Two Steps Behind

by Kizmet

Summary

Infinity War arrives on Earth. While James Rhodes, Pepper Potts and the New Avengers struggle to defend Earth, Steve Rogers leads a suicide squad team behind enemy lines to weaken Thanos’ forces before they can reach the planet. Tony Stark and Loki have their own plan to end the war and Thanos’ threat.

Notes

I know it goes against comic book logic to allow the military to have any effective tech but screw that. In the MCU Sam has the Falcon gear because he was testing it for the military, well he washed out after Riley fell but why would the testing have stopped? Despite Riley’s death the equipment appears sound. Tony might have upgraded Sam’s gear beyond what SI was mass producing but the wings still belong to the military. Osborn was developing the glider for the military as well. If Norman had stayed on as the Goblin he might not have let it be sold to keep an advantage for himself but he’s in jail and Harry has no reason to not to. Harry’s experience with this sort of tech would say private individuals like his father...
shouldn’t have access to it not that regulated militaries should be kept at a disadvantage.

**New Avengers:**
James Rhodes/War Machine
Vision
Hope van Dyne/Wasp
Carol Danvers/Captain Marvel
Alexei Shostakov/Ronin: Best known as Red Guardian but he and Carol were basically turned over to the Avengers after their powers became public during the confrontation with Wanda back in “Uncompromising Principles” I’ve been using Ronin for his code name instead and a super-solider power set.
Peter Parker/Spider-Man
Melati Kusuma/Komodo - Lizard-like appearance, enhanced strength/speed/reflexes, regeneration (from "Avengers: Initiative")

**Avengers Academy Students:**
Kamala Khan/Ms. Marvel - shapeshifting (from “Ms. Marvel”, 16 in 2019)
David Alleyne/Prodigy - Mutant in the comics, Inhuman here, absorbs knowledge/skills short term, high intelligence (“Young Avengers”/”New Mutants”, 22 in 2019)
Harley Keener/Iron Man - 17 in 2019
“Thor.”

The demi-god smiled when he saw James Rhodes and Pepper Potts. “Son of Rhodes, Lady Pepper it is most fortuitous to see you. I have been tasked with discovering if Niflheim’s gifts please you.”

“About that,” Rhodes said holding up the key Thor had delivered on his previous visit to Earth. “Tony built this. I don’t have a single clue how that’s possible but I’m thinking you might be able to enlighten us.”

Thor took a deep breath, his smile fell away. “So it is as I suspected. Nothing of Niflheim is confirmed but long has it been rumored to be the realm where the departed reside. When I was informed that an armorsmith of Niflheim had broken that realm’s near sacrosanct policy of isolation to come to Midgard’s aid I could not help but think—”

“There’s damn little Tony held sacred, too much of a rationalist,” Rhodey replied. “…His relationship with coffee notwithstanding.”

“You haven’t seen Tony,” Pepper interjected. “Haven’t seen this armorsmith closely have confirmed your suspicions?”

“I have not, Lady Pepper,” Thor said gravely. “What information I brought about his gifts to Midgard was relaid through Odin All-Father.”

“Why not?” Pepper demanded. “You thought it could be Tony, why wouldn’t you verify it? I know my mythology, I know your father didn’t succeed in bringing Baldr back from the dead but success was a possibility. Even after meeting you, I discounted myths like that one, until two weeks ago when I found myself holding something Tony Stark build three years after his death.”

“Baldr?” Thor looked puzzled.

“Your brother,” Pepper prompted. “He was slain by a mistletoe arrow, by Loki’s treachery. Hela promised to release him from the Underworld if all objects alive and dead would weep for him.”

Thor shook his head. “Loki is my only brother. My father did have a much younger brother, Baldr, who was killed by Utgard-Loki, not my brother Loki. Utgard-Loki had been Jotunheim’s ambassador to Asgard in the days before the Jotun-Aesir War and Baldr was his opposite in the Aesir court. When news of the Frost Giant’s war of conquest on Midgard reached Asgard, Baldr challenged Utgard-Loki to combat claiming that he had betrayed their friendship. Utgard-Loki accepted his challenge saying that personal loyalty to a friend was a candle in a blizzard compared to loyalty he felt to his king and his people. As the story goes, many believed that Utgard-Loki would allow Baldr to slay him to resolve the conflict of loyalties but it was not so. The ensuing battle was epic, the prowess of both warriors awed those who witnessed it, yet in the end Baldr was slain.”

“The quest to restore him from the dead?” Pepper asked with fragile hope.

Thor shook his head, he put a hand under her elbow to steady her if the dashing of her hopes proved too much. “Baldr was considered for the Einherjar after his death, it is a both a great and terrible honor. Mistress Death does not willingly relinquish that which she has claimed. It is true that the
Aesir have means to steal our greatest warriors back from her realm to preserve Asgard’s strength but there is a cost.” Thor turned away from the renewed determination that filled Pepper and Rhodey’s expressions. “You do not understand. It is not a cost that we pay to have them back, it is a toll extracted from them by Mistress Death. They do not come back as they were. Do you think there was any price my father would not have been willing to pay to have my mother restored? The Einherjar are Asgard’s finest warriors, stripped by death of everything but their dedication to the kingdom’s safety.

“Or to say more truly, only a single purpose may escape Death’s grasp. We cannot command the purpose that returns with them. The Einherjar are terrible indeed, Asgard’s answer to the Dark Elves’ Kursed. They are remorseless, fanatical in the pursuit of their goals. Only the most dedicated of Asgard’s fallen warriors are chosen to become Einherjar,” Thor grimaced, “To ensure that their goal would be Asgard’s defense. Baldr was considered due to his brilliance in battle and his purity of spirit but my father did not accept Baldr’s nomination. He had the soul of a poet and a philosopher, Odin All-Father decreed that none could know for cert what purpose lay closest to his heart.”

“That sounds a bit like that ‘glorious purpose’ crap Loki was spouting during the Invasion,” Rhodes commented.

