used to each other, talking before long about things Tony couldn’t follow. Tony didn’t mind, content to listen to their rambling while working on his own project.

He had been able to work on some aspects of it at the lab or during the few snatches of unsupervised minutes. All schematics and data neatly hidden away where even Nat wouldn’t be able to find it. The big work - assembling everything - would be impossible to accomplish without anyone asking questions.

“Peter, can you help me with this please? Harley can work on the AI codes, right, kid?” he glanced up at Harley who nodded excitedly, immediately moving to the laptop to start working.

“What do you want me to do?”

“Just check everything over and tell me if something’s off.”

“Alright.”

Tony turned to Peter, careful to leave to front of the suit he was working on hidden as he showed Peter the wiring inside, explaining to him how everything worked and what still needed to be done.

It was efficient, working with the two teens, and he couldn’t help pride bustling in his chest as he realised how brilliant these kids truly were. Sometimes it was hard to remember that not every kid knew basic coding before learning to write their name and that most kids barely accomplished anything by the age of 25.

These kids were geniuses, and perhaps if they’d grown up in the same environment as him they would have already taken over the world by now.

Okay, perhaps a little over the top, but he was proud, nonetheless.

“Alright, I think that’s it.” Tony proclaimed with a huge grin as he had checked over the final wire. Harley confirmed the AI should be completely functional, and was already excited about testing her out.
“Cool! Are you going to tell us what it is, now?” Peter whined, looking about ready to burst out of his skin in excitement. Tony grinned at him and leaned forward over the table, grabbing the edges of the suit.

“You ready?” Both teens nodded, Harley curious and Peter excited, and his smile widened as he flipped the suit around to show the front of Peter’s new suit.

“Wait, is that - ?” Peter started, looking at it with wide eyes.

“Jup,” Tony let out, popping the p as he smoothed out the fabric. “I got sick of seeing you running around in your pyjama’s.”

“They’re not py - thank you mister stark!” Peter cut himself off glancing between the suit and Tony in awe.

Tony rolled his eyes, tired of watching Peter squirm in excitement and handed the suit to him. “Here, put it on and try it out. We’ll still need to upload the programming and the AI will only be accessible after you’ve completed the training protocol but at least it’s better protection than what you have now.”

Peter grabbed the suit in excitement, almost stumbling over himself when he tried to pull off his shoes. Tony took a moment to glance at Harley, who was watching them with a soft smile.

“I also have something for you, don’t worry.” Tony smiled as Harley raised a curious eyebrow at him. “Well don’t actually have anything. But instead of giving you your own AI, I’m going to teach you to make one.”

“Wait,” Harley looked at him in confusion, “Really?? What for?”

Tony shrugged with a small smile, “you tell me, kid. I had an AI years before I became Iron Man. They can help you around the lab, when working on projects, or serve as protection. That’s the fun in making your own: you can code them for anything.”

Tony took a minute to think that over, “well except world destruction, domination, genocide,
stealing candy from babies, and so on and so forth. I can and will take it away from you.”

Harley rolled his eyes, already used to Tony’s antics and Tony knew the kid was way too good to actually hurt a fly. Well at least without being provoked.

The teen walked around the table to throw his arms around Tony, and this time it was his turn to be taken aback. He happily squeezed back, however, up until a twatting sound caught his attention.

A web was stuck to the wall an inch from where Harley and Tony were standing, and he turned his head towards Peter. He was watching Tony sheepishly from where he’d been toying with his web shooters, hiding his hands behind his back as if Tony hadn’t already caught him.

“See, now that’s what we’re not going to do.”

The voice of FRIDAY informing him of an incoming call was enough to distract him, and he groaned internally at the name flashing on his glasses.

“Yeah cap,” he answered with all the politeness he could muster, “it better be something good cause this is my day off.”

“You have to come back now. The sorcerers are planning something.”

“The sorcerers are always planning something. Call me when something’s actually going on.” He moved to end the call before he lost his nerve, annoyance clear in his tone.

“Stark, listen to me,” Captain spoke, authority waving through the small receiver in Tony’s ear. Tony hated himself for it but stopped in his tracks nonetheless. “Camera’s spotted one of them near the Brooklyn bridge. we have to stop them.”

“How come you have a small army of people in New York right now but I’m so desperately needed? I’m sure you can lose this once on your own.” Or will you not have anyone to blame for your defeat then? Stark thought to himself. He didn’t want to seem too upset in front of the teens, but the captain was working wonders on his nerves.
“You really care more about your ‘day off’ than helping people?”

Tony felt like ripping the captain’s head off, and he died a little inside because it worked every time. He hated that the captain always knew what buttons the press.

It almost made him not want to go. Defiant till the end. But he had to, he knew he did. Not going will only make things worse with the team later and he didn’t quite feel like dealing with that today.

“I’ll be there.” He replied before curtly ending the call and turning towards the teens.

“I have to go. Peter, Happy will take you to the hotel for tonight and I should be back tomorrow morning to make the trip back to New York. Harley, I’m so sorry for cutting this trip short. I promise we will start on your AI soon. Still on for Thursday video chats?”

“You’re on,” Harley smiled, disappointment well hidden.
The sorcerers were elusive. They never spoke of their plans, never showing a regular pattern, no connection between the things they stole or destroyed.

At times when it seemed like they had figured out their motives, reports came in later about artefacts having been stolen or an important figure having been killed somewhere else. It didn’t help that Strange set out attacks just to draw Tony out, therefore complicating the puzzle they were trying to piece together.

It was infuriating, and Tony desperately hoped this attack had meaning or he’d actually have to kill Strange for interrupting his time with the teens.

He arrived in Brooklyn late, but by how much, Tony wasn’t sure. The amount of damage already done to the surrounding structures would suggest they had been going for a while, but for the Avengers all it really took was five minutes.

He let the annoyance about his careless teammates fuel him as he surveyed the battle, sorcerers and Avengers spread out over a few blocks.

It was mainly concentrated by the entrance to the bridge, at least, the space a little more open than the more residential center.

Nat was in the street, fighting a sorcerer they had gotten to know as Mordo, distracting him as Clint tried to take aim from a nearby building.

The arrow would have hit its mark, but it dissipated into thin air as it came too close to the sorcerer. He glanced behind him with a manic grin before tossing Clint back from his place on the roof with a simple spell, his groan of pain clear despite the loud noises of battle around them.

Nat grit her teeth and tried stepping up her game, but the sorcerers were too fast and she was a fool for trying to fight them with bare hands and weapons that couldn’t penetrate their shields.

Tony looked over the rest of the battle ground, skipping over Hill and Sam and glancing towards Thor. Thor was the most equipped to deal with the sorcerers. Even they weren’t immune to lightning, and he always managed to keep some of them busy on trying to deflect his strikes.

His eyes settled when he finally found Strange, however, fighting against Steve.

Well, fighting - it was more like a matador messing with a bull.

Steve was clearly angry, muscle strain visible from Tony’s spot in the sky as he attacked and attacked and attacked while Stephen just danced around him, hands moving through the air in fluid movements as he easily sidestepped Steve’s lunges. It was distracting how graceful the sorcerer was, robes curling around him as he moved in sync with his cloak.

Tony landed behind Stephen, blaster pointed at the back of his head and ready to deflect any attacks on his person.

He wondered how Stephen would fight today. Would he get up close and personal, using hand-to-hand, or would he dart around, spells following in quick succession as he toyed with the engineer. Either way Tony knew it was going to be maddening, that the sorcerer would know exactly how to drive him up the wall.
“You better have a good reason for forcing me out here,” he ground out, pulling the sorcerer’s attention to him. Stephen turned with a smile, cloak waving at Tony in excitement. “This was my day off.”

“Oh good, you made it!” Stephen grinned, completely abandoning his fight with Steve to stalk over towards Tony, not minding the weapons aimed at him. The Captain glared at Tony, trying once more to throw his shield at Stephen, who deflected without even looking.

“I’m already pissed off as it is, Strange, don’t make things worse for yourself,” Tony snarled, keeping his gaze fixed on the sorcerer.

“But things keep getting better and better!” Stephen purred, winking at Tony as he let his eyes roam over Tony’s body. It was a ridiculous movement, purely for show as he was completely covered in the same armour Stephen had known for months.

Scoffing, he fired up his weapons, Stephen throwing up shields to block the attack, before using his sling ring to get away.

Tony cursed, but it wasn’t surprising. The bastard was slippery, waving through space easily and making Tony’s head spin, seemingly being at multiple places at once.

A hand on his shoulder warned him, before Stephen pressed a kiss to the cheek of his mask and darted away again, disappeared into another portal.

Tony stumbled back in bewilderment, turning around towards where he’d last been with a growl. Surveying the area around him, he tried to see where the sorcerer had run off to, angry that he always managed to get so close. It wasn’t the first time Stephen darted closely just to run a hand over his back or side, the teasing touches infuriating Tony even further. It made Tony wish he’d just fucking end him right then and there, instead of showcasing how powerless he was against magic.

It was frustrating, getting toyed with, with the sorcerers’ skills and magic winning over their brute force every time. There was always something new, something surprising that threw them off their rhythm. And Strange was the worst of all, being extra annoying just for the sake of it. Teasing and flirting and messing with Tony’s mind.

He almost preferred him angry and merciless, so he would finally stop messing around and get to the point. At least when he was angry he was less calculated, driven by rage clouding his intelligent mind.

He recognised the sparks of an opening portal to his left and smirked, ready to try out the newest addition to his suit.

The metal whips sprung out before the portal had even fully formed, clasping around the sorcerer as he stepped through and yanking him off-balance.

Vanko had been onto something, but Tony couldn’t deny they were inspired by Stephen’s. They were more agile, more easily to control than Vanko’s were, and Tony wouldn’t have cared for them at all if not for throwing it in Stephen’s face. Showing him he could adapt, could get better, and would find better and better ways to fight against them. That he would never stop fighting him until one day he would win, he would defeat the sorcerer once and for all.

Stephen yelped in surprise, and Tony grinned in satisfaction as he pulled the whips towards him. The metal retracted into his suit until Stephen was standing in front of him, the remaining ropes
around his throat and arms keeping him from doing magic.

“Well, well, how the tables have turned,” Tony smirked, sure it was clear enough in his voice. The sorcerer was watching him in amusement however, despite his predicament, making Tony’s stomach twist. His blue eyes sparkled with mirth, the grey streaks in his hair striking from this close even as his face remained unfairly young.

“Shame, Stark, tie me up properly or not at all,” he tutted, leaning his head forward towards him, trying to close the distance between them even as the metal dug further into his neck. Tony’s gaze flicked to the pale stretch of the sorcerer’s throat, before glaring back into his eyes. “Come on, sweetheart, you can pull them tighter; I can take it.”

Tony shook his head in disbelief, exasperation at the sorcerer’s theatrics bubbling underneath his skin. The moment of confusion was all Stephen needed however, and Tony realised his mistake as soon as he saw the smirk crawl onto Stephen’s face.

The sorcerer, tied with his hands behind his back and held in place by the ropes around his neck, jumped up, wrapping his legs around Tony’s waist in one swift movement.

The motion shocked Tony enough to loosen the ropes, but instead of ducking away, Stephen only leaned closer, wrapping his freed arms around Tony’s neck. Tony stumbled back, trying to get away from the sorcerer, even as his hands grabbed at Stephen’s thighs to steady him on instinct.

Stephen sat comfortably, smirking at Tony who was starting to heat up in his suit. “Now if you take off the mask, we can have some real fun.”

Why did Stephen’s voice always have to be so low and smooth, making Tony’s head spin and distracting him from the matter at hand? Couldn’t his voice be just as grating and annoying as the sorcerer himself? It must be the world’s cruelest punishment, designed to make Tony suffer even more.

Tony growled and tossed him off, firing up his thrusters to get away from the frustrating bastard. He floated in the air, Stephen not taking long to join him with his cloak fluttering gracefully in the wind. A small pout was visible as he booed Tony, but Tony’d had enough.

He shouldn’t even be here. If it wasn’t for Stephen, he wouldn’t have had to cut his time in Tennessee short. He needed to end whatever the sorcerer was planning, had seen enough of him for a lifetime.

“Can anyone tell me why they’re here?”

No one answered him, and he rolled his eyes before looking around to figure it out himself.

“FRIDAY, scan the nearby buildings for any sorcerers or anything of importance.” It took the AI a second to complete her scan, during which he continued trying to get a hold of Stephen again, the sorcerer only dodging him, darting around with that infuriating smile of his.

Steve had moved on to fighting other sorcerers for what use it was going to do, and FRIDAY finally spoke up as he sent Stephen flying with a well-aimed missile. It wasn’t much and he would recover soon enough, but at least it brought some spark of satisfaction, knowing he wasn’t completely powerless against the sorcerer, that Stephen was still human and therefore still susceptible to injury.

“There was a call to the authorities about a disturbance at a mansion a few blocks away,” FRIDAY’s Irish lilt rang through his speakers, “eye witness describe sorcerer activity.”
He turned in the direction FRIDAY pointed him, but the smirk on Stephen’s face showed he was already too late.

“Too bad we finished early,” he sighed dramatically, “but I’ll make sure to see you soon, Stark.” He winked at Tony and disappeared along with the other sorcerers.

Gritting his teeth, he hurried over to the building, already scared of what he would find. The front door of the house was already blown off, when Tony got there, people crowding around the place to see what the commotion was about.

Apparently, a collector lived there, the sorcerers having taken some artefacts and burning whatever was left. Luckily, most inhabitants had been smart enough to stay out of the sorcerers’ way, but the bodyguard of the family hadn’t been so humble.

It made his stomach twist, thinking of Happy, knowing that if he’d been in the same scenario, he would have jumped into danger no matter how much more powerful his opponent was. Happy was stubborn like that.

Tony landed on the street outside, listened to the people’s explanations about what had happened and gave his condolences. He hated how he had failed, how they always seemed to fail. It was too easy for the sorcerer to keep them busy, overpowering the Avengers by their sheer strength in numbers.

“If you hadn’t stopped to flirt with him you could have blasted his head off before he’d even turned around!” Steve had stopped next to him, arms crossed as he too glared at the building, flicking an accusing glance at Tony.

Tony didn’t comment, trying to keep his temper under control and not let the fire consume him from the inside.
“Tony, we need to talk.”

Tony didn’t even look up from his work. He knew it infuriated the captain, but he didn’t care, wouldn’t let himself be bossed around his own lab.

He was already barely allowed five minutes of peace at a time before someone came to bother him and he wasn’t allowed to put up restrictions.

The entire building is everyone’s home after all, and they should be able to reach him at all times for if there were something to go wrong. Being antisocial and locking yourself away won’t help the team dynamic; they should be able to trust everyone in their safe spaces.

It was bullshit, Tony knew, but what could he do?

After Ultron, having his own unsupervised lab was officially vetoed by Steve, and even if there had been a vote it would have been unanimous.

“I’m working.”

“It’s important,” Steve insisted, walking closer to stand in front of the table Tony was working on, arms crossed in that stance that screamed of his superiority complex.

“So is this,” Tony countered, reaching over to grab the wrench as he focussed his attention on FRIDAY. His suit had been damaged during the mission from earlier in the day, and he wanted to get it fixed before some other idiots (Stephen) decided to attack. “Are those test results in yet, baby girl?”

“Not yet, boss, still running.”

“Perfect, so you have a minute.” Steve spoke up. Tony rolled his eyes, finally looking up and piercing his annoyed gaze.

“You still here?” He was already in a sour mood as it was. They had finished today’s mission without too much problem, yes his suit had gotten damaged but it was the only thing that had even gotten any scrapes at all. It had been a clean mission, and he should be glad for a job well done.

Then why, he couldn’t help but wonder, did he keep messing up against the sorcerers? They failed most times, Tony failed most times. Their magic shouldn’t be that much harder to beat than HYDRA weapons and alien tech. Tony had so many ideas on how the could inhibit them from doing magic in battle, to protect themselves and other but he kept letting himself get distracted.
The sorcerer too easily got under his skin, and it was absolutely infuriating Tony.

“Your childish behaviour is doing none of us any favours. You need to start being more of a team player.”

Tony couldn’t help the scowl falling over his face. He was already beating himself up enough as it was and now Rogers dared blaming him for their pathetic teamwork?

How fucking dare he?

He was nothing but courteous, always putting his own misgivings aside to work as a team during missions.

Yes, things didn’t always work out according to plan, and Tony - they all - had to step up their game if they wanted to defeat the sorcerers. But unlike Rogers’ implications, he wasn’t a child. He knew the importance of what they were doing, and wasn’t going to risk innocent lives because he didn’t get along with his colleagues.

That he would even imply otherwise was enough for Tony’s ears to start ringing.

“Listen up, cap,” he started, Steve was already sighing, knowing Tony was going to throw another one of his ‘tantrums’. Tony hated it, hated how no matter what he did or said, it would always fall on deaf ears. “Perhaps you’d be a better team leader if you weren’t so afraid to own up to your own mistakes.”

“I wouldn’t expect anything better from you, though,” he continued, itching to hit the captain where it hurt. To get some kind of indication that he was at least hearing him. “As you didn’t actually get to that part of the military training, huh, private Rogers.”

Tony didn’t regret saying it, even as Rogers eyes met his in fury.

It had made sense in the beginning, having the Captain America become team leader. Tony had been naive and hopeful back then, thinking the world could rally behind the symbol of peace.

But in the end, the world was bigger than just America, and over time Rogers had proven his absolute lack of leader instincts. He always had personal motives that didn’t line up with the greatest good, with the survival of the most people.

And it was impossible to believe how much money Tony has already spent on cleaning up his messes.

“The rest of the team clearly doesn’t think so,” Rogers fired back, leaning closer over the table that separated them, “The actual team members that have earned their spot. So, honestly Tony, I couldn’t care less about your opinion. I already had the support of the only Stark that ever mattered.”

Tony flinched back from the Captain’s word in disbelief, anger crawling through him as a hint of satisfaction shone through Roger’s eyes. It shouldn’t hurt as much as it did. He was absolutely disgusted that after all this time he still struggled with his daddy issues, angry with the captain for the ‘impossible’ standard he’d set for his father’s son.

He fought for something to say, for anything that would make him win against Steve no matter how petty. A second later, however, he realised the captain had been frozen in place.

He blinked, leaning forward to inspect his face, still with that infuriating smile, hard around his
lips. Tony poked him in the cheek, but absolutely got no reaction, as if he’d suddenly been replaced by a wax statue. “What the-“

“He’s lucky the spell’s reversible,” a tight voice spoke up from behind him, and Tony immediately turned towards the sorcerer, gauntlet forming around his hand as he aimed. Anticipation ran through his veins, and he almost wished the sorcerer to start something so he could take his anger out on him.

Stephen was sitting on a work bench, feet dangling in front of him as he leaned back on his hands and glared at Steve. The cloak let go of his shoulders, and Tony yelped as it flew towards him, trying to aim at it without destroying his lab in the process. The fabric was too agile, however, swooping around him to settle on his shoulders and holding on tightly.

He redirected his repulser back to Strange, instead. He was certain he hadn’t heard a portal opening, the sound something so familiar by now that it should have been a Pavlovian response to turn around. “How the fuck did you get in here? And what is your bratty bedsheet doing?”

Yelping as the Cloak slapped him over the head, he continued glaring at Stephen.

“Be nice, it likes you,” Stephen drawled out as he flicked his gaze to Tony.

He squinted his eyes at the sorcerer, his attention putting him on edge. “That still doesn’t answer my first question.”

“Oh, Stark, cute of you to think your silly tower is safe from me.” Stephen smiled, and it was so genuine it made Tony’s cheeks heat up.

In anger of course.

The tower was highly secure, it wasn’t Tony’s fault that he hadn’t figured magic out yet. That he hadn’t had any time or way to figure out the science behind it and adjust his technology accordingly. “In contrast to our dear captain over there, however, I know not to force my presence on others.”

*Did everyone have to be so fucking infuriating?* “If you’re not forcing your presence on me right now, then what are you doing?”

Stephen raised an eyebrow and glanced at the ceiling in thought. Tony could breathe for a second with his eyes no longer on him, the tightness in his chest easing slightly. “Touché, guess my contempt got the best of me. See I don’t like people messing with what’s mine.”

“I’m not yours,” Tony growled, but dropped his glove, feeling ridiculous still holding it up while it seemed to have zero effect on the sorcerer.

“A man can dream,” Stephen sighed, dropping his gaze back to Tony to run an appreciative glance over his body. He shifted uncomfortably, fingers twitching at his side as he turned away from him.

Perhaps not the best move, exposing his back to his enemy, but the blasted cloak was still on his shoulders anyway.

His heart sped up as he could hear the sorcerer jumping down from the table, glancing back to see what he was doing. He was just walking around however, surveying the different projects he’d been working on as he slowly made his way towards Tony. Tony watched him in silence, curious as to what he would do, what his plan was. There had to be an ulterior motive to him being here, though there was literally nothing Tony could think of that the sorcerer could be interested in.
Well except for himself, of course.

“Shouldn’t you be off doing evil?” Tony eventually asked, no longer able to keep the question to himself, folding his hands over his chest and leaning against the table.

“Not until later tonight,” Stephen hummed, stopping to pet DUM-E’s claw. Tony raised his eyebrow at the movement. No one ever acknowledge the bots except for him and Rhodey.

His attention quickly snapped back towards his actual words, however. “What?”

Stephen gave him a pointed look, rolling his eyes softly at him. Softly? Not a word Tony would have ever expected to use to describe Stephen. He was all harsh movements and harsher words, whether they were flirtily directed at Tony or used in anger against his teammates. Tony found the softness suited him, lighting his eyes up and smoothing out his features. “I’m kidding. You can rest easy tonight. You look like you can use it.”

“You insulting me? That’s a first,” Tony smirked. He knew he looked terrible. Had barely slept five hours in the last two days, but he’d been busy. Steve had decided they needed extra training - they did - but as he still had some responsibility at SI and he also needed to update everyone’s gear he was stretched thin.

“Don’t worry,” Stephen smirked right back, stopping in front of Tony. Tony glanced up at him, feeling every inch of height difference between them. Curse his father’s genes.

Stephen leaned forward and Tony froze.

They were already standing unnecessarily close, his scent overwhelming his senses, and he had to fight his own body not to lean into it. His weak heart had to be the cause of the arrhythmia he experienced, there was no other explanation.

The sorcerer’s lips passed his own, however, his hand cupping his ear like a fifth grader sharing a secret. “You’re still the most enchanting person in the multiverse.”

Tony hated the shiver running down his spine.

Biting his lip, he let the familiar anger course through him as his hands clutched tightly at his side. Stephen leaned back, incessant smirk sparkling in his eyes, and Tony had reached his limit.

With a swift movement, he used his elbow to push Stephen back, forcing more distance between the two of them. He let his gauntlet shift into a blade, pushing it against Stephen’s throat as he growled.

“Get out of my lab.”

The sorcerer didn’t let it dampen his spirits, glancing down at Tony with a pleased expression, before motioning for the cloak to return to him.

“Probably for the best,” Stephen sighed, glance filling with disgust as it flicked towards Rogers. “Too much time passes and they start asking annoying questions.”

His eyes turned hopeful as he looked back at Tony, still pressing the knife against his skin, with a questioning eyebrow raise. “Unless you want to keep him like this? Personally I think it’s horrible for the decor but we could move it?”

Tony glared at Stephen, only slightly tempted to agree. “Turn him back.”

Tony watched him disappear from underneath his fingertips, no portal this time, before glancing around the empty lab with something akin to regret. Brushing it off, he retracted the blade and turned his gaze towards Steve, still frozen in place.

He sighed, turning to stand back in front of his workspace and glancing down at his mask.

A frown fell over his face however, when an invisible hand seemed to draw a pink heart on the cheek of his faceplate. Once the heart was completed, the little drawing started moving, beating like a normal heart would, except for the soft stutter every few seconds. He glanced around in bewilderment, before burying his head in his hands and groaning into them.

Leave it to the sorcerer to frustrate him to the bone, always toying with him in more and more unexpected ways. He had to breathe in deeply a few times to shake the annoyance out of his skin, and barely looked up when he heard Steve shift in front of him.

He grabbed his helmet and left the lab without a word to the captain, too angry and frustrated to bother with him right now.

That infuriating asshole.
Thanks for everyone leaving comments! I really hope you like this chapter as well and more fun stuff is definitely to come

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Everything was becoming too much.

He was running himself ragged, he knew. To get the team’s approval, the public’s approval and most important of all, his own.

With every moment of peace, every dot of light on the horizon being ripped to shreds as soon as he thought he was improving.

He’d been trying all week to get that stupid heart off his helmet. Had to use an old suit in a fight against the sorcerers a few days ago because for the life of him he wouldn’t give Stephen the satisfaction of wearing the heart on his cheek.

Yet when he thought he had finally done something - created a whole new bleeding edge suit that would not only be without magical graffiti but would surely help him in battle, help them in defeating the sorcerers, help them in protecting civilians more successfully - the others only saw fear. Fear of what his new inventions could do, that it would be uncontrollable.

Tony couldn’t help but scoff; he had things under control. He always had control over his technology.

Perhaps unaware of what others were doing with it, in the past, but there was a reason he wasn’t mass-producing his new tech. He knew about his failures, was painfully aware of them, had to live with them every single day.

Yet, if this was solely for him to use, solely for making the world a better place on Tony’s terms, why could the team not see it as something good? Why break him down, shove their distrustful little hands into anything that gave Tony a slither of happiness and make it about them?

About their fears and Tony’s past mistakes.

The team, Stephen, his own pathetic failures… they were all becoming too much.

He was reaching his limit, ready to boil over. To fly too high and crash into the ocean.

He needed something to rip apart, something to hit his frustration out on, but he had nothing safe to blow up on the roof and he was not so angry that he’d risk getting people hurt.

Ideally he could head down to the training room to work out his anger there, maybe beat up a punching bag even Steve shouldn’t be able to kick through.

But he didn’t want anyone to see him. He didn’t want to even think about his teammates.
He wanted to do something to piss them all off. Most of all Steve. He felt like some rebellious teenager, thrown back to skipping his dad’s important events to get pissed at a club instead.

He needed that. Needed that rush of doing something he knew would get him in trouble. Needed to be in control of the situation. Have Steve yell at him for something he did purposefully for once. Wanted to feel smug and reckless and like a goddamn adult making his own decisions without having to apologise for them.

“New suit?” A voice asked from behind him, bored and languid, the perfect fuel to Tony’s already open flame. “Looks good on you.”

He swivelled around, arms flailing at the movement as he turned angry eyes on the sorcerer. Tony could see the sorcerer’s interest spike slightly, clearly not having expected the harsh reaction.

He was not flying, instead standing a little further away, cloak nowhere to be spotted. His arms were crossed, leaning against one of the antennae stationed on the roof. Tony still felt the fire lapping away at his skin, heating up even more with the second.

He hated the sorcerer’s perfect posture, his lean legs leading up to slim hips and broad shoulders, the way his hair was always perfectly in place. The way his expression was always so different yet so infuriating still.

He didn’t know what he himself looked like. A mess probably. Angry and pissed off, nanotech suit covering only half of his body because he needed to feel the cold February air against his bare arms. Hair tangled from working in the lab all day, and muscle shirt soaked in sweat.

He stalked up to him, every step making his heart speed up in determination.

Stopping right in front of the sorcerer, he glared up at him, hating the fact that the sorcerer was taller than him and how fucking blue his eyes were in the dark of the night.

Stephen just raised a curious eyebrow at him, the usual off-battle boredom returned and pushing Tony over the edge.

He hated him. Hated the sorcerer for always winning, always besting him and using him like a puppet to play with. Hating him for making his skin itch uncomfortably, for being so goddamn infuriating.

Stephen squinted down at him, angry suspicion starting to crawl over his own features. “What did they do?” he demanded, almost a soft growl in his fury, mirroring Tony’s own.

God he was fucking maddening.

At the very least he could take satisfaction from surprising the sorcerer.

“Shut up,” he growled back, before he took the last step separating the two of them and grabbed him by the collar, yanking him down into an angry kiss.

Stephen stalled in surprise, which had Tony smirking against him, lapping into his mouth even further. A low moan was the response, sending reverberations down Tony’s spine in bliss. The angry fire in his core only heating up even more, pulling and pushing like tidal wave as it coursed through him, making him push himself further against the sorcerer.

He tried reaching for more heat still, more touch, more rough softness as he let go of his collar and let his hand trail up to Stephen’s neck. Keeping him in place as he pulled him down against him,
allowing him to taste deeper, touch harder, until every thought was out of his mind. Every regret and mistake of the past dissolving under the sorcerer’s tongue.

Stephen growled against his lips, pushing back into him, but Tony refused to give up control however.

He was in charge. His terms. His decision. His self-destructive behaviour.

Usually, he hated how attracted he was to the sorcerer, but now he was making the most of it. Enjoying having the powerful man under his fingertips, at his mercy for as long as the illusion lasted.

His mouth tasted like red wine and something salty, and his hands roamed his torso, dispelling any and all thoughts from Tony’s mind.

At the back of his head he could hear something about consent, but the sorcerer seemed eager enough, and Tony knew he was powerless to force him into anything. He only had control now because Stephen was letting him have it. He wasn’t a complete idiot, after all; knew the sorcerer could dominate him without second thought.

Stephen pulled back eventually, putting but a breath of distance between them. Hi arms were draped lazily over Tony’s shoulders as he stared at him with an amused smirk. Always that amused smirk. “Stark?”

“I’m going to fuck you now.” Tony gritted out, grabbing the sorcerer by the waist and digging his fingers into his hips as Stephen nodded in agreement. “You’re going to take us somewhere else, and then I’m going to fuck you.”

Stephen perked his eyebrow at the suggestion of moving, probably surprised Tony would even trust him enough to take him away from the tower. Truth is, Tony just didn’t give a shit about his own safety at the moment, and New York rooftops were infested by crawly vigilante’s that he didn’t feel like traumatising.

Something flashed Stephen’s eyes akin to realisation, immediately chased with a small smirk. Again with the mind reading then. He should be upset about people messing with his head, but he had no discernable proof and he felt clearheaded enough. He didn’t quite care.

Stephen let go of his neck and pushed him, walking him back a few steps until they were standing in a bedroom, dark furniture filling the space. Tony took a second to look around and search within himself for an ounce of regret, but couldn’t find any. With that confirmation he attacked the sorcerer’s lips again, already missing the touch.

“Take off the suit,” Stephen ground out between kisses, and Tony complied with a tap against his chest, nano bots retracting into their housing unit.

The night was harsh, it was angry, fuelled by hatred and primal desire, and for the first time in a long time, Tony felt alive. Felt like he was in charge of his own life and choices.

Stephen, despite being infuriating in battle and just an all-out asshole, was surprisingly fun in bed, though Tony would never admit it. He took things farther than any of his previous lovers ever dared and he revelled in it. The carelessness of it all, the lack of worry about hurting each other, and Stephen wasn’t shy about voicing his appreciation either. He didn’t necessarily enjoy pain in any context, but they could be rougher, didn’t have to flinch back from forming any bruises. It was exhilarating, just doing whatever they wanted, anger and frustration turning into pleasure and
By the end of the night, Tony was exhausted in all the right ways. His muscles pleasantly strained and skin sticky with sweat. He listened to Stephen’s soft panting next to him, and dared to peak a glance at the sorcerer. He was staring at the ceiling, face devoid of any emotion, cheeks still heated from their earlier exertion.

Feeling Tony’s eyes on him, he let a smirk crawl onto his face, tilting his head slightly to glance at him. “Don’t get sentimental on me now, Stark.”

Tony huffed, “Hey, I’m not. I just made all your dreams come true.”

Stephen hummed noncommittally, gaze returning to the ceiling, the smug smile staying on his face despite the emptiness of his eyes. “Told you we’d have fun in bed.”

He had. On multiple occasions. In varying degrees of explicit.

Tony rolled his eyes, earlier bliss starting to fade as his common sense returned to him. He pointed his own stare at the ceiling. The dark wood was starting to lighten along with the sky outside, and Tony was suddenly reminded how he’d ended up there. Where he was, who he was with.

He was - honestly he didn’t know. He had told Stephen to take them away and he had, though where to, Tony wasn’t sure. Most likely to the sorcerer’s base of operations.

Well, that was stupid of him.

The thought sounded through his head loud and clear, and he immediately jumped up out of bed to stumble around the room, searching for his discarded clothes and cursing his own existence.

He’d had multiple walks of shame throughout his lifetime - though mostly he was the one being walked away from - but this really topped the cake.

What kind of idiot goes off to have sex with his enemy?

Having the heroes out of the way, no matter how attracted Stephen was to him, would only make his life easier. The Avengers were powerful but easily dealt with with magic. Tony had only been protected by Stephen’s attraction to him, and he was pretty sure that same attraction was why they hadn’t just killed his teammates off yet.

Who was to say what Strange would do now he’d gotten what he wanted? And he was the fool who just gave it to him.

Stephen was watching him with lazy eyes and Tony glanced at him as his breathing started getting heavier.

He recognised the symptoms but tried to clamp down on the panic crawling up his spine. Not now. Not here. Not in front of the sorcerer.

He couldn’t show weakness, had to find a way out of here, but the feeling of being trapped, the imminent feelings of failure were heightening with every breath. He didn’t dare turn back to Stephen, trying to hide the heavy rise and fall of his chest as he grabbed his clothing off the floor.

He didn’t know what was freaking him out most, Stephen having lead him into a trap somehow or him genuinely not caring at all about Tony being his opponent. That he really had just planned on fucking him and letting him leave to fight him another day and continue this game they had clearly
been playing. The game that Tony had let himself be so easily dragged into.

Not anymore. Taking a deep breath, he turned to face Stephen with a defiant glare, swallowing down any remaining panic.

Tony could swear Stephen’s gaze wavered slightly, but a second later, Stephen’s piercing blue eyes were gone, along with everything else in the room.

He blinked against the light of the sun starting to peak over the horizon as he was standing on the roof again. The few pieces of clothing he hadn’t recovered yet were laying at his feet. The only thing missing being his muscle shirt.

Tony stopped in disbelief as his sigh of relief mixed with a twist of his heart.

Option two then.

Chapter End Notes

The next two parts will be quite short so I’ll be posting them together as one chapter. Part one will be posted to my Tumblr either Sunday or Monday evening, and part two (and the update on here) might be later in the week.

Tumblr: @funkylittlebidiot
“You’re wearing his shirt again.” Wong pointed out, expression subdued as he stared at Stephen through the gaps in the bookcases. It was a useless effort, checking the order in the library, as no sorcerer in their right mind would risk the librarian’s wrath.

Stephen didn’t have to look down to confirm Wong’s observation. He had chosen the piece of clothing deliberately after all, and he was glad at least that Wong wouldn’t be able to sense the small preservation spell he’d placed on it.

It smelled like Tony, and he’d like to keep it that way.

“And what about it?” Stephen replied, already bored of the conversation as he moved to grab the next book in his ever-growing pile.

Studying usually helped to keep his mind occupied, but over the last few months he’d gotten behind, losing time both by not being able to keep his attention on the books and by wasting time searching out Tony.

He wasn’t at all interest in his friends’ opinion. Both Wong and Karl had made their thoughts very clear as soon as Stephen’s incessant crush had started.

You think he wanted to be head over heels for his opponent?

Well, it was fun to see how easy it was to rile him up, how flustered his words made the Iron Man even as he tried to hide it. It was fun to know he could say whatever he wanted and tease without repercussions. Tony Stark had become a fun plaything as soon as Stephen had laid his eyes on him.

What could he say; he had a thing for strong men with pretty brown doe eyes who never quite knew to shut up.

Best of all, he didn’t have to worry about getting too involved, because Tony Stark was unobtainable.

Oh what a joke that had become.

His infatuation hadn’t even been his fault.

He’d started teasing Tony because he’d sensed the engineer’s attraction to him. Stark may deny it as much he liked, but Stephen wasn’t blind and knew the man couldn’t help thinking he was hot. He wasn’t going to pretend to be humble about his appearance.

If along the way Stephen’s intrigue had manifested into something more, that was his mistake.

There was something so fascinating about Tony Stark. How there was so much snark in such a tiny body, so much fake bravado mixed with a need for approval. And why the fuck he wasn’t getting
any was a mystery to Stephen.

Anyone could see he was the biggest asset the Avengers had.

Perhaps he’d gotten protective, seeing how everyone was treating him, perhaps he liked how his teasing managed to distract the engineer of his troubles. Or maybe he was just vain and shallow, attraction fueled by nothing but his libido telling him Tony Stark was what he needed.

Either way, toying with him was as much of an outlet he was going to get for his feelings.

“You know it can never be more, Stephen,” Wong tutted for the hundredth time. “He’s only a distraction to you. To our cause.”

“We constantly need to adapt our timeline either way,” Stephen waved him off, pretending to skim the next page, “having to go back for a particular book or artefact a week later isn’t going to change the course of history in the long run.”

“You know Mordo is getting more and more annoyed with you.”

“That’s his problem,” Stephen shrugged, “He didn’t seem to mind when it was of use to us. Even the Ancient One hasn’t said anything about it.”

Stephen was done for. Had been for a while.

He just had never expected for his feelings to go deeper than simple attraction. Would have enjoyed a single good fuck with the very alluring superhero and have moved on.

But as the months passed, he found that not only did he lust for the man, he’d stopped enjoying sex with other people, the thought of anyone in his bed that wasn’t Tony appalling. And now he’d experienced first-hand how compatible they truly were, he didn’t think he’d ever want anyone else.

He needed Tony to be his. Wanted him in ways that shouldn’t be possible for him.

He’d never been sentimental, never given a fuck about his partners, but Tony was special, he knew that much.

Didn’t need his third eye wide the fuck open to realize Tony’s importance both to the world and to himself.

He knew Tony was attracted to him, as proven by him finally making the first move, but Stephen wanted more from him.

You could say many things about the evil sorcerer, but he was not delusional. He knew the engineer would never love him the way he did, yet he couldn’t help his own feelings. If fucking was all he was going to get, however, he was going to make the most of it.

At first, the engineer had avoided the roof for a while, instead spending more time in his lab despite the Avengers’ presence. The few times they’d fought each other Tony had remained quiet, even as Stephen had pulled out all the stops. Teased and flirted, using his new obtained information of his likes and dislikes as leverage for the engineer’s attention, yet no dice.

Stephen had contemplated going to search him out first, going to annoy him into caving once more, but Stephen couldn’t.

Call him a hopeless romantic, but he wanted Tony to come to him. After all he was constantly
being manipulated by the Avengers, and Stephen didn’t want to add another person to the list of people using him. He would gladly let Tony use him, instead.

There was also that bit of panic he’d noticed on Tony’s face after. He’d expected anger, sure, but seeing how upset the engineer was had still sent a spike of hurt through him, and by the vishanti he would never admit to that tiny insecurity having worked its way underneath his skin.

Then there were the Avengers, the reason Tony had come to him in the first place.

He swore one day he was going to kill them all. Let Tony be angry at him as much as he wanted just to get those leaches away from his precious love.

His patience had been rewarded, in the end, and it had been a relief when Tony had finally fallen into bed with him a second time. Stephen swore one day he’d stop caring. He’d stop his treacherous heart from getting involved, but it was harder than he had expected. He wanted to touch Tony softly, praise his heart and mind sincerely, so Tony understood how much he truly meant it.

Instead he had to stick to endless teasing, always a hint of snark to hide the truth of his love.

As long as Tony assumed it didn’t go farther than desire, he would be fine.

“He will never understand what we are trying to accomplish.” Wong spoke up once more, pulling Stephen from his thoughts. “Definitely doesn’t approve of the means to our end.”

Stephen knew that, for heaven’s sake.

He stood up, abandoning his books as he glared at his fellow sorcerer. The cloak flew toward him from where it had been exploring the far side of the library, attaching itself to his shoulders at once. He turned his back to Wong in annoyance, the librarian’s irritated sigh following him as he headed towards the hallway, before opening a portal to the Avengers’ tower.

The mirror dimension must have been a stalker’s wet dream. Stephen was very aware he was using it that way at least, so he shouldn’t judge, but he couldn’t help himself.

If Tony could never be his, at least he could have him in his head.

He was sitting in front of his desk in his room, hologram projected in front of him.

Stephen should have known. It was Thursday, after all, the day of his evening video chats with some teen from Tennessee.

He took a seat on Tony’s bed, crossing his legs and cupping his cheek with his hand as he watched the engineer. His brown eyes were focused, talking to Harley about AI’s. Stephen knew he’d been trying to teach to kid to code his own for the last couple of weeks, aware that their project should almost be finished by now.

It was intriguing how good Tony was with kids. There was a vigilante running around Queens that Stephen probably shouldn’t know the identity of, and he’d seen Peter sling around with a new suit recently, clearly made by Tony. He didn’t know how Tony kept finding these teenagers, but he was great with them, Stephen couldn’t deny.

Perhaps if Stephen had ever felt the need for children the thought would have pushed him over the edge even more.
He watched as Tony smiled proudly as the first hints of a voice ran through Harley’s garage, and noticed the teen’s own excitement. Tony’s eyes lit up, more vibrant and real than he’d ever seen from him.

Stephen couldn’t help perking up, stretching his legs back out as he got up and made his way towards the desk. He was enthralling, leaning forward slightly to get a better look at the screen, brown eyes scanning the code expertly.

Stephen wished he was able to sit in Tony’s lap, to have the engineer’s focus on him with that same intensity, but perhaps that was taking things too far. Instead, he had to make do with sitting on the desk, facing Tony to get the best view, and let an invisible finger covered in gloves stroke Tony’s cheek.

The flutter of his heart was as unwelcome as ever, but at least he’d get to see him later tonight for real. Would be able to run his hands over his skin as he’d get to pretend to be loved by the most gorgeous man in the multiverse.

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Okay, so maybe Tony had started an affair with a super villain.

Did that make him a bad person?

He had tried to resist a repeat performance after their first night, to the point that he’d even avoided going to the roof. The result being he’d have to deal with his teammates more. The frustration building up, along with Stephen’s flirting during battles, had been enough to make him cave, however.

Tony hated how effective the sorcerer’s teasing had become.

Stephen luckily never mentioned their nights in front of the Avengers. He could easily shrug it off and deny it, joke about Stephen not being able to tell dreams from reality, but it would plant seeds of doubt, and Tony could really not afford that right now.

He still always fought him when the sorcerers attacked, stopped him from hurting people and damaging the city too badly. So if at night he waited for him on the roof of the tower, and jumped him as soon as he made an appearance, was that really so bad?

Everyone deserved a little downtime after all.

And Stephen was fun, he was intriguing and didn’t ask many questions. They barely talked, except for the jokes and snarks coming from both sides, and the absolute filth Stephen spewed as soon as they’d gotten a good rhythm going.

He was still as infuriating as ever, however, but Tony loved to channel that pent up energy into a good fuck, the physical strain pulling every ounce of frustration out of his muscles.

It was healthy, he decided, both physically and to fight back the stress that so easily built up during his time with the Avengers. Not sure his cardiologist would count it as a workout routine, but that didn’t really matter anyway. Maybe he should ask? Stephen would probably know, being a doctor and all.
And after all, how could he resist when Stephen was so damn beautiful?

Tony always watched him after sex, using the excuse of post-coital bliss to trace his eyes over his gorgeous features. The way his cheeks dipped, the curl of his lips, the soft expanse of skin by his throat, blotchy and red now due to Tony’s earlier administrations.

Stephen paid him no mind, as usual staring up at the ceiling. Tony often wondered what he was thinking during these moments. His own hatred for the man only returned after he’d been dropped off at the tower again and had gotten some sleep, but Stephen’s face went slack right after.

It was difficult to understand what could be going through his mind. Tony knew his hatred was one-sided, the sorcerer never being shy with his words of admiration or possessive streak, but when it was just the two of them, when he wasn’t playing Tony in the midst of battle or when they weren’t lost in the heat of passion, he was calm, as if lost in thought.

Tony didn’t understand it. And he hated things he didn’t understand.

He was sick of it. Sick of the quiet, sick of the neutrality.

“Why do you hate my teammates so much?”

It was a question that didn’t really warrant an answer, but it got the desired result. Stephen’s face immediately went hard, scoffing up at the ceiling before turning towards Tony with an exasperated eyeroll.

“Because they treat you like garbage.” Stephen said pointedly, locking his eyes with Tony. Tony sighed looking into them, shifting so he was lying on his side and could watch Stephen more easily, pressing his face against the soft pillow that smelt strongly of the sorcerer. “And they complicate my missions.”

“You know,” Tony teased, “at the tower we call your ‘missions’ attacks.”

Stephen hummed uncaringly, moving to look back at the ceiling.

“How do you know I don’t deserve it?” Tony asked quickly, successfully keeping the sorcerer’s blue eyes on him, smiling as Stephen squinted at him.

“Why would you?”

“Because I fucked up and created a super AI that was planning to - and almost succeeded - in destroying the human race.”

Stephen scoffed again at his answer, glaring at Tony. “So if I plan on killing a bunch of people, say a certain Avenger, but something goes wrong and I fail. Does that make me a good person?”

“What?” Tony frowned in bewilderment, lips twisting at the ridiculous question. “No?”

“Of course not, because intentions matter despite the result.” Stephen stated pointedly, eyes flicking away from Tony’s to focus on something behind him. Tony frowned to himself, letting the words sink in. They made sense, logically, but was it really that simple?

“People still got hurt, despite my good intentions, and those people need someone to take responsibility.”

“Why?” Stephen asked, piercing Tony’s gaze with his own once more. “What good will it do their
dead loved ones? Your mistakes might be yours, but they’re not always within your control. You’re a fool if you think things are that simple.”

Stephen spoke with such certainty, it was almost contagious. He wanted to believe what he was saying, and knew there was a core of truth in his words. He didn’t want to think this deeply right now, he wanted to continue pretending everything was alright and he was just lying in bed next to some regular hot guy that he’d just had incredible sex with.

“So what happened to Wanda?” Tony asked, hoping his discomfort wasn’t too visible. “We haven’t heard from her since she joined you.”

“Oh don’t worry,” Stephen replied, eyes sparkling with hidden mirth, “she’s safely locked away in the dungeons of Kamar Taj.”

“Wait, what?” Tony frowned, sitting up on his elbow to glare down at Stephen. “So you did kidnap her?”

“Relax, Stark,” Stephen huffed, “she’s there voluntarily. Vishanti forbid she learns from her mistakes.”

“But - Why?”

“Well, we couldn’t kill her because she might be useful later -”

“That’s not what I meant!” Tony groaned in frustration, sitting up completely and carding his hands through his hair. His heart was starting to speed up, unsure of the cause but being fully aware of the guilt coursing through him.

“We kept our promise.” Tony glanced back at the sorcerer in confusion. He’d been certain it had been her own choice. He hated her, but he didn’t think he could let her rot there against her will. “If she joined us we would teach her how to control and hone her powers. She’s given books to study and knows that if she tries to escape - which she won’t be able to - we’ll just take her powers away from her. In a few months we’ll review her progress.”

“But why,” Tony asked again, confusion still itching under his skin as he locked eyes with Stephen once more, the sorcerer watching him carefully. “Why bother locking her away at all?”

“She’s dangerous. Her little stunt with Sokovia set the earth on a dangerous path that goes directly at what we were trying to achieve. So, dungeons it is.” Stephen shrugged, tilting his head slightly, “You’re so certain someone needs to take responsibility. Well, it was her, and she’s being punished.”

“I don’t know how to feel about this…”

“Then don’t worry about it; it’s out of your control either way,” Stephen smirked, the sight making Tony burn up slightly. He was right, and Tony couldn’t deny that he felt relieved. The witch hadn’t caused his anxiety issues, but she sure as hell hadn’t helped. He still sometimes woke up in cold sweat, image of Pepper and Rhodey dead on a pile of his mistakes edged into his brain.

“You’re not torturing her?”

“I could if you want me to-” Stephen cut himself off with a sly grin at Tony’s glare. “No, we are not.”

“She’s there voluntarily?”
“Well, technically she couldn’t leave either way, but she’s not currently being detained against her will.”

Tony stared into Stephen’s eyes, searching for the truth hidden beneath his blue irises, before he relaxed against the mattress once more. “Fine.”

They lay in silence for a while, before Tony couldn’t take it anymore. He needed to be distracted from the witch, from Sokovia, and from the fact that Stephen had done what he’d asked Steve to do months ago.

“I still miss JARVIS, though,” Tony sighed fondly at the memory of his old friend, hoping to think about something to change to subject, turning to watch Stephen again.

“Who?” Stephen glared at him in suspicion, making Tony smile slightly at the hint of jealousy.

“My AI,” Tony explained, rolling his eyes, “he was destroyed by Ultron when he escaped my lab.”

Stephen nodded in understanding, eyes blinking sleepily and Tony figured it was about time he left. He was exhausted himself. Stephen, the asshole, had attacked some basilisk in Italy earlier in the day and it must already be close to four am. He needed to get some sleep.

“Your AI. He was coding right?”

Tony frowned at the question, but nodded at the sorcerer as he rolled out of bed and stretched his arms over his head. “Duh.”

Stephen sat up a little, leaning onto his elbow as he gave him a pointed look at Tony’s rude answer. He was still lying under the covers, showing no signs of planning to get up any time soon. Tony let himself get distracted at the sight of his bare shoulders, muscled but lean, pale skin expanding under the covers. “Do you still have the chip he was last downloaded onto?”

“Yeah.”

“Give it to me.”

It wasn’t a question, and Tony startled as he glanced back, finally finding his pants on the floor and pulling them on.

“Why?”

“I can bring him back, I think. If you’d want that of course.” Stephen’s bored demeanour had returned, but Tony didn’t pay attention to it this time. The words were of interest however.

“How?”

“Magic.”

“Haha,” Tony rolled his eyes at the cryptic answer, already feeling the hope for the return of his old AI fading, “I don’t need another AI mystery science hybrid.”

“Nothing like that. I promise. I should be able to restore him to right before he was destroyed. Memories and all.” Stephen returned to lying on his back, focusing his gaze back on the ceiling instead of Tony and wrapping his arms under the back of his head. The stretch of his muscles was mesmerising, and Tony had to remind himself to get dressed and get the fuck out of there before the team started asking too many questions.
It was a tantalising prospect. He loved JARVIS. Some people might find that weird, but he had. He had been a friend when he’d had few, a voice of reason, a companion in his most desperate of moments. JARVIS always knew what he needed, knew his self-destructive behaviour better than anyone, had saved his life many times, and could have been the last voice he’d ever heard on multiple occasions.

He missed him. FRIDAY was great, but he was too afraid of letting her close to let her off her leash so to speak. She wasn’t as sentient as JARVIS was. Because that was the truth; JARVIS had basically become a second person, able to think of its own. He’d been his AI for almost twenty years after all.

It would be nice to have another ally at the tower.

“Alright.”
The lab was calm this early in the morning. The sun was just starting to peak over the horizon, basking the floor in a pink hue as the bots started whirring awake. Tony had returned a little later than usual, to the point that it seemed stupid to go to bed, so he’d decided to finally try out the gift he’d received from Stephen.

It wasn’t a gift.

A favour.

Whatever it was, Tony couldn’t help hoping Stephen had managed to do it. That he had been speaking the truth when he said that JARVIS could be brought back.

The lab was luckily still empty. Nat and Steve were probably already awake somewhere but hadn’t realised Tony had returned (or in their eyes, had woken up, as they hopefully didn’t know about his nightly disappearances).

He sighed, twiddling with the chip in his hands, nerves twisting in his stomach.

Would it work?

He had been putting off trying it out. Afraid to be disappointed. Afraid of what hearing JARVIS’ voice again would do to him.

Yet he wanted it.

Taking a deep breath, he moved his hand forward, scanning the chip before being able to halt himself any longer. The scanning took a few seconds. Even with Tony’s highly advanced equipment, JARVIS was still made up out of a lot of data.

It made his heart jump slightly. That it was taking a little longer was promising; it meant there was data on it to explore. What had been left of him after Ultron hadn’t been pretty.

Yet with every extra second, it could mean more complications.

Had it always taken this long? Tony’s heart was beating heavily by the time the system finally beeped in completion, and he held his breath in anticipation. “FRIDAY?”

“JARVIS appears to be fully operational, with his data being similar to his last records before Ultron attacked, Boss.”

“Good Morning, Sir. It appears I have been turned off for a while. It’s currently 6 12 am, April 28th 2016 and the weather in New York is sunny at 42 degrees.”
His eyes were stinging by the time he was finished speaking, tears threatening to spill, and he had to hide his face in his hands as his shoulders were starting to shake.

“I have taken the liberty of sharing my data of the last few years with JARVIS,” FRIDAY spoke up.

“It’s good to be back, sir.”

Tony lifted his head out of his hands to look up at the ceiling, smile splitting his face in two even as he suddenly felt exhausted. “I missed you, JARVIS.”

“JARVIS?” A confused voice spoke up from the doorway, making Tony jump and sit up straighter. “You brought JARVIS back?”

Tony didn’t know how to answer. He hadn’t been allowed to mess with AI’s anymore, FRIDAY only allowed cause she was already completely functional before Ultron. He could hardly say it had been a gift from - favour from Stephen either.

“Just the voice,” Tony lied with a tight smile, hoping his panic didn’t give anything away and praying to god FRIDAY had the good sense to shut the fuck up for now. “For in my suits only. The tower will still be controlled by FRIDAY.”

Steve sent him a suspicious glance, but shrugged before nodding his head towards the hallway. “Come have breakfast with us. Everyone’s already awake but Clint.”

“I have somewhere to be.” He tried to be polite, not feeling like starting a fight right now. His hands were twitching, eager to go up to the roof and contact Stephen.

“Where?” Steve asked, frown digging into his forehead in confusion. He didn’t look upset at least. “It’s barely six thirty.”

“I’m meeting Pepper about some SI documents. Shouldn’t take too long.”

“Alright then.” Steve nodded and turned, and Tony’s shoulders relaxed as soon as the door had closed behind him.

Pepper knew to cover for him, and he refused to let Steve ruin his good mood so he sighed happily, smile on his face as he tapped his arc reactor, nanobots flowing out of his housing unit.

“JARVIS, can you upload yourself into the suit?”

“Just finished, sir.” JARVIS’ voice sounded through his helmet and Tony felt genuine happiness course through him for the first time in months.

He was on the roof before long. Only once there, however, did he remember he had no way of contacting the sorcerer.

He had always shown up out of nowhere, swiping him away from the Avengers for a few pleasant hours before dropping him back off. All he’d have to do if he felt like seeing him was go up to the roof and he’d be there, but that had always been at night, never early in the morning, especially as he’d just dropped him off about an hour ago.

Tony huffed in frustration. There was no reason for him to want to see the sorcerer. No reason for them to have any line of communication. They had a system, and it worked.
Tony was ashamed to admit that when a few hours later, FRIDAY warned them of distress in Buenos Aires, he’d been excited.

Not for the people being hurt or the damage being done, but purely for the prospect of seeing Stephen. He managed to file the self-hatred away however, focusing instead on the opportunity to thank Stephen.

He’d spent all morning talking to JARVIS, absolutely blown away by the fact that he was able to work with him again. He was still the same, sarcasm dialled up to eleven and aware of what Tony needed before he’d even thought about it himself.

The main fight luckily took place in a desolate part of the city. The buildings old and rattled. It was one of those battles that Tony had no clue what the sorcerers were doing. What they could possibly want from the old buildings, what they had to gain from destroying the neighbourhood and causing a panic.

He barely noticed the other sorcerers, throwing around spells and engaging his teammates.

Tony flew directly at his wizard instead, occupied with an empty suit, controlled by JARVIS, distracting him. Stephen saw him coming last minute, but he was too late to move his arms, Tony crashing into him and sending them both flying. He twisted in the air, so it looked like Stephen had taken control of the roll to throw Tony against the wall.

“JARVIS,” Tony mumbled, and a second later his screen went dark, all communications with the rest of his team falling quiet and making sure no one could hear him.

Original confusion was replaced by a devious smirk as he did what Tony had wanted; pin him further against the wall to trick his teammates. And of course, Stephen didn’t waste the opportunity to purposefully press their hips together.

It shouldn’t work as well as it did with Tony’s suit on, but he could still feel the tug in his belly, the need to take everything off and touch the sorcerer.

“Make us invisible.” He spoke, loud enough so Stephen could hear through his suit and the surrounding chaos. The sorcerer raised an amused eyebrow at him, clearly not expecting Tony’s attitude. They’d been fucking for weeks, fighting for longer, and yet Tony had never mixed those lives together.

Stephen? Yes, constantly. He flirted so much and talked so filthily that Tony wasn’t even ashamed to admit he left some battles fully hard.

But Tony never acted on it. For all these weeks it had almost been like day Stephen and night Stephen had been two very different people.

Today Stephen was playful, flirty, teasing Tony without even being that sexual, but still Tony couldn’t bring himself to be angry at him. He’d been itching all morning to see him, and he just couldn’t wait until tonight anymore, not for this.

Stephen shrugged and snapped his fingers, the world around them cracking like glass, making Tony glance around in awe. “Did you just break the world?”

“We’re in the mirror dimension. No one can see our hear us, here.” Tony frowned slightly, the seemingly happy Stephen from earlier had diminished, face carefully neutral as he watched Tony,
and he hadn’t even made a move yet despite apparently being alone.