“Sounds a bit like Rogers’ obsession with Barnes,” Pepper muttered under her breath.

“Aye,” Thor said to Rhodes. “I had similar thoughts myself. I had believe my brother dead for a year and the man I fought in the Battle of New York?” he shook his head. “For a long time after that day I was convinced that the brother I loved had truly died in the Void and I would question the sanity of any who would claim to predict the goal would consume my brother’s heart and soul if he were made Einherjar. But I was wrong. His grief for our mother was my first inkling, still I only accepted the truth; that my brother had not yet been lost to me; when he lay dying in my arms. I gave up on him too soon and in doing so I spurned the opportunity to have him back.”

“The point you’re talking around is that Asgard does have the means to bring Tony back from the dead but he wouldn’t be the same,” Pepper said flatly. “And you’re afraid of what he could become.”

Rhodes glanced away, “I hate to say it, but I’m seeing his point. The Jericho was Tony without too many moral concerns and not particularly motivated. Do you want to see what he could do if he was really trying and not censoring himself?”

Pepper gave Rhodes a surprised look.

He shrugged, “I was against Tony shutting down SI’s weapons division but, until we found out about Stane's sideline in black market arms dealings, I had no clue why he was encouraging Tony to develop shit like the Jericho. It was going to be sanctioned before it hit the market, just like the three similar projects that preceded it. I wanted guidance systems, precision delivery for surgical strikes, I didn't have any need to blow up mountain ranges.” Rhodes shook his head, “I should have known that something fishy was going on when low collateral damage projects kept getting shelved in favor of another deterrent bomb no one needed. Nuclear’s deterrent enough, my job was to get weapons that we could actually use.”

Pepper’s lips compressed into a thin line. She turned back to Thor, “I’ll accept that whatever you do to create your Einherjar, we don’t want to do that to Tony. But tell me more about Niflheim.” She touched her key, “Because this is Tony, our Tony.”

“There is little I can tell,” Thor said. “Niflheim is a realm shrouded in secrecy. When they do acquiesce to discourse with the other realms their ambassadors cloak themselves entirely. Visitors to
that realm are extremely rare and always restricted to a visitor’s sector. They will treat with the other Realms but even a state dinner would be considered exceedingly close contact and a grievous breach of protocol. I have not and will not speak with the Armorsmith. I do not even know if he is one of the Niflhiem retinue staying in Asgard or if they serve as his intermediaries. But,” Thor paused significantly. “I have been asked to gather feedback on the functioning of your gifts.”

Pepper and Rhodes both caught Thor’s arms. “We can send messages to Tony,” Rhodes realized.

“If it is not obviously a departure from the requested feedback,” Thor cautioned.

“I can work with that,” Rhodes said only to be cut off by a blaring alarm. “FRIDAY?” he asked.

“The Nova Corps spotted skip-ship signatures,” FRIDAY reported briskly. Rhodes’ expression turned grim when she didn’t add a nickname. “Upper atmosphere over North America in fifteen minutes. Avenger team alpha’s fliers and the US Air Force are cleared to intercept. Moon base forces and the Milano engaged eight point three minutes ago. I’m sending War Machine to you.”

“I’ve got to check on the shields,” Pepper exclaimed.

“Command center’s on Level B2,” Rhodes replied shortly. He stalked toward the nearest door, hating that even with his leg braces, he was still the last person in the air. “FRIDAY, who’s on board?”

“Captain Marvel and Vision. Wasp is on her way from the West Coast. Trainees on standby: Iron Man and Cloud 9,” FRIDAY replied. Then she hesitated, “Baptism of fire for the suit Crown Prince Odinson brought me or should I take a quinjet?”

“You’re cleared to use Iron Lass,” Rhodes decided. “Ronin has the Avengers ground forces?”

“Spider-Man and Komodo,” FRIDAY replied. “Trajectory indicates Chicago is the target. The Army is sending a Ranger squad, mixed Goblin-Falcon unit, from Fort Custer.”

War Machine stalked into the hall and Rhodes walked up to meet the armor, dropping his cane as it wrapped around him. “Care to lend a hand?” he asked Thor.

“If it will not offend your government,” Thor agreed.

“They’re early,” Rhodes said. “Months early.”

“Have we not made use of light and speedy craft to scout out the enemy?” Thor asked. “Is it not likely that Chitauri have done the same?”

“It’s likely,” Rhodes agreed. “Hopefully that means they won’t have any big guns but I won’t count on it.”

As they rose into the sky Rhodes saw three pillars of light shooting up into the sky, from Manhattan, Queens and Brooklyn, the Arc Shields began to spread from their apices and then the leading edges of the three shields met, merged and spread. Reinforcing each other the three-in-one shield’s coverage extended into Jersey City, The Bronx and Staten Island.

“Twenty-three hostiles made it past the Moonbase,” FRIDAY reported. “Exospheric craft, excluding the Milano, have broken off pursuit. I’m switching to battle mode and turning coordination over to Cho.”

As War Machine and Thor flew westward, they were joined by Captain Marvel, Vision and Iron
Lass, the battle avatar Thor had brought for FRIDAY, along with a quinjet carrying Ronin and the rest of the ground team.

"The Air Force beat you there," Amadeus Cho reported. "We have flying manta rays, about the length of a bus, not counting the tail. First contact, conventional weapons are doing damage but nothing definitive. The Milano’s gunner is a vicious bastard, watch out you don’t get caught in his cross-fire, but you can’t say he’s not taking out the bad guys. Goblin-Falcon unit will trail you by ten minutes. Odds are against Wasp making the fight."

"Chicago doesn’t have an Arc Shield," Rhodes reminded the others as they flew.

"They’ve got subways," Amadeus said. "Police are routing people underground. No evac orders, just sitting tight and trying to ride it out."

"I see them," Vision declared.

"Time to go to work," Captain Marvel said and sped toward the flashes of gunfire.

"FRIDAY, cover her," Rhodes ordered. Then muttered, "Invulnerability’s gone to her head. Vision, stick with me. Ronin… Make sure they don’t get in the subway tunnels. It’d be a slaughter."

"Their soldiers will not get past us," Ronin declared solemnly.

"Thor," Rhodes hesitated. Thor wasn’t one of his team and was somewhere between a flier and ground forces.

"I will assist with the aerial battle unless forces on the ground become too numerous," Thor decided.

"How ‘bout I just point you toward the thickest fighting?" Cho suggested as War Machine and Vision hurried after Marvel and Iron Lass.

Thor smiled. "That would be most appreciated. May I ask, are you another of Friend Tony’s creations?"

Amadeus laughed, "I’ll take that as a compliment but no, I’m flesh and blood."

Several of the Chitauri’s flying manta rays showed damage from the jet’s strafing runs but they were managing to evade the missiles. As the the fighter jets circled back for another run the manta rays spread out vertically. When the jets sped by several of the higher rays closed their wings and fell like stones, colliding with three of the jets and enfolding them. The paired combatants fell toward the ground for several moments then the rays spread their wings while the crumpled jets plummeted toward the ground, given the damage there was no chance the pilots would be punching out. "Fuck," Rhodes swore quietly.

Captain Marvel continued speeding up as she entered the battlezone. Picking one of the rays she flew straight at it, one fist outstretched, and punched through. A moment later she burst out the other side in a spray of sparks and ichor. FRIDAY opened fire on the ray’s wingman as it slashed at Captain Marvel with its barbed tail, driving it back. "Colonel-man, you’re going to love the new repulsors," FRIDAY chimed. "They pack a punch and the energy drain is a hair less if anything… And when we get done here? You’re going to have to explain ‘dead’ to me, my data’s faulty."

Vision cut a swath across the sky with the Mind Stone’s energy blast, destroying one ray and driving another into War Machine’s missiles. The Milano swooped and twisted through the skies in pursuit of the Chitauri ships. The fighter jets thundered by for another pass, this time carefully targeting only the highest of the rays. Lightning split the sky as Thor landed on one of the rays and brought his
hammer down in a crushing blow.

“The Rangers are here,” Amadeus reported. “I’m sending them after the boogies damaged by FRI and War Machine, I think that’s about their speed.”

“Be nice Cho, or I’ll stop letting you take the comms.” Rhodes warned.

“I didn’t say it to them,” Amadeus protested and Rhodes groaned. But Amadeus’ tactical judgement proved sound. The Goblin Gliders were restricted almost entirely to bombs. The kickback associated with anything larger than a rifle inevitably knocked the pilot off the glider. There’d been discussion of mounting rocket launchers on the glider itself but aiming with their feet had proven too challenging for any of the test pilots. The Falcons were slightly slower in the air but more stable, they could handle the kick from small missiles but still couldn’t carry a fraction of what War Machine and Iron Lass were armed with. Still, working together, the unit corned and took down the previously damaged rays in just a few minutes.

On the ground Ronin directed Spider-Man and Komodo to split up and cover the subway entrances as Chitauri warriors began extracting themselves from the rubble surrounding the downed ships. “Collapse the nearby entrances,” Ronin ordered when he saw the numbers they were facing, “We cannot hold our ground.”

Spider-Man hurried, swinging across the city toward a column of smoke marking a crash site. He leaned over, poking his head into the subway from above. “Okay, everybody back. Company’s coming and we’re just going to pretend we’re not home so I gotta lock the door.”

“How bad is it?” a police officer asked.

“We’ll win,” Spidey said quickly. “The guys in the air are great. But the Chitaui got off a few bombing runs and ships crashing into a city isn’t great for it either. The important thing down here is keeping their ground troops out of the subways. I gotta seal this entrance now.”

The officer nodded as he started herding people back. “I’ll pass it on. See what we can do to help.”

Spidey nodded. Then he webbed the supports on either side of the entrance and pulled until it collapsed.

There were Chitaui between Komodo and the entrance she was supposed to seal. That only meant the Chitaui were closer to her than the entrance was. She crept up behind the last of the alien party, grabbed him around the throat and drove her boot knife through his eye socket. Alien or terreran, biology followed a certain logic, visual systems meant heavy nerve connections, the sort of thing that would be a pathway to the brain, there weren’t many things that could survive with several inches of steel being twisted into their brain. When the warrior she’d ambushed fell, Komodo grabbed his rifle and opened fire. Offensive technology tended to outpace defensive within a society, your own weapons were almost always good enough to kill you. After the Chitaui attack party were dead Komodo collapsed the entrance using the cleaning chemicals one of the civilians had liberated from a janitor's closet. “Remember, use a three to one ratio,” she said handing the bottles back to college kid who’d offered them.

The Milano touched down for a brief second. Even before the ship landed Gamora and Drax leapt out of the open hatch. They jumped straight into battle, going after the Chitaui with a competitive zeal to finish off more enemies than the other.

At first the Chitaui ground troops had been content to destroy the first building they laid eyes on. Hard on the city, but it kept them busy until the outnumbered Avengers and Guardians had time to
deal with them. But as the eighteenth ship crashed into one of the city’s parks spilling out it’s cargo of blood-thirsty warriors, they started trying to dig out one of the subway entrances. It was a larger party than the earlier ones they’d fought and Ronin assumed that the Chitauri survivors of the earlier skirmishes had joined up with the new arrivals. “They’re starting to organize,” he said. “If you can, I would appreciate some support.”

“I’ve got a group of stragglers,” Komodo reported. “I’ll be there as soon as I stash them.”

Spidey swung around a flagpole to deliver a double legged kick to one of the Chitauri. The alien warrior just wouldn’t stay down no matter how much webbing he used. He’d knocked one off a building, seeing it’s shattered body on the pavement below had left him feeling sick. But they just wouldn’t stay down.