It immediately made Tony’s insides twist shyly, earlier bravado fading slightly. He was still excited however, and let his faceplate melt away, revealing his smile to Stephen. He frowned slightly as he saw Stephen freeze, still holding him against the wall and eyes digging into Tony’s in something akin to confusion.

He snapped out of it a second later, breathing out as he raised a questioning eyebrow at Tony and stepped away, spreading his arm to motion around him.

“Well, Stark,” he smirked, “you’ve got me all to yourself. Didn’t really think exhibitionism was your kink, but I’m up for anything.”

Stephen turned his back to Tony in a swift movement, the twist of his ass distracting Tony temporarily before he managed to compose himself. The sorcerer was watching the fight around them evolve with a considering glance. Hulk was running around in the distance, smashing things that was going to cost Tony a lot of money later, and Steve was throwing around cars like he was taking off socks after a long day.

“Hey,” he started, Stephen’s shoulder freezing up slightly once more, before turning back to face him.

“Yes, Stark?” Stephen rolled his eyes at him now, “If you don’t want me to stick your dick in my mouth, why are we here?”

“To thank you.”

Stephen raised his eyebrow at him, clearly unimpressed by that answer. “You could have thanked me this morning. I don’t see how anything I’ve done since then warrants such gratitude. Well, not unless you’re planning on joining the dark side; I’ve been very productive today.”

Tony let the comment slide, as he proceeded.

“I installed JARVIS this morning,” Tony explained, watching the sorcerer’s eyes carefully as realisation fluttered through them. He took a step closer, lips tilting into a grateful smile. “It worked. He’s back. Thank you.”

Stephen was frozen in place as he stalked towards him, eyes unmoving from Tony’s. Tony noticed the tightness around his eyes, the confused tilt around his lips which had returned. He’d always admired Stephen’s eyes; how they sparkled like sapphires in the night and shone brightly like the ocean in sunlight.

A smile was still tugging at his lips as he stopped in front of the sorcerer, suddenly reminded of the first time he’d kissed him. He’d been so angry then, but now all he could feel was appreciation and happiness. He leaned up, stretching out his neck to carefully press his lips against Stephen’s.

When he was barely a breath away from the sorcerer’s lips, however, the sorcerer swallowed before taking a step back and clearing his throat.

Tony frowned at him in confusion, heart jumping painfully at the retreat. It was the first time Stephen had rejected him. He had clearly been a fool to assume he never would.

“I’ll see you tonight, Stark.”

Before Tony could say anything else, the sorcerer moved his hands, the air around them untwisting
until they were standing in the middle of the battleground again. Tony covered his face with his suit, not wanting anyone to be able to read him.

A second later Stephen was gone, and it wasn’t long before the other sorcerers disappeared as well.

All Tony could do was stare at the place he’d disappeared in confusion, ignoring the questions his teammates were throwing each other.

Tony couldn’t figure it out. He was supposed to be a genius, yet the sorcerer had him stuck.

Ever since their first meeting, Stephen had been so adamant of his attraction to Tony. Never shy about his thoughts and feelings.

Tony always managed to pique his interest, no matter what time of day.

They had a good thing going, in Tony’s opinion, so why had he pulled away?

It didn’t seem like he wanted to stop their … whatever it was their arrangement could be called as he’d assured him that they’d see each other later.

All Tony had wanted to do was show his gratitude, had wanted to kiss Stephen since hearing JARVIS’ voice that morning.

It was a harsh reminder that maybe he’d gotten too comfortable around the sorcerer.

Perhaps he’d stopped hating him over the course of their affair. When had he started feeling excitement to see the sorcerer instead of the pure sexual lust and anger?

They had gotten too used to their nights together. It had become second nature, so much so that the lines between them had blurred.

But evidently only on Tony’s side.
“That was an absolute dick move,” Tony ground out as Stephen’s lips trailed down his cheek towards his neck, his scarred hands mapping his naked back. He loved it when Stephen sat in his lap, having him wrapped around his torso and the sorcerer’s full attention on him.

Tony revelled in those moments.

When Stephen had rejected him before the insecurity had gotten under his skin, almost scared to see the sorcerer again later that day. He wouldn’t have been the first person to start getting sick of him over time, to want the dream but not reality, what he appeared to be but not who he was.

Yet Stephen had been just as enthusiastic as usual, and Tony had wanted everything to go back to normal so he’d rolled with it. It had been his mistake to forget their place, the unspoken rules set up at the beginning of their arrangement.

And Tony had started pretending to continue being angry with the man. It seemed to be when Stephen was most comfortable; rougher, touchier and more demanding. Tony loved it. Loved to give everything to him but keep him on the edge.

“You enjoyed it,” Stephen scoffed near his ear, trailing his teeth over his earlobe and carding his hands through Tony’s hair, successfully making him forget everything about their earlier battle.

Perhaps he had; to some degree.

It was true that the sorcerer attacks had gotten pettier. Less organised and with less collateral damage. Perhaps it was part of the reason that Tony had allowed their nights to continue. Wasn’t sure what he’d do if anyone were to die due to Stephen.

Again.

Tony pushed his thoughts aside as Stephen started pushing him down until his back hit the mattress, the sorcerer making eager work of his shirt, pulling it over his head and attacking his scarred chest.

He was just starting to pull at Tony’s pants when a sound echoed through the hallway and into their bedroom, making Tony frown as Stephen stiffened on top of him.

He scoffed at the door, sitting up in Tony’s lap as a considering gaze flicked between him and the exit. Tony stared back at the sorcerer, annoyed at the distance between him and Stephen.

“You have to wait here or leave.”

“What? Why?” Tony asked in confusion, turning his head towards the door in suspicion, itching to get up and grab his housing unit off the floor, feeling horribly exposed all of a sudden. Stephen was already climbing off of him, gathering his clothes and quickly getting dressed.

“Wait here then, it most likely won’t take long.” Stephen rolled his eyes, heading towards the door before hesitating and turning back towards Tony. Tony watched him, absolutely baffled by the sudden change in situation. Only a second ago Stephen had been focussed solely on him, now he was a million miles away.

Sputtering, he managed to ask, anger starting to raise its head, “You really need to attack
something else? Didn’t you already do enough damage today.”

Stephen glared at him, eyes flashing and already twisting the nob on the door, “Careful, Stark.”

“No!” Tony sat up straighter, unbothered by the warning tone in Stephen’s voice, “Whatever is going on-“

“... is not in this dimension,” Stephen interrupted him, “there’s nothing you can do anyway. I have to go now so make up your mind about leaving, will you.”

Tony wanted to argue, wanted to tell Stephen to send him back, but apparently he took too long, because Stephen opened the door and disappeared, leaving Tony on his own.

He glared at the door, as if Stephen would be able to see him through the wood, flopping back against the mattress and letting out a frustrated sigh. What the hell?

He had just left.

Tony felt like a brat for being angry at him for it. For demanding Stephen’s full attention when something important was clearly going on. He thought he understood Stephen enough to know he wouldn’t willingly walk away from their ... session.

Yet some part of him knew he should be more outraged, should stop him from doing whatever he was doing. He was his opponent, and the fact that he was predisposed in Stephen’s bedroom now could have been exactly what the sorcerer had planned all along. It could be the big finale, the moment where it all turned out to be a trick, the big betrayal, the play reaching its end to thunderous applause.

But Stephen had said it was in a different dimension - a mind-blowing thought for later - and he had never lied to Tony before. He wanted to believe he was telling the truth, if only for the fact that he wouldn’t know what to do if it wasn’t.

Not able to lie still with his thoughts for long, Tony got up from the bed and glared around the room.

With the amount of time he’d spent there by now, he should be more familiar with it, but he’d never really spared their surroundings a second thought.

It was rather simplistic, with a comfortable chair near the window and a desk against the far wall being the only furniture besides the fourposter bed.

It really did look like Hogwarts.

It didn’t take long for Tony to get bored with the lack of interesting objects, nothing to tinker with or no books to read. At least not in languages he understood.

He pulled his shirt back over his head and hesitated by the door for barely a second before he opened it, letting his curiosity lead him further into the building.

He stepped into a hallway, almost surprised to find it looking so... bland? It was just a normal old hallway, one wall lined with doors while the other showed windows at regular intervals, looking out on... Manhattan? Tony couldn’t place it but it looked like New York City.

He had honestly expected to be anywhere else, surprised that all this time they had been this close to the tower. He’d been thinking of Stephen’s bedroom as a kind of hide-out, escaping as far away
from the tower as possible. Maybe somewhere in Europe or Asia.

Stephen’s windows had looked out on a random set of roofs, so he’d known they were in a city, he’d just expected something like Brussels, Prague or Beijing.

Luckily, the hallway was empty, not sure what would happen if he bumped into another sorcerer. He would probably get killed on the spot. They had never left Stephen’s bedroom, had no reason to, really, and Tony had no reason to believe they would be as courteous as Stephen had been. Tony didn’t have the leverage of sex over them either.

Sneaking his way forward, he reached the end of the hallway, leading out into a landing overlooking the income hall. A huge window illuminated the stairs leading down, and Tony stared at it for a while. The window was honestly gorgeous, the city lights spreading an almost mystical glow into the foyer.

His gaze slid down over the wall until it caught on a set of swords hanging a little further away. Tony stepped forward, letting his intrigue lead him as he reached out his hand, trying to feel the smooth, surely centuries old, metal.

In a flash of deep red, the cloak stopped him.

It came out of nowhere, wrapping itself around his arm and pulling him back, before settling on his shoulders. Tony looked at it in surprise, glancing around the space to look for its owner but ending up disappointed. “Shouldn’t you be with Stephen?”

The fabric squeezed tighter around his shoulder, and Tony sighed. “Left behind as well, hu?”

He glanced further around the foyer, stifling a yawn behind his hand. He was in dire need of caffeine if Stephen really expected him to wait here for him. “Okay, fabric - ouch! - fine, cloak, where is the kitchen?”

The cloak starting pulling at his shoulders, Tony obediently following its direction down the stairs, reaching the downstairs area as it started leading Tony into another hallway.

As they rounded a corner however, Tony almost bumped into another body.

His heart started racing as he stared at the sorcerer in shock, uncertain of what to do now. He’d only ever seen Wong in battle. Not as often as Stephen or Mordo, but when he was out on the field he wasn’t one to be messed with.

Tony was mostly caught up with Stephen and barely interacted with the other wizards as a result, but the tic-tac, especially, seemed to be afraid of him, for some reason.

He wasn’t looking forward to finding out the hard way as to why.

Once again he became very aware of his absent housing unit, cursing himself for not picking it up from the floor before leaving the room.

“Euhm, hi?” He met Wong’s blank stare with a nervous smile, feeling the cloak wrap around his torso more tightly as he kept his gaze locked on the sorcerer’s.

Wong rolled his eyes as they flicked towards it, the neutral expression remaining as he looked past Tony and continued on his way with a single line of dialogue. “Kitchen is that way. Stephen should be back soon. Don’t touch anything.”
“Thanks,” Tony managed to drawl out, not sure that was the correct response, as he watched the sorcerer walk away in bewilderment. Alright then.

He was still frowning when he stepped into the kitchen, the cloak relaxing around his shoulders.

It was weird being - wherever they were. The building seemed almost cosy, with warm colours and reading nooks spread around. Looking around the kitchen now, it almost looked like a completely normal house.

He kept the space dark, not bothering trying to look for a light switch, as he let the light spilling in from the hallway illuminate his search for the coffee machine. He found one shoved away behind some plants on the counter and searched the cabinets for coffee beans. When he finally found some he made himself a pot, letting his gaze explore the space while he waited for the machine to finish.

The kitchen table was quite big and round, surely meant to seat twelve people at least, but there were only about six chairs spread around it, no two matching. It was dark out, but the big window to the left would let in a lot of light during the day, illuminating a bunch of plants spread out on the windowsill.

He hummed to himself in confusion as he turned back to the cabinets to search for a mug, sighing as soon as the taste of warm coffee relaxed him.

“Ah, I didn’t know Stephen had a guest.” A voice sounded from the doorway.

Tony frowned as he turned around, the woman was about … honestly ageless. Completely bald and wearing dark green robes, eyes wide and almost eerie.

Tony felt like he needed to be scared, knew that whoever this person was was powerful. He could feel it in the air, see it the way she held herself and how even the cloak stilled around his shoulders.

Yet at the same time her presence was calming. Almost like a Boa constrictor at the zoo. Knew she had the power to kill him but saw no use in bothering.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to intrude. Wong mentioned I could wait in here.”

“Of course, you can,” The woman confirmed, setting Tony at ease a little more still. He didn’t want to let his guard down, wouldn’t allow his eyes to leave the threat in the room, but she only looked amused. “Stephen will be back any minute. I’m only visiting, myself.”

Her voice was soothing. Tony thought if she were to record audio books or maybe a podcast, he’d finally get a regular sleep schedule.

Her eyes were focused, but glanced around the room idly, clearly unbothered by Tony’s presence as she continued slowly towards the windowsill.

“Precious plants,” she commented, petting one of the branches, “Stephen overwaters them, of course,” turning her head towards Tony, she rolled her eyes slightly as if they were sharing an inside joke. Tony frowned at the sentiment, not imagining Stephen caring about something as tedious as plants at all.

“You’re right,” she sighed even as Tony hadn’t spoken, “he gets incredibly bored. It’s a shame really; brilliant mind but focus a mile away.”

“Do you know him well?” He asked, words slipping out before he could stop himself.
“That’s hard to say,” she started, “there are a lot of sides to a person. I’ve seen almost all of his, but which one matters the most is subjective, of course.”

“And if you’re someone who likes to describe people to their actions, well…” she hummed considering, glancing back up at Tony, “well, let’s say I’ve seen him make a million different choices in a million different lifetimes.”

“You could have just said yes,” Tony grumbled into his mug, annoyed at the cryptic answer. He’d thought Stephen was bad, but he wasn’t even close.

The woman sent him an amused look, visible even in the dark.

“Ancient One?” Tony straightened as he glanced towards Stephen standing in the doorway. His gaze was fixed on the woman, luckily. He was barely five years older than Stephen, after all, and aging pretty decently if he said so himself.

She didn’t take offense, smile broadening as she turned towards Stephen. “You’re back. Wonderful. I take it everything went smoothly.”

“It did,” Stephen replied politely, and Tony hid a smile behind his mug. It was amusing to see how Stephen turned into a weary schoolboy in front of the - Ancient One? Yeah no he was not going to call her that.

“Splendid.” She replied, heading towards the hallway. “I’ll speak with Mordo and then I’ll be on my way.”

She left, leaving Stephen to watch her walk away before turning back towards Tony, face carefully neutral as his eyes locked on Tony’s.

Tony’s stomach bottomed out, remembering why he was down here in the first place. He didn’t know where Stephen had gone off to, or what he’d meant when he said it “wasn’t in this dimension”.

But he knew that he wanted answers.

“You going to tell me what that was about?” Tony asked, squinting at the sorcerer as he lowered his mug.

“That was the Ancient One,” Stephen explained vaguely, moving to stand behind the counter along with Tony. His gaze was still watching him carefully, eyes closed off as he they were locked with Tony’s. The cloak floated off his shoulders, hesitate in front of the door before leaving the room completely. Stephen didn’t acknowledge it.

“Not what I meant.” Though he did have a lot of questions about that as well. He let his face harden, as he glanced away from Stephen’s eyes. “You better tell me where you went off to, because if not you can just send me back now.”

He meant it, even as he couldn’t be more aware of the space between them, how the sorcerer was close enough to touch but keeping his hands to himself. He wanted to look into his eyes, show how serious he was, but he’d probably cave as soon as he did. He focused on his eyebrows instead, not quite as effective but it held the sentiment.

“Careful,” Stephen warned again, not bothered by Tony’s show in the least as he sent him a stern look. Tony didn’t miss the sorcerer’s Adam’s apple bob slightly. “I’ll do it and where will you be then?”
Tony raised an unimpressed eyebrow, hoping Stephen couldn’t notice how his expression immediately went to his groin.

When Stephen didn’t answer, Tony faked a nonchalant shrug, placing his cup on the counter and turning towards the hallway. He avoided looking at Stephen, not knowing if he’d still be able to walk away otherwise. “Alright I know where the door was -“

Before he’d even set two steps, Stephen growled from behind him, hands gripping Tony’s hips to pull him back. Stephen twisted him in one quick movement, lifting him onto the counter and forcing his legs open. His lips were on his neck barely a second later, biting forcefully into his pulsepoint and Tony had to bite his lip to suppress a moan.

He bucked forward involuntarily, pressing his growing length against Stephen’s stomach. His hands moved to card in his hair on instinct, forcing his head to stay where it was.

Tony wanted to object, wanted to abscond from sex until Stephen explained where he’d gone off to, but Stephen was doing a wonderful job distracting him.

Perhaps he could go celibate later.

Stephen was never this dominant with him, Tony having told himself that as long as he was in control their nights were okay. It wouldn’t be him giving in to the evil sorcerer.

But by God, Tony had missed this. Had missed surrendering.

He always fought back, however dire the situation, and wouldn’t let evil win.

Having Stephen ravish him now was nothing but a relief, a step back from his daily stress. Tony couldn’t stop him if he’d wanted to, wouldn’t be able to have his limbs cooperate when all they wanted to do was pull Stephen closer.

He pulled Stephen’s mouth towards his - his only request for now - moaning against his lips as he let Stephen take the lead. Sighing with pleasure, he let his nails trail over Stephen’s neck, smiling at the warmth coursing through him.

A second later Tony felt like he was falling, stomachbottoming out as he gasped. He hit soft mattress, the burgundy sheets so familiar by now. Stephen quickly joined him on the bed, Tony running his hands up his sides as the sorcerer crawled up to his face.

“You didn’t open a portal.” Tony asked, frowning up at Stephen even as he didn’t really care. All he cared about was Stephen’s eyes, blue irises impossibly thin with his pupils blown wide.

“Don’t have to in the sanctum,” Stephen ground out as a response. He dipped his hands under his shirt and teased his nipples, leaning down to swallow Tony’s gasp.

“Fuck,” Tony moaned against him, arching his back up to Stephen, needed more skin against his, needed the sorcerer closer to him as he moved his legs up to wrap around Stephen’s waist.

“I plan to.”

Under any other circumstance the response would have annoyed him to high heaven, but the promise drove him crazy in all the right ways now. Swallowing down a moan at Stephen’s insufferable grin as he let Stephen have his way with him.
His eyes were still closed, but he could hear Stephen’s breathing. Too soft and irregular to not be conscious.

He should panic about having fallen asleep. About having let his guard down around an enemy. But he was too tired. Exhaustion was already pulling him back into darkness, limbs feeling heavy as his breathing evened out once more, disappearing into unconsciousness.

He could still feel Stephen shifting next to him, could feel him rolling closer, his body heat warming his space. A trembling finger moved over his forehead, brushing aside his hair before trailing down along his cheek and brow. A second later the warm hand cupped his cheek, stroking his cheekbone before resting in his neck.

The last thing Tony remembered before falling back asleep being the soft shivers the touch sent down his spine, and the longing jump of his heart.
waterloo

Chapter Notes

Thanks again for all the love received! I'm horrible at answering to them but I do appreciate them a lot. Really keeps the creativity flowing.

That being said; I hope you enjoy this chapter! x

See the end of the chapter for more notes

His eyes were still closed, but he could hear Stephen’s breathing. Too soft and irregular to not be conscious. He should panic about having fallen asleep. About having let his guard down around an enemy. But he was too tired. Exhaustion was already pulling him back into darkness, limbs feeling heavy as his breathing evened out once more, disappearing into unconsciousness.

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——-

When he woke up again in the morning, he was lying in his own bed, blankets wrapped tightly around him and sun shining in through the big windows. Sitting up, he glanced around in confusion, but his bedroom was empty as usual, his hologram still set up at his desk where he’d face called Harley the evening before.

“JARVIS? What time is it?”

“It’s around nine fifteen, sir.”

Tony’s eyes widened in surprise. He must have been exhausted after seeing Stephen, though he couldn’t remember coming back to the tower. He still remembered falling against Stephen, tired and sated after having been absolutely wrecked in all the best ways.

He couldn’t remember the last time he’d bottomed. Don’t get him wrong, he loved it, it had just been a really long time since he’d been in a relationship - no, had sex with a man.

He moved to get up, and Oooh jup, he felt that.

A smile slid over his lips however, the discomfort reminding him of Stephen the night before, the lips that trailed over his neck, whispered words uncharacteristically soft, sweet nothings and promises of adorations bordering on sincere. Thinking about it now warmed his heart, but he tried to repress it, needing to get up and ready to head downstairs.

And if anyone noticed they didn’t say anything about it. Even if they had, he wouldn’t have engaged, wanted to hold on the the bliss of the morning for as long as possible.
He made it until five pm before everything went to shit.

He had been playing pool with Rhodey when FRIDAY had warned them about an attack at the UN headquarters.

Disappointment had been his first reaction, bathing his body in cold water as he moved to get ready along with the other Avengers.

It was quickly replaced by fear as soon as they reached the scene.

Within five minutes it was clear that the sorcerers weren’t messing around this time. They had a mission, and clearly part of that plan was to get as many Avengers incapacitated as possible. Tony watched as Natasha was tossed back, her skull making a sickening cracking noise as it hit a wall, body lulling quiet a second later.

Clint made his way over towards her, shooting a last arrow before giving in to temptation and moving to check on her. It was the wrong move.

Mordo appeared out of nowhere, firing a spell Clint was unable to block and he yelled out in pain, falling in a stuttering mess next to Natasha’s - hopefully just - unconscious body.

Tony stayed quiet while he fought, engaging with some unknown sorcerers as he tried to look around for Stephen. He was nowhere to be found, and though it should be a relief, it scared him. Without his eyes on him, he couldn’t know what he was doing.

He was faring best against their opponents, with his suit protecting him he was at an advantage against physical weapons, and his repulsors were able to block the occasional spell aimed his way.

Magic was energy, Stephen had explained one night, as were his blasts.

It barely gave Tony an edge, however, and he knew he wouldn’t be able to hold out much longer. As more and more Avengers fell, more and more sorcerers turned towards him.

He was sweating inside his suit, limbs moving on instinct as he blocked as many spells he could, gritting his teeth whenever a blast hit home, and trying not to think of how his remaining teammates were struggling around him.

Breathing heavily, he grunted as he was tossed back a few feet, back forced against a wall. At least no one could attack him from behind, but it was barely a consolation as the five sorcerers in front of him drew closer, surrounding him. Flying up would leave him vulnerable to attacks and JARVIS was working overtime searching for a solution.

He vaguely noticed a portal opening a little while away, eyes remaining on the immediate threat in front of him.

“Leave him to me. Go help Wong.”

The sorcerer’s moved back, creating a portal as they disappeared, leaving only Stephen standing in front of him.

Tony’s heart didn’t know if it should speed up in relief or terror, unable to read anything off the sorcerer’s face. But Tony was tired, had seen one teammate too many tossed around, and was too pissed about his good day having been ruined. He wasn’t going to give Strange the satisfaction of winning today.
Firing up his weapons systems. Stephen sidestepped his attacks, dancing back as the cloak drifted him around, swift movements easily blocking Tony’s angry ones.

The dynamic had shifted. Tony had noticed it as soon as Stephen had spoken. He wasn’t playful, wasn’t flirting, wasn’t messing around. He was deadly serious, and that detachment hurt more than any trick would have.

Tony tried to hit and hit and hurt, but Stephen didn’t give him the opportunity, spells floating around him and barely missing Tony’s form.

He didn’t know how long they were fighting each other, but a sorcerer called from behind him, alerting Stephen. Tony couldn’t hear what they said, too focussed on not getting hit by yet another spell.

But when he turned around to face Stephen once more, the sorcerer was gone, and he was left alone in the destroyed meeting hall, bodies of his teammates scattered around him.

———

He was numb.

He had spent hours in the infirmary as the Avengers luckily opened their eyes one by one. Bruce had been able to help with most of their injuries, the Hulk not having been allowed out with them to the enclosed space of the UN building.

Yet Natasha would have to stay in bed for the next couple of days, and Steve had been conscious for a while but had drifted back to subconscious as he was still being artificially respirated. They were the worst of the injuries, but others were still shaken from some of the spells they’d been hit with.

Tony watched them all from the sidelines with not a scratch on him. Needed to know they were okay but feeling like an outsider, having been the last man standing as usual yet not having been able to hurt the sorcerers nearly as much as they’d hurt them.

He tried to keep the guilt at bay, to not have it burn him up from the inside. But as more and more Avengers regained consciousness, Tony couldn’t stick around anymore.

He didn’t know how he made it to the roof, only that he was standing outside now, thin sweater just enough to keep out the chill.

It was later than he usually would have been, and any other day he would have wished for Stephen to be there. To be waiting on him still.

He stepped towards the edge now, glaring out over New York city. In the distance he could hear sirens, and though logically he knew they weren’t for the attack from earlier anymore, it still seared through his mind, winding him up with every sound.

“Isn’t this the part where you fuck your frustration out on me?”

“Oh actually, I think I’d rather fight you right now,” Tony replied, voice steel as he turned around to face Stephen. He was standing a few feet away from him, as usual without Cloak, and though his face was as detached as it had been earlier, there was something softer underneath. Something careful, almost apologetic.

Tony was projecting. There was no other way; had to be hoping for something there, something
that would give Tony any reason to forgive him. Needed Stephen to beg for it so he could give in already. Something that would make it okay that he wanted the sorcerer’s arms wrapped around him.

Stephen raised an unimpressed eyebrow at Tony’s anger, before shrugging. Tony’s eyes widened when Stephen summoned a blade, throwing it with deadly aim at Tony’s chest.

He just had enough time to roll away, skin scraping over concrete and immediately letting the nano suit cover his body.

“What the hell?” He yelled at Strange, exasperation making his head fuzzy. It was almost a relief, however, having the anger for the sorcerer returned. Pushing away whatever emotions had been clouding his judgement, head clear for the first time since starting their affair. “What the actual fuck is wrong with you?!”

Stephen shrugged again, and Tony could spit fire. “It’s not my fault you forgot who I am. I am still your enemy, as you are mine.”

Hurt cut through his heart, mixing with his outrage to form a deadly explosive.

Gritting his teeth, he fired up his repulsors, aiming at Stephen without thinking. He actually had the decency to look surprised, eyes widening slightly as he blocked the blast last minute, still thrown backwards with the force of impact.

Stephen rolled over the ground, as graceful as ever, ending back up on his feet and twisting his hands in a spell in retaliation. Tony dodged, scorn fuelling his actions, and was about to ask JARVIS to fire up the missiles, before he stopped in his tracks.

Fuck this. Fuck Stephen and his magic.

He let the suit flow into its housing unit, Stephen watching him with a curious expression, face hard. He moved his hand to his chest, ripping the unit off in a fluid movement and tossing it aside.

They had been fighting for months. And mind you Tony was still planning on fighting him now, anger not close to dissipating. But if Stephen truly saw him as an enemy … let him hurt him.

Stephen was still watching Tony suspiciously, stance defensive as he noticed the fire in Tony’s eyes. Tony leapt forward, throwing a punch which Stephen blocked, immediately moving his leg to kick Stephen in the hip.

Stephen growled, retaliating by breaking through Tony’s blind spots. He got a few good hits in, the pain of the blows reverberating through his body and clearing his mind.

They’d fought often enough for Tony to know all the tricks he had up his sleeves, but he didn’t pull out any weapons out of nowhere, didn’t use the ring to sneak just out of his reach and attack him from behind.

He stayed in front of him, matching him in movements but nothing more. It infuriated Tony; needed Stephen to just get it all over with and win for good; he’d had enough, was so sick of losing and feeling absolutely powerless when it came to Stephen.

Stephen eventually got in a good kick Tony should have been able to block, sending him back a few steps. He growled in anger and surged forward, grabbing Strange by the shoulders with a twist and slamming him into the ground with a move Natasha would have been proud of.
Stephen groaned in pain, and Tony fell down on top of him, making sure to keep him in place as he straddled his hips.

“What are you doing?” Tony demanded, ignoring the clench of his heart as he watched Stephen underneath him.

The same image he’d seen so many times now.

Stephen sprawled underneath him, face flushed and smiling in pleasure, infuriatingly pretty as he teased Tony. He’d never known anyone who could speak so prettily while being fucked, who’d managed to seem in control while surrendering to another person.

This was nothing like that.

Stephen sighed, rolling his head back to look up at the sky instead of Tony, looking utterly defeated. Tony had seen him in battle, but his face had never been this hard, this angry towards him. He swallowed at the sight, trying to fit the pieces together and avoid the pull in his chest.

“Now what, Stark?” He muttered, still avoiding Tony’s gaze. The teasing was back, which was anything but a relief as it felt diluted and forced. “You beat me.”

“I didn’t,” Tony frowned, anger fading as it was replaced by confusion. He had magic, he could push him off easily, their position anything but a checkmate.