Gamora and Drax were on their own comm channel and didn't hear Ronin’s call for aid.

Ronin waited for reinforcements unit the entrance was all but breached then charged the dozen Chitauri with a loud shout, twirling a chain and sickle weapon. He used the weighted end of the weapon to wrap the chain around one of the Chitauri’s necks and yanked it back sharply as he sliced across a second’s chest with the blade.

In the sky above the surviving members of the Goblin/Falcon unit harassed and herded a second pair of rays into FRIDAY and War Machine line of fire. Vision and Captain Marvel fought together, tearing through ship after ship with brute strength. The jets had retreated as their casualties outweighed the assistance they could provide.

Ronin spun and lashed out with chain and sickle, with fist and foot. He held his own in a circle of Chitauri.

One of the Chitauri tore free of layers of webbing and came up behind Spidey, grabbing his arms and holding him while another drew a knife. Spidey squirmed and kicked trying to break free, twisting madly to keep his captor between himself and the knife. Thor landed, denting the pavement and smashing the knife wielding Chitauri to the ground. Lightning lit the square and the Chitauri fell in numbers. “Ronin’s in trouble!” Spidey exclaimed.

Komodo herded her group into a bank. “The vault,” she ordered. “It’s open. I’ll lock you in, someone will come for you when the fighting’s over.” As soon as the door closed she started running.

Ronin snagged an energy rifle with his chain before the Chitauri could fire it. Then he spun and kicked a spear out of its wielder's hands

Rocket cackled as Quill rolled the Milano, lining him up to shoot down the last of the rays. “Thanks for the assist,” Rhodes called, cranking up the volume on his external speakers. “We’re headed dirt side, still got trouble there.”

“If you don’t mind we’ll tag along,” Quill replied. “Got a couple of friends to pick-up anyway.”

While Thor flew, Spidey swung from building to building toward the location Ronin had transmitted. They saw the battle from several blocks away. Ronin was surrounded but holding out. A tingling at the back of his neck jerked Spidey’s head around. He saw another Chitauri raising its weapons and shot out a line of webbing. He yanked the gun off target. Just a heartbeat after it fired.

Ronin crumpled. As the Chitauri closed in on him Komodo, Spidey and Thor rushed in. While Spidey dragged Ronin out of the fighting Thor laid about him, smashing Chitauri left and right.
Komodo used her stolen rifle to pick off those Chitauri Thor tossed clear of the fight.

Elsewhere in the city Gamora and Drax eliminated another ship load of Chitauri. Vision burned one of the downed ships before it’s fighters could disembark while Captain Marvel scouted out other roving Chitauri ground forces. War Machine and FRIDAY joined Thor and Komodo, turning the battle to a route.

On a roof above the city as the fighting died out and a baited silence fell, Peter held Ronin as the older Avenger breathed his last.

Chapter End Notes

I went back and forth for a long time about whether or not to do a ‘brought back wrong’ subplot. On one hand there needs to be a reason why they don’t just bring everyone back from the dead. On the other hand it was always going to be a red-herring and I think ‘Lima to Stockholm’ already made it clear that Tony did come back as himself. So I’m keeping a vestige of the subplot in but the resolution is already in place: Stealing someone back from Mistress Death has consequences but she sent Tony back to deal with Thanos and that’s a different matter.
Strange Bedfellows

Chapter Summary

Recruitment drive

Alexei Shostakov’s body was escorted back to Russia by Captain Danvers and Colonel Rhodes. They were met in Moscow by a group of Russian Enhanced and several government and military officials who formally took possession of the body.

“Alexei has been one of the Avengers mainstays ever since he joined the team,” Rhodey said quietly as he stood beside the flag draped casket “He was a valued instructor and mentor to an entire generation of Enhanced, helping them to learn to use their powers responsibly and a sympathetic ear for anyone suffering homesickness. He regularly commanded the Avenger’s ground forces for the last four years, always demonstrating a high degree of professionalism and a spirit of cooperation as he was often the one of us most directly interacting with local law enforcement officials. I don’t know what we’re going to do without him.”

Lt. Shostakov’s former commanding officer stepped forward. “I am gratified to hear that he served with distinction while on loan to the Avengers. We had discussed his return home but given your team’s work in shaping the Accords he felt he could do the most good in improving relations between the Enhanced and the world by remaining with you.”

“I’d like to speak with his family, if possible,” Carol added stepping forward. “We worked together closely. I’d like to offer condolences personally.”

Behind the reporter the camera showed Chicago’s shattered skyline. “Thanos’ opening salvo has claimed the lives of seventy-six civilian, sixteen members of the US military, three servicemen from allied militaries and Lt. Alexei Shostakov, the Avengers’ Ronin. As the losses due to the battle are tallied the question is being asked: Can we afford to defend every city?”

Nick Fury stalked into the UN conference room flanked by Maria Hill and Phil Coulson. “What’s this piece of trash doing on my planet,” he demanded giving the dark haired demi-god seated at the conference table a sour look.

Thor was all but hovering over his brother and Fury would have wagered nuclear codes that the blond had only just learned of his brother's survival from the obvious guilt and wonder on Thor's face. Still he was trying to remain diplomatic. “Director Fury, my brother’s actions during your previous interaction were coerced.”

“So you told the Accords panel,” Coulson remarked. He glanced at Loki, “I’m sorry to discover my celebrations at the news of your death were premature.”

“And I am pleased that news of your death at my hands was an overstatement,” Loki replied. “Midgard, the Universe needs defenders with… Conviction.” Coulson’s small smile acknowledged Loki’s point, he hadn’t thought that the demi-god’s heart had been in it during the earlier invasion.
Maria Hill looked skeptical, “So you had to rip that guy’s eye out in Germany, because you’d been tortured.”