“You ended up on top,” Stephen supplied, jaw tightening as his eyes finally met Tony in a challenging glare. It wasn’t convincing, and Tony’s heart was beating anxiously, speeding up with the second. He didn’t understand what was happening.

Why didn’t he fight back?

Stephen’s eyes softened as he noticed, but he avoided his gaze as he laid his head back again, swallowing before speaking, voice laced with exhaustion. “I won’t hurt you, Tony.”

“Why not?”

Stephen still didn’t look at him, ignoring the question and staring off into the distance. He still looked angry, jaw tight and glare aimed at the stars, so why would he not just fucking answer?

“Why not?!” Tony leaned forward to yell at him, letting go of his arms so he could force Stephen to look at him.

“I can’t!” Stephen spit out, glare shifting towards Tony in defiance.

What? That didn’t make any sense! It didn’t -

Oh.

Oh.

Tony’s heart jumped pleasantly, stomach soaring as if he was on a roller coaster.

Searching Stephen’s pale blue eyes, it was all so clear now. The anger at the world, mirroring Tony’s own feelings, the urge to be closer, the pain at seeing him so close yet so far.

He took a deep breath before leaning down, pressing his lips against Stephen’s and kissing him senseless.
They had kissed thousands of time before, but this one was more meaningful somehow, the knowledge of Stephen’s confession along with his own gnawing feelings heightening the experience.

Stephen’s lips moved hesitantly against him even as Tony pressed harder, hoping that if he just kissed him deeply enough, the butterflies in his stomach would settle down. Stephen’s freed arms moved up to tentatively card through Tony’s hair, holding him in place and their lips locked.

He shuffled further back until he was positioned on Stephen’s lap, not once breaking the kiss, and pulled Stephen up with him. Stephen’s arms dropping to circle his waste, hands roaming over his back.

The fluttering in his stomach was only getting worse, but Tony didn’t care, wrapping his own arms around the sorcerer’s neck and pulling him closer still. He nipped at Stephen’s bottom lip one last time before pulling back, needing air to fill his lungs as he pressed his forehead against Stephen’s. Stephen’s eyes were closed as he tried to regain his own breathing, and Tony’s heart stuttered at the sight.

“Stephen -“

“No, Tony,” he interrupted him, eyes finally opening and watching Tony with a calm determination. “We can’t.”

Tony frowned, chest tightening with fear. “I- what?”

“Tony,” Stephen started, halting slightly as his lips twisted into a sad smile, “my love, I don’t deserve you. I have already destroyed too many things dear to me.”

“Stephen, don’t,” Tony whispered, bordering on desperation as he gripped onto his robes.

“We’re on different sides.”

“Why do we have to be?” He moved his hands back to cup Stephen’s face, holding him close. “Fuck the Avengers. It’s not a hard choice.”

Even saying it guilt started gnawing at his stomach. They just wanted to make the world a safer space, as did Tony, and they were downstairs hurt while he was up here in the arms of their enemy. Though he did mean it; he wanted Stephen, more than anything.

Stephen remained quiet, avoiding Tony’s gaze, and it was driving Tony up the wall. His silence said it all, however; it wasn’t that simple.

He hadn’t forgotten the attack from earlier, the people that had gotten hurt and died because of Stephen and the sorcerers. Tony knew he couldn’t stand behind that without loosing himself. He wanted to help, couldn’t bear seeing people hurting and not be able to do anything about it.

Tony moved off of Stephen’s lap, shuffling back until he was sitting against the railing. He rested his elbows on his knees, needed to put some space between him and Stephen so he could think.

Why the fuck did he have to fall in love with a villain?

Because that’s what it was, and he couldn’t deny it any longer.

He thought about his broken teammates downstairs, and felt horrible for not caring more. For preferring to sit on the roof with the person that had been responsible for their wounds.
Stephen had hurt and killed innocent people, damaged the city and wreaked havoc on a daily basis, but Tony still loved him. Loved the way he was so certain, so sure of himself, and seemed to have everything figured out. He loved his hands, soft but harsh at the same time, and the way sunlight reflected in his eyes. He really enjoyed the way he teased him, kept him on his toes and knew how to set him off in all the best ways.

He really really loved the way Stephen cared for him. That he recognised all the work Tony was putting in and settled his doubts.

And though Stephen was right in saying that he could never stand by Stephen as he continued on this path, he couldn’t help hope that maybe he could stop him from hurting people.

Why couldn’t he just figure it out?

Tony sighed, glancing back up at Stephen, whose gaze was pointed towards the horizon, face blank and eyes distant with concealed emotion. He held out his hand, relieved as Stephen’s look shifted towards it before placing his own in Tony’s. Linking their fingers together, they continued sitting in silence, until eventually over the horizon the sun started to rise.

Chapter End Notes

originally posted on Tumblr @funkylittlebidiot
Tony hesitated only momentarily before taking the final steps to the front door and knocking. Except his fingers never touched the wood.

Tony stumbled as he felt like he blacked out for a second, swallowing down the nausea and trying to blink away the dark spots in his eyes. This definitely was a lot less pleasant without Stephen’s arms around him.

“It’s the middle of the afternoon.”

He swivelled around, trying to find the source of the voice through his disorientation. His eyes settled on Wong, standing behind a table, books spread out in front of him.

“Good afternoon?” He frowned at him, not sure what he was getting at. Perhaps he should have accounted for the possibility of a sorcerer opening the door that wasn’t Stephen.

“Why are you here, Stark?” Wong sighed in exasperation, sinking back down in his chair as he glared at Tony.

Tony wasn’t sure how much the sorcerer knew about him and Stephen. Obviously he was aware of Tony’s visits every night, having barely bat an eye when he’d ran into him before.

And Wong must know enough not to be alarmed by an Avenger having found their secret hide-out. After all, he could still call on his teammates, take the sorcerers down once and for all. Tony wasn’t quite sure why he hadn’t already. He knew he loved Stephen, and not wanting to lose him was enough to keep quiet for now, but who knew, maybe in a few weeks or months something would change his mind.

Even now there was guilt gnawing at his stomach when he let himself think about the sorcerers for too long, aware of the damage they’d already done to people’s lives.

Yet, all it took was forcing himself to think about Stephen instead to ease that guilt. To file it away for later. Perhaps it was okay as long as he could keep Stephen from hurting anyone while they were together.

“I’m looking for Strange.”

Wong blinked at him, face passive and expressionless, but it said enough. Obviously.

“So… can you help me out?”

“Well, he should be back any second.”

Tony checked his watch instinctively for any missed alerts, but before he could worry about Stephen’s absence for too long, he noticed a familiar flash of red and blue in his peripheral vision.

He turned, taking in the part of the room that had previously been at his back. Stephen was floating in the air in front of one of three big windows looking out over the same rooftops as Stephen’s bedroom. A set of couches separated him from Stephen, and he walked around them as he stalked closer to his sorcerer. Confusion set in as he watched him; Stephen’s legs were crossed in front of him, his eyes closed.
Wong clearly considered Stephen absent, and the slack features of Stephen’s face definitely supported that claim. He was merely here as a body, his mind a hundred miles away. The cloak was wrapped protectively around Stephen’s shoulders, and Tony smiled when it waved at him.

“Do NOT disturb him.” Wong spoke up from behind him, and he huffed before turning back towards his by now second favourite sorcerer.

“What’s he doing?”

“Do not disturb me either.”

Tony sighed, but he had time. He took a seat, making sure to have a good view of Stephen’s unconscious body and tapped at his watch so he could work in silence as he waited.

He hoped it wouldn’t take too long, however, as with every second he was starting to get more and more bored. And it only left time for his mind to run circles around itself, knots forming with every twist. In every way imaginable, this was completely new territory for him. He’d loved before, he’d lost before, but he knew with Stephen everything was heightened.

They’d barely spent time together that wasn’t sexual, barely held a decent conversation, yet the possibilities of what their relationship could be, if they let it, were driving Tony insane. If they found a way to make it work, if they managed to figure it out, Tony knew he wouldn’t want anything else.

Despite Stephen being a villain, he knew he was everything Tony wanted. Intelligent, snarky, humorous, absolutely gorgeous, matched Tony in every way possible whether conversational or sexual.

He wanted that. He wanted him. And he knew it was a dangerous game to let his feelings continue, to deepen it in the way they were doing, allowing it more meaning than it was supposed to be. He knew he was already in love with him, so he should cut ties. Break it off. Try to move on or better yet, finally lock his heart for good.

Continuing on this path would only lead to pain and misery in the end, but again, the hope that they would find a way was pushing him forward. The mere possibility of working it out, enough to keep him hooked and intrigued. To keep going on this self-destructive path. Tony had never quite learned to steer away from those, anyway.

Stephen had been so still the entire time he’d been here, that Tony immediately noticed when his eyes opened. His breathing became more shallow as he came to and glanced around, raising a questioning eyebrow at Tony’s presence. Stephen’s glance moved to Wong, still at the table behind him, and the sorcerer took that as his cue to leave.

Tony watched him carefully, unsure at how Stephen would react to him being here, but Stephen simply sighed and rolled his eyes with a smirk. He grinned at the sorcerer without even wanting to, getting up out of his chair to step closer to him. “I should have known you’d be stubborn enough to find the sanctum of your own accord.”

“What can I say,” Tony smiled sweetly, “anything is possible when properly motivated.”

“And what was the motivation, might I ask?” Stephen dropped his feet to the floor, elegant as ever, and the Cloak immediately let go of his shoulders as soon as it knew Stephen was fine and switched over to Tony’s. Stephen didn’t even react to the betrayal anymore.

“Isn’t it obvious?” Tony raised his eyebrow. “It’s not as if I have your phone number and I’ve been
“Well, I’m a busy man, darling, I can’t spend every second with you.” The teasing was almost
instinctive, Tony could feel it, and he couldn’t hate it. He only rolled his eyes softly at Stephen,
stepping just a little bit closer still as he looked him in the eyes.

“Can you spend an evening with me?”

Stephen squinted at him. “Did you hit your head? We’ve been fucking every night for months.”

Tony refused to let Stephen’s forced obtuse get under his skin, only shook his head softly as he
clarified; “I meant as in a date, Stephen. Dinner at eight?”

“You came here just to ask me out on a … a date?”

“Jup,” Tony grinned, “like I said; no phone number, and as much as I love having sex with you, I’d
like to see you in clothes for once. Preferably a hot suit.”

“So you’re just using this as an excuse to get me in a suit?” Stephen asked, eyebrow raised as he
leaned against the bookcases to his left with an amused smile. “What’s in it for me? I see you in
suits every day and honestly, I prefer tearing them off.”

“Well,” Tony started, smirking at Stephen, dropping his voice just a bit. “I don’t normally get
kinky until after the first date. And not to toot my own horn,” Tony winked, satisfied when he
noticed the interest in Stephen’s eyes, “but I’m really good at kinky.”

Stephen stayed quiet for a while, his gaze burning Tony’s skin. He already knew he was getting
what he wanted, Stephen’s flush and diluted pupils said it all, so he just smiled back at him
innocently, blinking slowly with a questioning smile.

As much as he would love for Stephen to drag him off to his bedroom right this second and have a
little appetiser before dinner, he was a man of class. So, instead of tearing Stephen’s robes off, he
kept his perfect composure, smiled at Stephen one last time before turning away and heading for
the door.

He shrugged the cloak off, the fabric hanging in the air sadly as both it and Stephen watched Tony
leave.

“Eight pm.” He yelled over his shoulder at Stephen and didn’t miss the sorcerer’s eyes glued to his
ass. “You’ll find me.”

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“Oh, I like this place,” Stephen commented as they stepped inside the establishment Tony had
chosen, glancing around with a familiar ease. Tony had been here a few times himself, having
chosen it today for its smooth atmosphere.

There was a bar near the front, marble illuminated with soft blue lights, but Tony had reserved a
small table near the back, the shadows perfect to get lost in, and a little more intimate which
allowed for easier conversation.

“Sorcerers spend a lot of time in lounges?” Tony asked, teasing tilt around his lips as he turned
towards the hostess and asked for their table.

“No, but surgeons do.”
He kept forgetting Stephen used to be a doctor. He knew… the bastard insisted everyone call him that after all, but then again Captain America wasn’t really a captain either. Stephen placed a hand in the small of his back as the hostess lead them to their table, and Tony let himself lean into the touch.

“If it wasn’t for my glamour, Veronica would have definitely recognised me.”

“Veronica?” Tony frowned, before realising he was talking about the woman, and he turned towards Stephen with a glare. “Wait you also slept with her?”

Stephen’s face immediately darkened, moving his hand until it was gripping at Tony’s waist, pulling him against his body. Tony only grinned up at him, using his hip to bump Stephen’s slightly as he winked. “That’s what you get for trying to make me jealous, asshole.”

The sorcerer loosened his grip and rolled his eyes in annoyance, but Tony still noticed the small blush on his cheekbones. He grinned in satisfaction as he stepped away from him and pulled out one of the lounge chairs, motioning for Stephen to take it, “now sit and behave.”

Stephen stared at him with a raised eyebrow, before taking the opposite chair and sitting down with a bored expression bordering on challenging.

“You just like being difficult, don’t you?” Tony sighed and glared at Stephen, knowing it wasn’t convincing in the least. He sat down opposite him, watching Stephen’s features carefully. He couldn’t help it. Stephen’s face looked like it was sculpted from marvel, smooth and hard, striking eyes that couldn’t help but draw him in. Even his hair was perfect at all times, deadly still and handsome.

He couldn’t wait to run his hands through it and mess it all up.

“Tony?”

Tony hummed as he was pulled out of his thoughts, letting his gaze drop back to Stephen’s eyes. The sorcerer was watching him with a subdued expression, eyes narrowing slightly at him. His heart jumped nervously at the expression.

“Why are we here?”

Tony frowned, leaning back in his chair as he stared at Stephen in confusion. “As in this lounge? If you don’t like it we can -”

“No,” Stephen rolled his eyes softly. He could feel the sorcerer search his irises, and once again he wondered if Stephen could really read his mind. If he could he wouldn’t have to ask, pretty sure his thoughts and feelings were pretty obvious even without telepathy. “Why are we here.. on a date?”

Tony opened his mouth to answer, exasperation already itching at his skin as he rolled his eyes at the sorcerer. But Stephen interrupted him, leaning forward a little to watch Tony more intently. “I know what you said earlier, but I thought it was pretty clear yesterday that this wouldn’t work out.”

He didn’t miss the sadness in Stephen’s tone. “Why not?”

Stephen tilted his head and sent Tony a look. “You know why.”

He did.
Stephen sighed in frustration, his hand moving up to card through his hair, before smiling down sadly at Tony. Tony hated how much he loved that look, how he couldn’t help find it incredibly sexy and how it made his heart jump happily. “You want to save everyone. And I can only tell you it’s not possible.”

The words were enough to dampen his spirits, looking away from Stephen and fixing his gaze on his drink instead. “Explain to me why. What is it you’re trying to do? And why is it so important that you have to kill innocent people over it?”

“We don’t have to kill innocent people, it’s just easier that way,” Stephen’s voice was calm, almost bored, and it made Tony’s grip tighten around his glass. “In the long run, a few lives really don’t matter at all. And the people we kill intentionally, well, those aren’t quite so innocent. At least not in their role for the future.”

“You’re really not winning me over, doc.”

“It’s not about achieving things now. It’s not about instant gratification,” Stephen pressed on, making Tony glance up at him slightly. He was starting to look agitated, staring at Tony as if that alone could make him understand. “We’re just meant to aid things along. Stop the world from spiralling away from its chosen path.”

“What?”

“Everything happens for a reason, Tony. I used to think that you could control your own life but you really have no say in the matter. There’s a force bigger than all of us,” Stephen sounded almost bitter at that last part, moving up his hand to take a sip of his drink. His voice turned teasing as he glanced at Tony over the rim of his glass, smirking slightly as he added; “The Avengers are nothing in the face of the universe. It’s quite relaxing fighting you, really.”

Tony glared at him and Stephen raised an amused eyebrow at his defiance. “Don’t worry, Stark, you’re my favourite for a reason. I don’t enjoy easy pray.”

Why he was so easily distracted from the matter at hand, Tony didn’t know. Stephen must have noticed Tony’s face fall slightly, because his gaze softened as he tried to meet his eyes. He could feel his ears turning red at being caught but tried to play it off. “You called me Tony before.”

Stephen’s face brightened again into a devilish grin, leaning forward over their little table as he cupped Tony’s jaw in his fingers, tilting his head to meet Stephen’s. Tony swallowed looking into his eyes, basking in the intensity of his stare. The way his eyes were lidded and playful and horribly sincere.

Stephen leaned towards him, Tony immediately itching forward himself, his mouth opening up underneath the pressure of Stephen’s scarred fingers digging into his flesh as he welcomed Stephen’s tongue.

He let himself be lost in it, in Stephen, sitting together in the dark booth of the lounge like any other couple would. Like it was just them, two meaningless people in an infinite universe. Kiss soft but passionate, like they had all the time in the world and treasuring each second.

“I’ve called you many things before, my love.” Stephen purred, when he pulled back, thumb wiping a bit of spit from the corner of Tony’s lips. Tony didn’t miss the way the sorcerer’s smile tilted even more at the affectionate term, the flash of pure glee mixed with the possessiveness of
Tony felt like he could explode. Like he could die happy. Like everything would be okay as long as he was with Stephen.

It wasn’t so bad, Tony had convinced himself. Staying apart now, after they had spent the nights together for months, seemed pointless. If they had to be on different sides during the day, they could still enjoy each other’s company in the shadows. At night there were no sides, just the two of them and the mess of feelings between them.

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Tony glanced towards Stephen, the sorcerer staring at the ceiling as usual, though his expression was softer than Tony was used to. The fluttering of his heart reminded him that Stephen loved him, as he did him, and even as it went unsaid, that was all that really mattered at the moment.

Smiling to himself, he rolled over until he was lying on top of Stephen, leaning his chin on his chest so he could watch him. He looked bemused at the movement, eyes softening as they met Tony’s, and he tentatively wrapped his arms around Tony’s back, pressing him closer in the process. Tony smiled in approval, glad to see the sparkle in the sorcerer’s eyes, and pressed a kiss to his collar bone before placing his ear against the Stephen’s chest, listening to the soft rhythm of his heart as he enjoyed the feeling of his strong arms around him.

They had never touched after sex before, the lines between them clear from the beginning. Tony couldn’t help himself anymore, and as he knew the sorcerer felt the same way, he was finished with boundaries. Needed them to change and adapt to fit their new truths.

Stephen smelt amazing, musky and warm, and Tony revelled in it, the proximity, being able to touch softly, affection coursing through him even as his brain yelled about Stephen being a villain. He was aware, but he was safe in his arms nonetheless, and had made peace with loving him anyway.

Stephen’s hands moved up, starting to softly pet Tony’s hair and Tony knew he was done for.

He would never be able to give this up willingly.
Despite what the Avengers might think, not all of the sorcerers’ missions involved bells and whistles. More often than not, their missions were quiet, taking out a politician here or there, pushing people to make certain decisions or strategically placing a relic somewhere.

It was like chess, shifting the pieces until they had arranged the board in their favour.

Stephen was taking his time today, lazily stalking through the halls of the Smithsonian. He’d never really been a fan of history, preferring biology and the life sciences, but since becoming a sorcerer he had a newfound appreciation.

Becoming a sorcerer had been about both taking back control and surrendering it. Both strengthening himself and trusting The Ancient One to lead them. There was a force higher than all of them, but if the Universe was the drunk uncle, the sorcerers were the ones steering him in the direction of the couch and praying he didn’t throw up on them.

Yet along the way, he’d found reading about history and spells to be soothing. He was learning to learn for the first time in his life. Not to become a surgeon. Not to become the smartest person in the room.

Sure, his goal had been to become a sorcerer, needed to learn magic and grow his power, but it had been nice to get his mind off of his own misery, away from the hospital he was supposed to be at.

Even now, with everything going on, the museum was the first thing to get his mind away from Tony.

Tony, whom he had somehow tricked into wanting to be with him.

The energy around him was definitely shifting as he neared the far end of the building, the relic surely not being far away.

The museum was quite calm at this hour, the only sound coming from the groups of students filtered throughout the displays. Stephen didn’t pay them any attention, easily following the threads of energy pulling him closer.

Tony had been spending the nights with him for the last couple of weeks. Ever since their ‘date’. Stephen still wasn’t sure how he’d ended up at this point, how he had ended up in Tony Stark’s inner circle. Even after all his teasing and flirting, he’d never expected anything more to come off it. Had expected that to be all he was ever going to get, but Tony’s shows of trust in him were silent but true.

Like the first time Tony had surrendered control to him. The night he’d left to fix that little squabble in the fifteenth dimension. The night Tony had threatened to leave. The night he’d slept in his bed for the first time.
It had been a line Stephen had never thought they would cross. Had thought Tony would use him as a plaything but nothing more.

At the time, he could still convince himself that was just what Tony had needed. That it didn’t mean anything more than that. That Tony had fallen asleep out of exhaustion, unable to think about the risk. That it didn’t mean that Tony trusted him.

Yet, now, Tony fully understood the extent of Stephen’s feelings for him, and he stayed. Asked him on a date. Fell asleep in his arms and pressed sweet kisses to his collarbone.

Stephen honestly didn’t know what he’d done to deserve any of it.

The signal seemed to come from a closed exhibition about ancient Egypt, which seemed about right according to his research. He ignored the no access signs, stepped around them and pushed his way through the doors. They fell closed again behind him and he glanced around the hall he was in, taking in the ancient artefacts and murals. It was clear why it was closed off; some parts of the hall were still empty, others only halfway through being set up.

“I don’t think you’re supposed to be here.”

Stephen turned around at the voice, spell curling at his fingertips as he took in the person following him.

“Spiderman?” He frowned at the teen in front of him. To anyone else he should look like a random staff member, the glamour around him strong and steady. Yet Peter seemed to be looking through it, white eyes focussed on his features as if having to strain to see clearly.

Stephen figured it made sense; the spell should only work on people not looking for it, not having wanted to waste energy on anything stronger. If his spider senses made him alert of something off, it should be enough to work through it. Stephen dropped the spell and glamour all together, knowing the strain would turn into a headache soon if Peter didn’t let up. “Shouldn’t you be in Queens?”

“Fieldtr-,” Peter choked on his words, and Stephen felt a smile pull at his lips. “I mean…I knew what you were up to and came to thwart your plan!”

“Really?” Stephen lulled, leaning an arm on the statue to his left. He could see the spider’s huge white eyes narrow slightly at him touching the art. It reminded him of Wong, so he only smiled wider, putting more weight on the truly ugly bronze. “So you came all the way out here? On your own? That’s brave.”

“I’m sure Mr. Stark will be happy to see you taking such responsibility all on your own.” Stephen continued, keeping his voice low but teasing. “One blast to that suit of yours and I’m sure alarms will be blaring. It’s been a while since I’ve seen him,” he lied, “I wouldn’t mind pulling him out here, would you?”

“He won’t mind me stopping you!” Peter’s eyes narrowed in determination, though he seemed a little more subdued about the thought of alerting Tony. Stephen thought it was adorable. He agreed, of course; Tony’s heart was weak enough as it was, didn’t need the fright of thinking Peter was in danger.

“Tell you what,” he started, stepping away from the statue and closer towards Peter. The Spiderman stiffened at his movement, hands twitching at his side. “I’ll allow you to try and fight me without alerting Stark. You won’t win, but it might be good practice.”
“I don’t need practice!” Peter scoffed and crossed his arms in front of him, stance defensive as he
glared at the sorcerer. Stephen quickly moved his hand, throwing a streak of smoke at him. The
teen tried to dodge, but with his arms crossed over his chest he was too late to move, clearly not
having expected an attack. It hit him straight in the chest, dissipating as soon as it touched him.

“Boom. You’re dead.”

Peter startled, hands dropping as he stared at his chest in panic. “I am?! Did you just poison me?”

“Relax, kid,” Stephen smirked. He was starting to see why Tony had such a soft-spot for him. The
teen was amusing, his heroism honourable, but by the Vishanti was he naive. “Just proving a
point.”

Peter sighed in relief before frowning back up at him. “How do I know you’re not lying?”

Stephen raised an approving eyebrow at him. So at least he was not completely gullible. “Are you
dead yet?”

“No.”

Stephen gave him a pointed look and Peter sighed at the loss, practically projecting his pout
through his mask. “Did that alert Mr. Stark?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“I told you I would let you practice without Stark’s knowledge.”

“Won’t he be angry?”

A chuckle almost escaped him, and he rolled his eyes at the teen, hoping it didn’t show the
fondness he felt bubbling up in his chest. “Should have thought about that before sneaking away
from your class.”

The teen’s shoulders drooped slightly, so Stephen maintained; “Might as well learn something.”

His mission could wait just a little while, and he could use the relaxation. Also, seeing the teen
being so eager to stand up for what was right, he knew he would get himself in trouble eventually.
Maybe perhaps he didn’t want Tony to have to deal with an injured Peter.

Stephen knew well enough that there were plenty sorcerers who wouldn’t bat an eye at killing an
innocent teenager, and even the ones that would, wouldn’t be aware of the Spiderman’s true
identity.

Instead of answering, Peter gave him a considering look before quickly throwing a web at him and
darting away. Stephen smirked as he easily deflected, turning around towards Peter who was
weaving through the different artefacts and cases.

“Mr. Strange, sir,” he yelled, voice uncertain, “can we time out for a second?”

“Really?” Stephen sighed in exasperation. By the Vishanti, how did this kid become a vigilante?
“First thing: it’s doctor. Second; you just initiated a fight and now you’re asking for a time-out? I
can guarantee you that won’t work in real life.”

“No, it’s just that I don’t want to break anything.”
Stephen stilled, glancing around the hall. The kid was right. With a quick snap of his wrists he shifted them into the mirror dimension, ignoring Peter’s awes as he continued their little battle. The relic could wait a little longer.

“He did what?” Tony yelled in exasperation, burying his face in his hands and groaning into them.

“Relax,” Stephen replied, voice smooth as he was focussing on the food he was making. “I wouldn’t have hurt him.”

“I know that,” Tony looked up from his hands, glaring at Stephen, “but he doesn’t know that.”

He was in the sanctum again, basically spending most of his time here now. JARVIS would alert him if anyone was looking for him, so he didn’t have to feel bad about it either. He could relax and enjoy watching Stephen in the kitchen, ignoring the smell of his cooking to focus on him instead. He was wearing casual clothes for once, loose sweatpants and a shirt Tony could swear had been his at some point.

It was a good look, he couldn’t deny.

“I’m going to kill him,” Tony grunted, pulling out his phone and searching for Peter’s contact. The tracker luckily said he was back home by now, and he trusted May to keep an eye on him for tonight. He glanced back at Stephen from his place at the kitchen island. “What were you doing in the Smithsonian anyway?”

“I thought I wasn’t allowed to talk to you about my ‘evil-doing’,” Stephen smirked at him, glancing back down as he moved the pot off the stove.

Tony huffed. Sure, blame him for not wanting to be considered an accomplice.

They still fought. Or “fought”.

It was mainly for show at this point, ramming each other against buildings until the homoerotic tension became too much and one of them snapped.

Tony noticed Stephen get rougher and rougher with the Avengers, the furious lines on his face sending sad waves trough him until he managed to pull his sorcerer’s attention back to him.

His eyes always softened, always returned to their teasing, their eternal joy at being around Tony. He could swear he’d never had anyone in his life who lit up solely because he was around and Tony was addicted to it. Addicted to Stephen’s affection, his protection and passion.

He really had been an idiot for not noticing it sooner, for not figure Stephen’s true feelings out months ago, and the only excuse he had was that Stephen was an expert at hiding his emotions.

But these days they were always so clear, always present, never-ending.

But just like any addiction, it was ripping Tony apart from the inside. Tony hated it. Hated the feeling of watching people in terror, about not being able to do anything to help them. While at the same time his heart couldn’t help but sigh happily at the sight of Stephen.

Tony hated how he was angry at Stephen, despite the love the sorcerer so freely gave him. The love Tony couldn’t help but return.

Yet he felt his anger justified. It bothered him that he never knew what Stephen was up to. Wanted
to be able to prevent Stephen from hurting anyone if possible.

Wanted to control his blasting range.

Every battle now he was terrified, terrified Stephen would cross a line he wouldn’t be able to forgive. Would break something between them that couldn’t be fixed.

Because he recognised that even if he wouldn’t be able to forgive something he were to do in the future, he would never be able to stop loving him. And that divide might one day be the end of him.

“And besides,” Stephen continued, pulling Tony out of his thoughts, “he did really well once he got into it.”

“Don’t you praise his stupidity,” Tony glared at Stephen, the man smirking at his words. *Wait a second* - “How do you even know about him?”

Stephen’s smirk only deepened as he placed two plates on the table, putting what was left in the fridge for the other habitants of the sanctum. Tony shook his head in exasperation. He had guessed at the sorcerer following him around at times, but it was still weird to have it confirmed. “You’re such a stalker.”