“I did not,” Loki replied coolly. “I could have used the scepter's power to quietly secure his cooperation. I could have left him uninjured, with instructions to support the Mad Titan’s glorious purpose. While I continued on, leading Midgard’s defenders on a wild goose chase, keeping all eyes fixed firmly on me, he could have turned the Iridium over to Dr. Selvig with none the wiser as to my hand in his actions. And while I admit Dr. Selvig was convenient given his work on the Tesseract and I did derive a certain pleasure from taking my brother’s sycophant for my tool,” Thor winced at that, “but I did not have to choose him. I believe one Reed Richards would be considered Midgard’s foremost expert on portal travel? It is my understanding that he is not known for habitually including safety overrides in his devices. Or I could have taken Richard’s rival, von Doom, and had the resources of a country at my fingertips. Had I built the portal in Latveria it would have been child’s play to hide it from your Avengers until I had amassed such an army that there would have been no hope of your preventing me from concurring this planet.

“Instead, I took the Iridium by force, drawing your eyes to the necessary components of my plan and Asgard’s eyes to your planet. I used a safety conscious man to build my portal. I opened it over the stronghold of your most firmly established hero’s home. I gave your scattered, fractus heros a common foe to unite against.” Loki showed his teeth in a rictus grin, “You ask could I have engineered my defeat without maiming or killing any of your people? I tell you it would have been child’s play to succeed. Be properly grateful that I did not throw in with Thanos in truth, there are many who have in hopes that the death he brings will consume the universe only after they have died of natural causes in his service.”

Hill looked ready to boil over but Fury subtly gestured for her to stand down. Then he sat down across from Loki. “I don’t give a damn about your daddy issues, about what Thanos did to you in the past or about what he’s planning for you in the future.”

Thor stood up scowling but Loki waved him back condescendingly. “Do be patient Brother, this is what is know as negotiation.”

Fury returned Loki’s smile with one equally cold, “You killed my people, put them through hell because it served your purpose. Now maybe you did give us the chance to beat the Chitauri back but you played it close enough to your vest that if we hadn’t managed to get our act together and handed you your ass, you could have claimed that you’d been a good little pawn. So Silvertongue, give me one good reason not to toss your ass at the nearest Chitauri ship and you’d better make it convincing. Make me believe that you’re not still trying to play both sides.”

“I have personal experience with Thanos.”

“So does Gamora and she’s prettier to look at.”

“I think I’m insulted,” Loki replied. “Seventy percent of this planet’s Enhanced turn to crime as soon as they discover their powers. This time around a strike force will be insufficient, you need an army. I can give a healthy fraction of those Enhanced you have wasting away in cells a reason to help you.”

“Keep talking.”

Steve Rogers and Frank Payne glanced up in surprise when the door to their wing of the prison swung open. Nick Fury strode in, “Come on, there’s something you need to hear,” he said. He waited a moment for them to stand then spun around and stalked back out, the other two trailing
along after him. He led them to a small guard room overlooking the prison yard.

To Steve’s surprise it seemed like the entire population of the supermax prison was assembled in the yard below. Thor was standing near the window looking pensive. “Thor!” Steve exclaimed a grin brightening his face.

“Steve Rogers,” Thor replied gravely.

Steve’s smile fell away. For the briefest moment it crossed his mind to wonder which side Thor would have been on if he’d been there when the Accords were presented but that thought was immediately followed by the thought of Tony dead at his hands, Rhodes paralyzed, Clint and Scott torn away from their families, all the deaths, the destruction caused and in the end the Accords hadn’t destroyed the world.

And yet Steve still couldn’t bring himself to say that the Accords, and even less so the United States’ SHRA, were good laws. But, with people like Rhodes and his new Avengers, Foggy and his partner, Pepper Potts and Hank Pym all working their asses off, the laws worked the way they were supposed to. In the end it wasn’t really that different. Before the Accords they’d been the ones to step in and fill the gap when bad guys and situations that the police or military couldn’t handle arose. With the Accords in place the Avengers had to fight to improve those laws, to keep them from being corrupted, but when they apprehended an Enhanced threat there was some certainty that they wouldn’t disappear into some metaphorical black hole or a literal hole in the ground. Steve had been shocked when Coulson had admitted that he and Fury had both signed and carried out orders to make Enhanced who’d been considered too great a threat disappear, one way or another. He couldn’t imagine that the new laws had really stopped that sort of thing but perhaps it was harder now that there were eyes on the way imprisoned Enhanced were treated.

“So what’s this about?” Payne asked.

“An offer,” Fury said. “Now quiet down you’re here to hear about the stakes.”

Steve turned to look down into the yard again. “That’s, that’s Loki!” he exclaimed. He looked to Thor, “But he was-”

Thor’s jaw tightened. “I was mistaken, Loki was not dead when I abandoned him.” He glanced away, “I was more fortunate than you, my father corrected my mistake before it became a fatal one.” Steve flinched, somehow it hurt worse because Thor had refrained from pointing out that he hadn’t caused Loki’s injuries, that he had believed Loki was past helping rather than assuming that Loki would be alright without help… That it had been Loki not Tony, although Steve suspected that the distinction might mean something different to Thor than to the rest of them, that Loki would always be Thor’s brother, never simply a villain to the demi-god.

In the yard Loki effortless commanded every eye. “You might remember me,” he said smiling the vicious, insane grin Steve remembered from Stuttgart. “I made attempting to conquer this mud ball fashionable. But when Thanos comes I will be fighting WITH the likes of the Avengers and if you have any sense you will as well.

“I’m certain you’ve heard that Thanos ultimate goal is the end of all life.” Loki spread his hands and shook his head, “Ridiculous, bad press, we are villains certainly but no one is that insane, yes? Where is the gain in that? You might convince yourself that Thanos is simply another conquer, someone you can cut a deal with. ‘Better to rule in hell’ is that not our motto?”

Silently Loki start removing his armor. He didn’t use his magic, just simply removed one piece after another and set it aside, then he raised his hand to the high collar of his shirt. Thor made a pained
sound as Loki revealed a tapestry of vivid, overlapping scars covering every inch of his chest and back. “Easily half of this came before Thanos asked me to swear fealty to him,” Loki declared but Thor's eyes fixed one particularly vivid blue scar in the center of Loki's chest.

“Thanos is in love with death, I do not speak in euphemisms or exaggerate. He break you to his will to prove his power. He will torture you for the music of your screams. And if you give in he will use you up and when you have nothing left to give he will lay your broken corpse on his beloved Mistess’ altar.”

“I've tasted of Thanos’ service,” Loki’s hand traced over a particularly gruesome scar that curved around from his back to bisect his stomach before disappearing beneath the waistband of his pants. For a moment Loki’s audience wasn’t seeing the scar, they were gagging on air that stank of ammonia, feeling the sting as a thin cut was opened in their skin, exposing their nerves to the poisoned air. As dozens of small hooks were inserted into the lip of the cut, holding it open so it couldn’t heal, so every wince further compromised their dermis, starting an escalating cycle of pain and the hopeless knowledge that every time they gave into the pain they inflicted more on themselves. “This time, when he comes, I will fight to my death to oppose him. Unless you have a taste for subjugation, for the taste of your own blood in your mouth as you beg for death, you’ll join me. This isn’t about doing what’s right, it isn’t about loyalty to your homeland or any other high minded drivel. This is a fight for survival against a foe who will hunt you to the distant corners of the universe simply for the offense of being alive.

“Or perhaps you do have someone, a child, a lover, a parent, a friend, someone you would see safe and sound. Know that the heroes of this world will not be enough. They will fall, the Earth will fall. If there is anything you would keep safe, from your own life to the last piece of innocence you might hold in your heart, then fight. Thanos will spare no one.”

“My turn,” Fury said. “Can I trust the three of you not to start anything while I explain what we’re offering?”

“You don’t- I- All I ever wanted was to help,” Steve stammered. “I’m not-”

Fury grimaced. “No, you didn’t need Loki’s little appeal to self-interest. But you do need to know what it means that we’re desperate for bodies to fight this war. You need to see that that the pardon you’re being offer? It’s not validation, it is a second chance that you do not fucking deserve.”

Steve nodded shortly and went to stand at the opposite end of the window from Thor. They didn’t speak as they watched Loki magic his clothes and armor back on.

Fury waited for Loki to start up the stairs to the guard tower, let the stage stand empty for a moment before making his entrance. “I won’t waste my time appealing to your better natures. Let’s get straight to what you motherfuckers get out of this deal.”

While Fury spoke, Loki joined Thor, Steve and Payne in the tower. Thor looked ready to cry. Loki leaned against the back wall of the small room, his arms crossed defensively over his chest. “Stop looking at me like that,” Loki snapped at his brother. “The injuries I showed them were real enough, at one time, but I broke long before my body’s ability to heal had been overwhelmed. So you can go back to comfortably despising me, I’m nothing like the heroes of our bedtime stories who suffered bravely… And died stoically.”

Loki sneered at Steve. “Or even your fallen shield-brother. If there is one ‘hero’ I would wish to emulate it is Man of Iron. When tortured, he didn’t break as I did, nor did he openly resist to become a tragic story of nobility.” Loki smiled fiercely, “He deceived his torturers and plotted their downfall under their very noses. Then he destroyed them. Whereas, I broke and did a lackadaisic job of
carrying out the orders I was given in the hope that you heroes would come through and defeat my tormentors for me, or failing that put me out of my misery.”

Thor walked slowly across the room and pressed his hand against Loki's chest. “This was not Thanos doing,” he said sorrowfully.

Even through Loki's breastplate Thor felt the icy chill radiating from the scar and drew back. Loki smirked, his eyes shining with bitter triumph, “If I weren't a monster I'd be dead now. Even when I try for noble sacrifice my nature betrays me.”

Fury finished his spiel then headed back to the tower while the inmates were herded back to their cells to think things over. “Dr. Banner,” he said covering any indication of surprise at finding the Biophysicist there.

“I told you: A chemical mixture that causes chaos. But that shouldn't come as news to you. I'd still like to point out that unstable isn't a synonym for malleable.”

“Do you have something to say, Doctor?” Fury asked.

“All the way back to the beginning you had a hand in the shaping of our so-called team. Would you look at someone's combat record to predict how they'd react to a cancer diagnosis? But you asked Natasha to evaluate Tony's fitness as a S.H.I.E.L.D. operative based on his reaction to finding out that the thing keeping his heart beating was slowly poisoning him.”

“I asked her to do an evaluation, that she failed to take his illness into account is an oversight on her part,” Fury replied.

“You should know that bullshit is one of my hot buttons,” Bruce replied, his tone measured. “You had the means to counter the effect of Palladium poisoning ready. Therefore you knew exactly what Tony was dying of going in. Which means you had good data on Tony going in. You waited until his mental condition had degraded to send Natasha in so she'd get a poor first impression of him to carry back to Clint and Steve. You waited until Tony had given up hope to sweep in and rescue him. I'm guessing that didn't work work as well as you'd hoped but Tony loved the team and no one was listening to him, so it worked well enough. For you.”

Fury tilted his head back. “You give me a whole lot of credit,” he said, his expression impassive.

“I think you earned your reputation,” Bruce replied. “You set Steve up to take leadership of the team without forcing him to get a psych review, proper training for his position or an in depth understanding of the current political climate. I suppose you could say it was on him to get the tools he needed for the job but you left him dependent on S.H.I.E.L.D. and he probably never even realized how much he didn't know, what with the way you kept feeding him lines about the world needing ‘traditional values’.”

“I won’t ask if you regret the way you manipulated both of them into dancing to your tune. I know moral quandaries aren’t exactly large on your radar,” Bruce said. “Instead I’ll ask about the metric you actually do care about: In the long run, how do you think it worked? Constantly building Steve up and tearing Tony down? Did it really serve your purpose to manufacture such an uneven power dynamic between them?”