He stood up from the barstool, heading over to the dining table. Stephen turned him once he was close enough, pulling him close and wrapping his arms around his torso from behind, talking close to his ear, voice maddeningly low. “Don’t be mad, my love. Can you blame me for not wanting to take my eyes off of you?”

“I can’t believe you’re making a massive breach of privacy sound cute.”

“You like the attention.” Stephen purred, placing a kiss underneath Tony’s ear, the touch sending shivers down his spine.

Damn Stephen for knowing him so well.

Tony turned around in his hold, pushing Stephen back with a dark look until he was sitting in one of the chairs. Their food was going to get cold, but that’s what microwaves were for.

He looked down at Stephen, smirking at being able to tower above him for once as Stephen’s hands fell to his hips, gaze fixed on Tony’s filled with hunger. “I still think you need to be punished.”

He leaned forward, agonisingly slow as he watched Stephen’s look darken, but before his lips finally reached Stephen’s, JARVIS spoke up from his earpiece, interrupting the moment.

“Sir, Rogers has called an emergency meeting and insisted on your presence.”

Tony wanted to groan, about to lean back out of Stephen’s space and check what JARVIS was on about, but Stephen didn’t let him. He growled before Tony could, grabbing his head and pressing him down, swiping his tongue over his lips to immediately ask for entrance. Tony melted under his touch - how couldn’t he - and he fell forward into Stephen’s lap, successfully having lost control to the sorcerer.

He almost forgot about JARVIS’ warning, and it took the AI reminding him for him to get enough self-control back to break the kiss between them. He couldn’t quite yet move off of Stephen’s lap though, but he took small victories.
“I really have to go,” he started, moving his hand up to brush a strand of hair away from Stephen’s forehead.

“Alright,” Stephen stated casually, allowing Tony to climb off of him. Tony smiled at him, before his expression faltered into a suspicious glare.

“You’re going to follow me aren’t you?”

Stephen stood up, brushing the wrinkles off his pants as he answered, “Well, my evening plans just cleared up so …”

Tony sighed and rolled his eyes, but leaned forward to tilt Stephen’s chin into a sweet kiss.

“In any case, I was promised to be punished for it so…”

Groaning, he bit at Stephen’s lips before forcing himself to lean back. “You better stop that right now.”

He’d never get out of here otherwise, and Steve had made clear his presence at the emergency meeting was mandatory. “And don’t meddle, or I’m not punishing or praising you at all for the next week.”

“As if you’d make it that long,” Stephen only smirked, tapping Tony against the ass as the engineer turned away from him. Tony bit his lip to keep from dignifying that with an answer, and crossed his arms.

Stephen winked at his defensive stance and opened a portal into Tony’s bedroom. As soon as Tony had stepped through, Stephen was gone.

He rolled his eyes as he walked towards the door and made his way through the hall towards the meeting room, knowing he wasn’t alone for a second despite the empty hallways.
He breathed in deeply before opening the door, immediately tensing up as soon as he noticed everyone already present. Rhodey was sitting next to the only empty spot, looking up at Tony with a slightly worried expression. Tony smiled to sate his best friend, ignoring everyone else in the room watching him carefully.

He sat down, trying to fold into himself and take up as little space as possible. He had realised a while ago that keeping the attention off of him kept the meetings as short as possible. There were some hills he was willing to die on, some decisions he wouldn’t let up on, but until he knew what the meeting was about he could stay quiet.

A pressure fell onto him, and Tony flicked his eyes towards the heavens to keep himself from reacting as an invisible body made himself comfortable in his lap, carelessly throwing an arm around his shoulder and leaning back against him.

He could feel Stephen’s smirk in the air in front of him, but he composed himself, tightening his crossed arms over his chest as he glared at the wall opposite him. Rhodey glanced at him again, confused look on his face as he leaned closer.

“Tones, are you okay?”

“Peachy,” Tony was proud of the easy smile he managed to pull off, but Rhodes still didn’t look convinced. Stephen was being obnoxious, yes, but at least he was enjoying himself instead of gearing up to kill the Avengers one by one. And it didn’t seem like he was going to take it farther than using him as a chair, which he was grateful for. “I promise, honeybear.”

He could feel Stephen stiffen on his lap, but Tony just rolled his eyes and smirked.

As he took in the different Avengers talking between each other, he casually shifted Stephen so he was sitting more comfortably in his lap. Making it so that to anyone unaware of the sorcerer’s presence, it would look like a random shift in position.

Stephen relaxed back against him, apparently getting over his moment of jealousy. He wasn’t going
to pretend he didn’t love the possessive streak in Stephen. Wasn’t going to deny the satisfaction coursing through him whenever it showed. In some twisted way, it was proof to Tony that he cared. And though he was already aware of the sorcerer’s love, it was nice to have it confirmed in these small ways nonetheless.

Yes, Tony might pull it out of him purposefully, mention a random name and watch him react, but he wasn’t cruel enough to see it through for longer than necessary. Especially when he hadn’t meant to in the first place. After all, he definitely didn’t want Stephen to consider his best friend a threat. He cared too much about Rhodey’s wellbeing for that.

Everyone seemed to be there already, yet the meeting wasn’t starting. If that wasn’t enough indication that nothing life-threatening was going on, he didn’t know what was. He sighed, already regretted having shown up at all, and took back his vow of silence; “is this meeting going to start or what? I was doing things, and would like to get back to that as soon as possible.”

The Avengers all looked at him, Rogers clearing his throat before ignoring Tony’s annoyance and starting the meeting. Natasha sent him a curious glance, but Tony ignored it, leaning back in his seat as he tried to tune out Rogers’ voice.

Tony could feel the air shift next to his ear, and it send shivers down his spine.

A whisper pierced through the barrier of reality, quiet but clear. “I’m ‘things’ now, am I?”

Tony rolled his eyes and felt his scowl darken as his pulse started beating faster, but he kept his gaze fixed on Rogers as Stephen shifted in his lap. He leaned his back against Tony’s chest as he too focussed on the meeting, apparently unbothered by Tony ignoring him. He was fighting the urge to wrap his arms around Stephen’s waist and pull him closer; it would look ridiculous to everyone in the room who wasn’t aware of Stephen’s presence.

His thoughts were pulled back to Rogers as soon as he noticed everyone’s eyes on him. He frowned, refusing to look apologetic as he asked him to repeat his question.

“I said that Sam and I were going to Greece to track down a lead.”

Tony frowned, and through his own confusion he didn’t notice Stephen tense against him. He leaned forward as much he could with the sorcerer still in his lap and turned his full attention on Rogers. “What lead?”

“You weren’t paying attention at all, were you?”

“Are you even surprised,” Clint cut in from where he was leaning back on his chair. He was going for humor but missed the mark, tone a little too sharp. Tony didn’t care one bit, would have been fine ignoring the archer all-together, but apparently someone had other plans.

A scraping heard over the floor was their only warning before Clint yelped and fell backwards, letting out a noise of pain as his back hit the ground.

Tony might have been fooled by it being an accident, if physics didn’t contradict it. Clint’s chair hadn’t been back nearly far enough to be sent teetering backwards by his body mass.

No one seemed to think twice about it though, so he only sent Stephen a warning glare as everyone was too busy either laughing at Clint, helping him get back up or in Natasha’s case, doing both.

“Does it really matter at this point?” Tony groaned, continuing on as if nothing had happened, “Just whatever,” he waved everyone off as they turned their attention back to him.
“So why call this ‘emergency’ meeting? Just to say you’re leaving the country? I’m pretty sure we’ll survive without the two of you for a few days.”

Rogers frowned back at him, as if he couldn’t understand how Tony didn’t recognise the importance of this meeting. Steve looked at him like that a lot.

Tony wasn’t sure if it was a general lack of understanding of how Tony worked or just a dislike of his person. It made him feel like a child each time. He was aware that Steve had spent years in an ice berg, but he was still only in his mid twenties. Yet, he talked to Tony like he was the pubescent teenager that was only around to be difficult. “You’ll be down two valuable players, Tony! You have to account for that.”

“Look, no offence,” Tony countered. He recognised he was being petty and starting unnecessary troubles, but they had gotten him into a bad mood. “But this could have been communicated through a company email. ‘Dear Avengers, we’re sad to inform you that you’ll be down two valuable players. Train accordingly and make sure to account for it in the on-call schedule. Take care. Love, Cap.’ That’s all it takes.”

Tony was so distracted by the argument that followed, that he didn’t notice Stephen’s presence fading away. As soon as he’d realised the sorcerer’s absence, however, he stopped in his tracks, swallowing back his words mid-sentence.

“Look,” he changed gears instead, and held up his hands in surrender as he already sensed at least three people about to interrupt him. “Fine. I’m sorry. But, we know now. You and bird man out of the country. Got it. Was that all?”

Glancing around the room, he waited for an answer, and when no one spoke up, he excused himself. He barely paid anyone any attention - the confusion clearly keeping them from arguing - as he left.

He had made it a few hallways until a voice called him back. If it hadn’t been Rhodey maybe he would have ignored it and continued on, nonetheless, but as it was, he could spare a few minutes. Schooling his features into an effortless smile, he turned around to face his best friend. “What’s up, armadillo?”

“Armadillo, really?” Rhodey snorted, but there was something off. Tony could sense it in the air between them. “That’s your worst one yet.”

“Oh come on, with the armour?” He joked, trying to not make it obvious that he wanted to get back on his way. It was a horrible feeling, in a way. It wasn’t Rhodey’s fault either. He loved him, would always love him. He was his family, after all. “You can’t tell me it doesn’t fit.”

Rhodey didn’t answer, only rolled his eyes as a small smile tugged at his lips. There was that flash of worry again, though. Tony didn’t understand where it was coming from. In the meetings it might have been in place. Must be a habit at this point, to worry about Tony causing a scene.

But he was doing better than he had in a long while. He wasn’t spending excessive amounts of time in the lab anymore, actually getting a few hours of uninterrupted sleep in Stephen’s arms and had been eating better. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d gotten into an argument with Steve - at least from before today - and he was generally happier.

Rhodes must have caught on to his thoughtful expression, so tuned into each other by now after decades of knowing each other. They had lived together for years after all, seen both of each
others’ lowest moments. Even if there had been periods of time where they’d barely seen each other for months - both having busy careers - they never lost that touch.

It made Tony feel uneasy, now. He didn’t want to feel it, but much like his love for Stephen it wasn’t something he could choose or control. Tony hadn’t kept anything from Rhody since the Iron Man suit - except for when he was dying that one time but that’s neither here nor there.

He didn’t want to keep secrets from Rhody, and he didn’t want Stephen to be a secret either. But he knew Rhody wouldn’t approve, and he didn’t want to hear from one of the most rational and trusted people in his life all the ways his relationship with Stephen was a bad idea.

“Tones, are you okay?”

“I’m fine, Rhody,” Tony smiled at him, feeling the knot built in his stomach as affection pulled at it. “I promise.”

Rhodey gave him a considering look, before his shoulders relaxed and he sighed shaking his head. Tony released a breath he hadn’t known he’d been holding as he noticed the soft smile pulling at Rhody’s lips. “Alright then.”

His smile turned into a smirk as he did a one-eighty and changed topics. “You’ve got a date for next week’s gala yet?”

Tony grinned back at his friend, falling back into their comfortable teasing easily. “You asking me out, platypus?”

“In your dreams,” Rhodey huffed, but he looked pleased, “I have to go now. Enjoy your night.”

And with one pointed look, he turned around and started walking back towards his own bedroom. Tony took a minute to watch him leave, before continuing on his way.

By the time he’d made it back to his bedroom, he’d already forgotten all about the meeting and Rhody, mind solely worried about Stephen, and why he’d disappeared earlier. But when he walked into his bedroom, all worries immediately melted from his brain, much like everything else still hiding in there.

For Stephen was laying on his bed, very much naked and - dear gods - tied up to his headboard with those dark red whips of his.

He managed to stop himself from climbing onto the bed, however, narrowing his eyes at the sorcerer as he fought with his own stubbornness.

Stephen was watching him with amusement as Tony still couldn’t stop himself from pulling off his tie and starting at unbuttoning his shirt. “I told you you weren’t allowed to meddle.”

“You have no proof,” Stephen only smirked, and, well, thank god he made the tower soundproof. Sense came back to him only a few hours later, when he was lying on his back in the middle of the bed, breath already returned to him and Stephen pressed closely against his chest, legs tangled with his.

He carded his hands through Stephen’s hair, the sorcerer idly tracing the scars on his chest. When Stephen turned his head to look up at him, careful expression on his face, Tony couldn’t help but smile and kiss the frown on his face.
“What?”

“You’re okay with Steve looking for Barnes?”

“Who?” Tony looked down at him in confusion, smile faltering slightly as he caught Stephen’s frown deepening.

“Barnes? The Winter Soldier?”

“Oh, is that what the lead’s about,” Tony rolled his eyes as it clicked. Steve had told him about Barnes a while ago, after he himself had found out about him still being alive.

He hadn’t realised he was looking for him again, but he guessed most things from Sokovia were cleared up by now. “Yeah, why wouldn’t I be? I can’t fault him for wanting to find his best friend.”

“You forgave him?”

“Well, it’s not like he was in control as the Winter Soldier,” Tony shrugged, “and honestly I don’t know much about him or what he did. Haven’t been really paying much attention.”

Tony frowned down at Stephen, tightening his arms around the sorcerer as he noticed the scowl forming on his face. The softness of earlier was fading out of his expression, harsh lines of anger cutting into his face as his blue eyes darkened.

“Babe, what-,” Tony started, moving his hands to cup Stephen’s face, “Are you angry at me? I forgive you didn’t I? Am still forgiving you for most of what you’re doing, I-”

“No, Tony,” Stephen interrupted him, pushing off his chest and sitting up, draping a leg over his waist so he was straddling him. “That’s not what I’m upset about.”

There was a dangerous edge to his voice, and Tony hated that he was aroused by it, pushing his libido aside to focus on the cause of Stephen’s anger.

“Then what-,” His question was cut short by Stephen’s lips on his, Stephen pressing into him and blurring his mind. The sorcerer pulled back abruptly, mid-kiss, and when he did, the anger had shifted to something else. His eyes were distracted, frowning at a spot on the pillow next to Tony’s head as if confused. “What’s wrong?”

Stephen pushed away from him, Tony feeling the cold of the distance between their bodies as Stephen got off of his lap, and started picking up his clothing and pulling it on. “I’m sorry, Tones. I have to go.”

“What? Why?” Tony asked in bewilderment, mind trying to catch up to the sudden change in mood.

“Emergency meeting of my own. I have to go speak with the Ancient One.”

“Why?” Tony repeated, more urgently now as he sat up as well, glaring at Stephen. He wasn’t angry at the sorcerer, though perhaps just a little bit; always so cryptic, and leaving him on his own for the night.

“Tones…” Stephen leaned over towards him as soon as he was dressed, pressing an urgent kiss to Tony’s lips before moving back. “I just need to check something with her. It’s important. I’ll see you tomorrow, I promise.”
And Stephen left, resigning Tony to think about why he’d suddenly disappeared. What he’d said to make the sorcerer leave so quickly.
He arrived in Kathmandu around noon local time, the ancient temple wide awake and its inhabitants moving around its halls with purpose. He hadn’t been at Kamar Taj in a while, main focus on New York and Tony Stark, but it was still just as familiar, the old space having become home in the months he’d spent there studying and training.

It didn’t take long for him to reach the chamber of the Ancient One. She refused to acknowledge the room as hers or an office, considering the sacred space open to everyone, but every inhabitant of the temple knew to find her there. It’s where she spent most of her time after all, and yes there was a desk, as even their leader knew the importance of enriching the mind.

He threw all pretense out of the window as he burst through her doors, considering his news too urgent to worry about etikette. She didn’t startle at his rude entrance, merely turned around from where she’d been staring into the flames in the old, stone fireplace against the far wall.

“Stephen,” she started, smile kind as she motioned for him to come in, ignoring the fact he already was. “What can I help you with?”

“You said the timeline had changed,” he started messily, realising he hadn’t stopped for a second to sort out his thoughts before coming here. He took a breath, focussing back on his realisation from earlier. “Rogers knows about Barnes. Yet Tony doesn’t. All signs lead to the Civil War still happening.”

“Rogers has known about the Winter Soldier from before Sokovia.” Stephen felt all of his nerves buzzing with urgency, yet the Ancient One’s voice was calm, showing no indication of any of his words being of any concern. “It wasn’t avoidable and wasn’t supposed to be avoided.”

“He knew about it before Ultron, yet he didn’t tell Tony?” Stephen spluttered in incredulity, anger starting to boil underneath his skin. “I thought Sokovia was what started the break of the Avengers?”

“If Sokovia hadn’t happened, Stark most likely would have never found out about it. Or if he had, it would have been under better circumstances and they could have worked through it.”

“It doesn’t matter,” The Ancient One interrupted him before he’d even started his outrage, causing Stephen to glare at her. “What you do next, does.”

“What am I supposed to do?” Stephen balked, “Not tell Tony that Rogers knows who killed his parents? And is actively looking for him to welcome him back into his arms?”

“You are going to tell him,” she answered easily, making Stephen stop up short, squinting at her in suspicion. “More like, you’re going to show him. At Friday’s gala.”

Stephen’s stomach dropped as he stared at her in disbelief. He had known about the gala for a while, had known they were supposed to disrupt it and knew there were supposed to be casualties. If there weren’t, no one would care enough for it to be a big enough impact. They needed it, needed people in outrage, needed people to demand a change, to rally for safety.

On top of that, the event would be a gathering of a bunch of important figures they needed to get rid of, the perfect shot to kill two birds with one stone.

Yet, he’d been worrying about it for the last couple of weeks, knowing it would cause Tony to
rethink everything they had built this far. Stephen wouldn’t even have blamed him. Even as Stephen’s own hands remained clean, Tony would never forgive him for standing by while people died.

He’d still had hope, however, that maybe – just maybe – if Stephen managed to get Tony to fall in love with him before then, if he’d get Tony to understand the importance of what they were doing, maybe he’d stay. Maybe he’d consider Stephen too important for him to leave. Maybe they could figure it out.

He knew Tony wanted it to work, but he also understood that for that to happen they needed compromises. And as it was, Stephen wasn’t able to give him anything worthy enough to match Tony’s love.

And now he wouldn’t just have a hand in yet another attack, he’d have to throw a wrench into everything Tony knew. In all the progress he’d made. Stephen knew it wasn’t easy coming to terms with the death of a loved one, and to undo all understanding Stark had about the death of his parents and do it in front of everyone attending the gala... it was too cruel to be forgiven.

Not only would he be picking at the wounds the loss of his family had left behind, he would be breaking up any bit of hope Tony had of building a new one with the Avengers.

“If I do this, he’ll never forgive me,” Stephen ground out, mind going a hundred miles an hour, trying to find a solution. A possible way this could be fixed without doing what needed to be done. He wasn’t quite ready to throw in the towel, wasn’t ready to give Tony up yet even as he’d known it to be inevitable.

“He will,” The Ancient One stated simply. It wasn’t confidence rolling off her, but ease. She was watching him with that imploring gaze of hers, trying to see a million different truths and possibilities. As if she was in at least five different moments at any one time.

“How can you be so sure? We can find another way- We can still fight him in the end - Tony will be able to stop him, isn’t that the point? Isn’t that why he’s so important?” Stephen rambled, turning to start pacing around the room. He didn’t pace. Hadn’t paced since his student years, but he couldn’t help himself now. “Eliminating the witch should have been enough…”

“Miss Maximoff would have been a possible catalyst, but as you may well know there are multiple ways to break something that’s already cracked.”

He believed in Tony.

Avoidance was the best option, of course it was. Wanda had set a course of events in motion that shouldn’t have transpired. They had been trying to stop that from happening. Meddling where needed to stop the Avengers from falling apart even as Stephen hated it.

They needed them together.

But as much as they needed to be able to work on their team, they had other matters to attend to, and it was clear they couldn’t do both. Every time the Avengers tried fighting against the sorcerers, or any enemy really, more and more cracks appeared between them.

Stephen knew that they were doomed in the end. Sokovia had already happened. Maybe if it hadn’t their team could have grown closer and bonded more, worked out their issues and difference, but Stephen was aware of Tony. Aware of the fact that the person that would have pulled them together in the end was drifting away, was being misled and broken in two.
The witch had placed distrust amongst the team, aimed directly at the most important piece.

It was the quake that set the ball rolling.

They needed to get it on a different path. Stephen trusted the Ancient One, trusted her when she said they needed to do this, but he knew it would be the cataclysm to his relationship with Tony. Perhaps he was selfish, but he couldn’t care about the world when all he wanted was to be in Tony’s arm.

“He will be able to stop the mad Titan if it were to come to it,” she started, eyes piercing Stephen’s as he glanced at her hopefully, “but you won’t like the price he’ll have to pay. The price you’ll have to pay.”

Stephen stopped in his tracks, snapping his head towards her as he felt his heart starting to break, anxiety coursing through him as it stopped and reset.

NO. It couldn’t be- He wouldn’t.

He wouldn’t let it happen.

“We can still prevent it any other way! I can keep him safe!” He rarely yelled at her. She was to be respected after all, but he needed it to be the truth, needed it to happen. Any other option that would keep Tony safe and happy and with him.

She stared at her, eyes pitying, and Stephen hated it, hated the feeling it sent through him. The feeling of powerlessness, a lack of control. He thought he’d gotten used to that. That it had been the reason he learned magic, the knowledge he’d gained at Kamar Taj; things can’t be controlled, and that’s okay. It’s the way of the universe. But feeling it used against him once more, after he already lost his hands, his profession, his passion, he couldn’t let it happen again.

He had trusted her with everything up until now, but he couldn’t let this happen. Needed control back in his own hands. Needed to be fully prepared for anything. Couldn’t take the risk that she was lying, that there was any other possible path she had missed. “Show me.”

The Ancient One nodded her head in approval, already moving her hands in front of her, the Eye around her neck starting to glow. “As you wish.”

And he saw. He saw everything. Every possible path, every possible choice, every possible scenario. Ages passed, millennia passed, and time after time he saw Tony die in front of him. Felt every stab, every blow, every cracking of a skull like a punch to the chest. Every time he saw Tony’s eyes close, a piece of him died too.

In some scenario’s Tony didn’t look at him, refused to, anger and hate clear in his features, and though those moments hurt, it was easier than when Tony clung onto him, whispering words of love in his ear with his final breath.

The Ancient One had been right; every time the Mad Titan made it to earth, got hands on more than one stone, either half the universe died, or Tony did.

It was equal in every way.

Scale perfectly balanced.

He would have picked Tony every time, but he knew he’d lose him either way. Knew Tony would be lost to his own self-hatred and guilt. Didn’t want to see the man he loved hurt in any way.
Knew that every time one of his teens were to die it would be the end of him. Every time that friend of his - Rhodes - would leave his side he’d crumble to the floor and be unable to get up.

Stephen knew he had no choice. They needed to prevent Thanos from coming to earth. Needed to succeed in their mission, put the earth back on its right path, even if it meant Tony would hate him forever.

“If we can’t keep the Avengers together,” Stephen started as soon as he’d caught his breath, letting a feeling of calmth settle over him as he forced himself to be at peace with losing Tony. As long as he lived, as long as he was happy, even if it was without him. “What do we do then?”

“Keeping the Avengers together was the best option before. We have shifted our timeline enough that there is second option. What you must do now is not about rallying the Avengers, it’s about delivering the final blow.”

“Tell me,” he demanded, stepping closer towards her.

“He must leave the Avengers of his own accord. He needs to come out on top.”
The event was classy and refined, which meant, naturally, that it was boring as fuck. If the gala was in their honour, the least they could have done was hire a better DJ or perhaps a live pianist.

What they got instead, were some speakers with ‘tasteful’ background music and a bunch of suck-ups begging for their attention.

Of course Tony wasn’t going to complain out loud. It wasn’t really the event he had a problem with, it was that they had thrown it in the first place.

Sure, it was a nice gesture, but Tony hadn’t become a superhero to receive thanks. If he’d wanted to go to fancy events he would have remained a weapons manufacturer. At least then he could ditch without anyone batting an eye.

He had better things to do tonight, but he was stuck, forced to play nice and smooch his way around. The worst part was that they were the ones needing to suck up to politicians and reporters, be charming enough to make the damage done to the city okay somehow.

Tony hadn’t been the one the cause it. Had been the one to pay for it, but somehow he was still forced to attend.

“Kind of makes you miss the old days, huh?”

He turned around to find Rhodey standing behind him, sparkle in his eyes as he took a sip of champagne.

Tony’s eyes fell on the glass, reminded of Stephen, before smiling up at his oldest friend. “Yeah, not as fun without the strippers.”

Rhodey chuckled, shaking his head as he turned towards the crowd.

His friend had been right to miss the past, admittedly not for the strippers or random hookups. Things had been simple, and though Rhodey had often been gone, they still seemingly spent more time together than they got now.

Rhodey was busy working coordination with the military, and along with Tony’s own many responsibilities, there wasn’t a lot of time the two of them could spent together.

Tony felt guilt crawl up his chest, knowing the time he’d been spending with Stephen had definitely cut into any time he could have gotten with Rhodey. He couldn’t help it, however.

Even now he was wishing he wasn’t here, missing the night he could have spent with Stephen, laying in his strong arms and tracing the veins on his neck and chest.

Especially since Stephen had seemingly gotten more affectionate in the last week. He was often quiet, which wasn’t unusual for him, but he held onto Tony, held him so tenderly it made Tony’s heart burn.

Rhodey glanced at him suspiciously at the forlorn sigh that managed to escape him but he quickly schooled his expression, taking a sip of his whiskey and glancing around the room again. Perfectly timed, some guy in a uniform motioned Rhodey over, allowing Tony to relax.
He knew they probably wanted him to come along as well, but he made a quick excuse and headed in the other direction. Rhodey rolled his eyes at him but waved him off, used to his antics by now.

He made his way around the room aimlessly, trying to at least avoid Steve’s gaze. Somewhere across the hall Thor’s booming laugh echoed over the crowd. Maybe he could find Bruce and start a conversation, that ought to keep him busy for a while.

Suddenly he felt a soft pressure on his lower back, and he turned around to see who was touching him. He frowned when he found no one there, certain he could still feel a hand carefully guiding him.

His heart jumped pleasantly as a smirk formed on his face, smiling up at where Stephen’s face should be. The bastard was stalking him again, but Tony couldn’t mind, the sorcerer’s presence immediately lightening his mood and relaxing his shoulders. He sighed out a content smile as he stopped right before Stephen could lead him out the room, digging his heels into the ground as fought against his own desire.

“Not yet,” Tony hissed under his breath, hoping Stephen could still hear him over the sound of the surrounding crowd. “Can’t slip out again.”

The hand left his back, and Tony frowned at the loss of the touch, moving to stand against the wall. He might not be able to leave, but at least it was a little more quiet in this corner, a little more secluded. He sincerely hoped Stephen hadn’t left when Tony couldn’t head out. The sorcerer’s presence was always calming, and just the touch now had been enough to relax him to the bone.

A second later, however, he was cursing his own wish. Stephen, never one to shy away from playing dirty, was trailing kisses down Tony’s neck, ghost lips sending shivers down his back as he managed to hold back a surprised moan.

“Asshole,” he cursed instead, trying not to show anything off with his body language.

Soft fingers trailed over his cheek, and he sighed, glancing around the room in contemplation. Everyone seemed busy enough, and a glance at his watch showed it was getting on the late side anyway. No one could really blame him for getting away just for a little while, in need of some fresh air.

No one noticed him slipping out, and Tony took a second to be grateful for small victories as he made his way through the hall. He’d been in this particular event hall before, and he made his way over towards a balcony looking out over the city that he’d used as an escape the last time he’d been there.

As soon as he’d stepped out into the cool spring weather, hands were pushing against his chest, crowding him against the wall as Stephen materialised out of thin air and pressed his lips against Tony’s.

Tony smirked into the kiss, eagerly moving his hands to Stephen’s hair to pull him closer.

“Missed you,” he managed to murmur between breaths, the sorcerer humming against his lips in response. Stephen’s hands dropped to his waist, pressing their hips together eagerly.

It was so easy to get lost in Stephen. To focus on the soft tremors of his hands as they moved over his body, and forget all of his worries. To forget Steve, and the Avengers and the gala and aim his attention solely to the lips against his.

“Wait,” Tony broke the kiss, framing the sorcerer’s face with his hands as he pushed him back. He
tried to fix Stephen with a stern gaze edging on a glare, but he didn’t really fear the answer. “Are you just here to distract me again? Is there going to be an attack?”

Stephen stayed quiet, eyes roaming Tony’s face, carefully neutral, and Tony felt his gaze darken as his features fell into disbeliefing disappointment.

He had asked the question more out of jest, trusted Stephen not to use him like this. He had proven time and time again that he could keep both sides of their relationship separate.

At least he had the decency not to lie to him.

Tony growled, starting to push Stephen away so could head back inside. His heart twisted painfully but Stephen’s hands were on him, holding him back. “Tony wait.”

“Give me one good reason to,” Tony glared at Stephen, hating how his stomach fluttered at the soft plea in Stephen’s eyes.

“You’re going back inside. You’re going to fight the sorcerers and you will lose. Your presence won’t change that just as how my absence won’t.” Tony scowled at the words. He knew Stephen was right. They had been losing for months, and even the satisfaction of keeping them form their price for a little while would be short-lived. “Tony, some things are just out of your control. Today’s events are decided by a force way bigger than the both of us.”

Tony now understood little of what the sorcerers were trying to do. And though he wanted to trust Stephen when he said it was what was best for the world in the long run, he couldn’t get over the single losses. Couldn’t get over the feeling that maybe if he worked hard enough, thought long enough and became strong enough he would be able to keep everyone safe.

He knew death was part of life, as was loss, he knew it more than anyone. But the deaths due to terrorist attacks felt too senseless. Too illogical to be anything but a horrifying tragedy.

It was terrible to see people get more and more used to it. Had passed the stage of cowering away in their homes and were starting to go out in public again, very much aware of the dangers yet not caring anyway.

In a way it was inspiring, Tony couldn’t help but think, but as they continued being strong and resilient and kept going out again and again and again… Tony wanted to protect those people. Wanted those people to be rewarded for their bravery instead of criticised for their stupidity.

Tony wanted to trust Stephen, but he didn’t want to believe he was right. Didn’t want to know there was no other way.

“Tony, please-,” Stephen pleaded, and it seemed so foreign that Tony stilled. He gazed in Stephen’s eyes in confusion as he tried to search for what Stephen knew that he didn’t. “Please, things will be so much better if you could just walk away. If you’d let me -“

“Can you promise that no one will lose their life today?” He pierced Stephen’s gaze, hard and determined, hand still clutched to his upper arm. His treacherous fingers dug deeper, loving the feeling of Stephen against him. Stephen stayed quiet, which was enough answer he needed. He stepped away from where Stephen had him pinned against the wall, the sorcerer doing nothing to stop him.

Tony almost wished he did. Wished he’d try to keep him there by force, would hurt him or just generally would give him any reason to stop loving him.
He hurried back inside, sparing Stephen one last look. He was watching Tony tentatively, sad eyes trained on his face.

Tony almost didn’t go. He was angry about so many things, but most of all he was angry that Stephen had been right. They’d fought the sorcerers, too late to get everyone out of the building, and they had lost. More ridiculous of all, Tony had lost.

Three of his team members - though they were not necessarily people he agreed with or particularly liked, Tony had trusted them - had lied to him. Had kept secrets. Had played him. Had thought so lowly of him that he’d lose it at the news of his parents having been murdered. As if any person who were to find out such a vile thing didn’t have the right to snap.

They had kept secrets. And played him enough to allow them to search for the killer. Not to apprehend him, punish him and lock him up as not to hurt anyone else, but to what? Forgive him? Pardon him? Get him to join to Avengers?

He was still reeling, still feeling the ice run through his veins as the massive projection, in the middle of the fight against the sorcerers, had played the footage of an isolated road at midnight, December 16th, 1991.

Could see Rogers’ face as he stared at him like he was a rabid animal, about to end everyone in the room.

“Did you know?” He had asked, not missing how Romanoff shifted closer, just the tiniest bit. How everyone in the room was watching him. Some with pity, others with the same trepidation as Rogers. The fight had gone out of him as one by one the sorcerers left, clearly having done what they had meant to.

Stephen hadn’t been part of the fight, but Tony almost wished he had.

He focussed back on Rogers, vision reddening as he saw the answer he’d been looking for in Rogers’ eyes. He couldn’t understand how he’d missed it. Steve was a terrible liar when put on the spot.

Clearly his morals hadn’t interfered with looking into Tony’s eyes with the knowledge of his parents’ fate. Of his mother’s fate. He could feel angry tears starting to blur his already hazy vision, everyone in the room as tense as could be.

Tony took a few minutes, hidden in his armour that stood still as a statue, as he watched more and more Avengers shift slowly, moving so that most of them were standing on Rogers’ side of the room, quiet apprehension clear on their faces.

Sam, Clint, Scott, Maria..
The message was clear as could be.

At least Thor and Bruce were still in the middle of the room, watching Tony with apprehension, yes, but more to keep a fight from escalating than worry about Tony’s actions.

“Tones?” The hand on his shoulder had been what had finally snapped him out of his daze, but he couldn’t look up at Rhodley. Didn’t want to watch the man who’d been there for him when he’d gone through the loss of his parents. The man who had sat by his side at their funeral, had dragged Tony there in the first place. The man whose family had taken him in, allowed him to celebrate the holidays with them and make sure he still had people to lean on. The man who’d formed the basis of his sanity.

He would break down if he did. Didn’t want to be reminded of any of it. Wanted to forget what he’d seen before it was burned in his brain for good.

He’d turned and fled.

He had ended up at the Sanctum three hours later.

He hadn’t planned to come, but he had anyway. Had grown tired of drinking, had grown tired of flying to distract himself, had grown tired of the voice in his head. And despite how angry Tony was at him, Stephen was still the one person who always managed to make him forget. Was still his escape.

So he was back at the sanctum, the doors easily opening up for him. The building was busier than usual, the sorcerers from earlier still in New York and milling around the building. They stopped their conversation as he walked by, but they only watched him with interest, not caution. Didn’t look at him like he was a time bomb about to go off.

He found Stephen in his bedroom, sitting on the edge of his bed as he stared out the window. His head snapped towards Tony at once, brows furrowing as surprise and acceptance warred on his face.

There was something in his eyes Tony hadn’t seen before. He always kept his emotions expertly hidden, except for the few times Tony managed to lower his guard. Tony always revelled in those moments, the glances he got at the affection the sorcerer felt for him.

Now it was more like a calm sadness, though Tony knew there was more emotions in his irises than Tony could probably ever describe. As much as he wished he could, he still couldn’t always read the sorcerer. More often than not he was a complete mystery.

Tony hated things he couldn’t understand, yet here he was in love with the sorcerer that in so many ways was still an enigma.

He had one leg pulled onto the bed with him, the other dangling over the edge, half turned towards Tony.
“How long have you known?” Tony asked, his own voice strange to his ears.

“For a long while. Before we even knew each other,” Stephen’s voice was low and dark, and it took Tony a second to recognise the tone as angry. “I was under the impression that Rogers had told you. That you knew, Tony. I only realised you didn’t about a week ago, after the meeting.”

Tony swallowed against the burning coal stuck in his throat. It explained the sudden anger he had seen on Stephen’s face, the reason he’d left so quickly. He still didn’t know where the hesitation and fear had come from after, but that didn’t matter right now.

What mattered was that Stephen had forced his hand. Had forced the Avengers’ hand. Had forced him into the situation at the gala in the first place.

He would have been fine not knowing, or in the very least, have been told instead of shown, the image of his mother struggling for her last breath still flashing in front of his eyes.

He gritted his teeth, hoping his voice didn’t sound too hoarse as he continued, “Why not tell me? Why like this?”

“It’s what needed to happen.” Tony watched the sorcerer, watched his face, hard as stone, and noticed the exhaustion in his eyes, the sadness and determination.

What he couldn’t find, however, was regret.

He remembered Stephen’s pleas, had known Tony would get his heart broken, but wouldn’t be able to walk away from the Avengers, from people getting hurt.

Tony wanted to be angry at him. Wanted to yell about having been played. But he couldn’t. Stephen had been right, had only wanted to protect him from the truth. He had never lied to him once, the truth delayed but not omitted completely. Even if it meant they were enemies.

And they weren’t. Not anymore.

He had been right about another thing as well; Tony couldn’t save everyone. No one could. But he was going to try his damn hardest to save as many people as possible.

He walked up to him slowly, the sorcerer watching him carefully. He opened his arm once Tony was close enough in hopeful invitation, and Tony gladly stepped closer, wrapping his arms around his torso as Stephen pulled him onto his lap and enveloped him in a hug. He could feel Stephen’s chest against his, could feel the soft breath of relief that he couldn’t hold back. The sorcerer’s scent made everything okay, even as silent tears started rolling down his cheeks. The way he felt warm and comfortable and safe and loved.

“I thought you’d be angry with me.” The whisper was soft, voice wavering slightly, and Tony wrapped his arms tighter around Stephen.

“You weren’t the one who lied.”

“I could have just told you …”

“This was part of your plan to save the world?” Tony interrupted him, leaning back to cup Stephen’s face.

“Yes…” Stephen breathed out, and despite it all Tony still couldn’t see any regret. It was enough for Tony.
Tony kissed him, clearly much to Stephen’s surprise.

He could feel him still against his lips, before hesitantly responding, quickly turning desperate, as if he couldn’t believe Tony really still wanted to kiss him, wanted him, and was about to change his mind any second. “I trust you.”

Despite it all, despite how little the sorcerer cared about the general human population, he trusted Stephen to do right by him.

Stephen had told him that he couldn’t hurt Tony. And Tony had understood because he’d very much felt the same. So if Stephen told him it had been what needed to happen, he knew he was speaking the truth.

It didn’t matter what the team thought, it didn’t even matter that Tony himself thought he was a failure, only managing to ruin everything despite his best efforts. Stephen loved him as he did Stephen, and Tony was starting to think that perhaps that was all it took.

“I want to be in control,” he muttered into the sorcerer’s neck, Stephen pressing a soft kiss against his crown.

“I know, love.”

“Tell me about the Big Plan or whatever. Tell me exactly what needs to happen.”

“I can’t,” Stephen sighed hesitantly, making Tony frown at him, “for the simple reason of I don’t know. Only the Ancient One does.”

“Because us knowing would affect the outcome?” Tony guessed, exhaustion washing over him. Stephen nodded, but it didn’t even matter. Tony didn’t care.

Because he was done being on a different side as Stephen. He was done having to deal with the Avengers. He was done with losing.

It was time he took matters into his own hands.
Tony woke up with a gasp, his whole body tense, fighting against Stephen’s arms which tightened around him. His lungs still screamed for air, and Stephen’s embrace fell away from him as he moved to sit up.

He needed space, needed time for his mind to wake fully and catch up with reality.

“Tony?” Stephen’s voice was clear, piercing through the sound of his mother’s screams still ringing through his ears. A firm but scarred hand cupped his neck, and the cool touch became his sole focus. His breathing stabilising as he focussed on the sensation, only turning to look at Stephen once it was under control.

He sighed out as soon as his eyes locked with Stephen’s blue ones, and it took a few minutes of staring and Stephen rubbing comforting circles against his skin with his thumb for him to be able to expel the images completely. The stress in his muscles took a little longer to fade away, but Tony let himself be pulled back against Stephen, easing as he could hear the sound of Stephen’s heartbeat through his torso.

He felt horrible with the cold sweat still sticking to his skin, and the room was at least two degrees hotter than it was supposed to be, but Tony needed the sorcerer’s warmth anyway. Stephen kicked back the sheets, allowing the cold air to brush their bodies as he held onto Tony, the engineer digging deeper against his chest.

He hated it. Hated the panic still stuck in his chest, the heaviness on his body holding him down while at the same time his muscles were aching with the need to get up. Get ahead of the situation, even if there was no situation to get ahead of. Not immediately anyway.

Everything would happen in time, as it was supposed to, but Tony couldn’t shake the feeling that he was supposed to now. That he would miss something.

To make matters worse, even as he was lying against Stephen, he couldn’t get his mind off of the video, the pain that had edged his way underneath his heart throbbing as a reminder.

Tony rolled away from Stephen, the sorcerer letting go of him at once. He checked the time, finding it to be only five am, the sky outside still dark.

He tied his watch around his wrist, leaving it dark as he was afraid to catch a glimpse of the news, knowing the events of the gala must have already been outed, the trending topic at the moment.

He didn’t know what he was more afraid of, their opinion on the Stark’s having been murdered, or whether or not they would stand with the Avengers.

“Tony?” He glanced back towards Stephen, also sitting up now, holding out a hesitant hand. “Let’s go get some breakfast.”
"I’m not hungry."

"Too bad, but I don’t care," Stephen huffed haughtily, making Tony roll his eyes at him but submit easily enough. He couldn’t stay in bed any longer anyway, wouldn’t be able to get any more sleep and needed to keep his mind distracted.

He pocketed his phone off the nightstand and took Stephen’s hand as the doctor pulled him off the bed. Taking a second to appreciate Stephen in his casual look - sweatpants and another one of Tony’s t-shirts, he let himself be pulled along, keeping heir hands linked as they stepped into the empty hallway and made their way down to the kitchen.

The sanctum was quiet again, most sorcerers asleep or having returned to Kamar Taj. Tony was glad for it. He knew it was only a matter of time. If he truly were to stand with Stephen, the sorcerers would become his allies instead of enemies. Yet for now he appreciated the tranquility.

As they reached the kitchen, Tony immediately beelined for the coffee machine, glad for the bag of expensive beans he’d stashed there earlier. They made their respective drinks without talking, comfortable in the silence as they moved around the dark space.

With his coffee mug in hand he went to stand next to Stephen, still working on his tea, and leaned against him, the warmth and scent of the sorcerer pulling him in.

“So…,” Tony started, letting go of his mug with his left hand so he could grab Stephen’s right one as it was resting on the countertop in front of them. He linked their fingers together, inspecting the scarred flesh in the moonlight streaming in from the windows. Stephen moved to pull his hand back, but Tony didn’t let him, putting up light resistance so not to hurt him as he kept his hand securely in his. “What happened to your hands?”

The sorcerer had done a great job covering up his past for the Avengers. Tony clearly remembered the first few days after having fought Stephen - no, doctor Strange - for the first time. He’d scoured the internet looking for anything on the mysterious villain. Yet all he’d been able to find were articles on Neurology and praise for the accomplished surgeon.

His resume was surely impressive, as were the many pictures of Stephen in a suit, but it didn’t explain why said neurosurgeon was suddenly throwing around orange sparkly mandalas and causing terror in Sydney.

It had been hard for him to reconcile the two. He’d been sure Strange had been the evil twin, but every source claimed Stephen to have been born alone.

Further proof came in the form of a lack of evidence of doctor Stephen Strange even existing after the summer of 2014. He hadn’t been able to find anything, and the only person at General Metro Hospital that even seemed to remember Stephen refused to give up his “personal information”.

It had been infuriating.

He’d noticed the scars before, not too difficult to figure out why he’d stopped operating, but he had no idea how it had happened. Stephen had gloves he wore often, but Tony loved his hands, and he was grateful any moment they weren’t covered up.

“You want to know about my hands?” Stephen turned to him with a raised eyebrow, watching Tony with wary eyes. “After all that’s happened, that’s what you want to know?”

“It might cheer me up,” Tony teased, though it didn’t feel as airy as he’d wanted it to be. Stephen looked at him, eyes sad but intense. Tony was used to it by now, used to how Stephen needed a few
seconds to search his face, to confirm his reading of the engineer. “Please?”

The sorcerer’s sigh turned into a chuckle in the dark, squeezing his hand with all the strength he had.

“I was in an accident. My car drove off a cliff and the shattered glass cut my hands to pieces.” Stephen’s voice was quiet yet clear in the empty of the early morning, and Tony watched him carefully as he continued, eyes distant as he focussed on memories rather forgotten. “They put in eleven stainless steel pins.”

Tony took a moment to stay quiet, wait in silence for if the sorcerer wanted to add anything. That didn’t seem the case though, rather Stephen sinking further into unwanted flashbacks. The shadows on his face accentuated his sadness, and Tony’s heart ached for him. It was refreshing, to focus on someone else’s pain instead of his own. To know that Stephen was there, and in a way just as messed up as Tony. That he wasn’t alone.

“So how did that lead to you becoming a sorcerer?” Tony asked, hoping to pull Stephen away from the past and back to him. Or at least a somewhat better time in his life.

“I thought there was a cure at Kamar Taj,” Stephen shrugged.

“Was there?”

Stephen watched him with a strange look, tilt at his lip making Tony smile and relax. “There was.”

“Then why didn’t you use it?” he frowned down at their hands. His thumb traced one of the more prominent scars on Stephen’s index finger, before he pulled them up to press a soft kiss against the back of his palm.

“I found something I needed more.”

“Magic?” Tony chuckled, leaning back and taking a sip of his forgotten coffee, placing the cooling mug on the counter after.

“Purpose.”

Tony rolled his eyes, but used their linked hands to pull Stephen into a kiss, nonetheless.

Purely for the sensation of Stephen’s lips against his, was he glad he’d come here the night before. Being able to lay and talk with him had been wonderful, allowing him to almost forget everything; allowed him to focus on Stephen instead, on the man he loved today instead of the parents he’d lost way too young. But something about kissing Stephen was like coming home.

He needed that, was addicted to it, to that feeling of safety and ease, the way Stephen was warm and careful, able to read him like a book and give him exactly what he needed.

Stephen was the one who pulled back, and Tony wasn’t above whining for him in disgruntlement. He blinked his eyes open in annoyance to find Stephen watching him, chuckle clear in his eyes that quickly turned soft. “Someone’s at the door for you.”

“Here?” Tony frowned, immediately on guard. His fingers still locked with Stephen’s started tensing, so he pulled them back. Stephen placed a quick kiss to his cheek before stepping away, giving him view of the hallway through the kitchen door.

A distant voice called for his name, and Tony frowned as he recognised it as Rhodey’s.
He quickly went in search of his best friend, finding him in the income hall, doors closing behind him right when Tony walked in. The war machine suit just visible outside on the curb. He was looking around the space with wary eyes, putting Tony on guard as he watched his best friend.

He trusted him, and a huge part of him immediately eased at the sight of him, but he didn’t know how he’d react. What he would say if he found out Tony had found solace in the space of their enemies. Had stood behind murderers without batting an eye. Rhody was valiant, had always had morals even stronger than Tony’s, though he’d mostly stuck to the rules to decide for him in the end. Had trusted them to be right.

“Rhodey?” His voice was cautious even to his own ears and he flinched slightly at the sound, hoping Rhody wouldn’t notice. Rhody’s head snapped towards him at once, his shoulders relaxing as his eyes found Tony’s.

“Tones..”

Tony recognised the sympathy in his voice, immediately tightening the rope around his heart. It wasn’t just his usual worry, instead he recognised it as the signature tone he’d used after the death of his parents. Even nearly thirty years later, he still remembered it clear as day.

“How did you find me?”

Rhodey must have read his hesitation, collecting himself easily and changing his posture to his usual air. “JARVIS snitched on you.”

Tony rolled his eyes, tapping his watch to get his AI’s attention, glad for the excuse to look away from Rhody for a bit. “Really, JARVIS?”

“You haven’t disabled Colonel Rhodes’ access to your location, sir.”

Tony huffed at his disloyal AI, but focused on his friend instead, finding it easier now that the topic of his parents was shoved aside for the moment. “So… why are you here?”

“Really, Tones? You think I’d just let you run off like that?”

“I don’t know if you’ve realised but this is the sorcerer’s base of operations.”

“Yeah, you think I wouldn’t figure out that the sexual tension between you and Strange had mysteriously disappeared?”

Tony squinted at Rhody’s smug smile, trying and failing to find a response. He had hoped to be smart enough to at least have a decent affair without anyone finding out, but he guessed it hadn’t been fair to underestimate Rhodes like that. He knew Tony better than Tony himself most days.

It had always been weird to Tony how that could be true. It proved itself again and again, yet Tony couldn’t believe Rhodes could see the real him but stick around, could know the depths of who Tony was yet still praise him the way he did. Treated him the way he did, trusted him with his life.

His own father had thought him a failure and disgrace.

Rhodey sighed, Tony relaxing at the sound. “I’m not fighting you again, Tony. I’m with you.”

Tony continued staring at him, his mind a little slow today after all he’d needed to process in the last twelve hours.
He really had been by his side all these years. He’d always looked out for him, trusted him even as he’d always been sceptical of his judgement. Tony still didn’t understand how he could be worthy of his love, he was only grateful for it every day.

Rhodey’s gaze shifted to something behind him as he continued, “I may not trust him, necessarily, …”

Tony turned to find Stephen having joined them, leaning against the door frame of the living room. He was looking at Tony, careful for his expression, watching out for him as usual. Tony smiled at the sight. Not invisible this time.

“… but I guess I’m willing to listen.”

“Look,” Tony sighed, turning back towards Rhodey, “we’re not sure what we’re doing either. But I can’t- I can’t go back to the Avengers.”

“You think I’d ask you to?” Rhodey huffed in incredulity, anger making its appearance on his face, “You’ve already given them too much to also give them your forgiveness.”

Tony rolled his eyes, fixing his gaze on the floor. Rhodey was right, and he was aware, but he hated how he couldn’t both save the world the way he needed to and have the good grace of the Avengers. He didn’t know why he so desperately craved it, even after all they’d done to him, but he couldn’t help the feeling of needing to have their approval. Or in the very least have them proven wrong about him.

“What do you need, Tony?”

What he needed?

It was a strange notion. Over the last few months he’d always compromised for everyone else’s needs. Worried about the Avengers above all else, considered it an indirect approach at making sure the earth had everything it required. The only thing he’d permitted himself having been his relationship with Stephen. Already feeling too selfish over that one want.

But after last night, he was done feeling sorry for himself. No more Avengers. He was going to safe the world directly as he’d always planned to. Rogers wasn’t going to hold him back anymore, no one was.

“I need your eyes and ears, a shower - Stephen,” he turned around to look at his boyfriend, who raised a questioning eyebrow at him, and winked, “you can join me - a state of te art lab, a fresh cup of coffee and Harley Keener.”

“Harley?” Rhodey frowned at him, expertly ignoring his comment about the shower, “the kid from Tennessee? What do you need him for?”

Tony shrugged, smile forming on his face as he glanced from Rhodey to Stephen. “I need his … energy.”

Rhodey smirked back at him, stepping forward as Tony let himself be enveloped in a hug. “Good to see you egocentric again, Tones.”

Tony sighed as relief flooded through him, clinging onto Rhodey as best he could. He needed the reminder, the confirmation that the most important people were still here. Stood with him. As long as that was the case he could be fine. He could make it through the day.
His parents weren’t any more alive than they were yesterday, but his family was still here, stood with him more than Howard ever had.

Tony stepped away from Rhodey with one last pat on the back, determination firing up his brain as he motioned past Stephen towards the rest of the building.

“Well, welcome to the sanctum, then.”
system changes

Chapter Notes

Happy 2020 everyone!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“It’s been seventy-three hours and he still hasn’t resurfaced,” Steve ground out as he glared at the map laid out on the table in front of him.

The sight had Rhodey in need to hold back a smile. He’d argued with Tony about letting the Avengers stay in the tower, but he couldn’t help admire Tony’s petty genius.

He’d given them enough to take away their right to complain, as they should have already been eternally grateful had Tony leant them a handkerchief, yet he’d shut down FRIDAY and every other bonus feature Tony had brought to the team.

The tower was nothing but a building at this point.

The lab had been safely locked down, no one able to go in no matter how hard they tried, along with the extra equipment, leaving the team with nothing but what they had on them at the Gala, and no FRIDAY to help their searches or project their screens.

No FRIDAY also meant no automatic lighting, which meant Rhodey had already had the pleasure of watching the team members frantically searching around the dark rooms for the light switch they’d never had to use. He’d only hoped Tony had the mind to record it for later enjoyment.

They were small things, but enough to constantly bother them and remind them of their mistakes. Rhodey knew Tony still controlled the tower for most part - he didn’t have to search around for lightswitches as FRIDAY still liked him - and he knew at some point the Avengers would come to that same conclusion.

For now they were under the impression that Tony would come back to them eventually, that he would end the wallowing in his own misery and swallow down his pride to rejoin their forces. But eventually they would have to realise this wasn’t a minor hiccup. This wasn’t something that Tony would have to get over and move on from.

Rhodey assumed that as soon as they realised Tony wasn’t just gone, wasn’t just stepping away, but was instead doing his own thing, they would realise the tower was too compromised. Tony hadn’t mentioned anything about taking down the Avengers, only focussed on protecting the world, but Rhodey silently hoped part of saving the world would mean leaving the Avengers in shambles.

At least get rid of the so-called captain.

“Is there really no way of finding him?” Steve directed his question at Bruce, the doctor having stayed quiet up until now. There was a tension set in his shoulders, and Rhodey recognised it as him trying to keep his anger under control. This far he wasn’t tingeing green yet, but the Hulk liked Tony, and therefore was probably throwing quite the hissy-fit along Bruce’s own upset.
“No equipment is quite as advanced as Tony’s,” Bruce sighed, rubbing his forehead. He looked exhausted, most likely hadn’t been getting a lot of sleep. “And even if we were to find something to locate him, we still don’t have anything to go on. He’s been working on stealth technology for years, including making his energy signatures untraceable.”

“Scott?”

The engineer jumped up from where he’d been hiding in the corner, staring at Rogers as his attention rested on him. “Ye- jup? Yes?”

“What about The Wasp? Can she substitute for Tony for the time being?”

Scott cringed, pulling back into himself as his fingers darted around the air in nervous movements. “Yeah, I don’t think she’s going to take well to being Tony’s ‘replacement’. Besides, she’s still working on getting her mom back, so I don’t think she’ll sympathise with you right now.”

Steve’s face hardened, blinking down at the map again as he clenched his teeth, muscles tensing.

“Look,” Clint cut in, making Steve look up at the archer, clearly glad for the attention having been pulled off him. He was lounging in one of the chairs, looking around the room in annoyed boredom. “Why not just focus on finding the sorcerers?”

“We can’t go against them without Tony! He’s always been our best bet against them,” Maria argued from where she’d been pacing back and forth, working the red stress ball in her left hand. “We have to solve this first.”

“But the sorcerers are the real problem! There is a reason I didn’t tell him about Bucky!”

“Every man deserves to know the fate of their parents,” Thor growled, for the hundredth time. The main argument had been between him and Steve over the last three days, so much so that they were running in circles around each other; Thor the one who was right, but Steve too stubborn to give in.

The god speaking up on Tony’s behalf had been a surprise to Rhodey, aware there had never been any love lost between the two of them. Sure, Thor had always been a bit of an outsider, mostly standing above all of the members of the team.

Rhodey felt it only natural; the god had lived for a lot longer than any of them, and by far a lot more powerful than he was probably given credit for. Steve had taken the role of leader, Tony the opponent keeping him challenged, and with the others used to or preferring to stay in the background, it left little space for the Asgardian in said dynamic.

On top of that he was often off-world, having his own issues to deal with, but allowing him to fall out of touch with the going-ons of the team.

Even now, Rhodey recognised the choosing of sides wasn’t personal, wasn’t the Asgardian finally picking a side or making a stand, but simply him standing up for his own values, and deciding what he was willing to condone or not. Rhodey could respect that, but he couldn’t deny it still leaving a bitter taste in his mouth. Perhaps because for him it was very much personal.

“So he could find Bucky and kill him? He’s innocent!”

“If you think Tony is the kind of person to need revenge you don’t know him very well.” Bruce sighed, rubbing his face as he glared around the room.
If he isn’t angry then where is he?” Steve fired back, arms crossed and chest puffed in defence. Rhodey wanted to punch him, but he kept his hands safely locked in his armpits as he bit his tongue. He needed to be able to stay in the Avengers without suspicion. If that meant staying in the background and keeping attention off of him like a fly on the wall, so be it. There was a reason he’d been able to work his way up in the military, after all.

Luckily for him, he wasn’t the only one acknowledging Tony’s side of the story, and if Thor and Bruce weren’t already two massive powerhouses in their own right this would have been where they’d earned his respect.

“Oh he’s angry, alright,” Thor cut in, booming voice filling the room, “as are we. He’s allowed to be, but anger does not equal vengeance.”

“Either way,” Steve argued, as he glanced behind him to confirm Natasha and Sam’s presence at his sides. Sam looked at him and nodded, but Natasha’s gaze was fixed elsewhere. She was eyeing Vision, the man looking back at her with cold neutrality. “He should have stayed so we could have explained.”

“We?” Bruce cut in, looking at Natasha who’s eyes flicked towards him at the words directed towards her, “you all knew?”

“We knew of the assassination, not whether or not Bucky was the one who’d done it.” Her voice was calm, almost soothing, showing no signs of any of this wearing on her. Rhodey wondered if she had a conscience behind her cold exterior, or if she truly only did what people asked of her. He’d never known her to do anything else.

“If you weren’t even sure, then why not just tell him? You clearly must have known enough to put the pieces together,” Bruce argued again, clearly getting agitated now, but he swallowed it down with impressive ease. “So you and Cap? What about you, Sam?”