“Tony Stark’s ego needed to be kept in check. Steve Rogers needed to believe that there was still a place for him in this world,” Fury stated. Banner rolled his eyes and started to turn away.

“But,” Fury said and waited for Banner to stop. Then he sighed, “But I didn’t expect Rogers and
Romanov to decide burning the house down was the best way to do pest control and then for Romanov to turn around and tell the U.S. government that she was too important to arrest, no matter what she’d done. I thought it was Stark she was picking up bad habits from. So I went out to the Barton farm expecting to find out that Ultron happened due to arrogance, instead what I find is that Tony’s being driven by fear, driven to the edge. You know, he was dying to tell someone what was haunting his nightmares but none of you asked and that does include you, Dr. Banner.”

“I know,” Bruce said. “I know I fucked up. Doesn’t change your role in all this.”

“Rogers and Stark needed to be equals,” Fury said. “The Stark of 2010? He would have spun Rogers around until he wouldn’t have known if he was coming or going. I stand by my professional opinion that that Stark needed taking down a peg, then. Didn’t mean I wanted—” Fury sighed, “I didn’t want to break Tony. Setting up a dynamic where the team expected him to knuckle under to Steve whenever they disagreed? That was never what I was after. You’re right, Romanov’s report was shit but it did the job it was intended to. The psyche report on Rogers? The one that missed his habit of demonizing anyone who disagreed with him? That evaluation was a hell of a lot more dangerous—”

“Because, unlike the report on Tony, you didn’t know it belonged in a trash can,” Bruce finished.
A dark haired girl in a purple trimmed flight suit climbed the scaffolding until she was perched just below the apex or the massive hanger’s arched roof. She settled in, leaning comfortably against an upright strut and looked out through the slight blurring of the force field keeping the atmosphere from escaping the base. After a few minutes the Earth rose majestically over the moon’s horizon. “I’m never going to get bored with that view,” Kate Bishop declared.

A hundred feet below her the hanger buzzed with life as pilots and ground crew from five of Earth’s countries mingled with over a dozen alien species, three of which weren’t even members of the Nova Empire but who had still put aside their differences to take a stand against Thanos.

Above and to the left of the rising Earth Kate saw the maleficent glint of sunlight reflecting off one of the four incomplete platforms the Nova Empire was building. While Kate knew they’d be used in the Earth’s defense she couldn’t forget that if the war went badly their guns would be turned on the Earth, to render it as incapable of sustaining life as the surrounding systems were rumored to be.

As Kate perched there, watching the continents of the Earth revolve below her, an alarm sounded. “Chitauri jump ships incoming,” a cool voice declared. Kate started down, swinging from strut to strut with a gymnast’s grace and a practiced familiarity with the moon’s comparatively weak gravity. “ETA to Mars orbit twenty minutes. Approximately fifty fighters detected.”

The fighters were kept constantly prepped for take off, even so the ground crews raced through last minute tasks as the pilots scrambled into the cockpits and started final checks. Kate met up with a young black man at the ramp of a larger-than-the-average ship, more of a sleek shuttle than a fighter. “All tanked up David?” she asked.

“The best pilot in the fleet for the next two hours.”

The two of them boarded their shuttle and settled into the controls. They waited while the fighters exited the hanger. “So, I got this gig because of my age,” Kate said conversationally. “Are they still going to be shoving me into ‘safe’ duties when I’m… twenty-three?”

David Alleyne snorted. “I asked for a non-combatant post,” he said. “Not everyone wants to go out and kill- well, sentient.”

“Are we sure of that?” Kate replied. “I’ve heard that the Chitauri have some sort of a hive mind. Are the drones really sentient or do they just carry out the Queen’s orders? I’m sure you’ve seen the videos of how they all just dropped after Tony Stark nuked the mother ship in 2012. Do they really even count as alive?”

“We always dehumanize the other side in a war,” David replied. “Makes it easier to sleep at night after killing them. I’m not ready to buy into the propaganda that killing the Chitauri somehow doesn’t count as killing. We’re up.”

The shuttle’s vertical thrusters lifted it off the hanger floor, then the main thrusters kicked in, rocketing it through the forcefield and away from the moon’s surface. They quickly achieved escape velocity and zoomed away from the Earth, toward the flashes of fire lighting space. They hung back, sticking to the outskirts of the battle, scanning the field and waiting. Then, one of the Earth-Allied ships exploded, a blinking red dot appeared on David and Kate’s heads up display.

“Pilot extra-vehicular,” David said. Kate settled into the gunner’s chair of what looked like a grapple.
As David threaded his way between the combatants several more red dots appeared on their screens. Even as he continued toward his target, David started plotting the most efficient a course to reach the other downed pilots.

Even after a successful ejections, once out of their ship, the pilots had only a brief window where they could be rescued. They had limited life support, only enough maneuvering capabilities to counter their inertia before they drifted too far into space to be retrieved, assuming they didn’t become collateral damage before they cleared the battle-zone.

As David braked near the first pilot’s signal, Kate smoothly aimed and fired the grapple, quickly reeling the pilot into their cargo hold. The inside of the hold was lined with stations where the rescued pilots could secure themselves and access the oxygen supplies on the shuttle to last out the battle.

It was quickly becoming clear how long the supply chain between Earth and the Nova Empire really was and that the Earth would shoulder the bulk of maintaining combat ready equipment. There had only been four engagements with Chitauri forces and already there were Nova Empire pilots flying Earth fighter jets retrofitted for use in space. In three more months the first new fighters, a synergy of the tech Thor delivered to Earth and learnings from the Nova Empire would be ready to fly, until then the retrofitted jets were pivotal in holding back the Chitauri attacks.

As the battle raged around them, speeding ever closer to the Earth, David and Kate successfully retrieved nine pilots, human and other, after they were forced to eject. They lost two, one when his life-support ran out before they could reach him, the other collided with a piece of debris.