“I did,” Sam sighed, looking the most regretful out of all of them. Rhodey had always liked the man, so maybe he was willing to be more lenient towards him. Either way he could respect a man standing beside his best friend no matter how stupid his choices.

There had been times Tony had put him in similar positions, and though those moments had always turned out to be right and fair, he couldn’t blame a man for taking the risk and blindly trusting his friend. “but it wasn’t up to me. And honestly, he reacted a lot better than expected for someone who just lost their support system.”

“Maybe because he didn’t,” Rhodey finally ground out, unable to stay quiet any longer, annoyance dripping through his words. He figured it was fine, as no one would believe him not having an opinion on any of this. “None of you were ever his ‘support system’.”

“Then who was?” Steve frowned accusingly. “We were his team!”

“For starters,” Rhodey huffed, “Pep, Happy and me.”

“You said ‘for starters,’” Nat raised an eyebrow at him, and Rhodey fixed his glare on her, “who else?”

“Contrary to popular belief you guys aren’t the centre of his world.”

“Then who is?” Rogers inquired again, having Rhodey stare at him in cold exasperation. Honestly his dimwittedness was working in his favour today. His point wasn’t to get them on Stephen’s
Rhodey didn’t know what to think of the sorcerer quite yet.

Months of fighting them had proven him to be powerful, and he’d played with Tony countless times, but he’d never quite hurt him. Some bruises left and right sure, but nothing more than Tony could handle.

He knew it wasn’t that simple. The sorcerer had stood by while people died, and along with the sorcerers had been the cause of multiple deaths.

But Rhodey was military. He didn’t see things quite as black and white as some of the others in the team. He’d known death and destruction on both sides, knew the term ‘friendly fire’ and how sometimes sacrifices had to be made for the greater good. If they wanted to avoid deaths altogether they would never go to war, they’d focus on defence only and let the enemies overwhelm them and slaughter them one by one.

They always tried to prevent deaths, tried to train and prepare every recruit as adequately as possible, but all of them knew that not everyone would make it back home. All to prevent a worse fate for the entire nation. Because not standing up to the threat was worse.

Now Tony and Stephen had explained what the sorcerers were up to, he could see it from their perspective. He’d hoped Stephen to be fully evil, so he could get Tony to see reason and pull him back.

Over the months that he’d expected Tony to be seeing Stephen, however, he couldn’t deny the positive effect the sorcerer had had on his best friend’s life. Up to the point that when he’d found them earlier, he’d been relieved the sorcerers were doing something he could almost condone. It hadn’t been something he’d wanted to hear or know, would have wished the earth to follow another path completely, but he’d been assured that wasn’t an option at this point.

And he believed in Tony.

Knew if anyone could stop the worst from happening, it would be him.

On top of that, he had also found the beginnings of a silver lining to the sorcerers’ attacks. It hadn’t been said, but Rhodey, who was the main link between the Avengers and Washington, had started to hear rumours.

More and more officials were buckling under the weight of public outcry.

People wanted protection, wanted accountability.

He knew the Avengers were reckless more often than not. He’d seen them suit up and head into battle without any strategic foreplay. Eager to save the day without thinking of the consequences of their actions. They always prepared what they were going to do, but somehow failed to account for the possible retaliation of their enemies.

Suspicion was starting to rise that said outcry was what the sorcerers truly needed, what the world truly needed. It would push people to be okay with protective measures more easily, even if the changes are drastic and scary, even if some people would argue on it infringing their comfort or privacy.

“You’re not entitled the know, captain.”
“Fine,” Rogers grunted, crossing his arms in front of his chest. “Let’s focus on trying to find him first. FRIDAY is restricted to tell us about his whereabouts. Nat can you hack into her?”

“I can try,” she shrugged, but focussed her eyes on Vision once more, “But what about Vision?”

Vision only stared at her, not acknowledging her inquiry at all, so Steve was the one to frown at her and ask the question that had the whole room confused. “What about him?”

“He’s part JARVIS,” Natasha shrugged, “Tony somehow managed to instal JARVIS again, so can’t Vision connect with its data and find Stark for us?”

The question seemed innocent, but Rhodey knew she meant more than just finding him. If Vision really could work as a link between the two, he could very much learn every secret Tony had JARVIS keep for him, every project he was working on and plan for the future. Every conversation could be listened in on. Rhodey fixed his gaze on Vision like everyone else in the room, but instead of doubt or intrigue, it was fear that was keeping him engaged.

“Actually, miss Romanoff,” Vision spoke up for the first time that evening, voice calm and smooth as usual, “the new JARVIS only has the same voice as the original, but its coding is completely different.”

Natasha and Vision stared at each other for a little while longer, the rest of the room looking on in confusion at the sudden tension between the two.

“Tony did say he only used the voice,” Steve cut in, voice certain, “he had no reason to lie.”

The ‘at the time’ hung in the air between all of them, and Rhodey had to do his best not to glare in the Captain’s direction. Natasha, either unable to read the android or not finding any signs of deception, relaxed her shoulders and turned towards Steve. “I’ll try hacking FRIDAY then.”

The meeting adjourned, and Rhodey allowed his gaze to linger on Vision, everyone too busy leaving the room and continuing their arguments between each other. The android caught his gaze for just a few seconds, and if Rhodey hadn’t known any better he wouldn’t have thought anything of it.

But he’d known JARVIS, and due to having spent plenty of time in Tony’s lab over the years, he’d come to recognise some typical signs in his coding. JARVIS was JARVIS, the one and only, and Vision either had somehow been fooled by Tony’s lie or he’d just lied for them. With that context in mind, the look in the android’s eyes had said a lot more.

Chapter End Notes

I know there was no Tony and Stephen in this chapter T_T but it needed to be written to combat my minor writer's block.

But don't worry: they'll be back soon!

Thanks to everyone following this story and leaving comments <3 it's always a delight to read and makes writing and posting a lot more enjoyable

I hope you all have a wonderful year!
“Tony?”

“Yeah?” Tony glanced up from where he’d been working on his latest invention. He didn’t even bat an eye anymore at the opening of a portal, only leaning up to accept a kiss from Stephen before turning back to his tools.

Stephen had placed a permanent portal in the sanctum to Tony’s lab, so the sorcerer appearing through one now meant he had probably come straight from Kamar Taj.

He could hear the bots whirring in excitement as the Cloak in no doubt had moved to play with them. He was glad Dum-E and U were keeping it distracted. Tony figured it had picked up on Stephen’s increased worry and protectiveness of him, because almost every time he saw the Cloak these days, it was wrapping itself tightly around him, barely allowing him space to breathe.

Either that or the fabric actually wanted to strangle him. Tony chose to believe the first.

It was kind of weird being in the tower, but waiting on a new lab would take time Tony didn’t feel like he had, and with FRIDAY’s very capable lockdown protocols it was almost like the rest of the tower didn’t exist. It felt like a small victory over the Avengers either way; they wouldn’t be able to take anything away from him.

Tony liked being able to stay in the familiar surroundings. He’d always enjoyed the lab at the tower, the technology as advanced as he could make it and the huge windows giving him a gorgeous view over New York. It had never been his favourite city, but he’d grown fonder of it over the years.

Minus the little hiccup where even the thought of NYC would have sent him spiralling into an anxiety attack.

Another bonus about staying in his own lab was that Rhodey could easily come visit and communicate with him when needed. He had his best friend keep an eye on the Avengers, and he didn’t even feel bad about it.

Rhodey was the most capable for the job, as he was both an in - and outsider, and could place things easily into context. He had always been an invaluable piece of the team, as their link to Washington outside of Fury and SHIELD, which meant he was sure to hear the most important details when it came down to it.

Tony had always admired Rhodey for his ability to stay impartial and objective. It had always been what he’d needed. Most people had followed him without argument from an early age; either wanting money or approval from the Stark prince. It wasn’t like Tony had been open to anyone’s opinion either, but he’d always admired Rhodey’s ability to say no to him.

The Avengers on their own weren’t really an issue, but it was great to know what information would leave the team and move higher-up and what not. This far it seemed as if they hadn’t yet disclosed that Tony wasn’t part of the team anymore. Tony didn’t mind too much, it allowed him time to regroup and get a head start without having to worry too much about public outrage and speculation. He knew there were rumours, knew people had seen him leave the gala and that he hadn’t been in public since, and he was almost scared to check how accurate they really were.

“Remember when I trained with Peter?”
“Please tell me he didn’t pick a fight with yet another evil wizard?”

“Sorcerer.” Stephen huffed, but Tony didn’t answer, only smirked down at his hands as he tried to finish his wiring. The knowledge of the world - or at least half of it - possibly ending had been a lot to take in, and definitely hadn’t been good for his already frayed nerves. So he did what he knew best; he built. The movements were familiar if not calming, and his mind, always three steps ahead, screamed for ways to protect the earth as best he could.

“I think you should, however,” he continued quietly, coming to rest on Tony’s right.

“Pick a fight with an evil sorcerer? I already did, babe, and though it ended pretty well for me I’m not looking for another fling.”

Stephen growled - in either jealousy or annoyance, and Tony fought back a smile as the sorcerer wrapped possessive arms around his torso from behind. His chest pressed against Tony’s back, and he clamped his teeth around Tony’s earlobe before hissing into his ear. “You better not.”

The sting of his teeth soothed by the soft lips almost pulled a surprised moan out of him, but he managed to bite his lip and stay quiet.

Tony leaned back against him, reaching his hand up to card it through Stephen’s hair, pressing him closer, the move prompting Stephen to lean down and start pressing kisses against his pulse.

“I’m working!” He protested as well as he could with his hand still massaging Stephen’s scalp, his eyes falling closed as he got lost in the sensation of Stephen against him.

The lips trailing over his neck were heaven, sucking in all the right places and sending shivers down his spine. It made him start to pant slightly, forgetting to breathe regularly as all his focus went to the warm bites against his skin.

It really didn’t take much for Tony to give into Stephen.

He’d been in blissful concentration, mind focussed solely on his latest task and away from the troubles that ailed him. It had always been his favourite state of being, where nothing mattered except the tools in his hands and the sound of metal against metal.

Stephen against him was the only feeling that topped that sensation.

Tony swivelled around on his stool so he could wrap his legs around Stephen’s, the loss of the doctor at his neck soothed by the sight now in front of him. He grinned up at the sorcerer, hands finding a hold at his collar.

The sunlight shining in from the huge windows basked him in a golden glow, making him look like more of a god than he already did. Tony suddenly felt a wave of longing for his mansion, thinking about living there with Stephen, waking up in the morning to the sound of the ocean and Stephen wrapped around him. He wondered what it would have been like, if they had met earlier.

Would they have even gotten along? Would Stephen have even bothered chasing after him? Would Tony still have found him as intriguingly alluring had he not been a villain?

Tony could imagine it, could imagine them in the orange sunrise, lounging in Tony’s old patio chairs together, tangled up in each other as they watched over the golden waves. Would Stephen have still been a surgeon? Would he still have as much time for Tony as he did now?

He dismissed that line of thinking, blaming his inherent neediness, and filing it away. There was
nothing wrong with being happy things turned out the way they had, after all, even if Stephen had suffered, even if because of it, half of the world might end if they didn’t do anything to stop it.

He winked, Stephen’s eyes dark as they followed Tony’s movements. “You were saying?”

“I think you should train with me,” Tony raised an eyebrow at Stephen, the sorcerer continuing his explanation. Whatever was on his mind was clearly important enough to continue despite the easy distraction of their bodies against each other. Stephen had gotten distracted by less. “You’ve fought magic before, but I can help you learn to cover your blindspots and use the best parts of your suit. I can help you learn how to beat me.”

“Alright, but why?”

Stephen’s expression was neutral and collected, eyeing Tony as the earlier arousal faded from his pupils. “Because if in any way we’d need to fight each other again, I wouldn’t want to win.”

Tony’s frown only deepened, gripping onto Stephen’s collar more tightly. Stephen’s smile turned reassuring as he noticed Tony’s distress, and Tony tried to pull comfort from the gesture. He wanted to turn it into a joke, say something about him having already beaten Stephen, on the roof when they’d first committed to each other. But it would only lead to Stephen explaining what he already knew; he meant fight for real, magic and all, fight to beat him, maim and kill.

He understood Stephen’s sentiment, but it was difficult to agree with the plan when he wouldn’t want to win either. Whatever that even meant. He couldn’t imagine a scenario where either one would have to hurt the other, especially after they were finally on the same side, and even if there was a possible future where they would have to, Tony would rather work towards prevention instead of learning to best his boyfriend.

“It’s not just that, don’t worry,” Stephen’s hands moved up to cup Tony’s face and tilt it back up towards his. Tony hadn’t even realised he’d dropped his gaze to the floor. The soft touch and blue eyes settled him, but he felt the relief of a fluttering heart only when Stephen smirked at him. He couldn’t imagine how that look could have ever made him anything other than incredibly turned on. He worshipped it, worshipped the darkness of it that pulled him in, mixed with nothing but wanton eyes and arrogant air. “If I know you can defeat me, you can defeat everyone.”

A snort escaped him and Stephen raised an unamused eyebrow at the sound, fingers digging into Tony’s thighs. “I’m serious.”

“I know you are, sweetheart,” Tony chuckled, pulling him down into a kiss. Stephen was reluctant to give in, but he couldn’t help melt into him in the end, making Tony lick into his mouth approvingly.

The kiss was almost disgustingly sweet, having Tony’s muscles contract with want, his heart clenched tightly as he held Stephen close. He could hear from the tiny breaths and sounds forced from Stephen’s throat that the sorcerer felt the same.

“Sir,” JARVIS spoke up from the ceiling. Tony ignored him as Stephen did something exquisite with his tongue, until the words finally filtered through his brain, “Miss Potts is on the line for you.”

Tony pushed Stephen back, the sorcerer looking at him in dismay. Tony knew he’d pay for it later, and he was already looking forward to it, but now he merely turned back around on his stool in excitement. “Pull her through.”
“Pep? Any news?”

“Yes,” his friend’s voice sounded from the speakers, clear and determined. He’d always admired her efficiency and purpose, and much like with Rhodey he wouldn’t know where he’d be without her, “the transfer from Rose Hill high to Midtown has been approved! And May has agreed to let Harley stay with them.”

“Yes!” Tony pumped his fist in victory, already turning back to face Stephen. The sorcerer had his arms crossed in front of his chest, but his earlier disapproval of having been dismissed had faded into a fond smile and a confused pull of his eyebrows.

“Why not have him stay at the sanctum?” His voice was deep and smooth, sending shivers up Tony’s spine as he tried to fight the sheepish blush creeping up his cheeks. “We have plenty of space.”

“I don’t want there to be a disparity between them.” He huffed quietly, turning away from Stephen’s amused gaze once more and focusing his attention back on Pepper. “Besides, he’s better off with a responsible parental figure around. Anything else, Pep?”

“Yes, Harley’s flight is supposed to land around eight tonight and May and Peter will pick him up.”

“Alright,” Tony smiled at the ceiling even as Pepper wouldn’t be able to see it. He could still feel Stephen behind him, even as they weren’t touching, and it sent a wave of contentment through him. Soon enough everyone he cared about would be in New York, and he would be able to protect them. He’d make sure of it. “Let them know I’ll pick them up after school tomorrow.”

“Sure. Also-“ Pepper faltered, her tone betraying her worry. It was enough to warn Tony of the upcoming subject. “Tony, are you certain you don’t want to acknowledge some of the rumours going around?”

“Nope, thanks, Pep!” Tony quickly ended the call, refusing to put any thought whatsoever towards media quite yet. He didn’t know why, but the thought of the press was enough to make him feel like his chest was constricting. Perhaps because if he saw the news about the gala and conflict between the Avengers, it would make it real. No matter how aware he was of the situation, perhaps it still hadn’t dawned on him completely. Maybe he just wanted to avoid seeing any footage of the video - snuff film - of his parents, as even a picture of the road would probably fuel his nightmares even more.

He could feel Stephen eyeing his back, gearing up to question Tony about his avoidance, so before Stephen could even open his mouth to say anything, he had already swivelled around and stood up from his stool. He crowed the sorcerer against a table, watching as Stephen’s protest died in his throat and his Adam’s apple bobbed in approval. Stephen effortlessly jumped onto the table, immediately wrapping his long legs around Tony and pulling him in.

The sorcerer’s eyes came at the level of his own now, and Tony took the opportunity to lean into him effortlessly, brushing their lips together in a bruising kiss as he bucked his hips forward. He revelled in Stephen’s suprised mewl, the sorcerer already starting to claw at his back and pull at his shirt.

Stephen was more than a distraction, obviously, but man did Tony like to use him as one.
“Are you sure none of the Avengers know you’re here?”

“I’m positive, Hap,” Tony sighed out for the millionth time trying to soothe his friend. He was used to Happy’s overprotective side, and even though he’d stepped down as his personal bodyguard on the account of him being Iron Man, he still couldn’t quite get over it. He guessed fifteen years of watching over his safety had left behind its marks. Or maybe Happy had always been this annoying. “They’re at the tower, trying to find the locations of my safe houses.”

“I thought you didn’t have any safe houses?”

“Exactly! I’m Tony fucking Stark; I don’t need them.”

“Doesn’t mean they won’t figure that out any time soon! They can have other sources!” Happy argued, glancing at him through the rear-view mirror before looking through the crowd of students starting to stream from the gates. Tony had no doubt that all these poor kids were war criminals in his friend’s mind. He was watching each with the intensity of a lion trying to protect its pride. “I still think the kids are a liability.”

Tony groaned, leaning his head back against his seat. “I’m filtering you out. Is that what you want? Now I’m not listening to you anymore at all.”

“Tony-,” Happy’s arguments died in his throat as the door to the car opened, and excited shatter filled the space. Tony sat up straight at once, smiling as Peter peaked his head inside.

“Hey Happy! I- whoa Mr. Stark, you’re here!”

Tony rolled his eyes as he fought against the fond smile creeping up his face. Peter’s eyes were huge and excited, and Tony motioned for him to get in. “Of course, I am! I said I’d get you, didn’t I? Now come in before you notify all of New York of my location.”

“Yea- uh of course,” Peter stumbled over his words as he took a seat across from Tony’s, Harley following and sitting next to him.

Tony watched the other teen for a second, looking for any sign that he’d made the wrong call in having Harley come to New York. Perhaps it wasn’t fair to ask a seventeen-year-old to switch schools in his last year of high school, but as often with Tony’s decisions after something big happened, it had been impulsive.

Harley looked calm and happy though, lips pulled into a worried frown the only sign he wasn’t completely at ease at the moment.

“I just - you know - thought you meant pick up as in have Happy come pick us up and -“

“Tony,” Harley interrupted Peter, who sighed in relief as he was stopped from rambling. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, kid,” Tony replied, though his smile wavered slightly at the teen’s worry.
He never wanted them to have to care about his wellbeing, but he couldn’t deny it being incredibly touching. It had been easier in 2010, when it had just been Harley and he’d had so much on his mind that he hadn’t had the mental capacity to worry about the kid. He’d been so young back then - still is, and definitely shouldn’t have had a role in fighting mutant fire ants.

Having the kid placed in danger was his fault, and even if Harley insisted time and time again that it was fate and they were ‘connected’ it didn’t quite help soothe that guilt. He had been happy trying to make up for it with new toys however, trying to give him opportunities and knowledge in return for Tony still being unable to let go of him fully. Even now he’d brought the kid to New York when who-knew-what would be going down soon. With the Avengers in shambles and placing him as a possible target once more.

“I’m perfectly fine.”

No one was supposed to know about the kids. He’d always made sure the Avengers weren’t aware of their existence or their link to Tony, and he was planning to keep it that way.

Harley watched him carefully, and though he didn’t seem fully convinced, he leaned back in his seat and stayed quiet.

“After all,” Tony’s grin returned fully as Happy started the car, “I’m finally able to take you to my lab! You’ll love it.”

“Really?” Peter asked, eyes wide in excitement. Tony could see Harley was just as excited, but was trying to keep it down, biting his lip to hold back a smile. It immediately calmed his earlier doubts and reassured him of his decision. “Can we meet Dum-E?”

“Of course!”

It didn’t take long for them to reach the sanctum, but during that time Peter had somehow managed to fill Tony in completely on all his classes, how his friends were doing, and was now rambling about the upcoming decathlon championships.

It was refreshing, being able to talk to the teens like this. The few times he’d met Peter in New York was when he came to visit Tony on the roof of Stark Tower, and that time was mainly spent talking about his adventures as Spiderman.

“And so now Liz decided to come to the championships anyway, because it’s what her dad would have wanted. She’s so strong!” Peter continued, mouth moving a mile a minute, “When my mom and dad died I – well I was still very young, so I didn’t really have to worry about my future at the time, I guess. She said her mom is thinking about moving them to Oregon though.”

“Wait,” Tony interrupted as the car had stopped and Happy opened the door, “what happened to her dad?”

“He died recently. They suspect due to a heart attack.”

Tony expressed his condolences as he moved out of the car, both teens following him but falling silent as they looked up at the old building in front of them.

“Is this where you’ve been hiding?” Harley asked. He’d been quiet for most of the ride, allowing Peter to ramble as he himself glanced around New York. Peter had directed some questions at him or dragged him along into explaining some of the things they’d done together over the day, and he always answered them without any trouble, but seemed comfortable letting the younger teen steal the spotlight.
“I don’t hide, kid,” Tony huffed, waving Happy off as his friend headed back to SI to continue his job as head of security.

“Well what do you call it when you don’t tell anyone where you are?”

“I call it ‘chillaxing’ now back off,” Tony fired back without any bite behind it, having Harley smirk at him as Tony lead the way inside.

Peter’s awes filled the income hall as they entered the building, and Tony was glad Stephen had made sure Wong and Mordo were at Kamar Taj. He wasn’t worried about them reacting badly to the kids, but it would make things a lot smoother.

He led the teens to the lab now. Making his way towards the hall leading towards the kitchen, both teens following apprehensively around the unfamiliar space.

Tony glanced back at them to check they weren’t touching anything dangerous. He’d joked about childproofing the sanctum the day before but Mordo hadn’t been amused. Wong at least had the fun observation that of it was save for Tony to live here, the kids should be fine.

Neither was touching anything, though Peter seemed to be forcefully holding himself back from doing so, as they glanced around the old walls and cabinets.

This part of the sanctum was luckily empty of valuable magical items, as the habitable part of the building, and therefore they didn’t really pose a risk unless they went up to the library or artefact room.

The door to the lab was inconspicuous, the same make as the one opening up into the kitchen, but as soon as it was opened it was clear it wasn’t quite natural.

The transition from old wood to modern technology was jarring, and the brain realised the space didn’t quite fit into building, clearly too big for the old brownstone. The view over New York sixty stories up didn’t quite help the process either.

Tony dismissed their questions for now, eager to start working again, and was glad the teens were easily distracted by the bots whirring towards them.

“Okay, kids,” Tony spoke, getting their attention back on him, “Time to play.”

Tony felt ten years’ worth of stress fall of his shoulders as he worked with the teens. It was wonderful; he was getting so much done with their help, and the kids’ excitement easily rubbed off on him. It was fun to see how his inventions could still be awe-inducing, how it wasn’t just something expected of him and still warranted praise.

It was also satisfying to see how both Peter and Harley were making so much progress since they started working with him. Harley was almost fully proficient in AI’s and was learning Peter to keep his updated. In no time he’d be able to access the full capabilities of his suit. Meanwhile Peter’s skills with robotics were vastly improving, and he was getting more creative with his inventions.

It was exhilarating.

So much so that he almost didn’t notice Stephen slipping into the lab. Almost.

He was the first to turn towards the sorcerer with a smile, the teens so wrapped up in playing with Tony’s Itsy Bitsy Spider protocol, which would make Romanoff think she was actually getting into his servers. It had been something he’d started working on as soon as he’d figured out she’d been
an agent all those years ago.

Peter was the first of the teens to look up and notice Stephen, and his eyes widened in fascination. “Doctor Strange! What are you doing here?”

He froze, glancing at Tony sheepishly before recanting his words. “I mean I know him from the internet -“

“Save it, Underoos,” Tony rolled his eyes at him, once more fighting against the smile pulling at his lips. It did really scare him sometimes how naive Peter was. Or at least how he so desperately wanted to be the hero and believe the best in people. He had never been like that, too focussed on his own gratification and desperation for attention, and as soon as he’d turned to doing the right thing it had come with doubts and pain.

He’d learned quickly enough that humanity can be vile.

Peter’s ears went red, huffing as he looked back down at his screen. “You said you wouldn’t tell.”

“Actually, I did specifically tell you I would.”

Tony gave Peter a break and focussed his attention on Harley instead. The teen was looking up at Stephen, confusion and suspicion taking over his features. “What is he doing here though? Are you working with the sorcerers?”

Tony took a second to think over his words. He wanted them to understand, to stand behind him - and hopefully in the end also behind Stephen -, but he didn’t want to tell them about the possible end of the world. It was almost too much for him to handle and putting that same burden on a couple of teens was a no-go.

He wanted them to have fun and be kids.

“More like working towards the same goal.” Tony started hesitantly.

Harley had fixed his eyes on him now instead of Stephen, and Tony almost felt ridiculous for twitching under his gaze. He glanced at Stephen, finding the sorcerer looking at him in reassurance, before turning back towards Harley.

“Look, it’s complicated,” Tony continued, more firm this time, “but can you trust me when I say it’s what the world needs?”

Harley was still watching him, Peter glancing between both of them nervously, but then he nodded. “Okay.”

That simple word of affirmation eased his shoulders, the tension slowly leaving the room as Harley continued working with Peter. Tony still watched him for any signs of anger as he moved closer to Stephen, but the teen seemed to have focused back completely on his task.

“Well that went about as well as expected,” Tony whispered, fighting against the urge to lean closer into Stephen’s space. They were standing a little less than a respectable distance apart already, but in a way, it was even more tantalizing.

“They care about you,” Stephen shrugged, voice calm and smooth as he too watched the teens.

He was so grateful for Stephen.
Stephen who seemed to fit into his life so effortlessly, who could read him so smoothly and knew exactly what he wanted or needed. The sorcerer who placed him above everything else in the world.

To have someone who knew about him and his ego, who instead of assuming Tony thought of himself as above all else, as the most important person in the world, understood the opposite to be true.

And instead of merely praising him for his humility, fought to prove him wrong. To prove that he was in fact more important than all else. Tony didn’t quite care about being the best or even leaving a legacy. He wasn’t like his dad in that aspect.

As long as he was Stephen’s most loved, as long as he had the people he cared for around him and safe, everything else wouldn’t matter.

Yet it was still different. Wasn’t like fighting for Howard’s pride or Steve’s approval.

Because Stephen never made him.

Tony never felt unheard around him, and Stephen, though not the best with words, always made sure he felt appreciated, loved, wanted. With his soft lingering touches and eyes that followed him around the room. With the way he showed his own vulnerabilities, showing that the relationship wasn’t just one-sided. That they were both people that brought their own issues to the table but considered each other important enough to work through it.

“I-,” Tony started to say something but was interrupted by Peter yelling out at them in a hesitant voice. He had stood up from his seat and started twiddling with the strings of his sweatshirt.

“Doctor Strange?”

Stephen raised an expectant eyebrow at the teen, though he couldn’t hide his slight surprise from Tony.

“Can we maybe train some more? I really learned a lot last time and -,”

“Wait,” Stephen interrupted him with a frown, but the teasing glint in his eye was clear as day. Tony was very familiar with it by now. “you’re Spider-Man?”

Tony rolled his eyes and pushed Stephen’s shoulder, but he had to admit it was funny to watch Peter’s eyes go wide, gaping between Tony and Stephen.

“He didn’t know?”

Peter’s voice was small but frustrated, but Stephen smirked and eased his exasperation. His voice was low and smooth again when he continued, all teasing having faded away. “I’m joking. I’m ready now if you want.”

“Really?” Peter’s expressive eyes were hopeful, blinking over towards Tony and how could he say no to that?

“Fine,” Tony rolled his eyes, and glanced over at Stephen who was watching him with an amused expression. “But be careful.”

Stephen nodded in agreement and motioned for Peter to follow him. Tony’s eyes followed their movements out of the lab, Peter trailing after Stephen, almost bouncing in excitement.
Once they were gone, Tony turned back around. Harley was still sitting in front of the computer screen, eyes fixed on the keyboard. He sighed as he moved to take Peter’s empty seat, watching the teen until he looked back up at Tony.

“You okay, kid?”

He was quiet for a while, seemingly collecting his thoughts, but eventually he spoke, words careful; “I’m not sure.”

Harley had changed a lot over the last couple of years, had learned to be careful about some topics, and grown more considerate of Tony’s triggers and limits, but one thing had always remained; he was never shy with his words around Tony. Seeing him so cautious made his stomach twist.

Placing a hand on Harley’s shoulder now, he hoped it came of as comforting, or in some way reassuring that he hadn’t changed. At least not drastically.

“Look,” he started, Harley still looking at him, “I know it’s confusing; and honestly I’m not sure either.”

He paused for a second, seeing if Harley would intervene or comment. Harley didn’t, but his expression became more thoughtful.

“But I know that I’ll probably always have doubts. So, I figured, why not have doubts while spending time with the people I care about.”

Harley shrugged as if to say he had a point, but his words were still unsure. “Alright. And you care about him?”

“I do,” he replied hesitantly, but his answer seemed to soothe the teen, so he repeated with more certainty. “I really do.”

Harley, apparently sated by that confession, turned back towards his screen and started typing again. Meanwhile, Tony’s doubt acted up once more, and he couldn’t help but ask for reassurance. “You don’t mind I dragged you out to New York?”

“Well, sharing a room with Peter is not ideal. He just won’t stop talking,” Harley whined, but Tony knew he was joking, and it definitely helped ease his fears. “But aunt May is really kind, and Midtown is so much nicer than my old school.”

“Really?” Tony smiled, faking surprise, “but Rose Hill was so … charming.”

Harley rolled his eyes at him, and Tony could feel a huge weight lift off his shoulders.

Whatever else would have to happen, he still had the people he cared about behind him, and that was all that really mattered.

Chapter End Notes

I know this is extremely slow-moving but plot is coming I promise!
Tony stopped in the entrance to the living room, leaning against the doorframe as he crossed his arms. Stephen was lounging on one of the couches, long limbs sprawled over the back and armrests. His attention was fixed on the ceiling, eyes annoyed as he listened to Mordo complain.

From what Tony could follow, the other sorcerer was making a comment about Stephen’s bratty attitude, which, you know, *fair*. Stephen merely rolled his eyes, leaning further against the leather of the couch as he started trailing his hands elegantly through the air to accentuate his words.

Wong was sitting at the table, barely paying their bantering any attention as his focus remained on his books, throwing in a cutting comment here or there. Today they seemed mostly aimed towards Stephen, Tony’s boyfriend ignoring any and all negativity and continuing with his own conversation.

It wasn’t unusual to find the three of them hanging out in the same space, but this far they’d almost always been working or studying. To see them all hanging out in their spare time was a first, mostly because from what Tony had gathered, studying was their spare time. It’s something Tony really enjoyed about the sorcerers; they were interested in what they were doing and truly enjoyed learning.

The Avengers had always bugged him into taking a break from his work, to relax with them every once in a while. And though he could recognise their good intentions, it was annoying still how they didn’t seem to get that working in his lab was his relaxation. That just because to them it felt like it was Tony’s obligation, it didn’t mean Tony thought of it the same way.

“Stephen,” Tony stepped forward, sauntering over towards his boyfriend. Stephen’s eyes immediately moved towards him as he fell silent. “Get off your perky little ass and put on some workout clothes.”

“Oh, darling, you have such a way with words,” Stephen teased, having Tony smile as he leaned down to press a lingering kiss against his lips.

When Tony leaned back up, Stephen followed, chasing his lips, but instead of continuing their kiss, he let his mouth pull into a grin as he did as told. The move had left him in a sitting position, and he pushed Tony away, standing up in one elegant movement. With a snap and push of his fingers, he had changed, eyeing Tony with a smirk on his face. “Waiting on you now.”

Tony could feel his eyes already darkening, focused on the man in front of him. He’d never seen Stephen in his workout clothes before. Sweatpants and T-shirt’s (mostly his own), suits and robes, but this was a whole new treat.

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**chorus**

Chapter Notes

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Yes, I changed the title. Why? Because I couldn't take the old name serious and cringed every time I had to use it

happy reading!
The outfit was clearly in the same style as the robes, but the cut and fit were more favourable for strenuous movements, arms free of fabric exposing his thin but sculpted muscles. His top didn’t come as low as with his usual outfit, showing him that his assumption of the robes being unfavourable for his ass was truly misguided.

If Tony didn’t have this much composure, he’d surely be salivating all over the floor.

“Get out. Both of you,” Mordo groaned from his seat, hand rubbing at his temples. Tony’s grin was directed at Stephen, who only tsk-ed at his friend before pulling Tony into an extra languid kiss.

It felt petty, stupid and dumb, but he couldn’t help melting into it. Satisfaction coursed through him when Mordo only groaned louder.

“Enough,” Tony pulled back as he rolled his eyes, controlling his breathing. “Let’s go.”

Stephen shrugged as if to say ‘your loss’, before letting go of Tony and heading towards the exit.

To his surprise, Stephen opened a portal as soon as they were in the hallway, and Tony stepped up to it without hesitation, standing next to Stephen as he looked up at his boyfriend. “There’s a gym a little down the street, you know.”

Stephen rolled his eyes, pushing lightly at Tony’s back. “We’re training with magic, Tony. Safest place for that is Kamar Taj.”

It was strange stepping through the portal and being in a completely different time zone. He usually stayed within New York, more accurately the sanctum and Tower, so taking a portal to a completely new place was disorienting. It was already dark outside in Nepal, but there were still some sorcerers milling around. Tony eyed them warily, but Stephen paid them no mind, simply started moving down the hall. Tony could only follow as he tried not to get distracted by the new environment.

They ended up in a courtyard, Stephen slowing down before he turned back to face Tony. Without much ado he shrugged, spreading his arms wide. “Alright, attack me.”

Tony frowned at him in exasperation, smile tugging at his lips. “Just attack you? I thought you were going to teach me stuff, dojo master.”

“Not a dojo,” Stephen rolled his eyes, eliciting a smirk from Tony. “And you already know how to fight; I’ll just point out what you can do better.”

“Fine,” Tony huffed as he glanced around the dark courtyard, only lit up by a few lanterns hanging from the edge of the building. “But, darling, as much as I love hearing your grunts and pants, I’m thinking we need some music. JARVIS? Something upbeat please.”

By a small miracle, JARVIS found speakers to connect to, and a second later music was blasting through the yard. Tony wondered if the noise would bother the habitants of the temple, but Stephen didn’t say anything of it, so he figured it was fine.

Stephen smirked at him as he took a few steps back. Tony’s eyes followed his movements, tapping the arc reactor chest plate to let Bleeding Edge crawl over him.

There were no words after that. Tony fired the first blast per Stephen’s request, and their fight continued from there. The spells Stephen aimed at him were seemingly harmless. Every time one made it past his defence it made a dinging sound against his suit but faded away painlessly.
Tony had thought he knew what fighting Stephen was like, but where the sorcerer would usually stick close to him and worm himself around his body, attacks close range, he stayed far away now. He used the cloak to float away from him whenever Tony tried to get close, continuing his attack from a distance.

In a way it was even more frustrating, as Tony’s body craved the attention, annoyed that the sorcerer stayed so far out of his reach. Yet he wanted to focus, wanted to show that he wasn’t useless against magic, and forced his mind to stay on the task at hand.

It seemed harder fighting from afar.

He figured out why, quickly enough; it gave Stephen more room and time to work on his spells, hands moving in more complicated designs. Tony retaliated by using his own long-range weapons, but Stephen was quick, blocking the blasts each time and Tony was too afraid of hurting him to hope for anything less.

There were plenty of weapons in his suit to end this fight quickly, but it would be too destructive, and final. The point was to train his combat skills, without immediately dropping the atomic bombs. But on the other hand, there wasn’t much he could do against literal magic. No roundhouse kick would suffice against a sorcerer who could simply fly out of his reach or drop through a portal.

But Stephen gave him some tips, and they tried again, and it didn’t improve much, but at least less spells were hitting their target.

It was two hours later when Stephen finally called an end to their little ‘sparring session’ and Tony panted slightly as he let his suit bleed away.

Tony was glad to see the sorcerer immediately coming closer to him, creating a small portal and handing him some water. He drank it as directed, keeping his eyes on Stephen’s neck as he downed a bottle of his own. Stephen was watching him in turn, almost calculating, worried. Tony couldn’t quite place it, and it bugged him, wondering what he could possibly have on his mind that had him so hesitant.

“What?”

“Now there’s this thing between us,” he started, unsure, after a few seconds, keeping careful eyes on Tony’s face, “I think it’s only fair I update you on what’s been going on with Wanda.”

Tony chuckled, choosing the focus on the first part of that sentence as he took a step closer to the sorcerer. “Really, Stephen? You’re still calling this a thing?”

Stephen looked at him in apprehension, before sighing, stepping closer to Tony and wrapping his arms around him. They were both sweaty and smelly, but Tony didn’t mind, only smiling up at the sorcerer. From close by he could easily see the red dusting the sorcerer’s cheekbones after their earlier exhaustion, and Tony could swear it brought out the colour of his eyes even more. “What would you like to call it then? Clandestine hook-up Premium?”

“I don’t know, doc, how about relationship to start?” Stephen rolled his eyes and was about to say something, but Tony shut him up, pressing his lips against Stephen’s just long enough to startle him into silence before he was leaning back again.

“What were you saying about Wanda?”

“She’s soon to be released from her training quarters.”
“You mean the dungeons?”

“Same difference,” Stephen waved off.

“What does that mean? She’s free again?” Tony couldn’t help the discomfort spreading through him, the fear at the possibility of seeing the witch again, now stronger than ever, apparently. He’d been so wrapped up in Stephen that he hadn’t thought about the witch and her presence in the ancient temple, but now the thought was in his mind he couldn’t help feel like the witch was going to jump out at him any second, mess with his mind again or just outright murder him.

“She passed the evaluation I mentioned. She has much improved and surrendered completely to the order.” Stephen was watching him, but Tony looked away, frown fixed over his eyes as he stared at the tiles on the floor. “She will still not be allowed to leave Kamar Taj just yet, but she’ll join regular apprenticeship training.”

“Order? Really?” Tony tried to joke, but he knew it was shallow.

“Tony-,” Stephen started, voice soft and pleading, but Tony stepped away, needing more air to breathe.

“No, no, I’m fine-,” he countered, and after a second of thought, started pacing up and down the stretch of room. He wasn’t particularly fond of the thought of anyone being locked in a dungeon, and he didn’t quite hate Maximoff enough to be upset about her progress, but it was a strange feeling, nonetheless.

Even today they were in the same building. For now, still locked up, but in a few days free to roam around.

He knew she would still remain in Kamar Taj, and Tony would return to New York, but somehow it still felt too close. Like every step she took to improvement brought her closer to him.

To her revenge on him.

Not that he wasn’t quite sure he deserved it. Especially after abandoning the Avengers.

Stephen opened his mouth to say something, but was cut short by Mordo calling out to them. Both him and Wong were standing in the entrance to the courtyard, motioning at them to join them.

“There’s a meeting about to start.”

“I didn’t know of this,” Stephen frowned, glancing at Tony, but he stepped closer either way.

“I should come, right?” Tony asked hesitantly, moving to follow him. Stephen seemed surprised by the question, stopping in his tracks to glance between Tony and his friends. “I mean I’m with you now, aren’t I?”

——

“This attack in Brussels should lure out the Avengers, which will be the last straw public outrage needs to set up restrictions on them. It will also show that Iron Man is not with them, which should dehumanise them even more.”

Mordo’s voice was calm, edging on routine, even as he continued, making Tony’s blood run cold. He seemed to be the only one in the room however, the rest simply following with a bored gaze or nodding along. “There will be five casualties that are unavoidable. The Ancient One has calculated these five to be enough to make it worth people’s attention and be the most beneficial for the
future.”

Even as he tried to focus on the technical, on Mordo continuing his explanation, on anything else, he couldn’t stop seeing the faces projected on the screen. There were five pictures, all in all not too bad, but Tony couldn’t stop seeing the one picture from the left.

It depicted a young girl, around four or five, with curly brown hair and blue eyes. The picture had a name underneath it. *Sophia.*

On the left, there was another picture showing a woman who looked very much like the little girl, probably either her mother or older sister. Tony secretly hoped it was the first, didn’t want her poor parents losing two children.

He stayed quiet though, sinking into his seat as the sorcerers around him were watching bald leader lady - he still refused to refer to her as ‘The Ancient One’ - as she stepped up next to reiterate the importance and following steps. His lip was starting to bleed with how much he was biting into it, trying to stay still.

He wanted to object, wanted to call bullshit and somehow get them to stop what they were doing. But he had chosen this. He had chosen to stand behind them. He knew what the consequences were if they didn’t. Stephen had told them about the threat they were trying to avoid. The threat he had seen coming for months if not years.

It was what’s necessary. But a part of his brain screamed at him to find another solution. That there was a way to stop those people from being killed without fucking over everyone’s future.

He could feel Stephen’s eyes on him, but he avoided his gaze, still glaring at the screen instead.

As soon as the meeting was adjourned, he got up from his seat and moved towards the door, walking through the hallway with purpose as he felt a familiar anger coursing through him.

“Tony!” Stephen was following him, voice careful but edging on a warning.

“Make a portal.”

Stephen stayed quiet but complied, Tony barging straight through it into their income hall. A hand pulled at his arm, begging him to stop as the portal disappeared behind them.

“Tony! Please, I know you-,”

“No!” Tony was yelling now, turning around to face Stephen as he couldn’t help letting the anger spill over. “I know I don’t have a right to be mad right now, but I hate this. I hate being responsible for their deaths!”

“You aren’t responsible,” Stephen countered, on the edge of raising his voice. He was clearly trying to stay calm and certain, trying to soothe Tony, but his own frustration was starting to bleed through, starting to sound like his old teachers trying to explain why he had to ‘show his work’ on a maths test, irritated and determined. “The universe is. You have no say in this nor are you able to prevent it from happening. I won’t let you.”

“Then let Thanos come! We’ll find another way; there’s always another way!”

“No,” Stephen’s eyes had gone cold, voice hard and stern, leaving no room for argument. “I will not risk the only thing I care about because you don’t believe the end justifies the means.”
“I just wish I didn’t know. I knew I couldn’t save everyone, but I wish I didn’t know!” He knew his anger was now edging on bitterness, the distaste in his mouth and spirals of doubt in his head. Would he have made the same choice if not blinded by his love for Stephen? Were all of these deaths caused by his selfishness?

He deflated, anger settling down as he let his exhaustion take over, his defeat filtering into his words as he spoke. “I wish I hadn’t known about any of this.”

Stephen’s cold eyes flashed for barely a second, yet it was enough for Tony to detect the hurt in them. The sorcerer took a step back from him, and Tony tried not to pay attention to the movement, tried to ignore the sinking feeling in his stomach. Was there a dark version of butterflies?

“Wish you hadn’t known me?”

“I-…,”

He was looking for something to say, but his mind was blank, anger draining from him as exhaustion took its place.

“I can’t do this right now,” Tony sighed, hating himself even more. He didn’t look at Stephen, couldn’t watch his reaction. His regrets were selfish and completely unfair, but he couldn’t help feeling them.

He gave Stephen a second to say something, but the sorcerer didn’t, still watching him with that cold gaze of his. Tony couldn’t stand it anymore, but he also didn’t have any answers, didn’t have anything to make it better, so instead he left him alone in the cold income hall.
He regretted what he’d said - or hadn’t said - as soon as the door to the lab had closed behind him, but his mind couldn’t let him care about turning around and making it right. Not before he did what he’d come to the lab for. He needed to work it off, wouldn’t be fair to Stephen to grovel for forgiveness now if he wasn’t completely sure, if his conscience didn’t completely allow it. He needed to find something first, something to fix it, to make it better, to make sure whatever sacrifices would be made would be worth it.

“JARVIS,” he sighed as he ran a hand over his face, stepping away from the door and deeper into the lab as he went to stand behind his favorite worktable, “Open the unnamed project file please.”

He’d chosen to know. Had chosen Stephen, but he hadn’t quite been aware just how many they wouldn’t be able to save. Apparently, he’d been under the impression that joining the sorcerer would give him some control, would give him a way to stop them and lessen the casualties. But as it turned out even as he’d convinced them to not kill anyone unnecessarily, the amount of people that still needed to die was substantial, and too much for Tony to handle.

All he could do now was make their deaths worth it. Was make sure Thanos would never happen, that he’d protect the earth.

His dad had told him he had the key to the future - was the key to the future. He’d long given up on trying to make Howard proud of him, but he hoped now the man had spoken the truth. That he really would be the person that would make sure the earth could move forward, that he could help give it the time it needed to grow and expand, the make it a better place for everyone.

That he could stop half the world from being wiped out.

While he worked, his mind wandered back to Stephen and their fight. Working always helped clear his mind, and though some part of him was still angry, he recognised he’d been unfair to Stephen. The sorcerer had been in his line of fire, but he hadn’t been upset with him. He’d been upset with the world, and the feeling of powerlessness coursing through his veins.

Of course, he didn’t regret meeting Stephen. Right? Right.

It wasn’t even a question. He should have objected as soon as Stephen had brought up the notion. But wasn’t that exactly what he’d meant? He’d wished he hadn’t known, and he only knew because of Stephen, because he couldn’t help giving into him.

When Tony finally emerged from the lab, he was feeling a little more satisfied. His project from the last few days was finally getting somewhere. JARVIS was running test protocols and starting assembly on the first prototype. It only softened the pain a little bit.

He’d expected to find the sorcerer in the library or kitchen, hoped to bribe him with some tea and affection into forgiving him. Wanted to assure him that he would never regret meeting him or being with him and would choose him time and time again.

What he got instead, was an empty building.

He didn’t even have to do a tour of the rooms to see if Stephen was hiding somewhere; the aura of the sanctum felt off. Tony could barely even belief his own thoughts; him talking about aura’s and energies in the air, but it was true.
Whenever Stephen was present, it would be warm and comfortable, reflecting the emotions of its master, but now it felt empty and cold. Even worse, the aura felt almost broken, ripping through the air in the hall. Tony entertained the idea that maybe Stephen was home after all, just feeling terrible, but that thought was quickly replaced as he stepped into the entrance hall.

There were clear signs of a battle, and Tony’s heart started racing as he climbed the stairs two steps at a time into the artefact room. He wasn’t allowed in there on his own - fair - but he knew those glass cases used to be not-broken.

Also, he was pretty sure that was a body.

It wasn’t long before panic started overtaking him. He’d been locked in the lab for over twenty hours, so there was no telling how much time had passed since Stephen and the sorcerers had left. He hoped they’d left of their own accord at least, but there was no telling that for sure either, there were clear signs of a fight, not who would have won it.

“JARVIS? FRIDAY?” he asked, voice wavering as he spoke into his com. “Bench EDITH for now. I need all your attention on tracking down Stephen.”

The last 24 hours hadn’t been Stephen’s favourite. In fact, the only day that probably topped it on the list of very bad days was his accident. It had started with his fight with Tony, but he hadn’t even had much time to wallow in self-hatred before Kaecilius had attacked, which of course had led to the death of the Ancient One. And now Dormammu was rising.

Just when they’d thought they were getting somewhere in their mission, getting the earth on its right track, something happened that might be the end of the universe after all. He wondered slightly if she’d anticipated it. She’d always been a step ahead, always knew exactly what needed to be done, had used the time stone to puzzle out their path a million times. She must have seen it happen.

Yet where had it brought her? She was dead, and Hong Kong was already falling apart, the dark dimension ripping apart reality as they knew it, starting from the sanctum.

Tony crossed his mind as it so often did, barely able to go a minute without thinking about the man, hopefully still locked away in his lab. It might not matter soon anymore, either way. Dormammu would be unstoppable, and everything they’d built would be lost.

It wasn’t ideal, but he had to. He was the only one able to control the time stone, the only one able to do this. For the universe, for Tony.

Hating himself as he rose up into the sky, he flew towards the dark dimension. He hoped Tony would forgive him, would get over him soon. Now he had seen how horrible their actions truly were, he probably would already be, might have already been planning on leaving him anyway. He wouldn’t miss Stephen, but he would be safe. And that’s all that mattered to him.

He flew towards the dark Dimension and forced all thought of Tony out of his mind.

Tony landed in Hong Kong next to Wong and Karl. They glanced over towards him, but their eyes were fixed on something in the sky. It wasn’t hard for him to find what they were looking for. Everything was still, frozen in place, the building - Hong Kong Sanctum, Tony presumed by the looks of it - frozen even in the middle of collapse. The people around them were just as stiff, the
world having been paused in the middle. Tony wondered how far the spell worked, what its reach was, but he only felt lucky that whatever magical war was going on had been enough to stand out on an energy reading.

The only thing that was moving besides the people on the ground - Mordo and Wong in front of him and some weird looking fellows who Tony could only assume were the bad guys standing opposite them - was a red streak in the sky, moving in a straight, determined line towards the center of the chaos. It took him a second to recognize it as Stephen and his stomach dropped as soon as he did, his heart sinking in despair.

“Stephen!” Tony yelled, taking a step forward as he was about to fly after him, but Wong grabbed his arm, the only reason he didn’t shrug him off being the spell that linked him to the ground.

He gritted his teeth, glaring at Wong as his heart jumped anxiously, mixing with anger. “What is he doing? I have to stop him!”

Wong didn’t answer, keeping his eyes fixed on the hole in the sky. Tony followed his gaze and tried to struggle, but he could only watch him disappear into the darkness. He felt his heart lurch painfully, knot forming in his throat as he felt panic coursing through him. It was too similar, too painful, memories from the past mixing with visions of the present, combining with the loss of Stephen numbing his heart. He was coming back. There was no way Stephen was gone. He knew all about disappearing into darkness, it wasn’t a one-way trip. It couldn’t be.

“He joined the dark dimension,” Mordo drawled out, voice disgusted and betrayed, as the guys with the messed-up eyes started chuckling.

“Even the doctor has given in to the pull of Dormammu.”

Tony wanted to protest, debunk such horrid claims. Stephen would never join… whatever dormammu was. But he felt too numb, too cold, too alone. Stephen was still gone. The portal in the sky started closing up, but Tony barely saw it, barely noticed he was able to move again as Wong’s hand fell from his arm. The librarian was the only one still looking up, keeping his eyes fixed on the colors swirling back into themselves.

“Tony-,” the voice sound soft and broken, almost disbelieving. Tony barely recognized it, didn’t dare hope it to be true as he turned around. Stephen’s feet just touched down on the ground when Tony’s eyes met his, and his heart jumped up into his throat as he stared at the sorcerer in front of him.

He wanted to run over towards him, to make sure it was really him, but after assessing Tony was in fact here Stephen’s eyes moved to the zealots as he spoke. “I’ve made a bargain. Your wishes will come true; immortality as part of the one. You will not enjoy it.”

Tony watched horrified as the men started crying out in pain, skin almost burning from the inside out as they were lifted up towards the hole in the sky right as it was closing up, the sanctum fixing itself right after.

His eyes found Stephen again barely a second later, uncertainty coursing through him as the weight of their fight from yesterday returned. Stephen was watching him as well now, his own insecurity clear. It seemed to be eating away at him, and Tony wanted it to be over. The distance between them seemed too vast, a lot bigger than even when Stephen had gone into the dark dimension. Tony hated it; he wanted them to go back to the ways they were, everything else be damned.

“Stephen,” he breathed out, dropping bleeding edge as he finally stepped forward, about to throw
his arms around the sorcerer’s neck. Before he could, however, Stephen took a step back, turning away from him and focusing on Wong. “The Ancient One is dead. We have to continue without her.”

Tony retreated as he watched Stephen, once again having widened the distance between them. Crossing his arms against his chest, he took a step back himself, allowing the sorcerers to discuss the matter between themselves. Now he had pushed Stephen out of his head for a bit he could recognize the complications concerning the Ancient One’s death. He only hoped that was the only reason he had rejected Tony.

“She was a liar,” Mordo cut in, disgust clear in his voice, “how do we know what she told us wasn’t a lie either? She was pulling power from Dormammu after all.”

“She wasn’t a liar,” Stephen glared back, “and I saw what would happen. She showed me even before all of this. We need to continue.”

Wong looked around them, indicating the people starting to wake around them, going on with their day as some of them started throwing them weird glances. “We can discuss this back at the sanctum.”

“Fine,” Stephen sighed, turning around to create the portal. He went through first, followed by Wong and Mordo, and Tony tried to fight against the dread forming in his chest as the portal closed behind him.

They headed into the parlour, and Tony followed only because he didn’t know what else to do. He stayed quiet however, letting the sorcerers discuss whatever they needed as he tried to follow along from his seat on the couch. It was difficult though. His mind kept drifting back towards Stephen, now in a heated debate with Mordo, and tried to shake off the anxiety and loneliness still enflaming his skin.

Yet the sorcerers were running in circles around each other, without getting closer to an answer. He’d always been bad at staying quiet when in a bad mood.

“The Ancient One couldn’t have been the only one able to use the stone or whatever, so just find someone else who can replace her.” He couldn’t keep the annoyance out of his tone, making Wong and Mordo look at him with raised eyebrows before glancing at each other. He didn’t care. He was used to disharmonious teams.

“So be it,” Mordo hissed, but he was glaring at Stephen instead of Tony. “But keep in mind that she could have been steering the earth towards destruction instead of wanting to save it.”

“Which will be easily verified once we check the timeline for ourselves.” Stephen replied for the millionth time, squaring off with Mordo before the other sorcerer finally gave in, sighing and rolling his eyes before storming out of the room. Wong watched Stephen tentatively before giving the both of them a small nod and undoubtedly heading towards the library.

Once both were gone, Stephen finally turned towards Tony, and Tony could feel some of the weight lift off his shoulders. The sorcerer watched him tentatively, hesitation clear in his movements. Tony stared back in defiance, before he remembered he was in fact the one who needed to apologize.

He had no right to blame him for staying angry despite all of this. He still had no idea what had happened in the 24 hours he had missed, and only now was the exhaustion and grief starting to show on Stephen’s face.
“Look, I’m sorry,” Tony sighed, running a hand over his face as he realized he hadn’t slept either. “Of course, I don’t regret meeting you.”

“Tony, I don’t want you to agree to this only because you think you almost lost me,” Stephen started carefully, his voice a lot softer than he would have expected. Yet there was still a stern edge underneath it, the hints of desperation and determination coursing through his tone. “The only reason you joined us in the first place is because of the Avengers.”

“No,” Tony frowned in incredulity, “I joined you because I love you.”

Stephen stared at him as if at a loss for words, dumbfounded as he blinked in confusion, eyebrows knitted together. It would be cute if it wasn’t so heartbreaking.

“Stephen,” Tony spluttered, leaning back against the couch as he looked up at the doctor. Stephen was looking back at him in doubt, and Tony had to fight not to roll his eyes in exasperation. “Please tell me you knew that.”

“Then promise me,” Stephen took a step closer towards him, almost begging as he woke up from the daze he’d been in as despair took its place. “Promise, you won’t do anything to stop it. It has to happen. Promise me or I’ll walk away. I can’t -,” he cleared his throat, it sounded almost painful as he followed it up with a swallow, looking away from him as if the sight of him was too much. Tony’s heart broke at his words, itching to hold the sorcerer close. “Just promise me.”

“I promise,” Tony whispered, voice hoarse as he stared at Stephen. He couldn’t not. He needed him, needed him more than air to breathe.

He looked so broken then, so small despite being taller than him, and he sighed, shoulders falling in relief as the fight faded out of him. Stephen allowed Tony to pull him in his lap, the sorcerer going limp against him. Stephen’s head immediately turned into his neck, air tickling his skin as he let out a breath. Tony held onto him, glad that he still could, that the sorcerer was safe with him.

“Hey,” he whispered, moving his hand to cup Stephen’s cheek and pull him out of his neck. Stephen looked at him, eyebrows knitted together as he still stared at Tony in doubt. It was only natural to pull him closer, just noticing Stephen blink before their lips met. Stephen reciprocated enthusiastically, kiss quickly turning heated as he held on as if Tony was going to disappear any second, like they only had a moment.

It was with difficulty that Tony pulled away, but he had to, had to look Stephen in the eyes and make sure he knew. “I love you.”

He sat back while Stephen stared at him, smile pulling at his lip as he watched the sorcerer. Dread for the future still lay dormant inside of him, but for now all that mattered was Stephen sitting in his lap.

When it was clear Stephen was still frozen, he inched forward again, missing the sorcerer’s lips against his. It was what the sorcerer had needed to start moving again, gladly attacked his mouth once more, pressing deeper into him. Tony let himself be pushed onto his back, laying down on the couch as Stephen fell on top of him.

He moved his hand down, trailing his fingers over his chest as his other hand pressed at his neck, keeping him locked against him. When Stephen hissed in pain, however, he pulled back as if burned. “You’re hurt?”

“Just a minor stab wound.” Stephen growled impatiently, moving his attention to Tony’s neck now.
Tony was going to use his mouth for talking. Tony wanted to object, wanted to get the full story out of Stephen and make sure he wasn’t wounded anywhere else, but Stephen’s tongue on his neck felt too nice, and he couldn’t help but melt into the feeling, all thoughts banished from his mind.

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