“Break off, hostiles have entered Earth atmosphere. All fighters break off immediately,” the order sounded, ending their part of the battle as the retrofitted jets and even the Nova Fighters hadn’t been designed to survive re-entry at combat speeds. “Good job everyone,” the base commander announced a moment later. “Only four hostiles made it past you. You’ve made mop-up real easy for the atmospheric forces today.”

Kate joined the other fighter crews in an exuberant cheer as David turned their ship back toward the moon to deliver their passengers to the medic teams.

Rhodes glanced around the conference room table at the leaders of the other Avengers teams and the Accords committee then sighed. “I don’t think Sam Wilson is a good fit for my team,” he said

“Why not?” Sabra of the Middle Eastern team asked. “You took Scott Lang and, as painful as it may be, you need to fill Ronin’s position.”

“Right, I need someone with leadership experience to act as the my ground team’s field commander. Wilson is a flier,” Rhodes said. “And while I theoretically support that the man’s paid his dues and deserves a second chance, I don’t want him on my team and I wouldn’t put him in a command position. I can get over Scott Lang’s involvement with the renegade Avengers because I didn’t know him back then and he didn’t know me. He didn’t know any of us when he decided to take Captain America’s side in that clusterfuck. And since then he went the extra mile to get several of my students home safe when he himself was hurting pretty bad. Now I’m not saying Wilson wouldn’t have done the same thing if he’d been in that position but it wasn’t him that the Inhumans took, it was Lang.

“I don’t blame Wilson for getting out of the way when Vision, on my order, tried to get him out of the sky. Even if we’d still been on the same team at the time it’s not Wilson’s job to play human shield for me. However, I do blame him for being part of that fight in the first place. Wilson and I
had been teammates for a year at that point, his decision not to trust me or Romanov with the full story before we were in position to throw down is something I can’t help but take personally. Still he’s paid for those decisions and he deserves a second chance. The thing is, I’m still paying for those decisions and I will be paying for them for the rest of my life. My best friend is dead, I lost the use of my legs and his decisions played a role in that. I’m not the right person to be his commanding officer.”

Everett Ross grimaced and nodded, “Okay, North America is out. Anyone else want him?”

“Africa,” T’Challa said.

“No,” Tiger, T’Challa’s Algerian co-representative, stated. “Wilson was involved in Lagos. When one of Rumlow’s terrorists threatened to release the bioweapon in that marketplace he was the one to make the call to risk the people of Lagos. Mr. Wilson’s presence is not acceptable in Africa.”

“Europe feels the same,” the Crimson Dynamo added. “There were too many harmed in Romania, in Berlin. We don’t want him.”

“Asia?” Ross asked.

“Wilson has experience but his abilities are not unique,” One of the Collective said. “His record suggests that it would not be wise to trust him with any but the most obvious of judgement calls. Asia would rather negotiate with the U.S. military to start training our own Goblin-Falcon units. Even if the tech is restricted to nations in our region with better relations with the United States it would be preferable to Wilson.”

“Anyone?” Ross pressed.

Sabra and Arabian Knight, representing the Middle Eastern team were pointedly silent. The two representatives of the South American team consulted each other quietly then Sunspot said, “We respect Wilson’s personal loyalty but at the same time it is a source of concern. He does not know us, we do not know him. Taking him on would be betting that we could win his loyalty before one of his old friends called.”

“But we remember his aid during the Vargas Tragedy,” Yo-Yo added. “As Colonel Rhodes said, he’s paid for his crimes and we’re willing to take a chance on him.”

“Well, thank goodness someone is,” Everett whined. “I am so glad there’s a plan for Rogers and I don’t have to go through this again… Wakanda is keeping Barnes? I don’t have figure out what to do with him, right?”

T’Challa rolled his eyes and nodded.

“Anyway,” Ross continued. “The next order of business is Vision. Nova Prime reiterates that allowing the Mind Stone to fall into Thanos’ hands would spell disaster and respectfully requests that Vision be placed under protective custody-”

“No,” Rhodes interrupted. “They don’t get to shove him in a vault because of that rock in his forehead.”

“Or at least be relocated to New Earth, away from the front line,” Ross continued.

“Vision wants to stay and fight. He’s one of our most powerful,” Rhodes argued. “The Earth is not Nova Prime’s priority. To him the our whole planet is acceptable collateral damage. And it’s understandable why he sees it that way. If I were a member of their government I’d make the same
call. But the Earth is our home, our everything and Vision could be a key player in keeping it safe. As long as he wants to be here, I’m going to selfishly support his decision.”

Steve glanced up when Fury appeared in the door of his cell. “So do I sign the Accords?” he asked.

“It’d be a nice gesture but no one gives a damn now,” Fury replied. “There’s not a city on Earth that trusts you not to write them off as collateral damage.”

“So that’s it, after you’re big spiel there’s nothing I can do?” Steve demanded.

“Not by a long shot,” Fury replied. “What I want from you is to lead a team doing hit and run strikes in Thanos’ territory. Think of it as going back to basics, apart from the mode of transportation it’s the sort of mission you were doing in World War II, the stuff that made you a hero in the first place.”

“My father made that shield.” Steve glanced away at the memory of Howard Stark flying him into Austria to rescue Bucky.

“The Earth matters because it’s the only oasis between Thanos and the rest of the galaxy? Screw that, I’ll grow that desert, carve it out of his empire, until the Earth is out of his reach.

“Barton and Romanov are already out there,” Fury continued. “You won’t be meeting up with them unless everything goes to hell. They’re scoping out the terrain. We’ve already got a list of targets that will hurt Thanos’ ability to make war on the Earth. Now they’re getting in deeper, trying to learn what your team will be up against when you show up to take them out. Barton and Romanov are trained for deep cover, I have no plan to extract them before the war’s won. Ready to meet your team?”

‘Not the Howling Commandos. Not the Avengers. Just a group of criminals trying to save their own skins.’ Steve thought. “You know, you may not be a threat but you better stop pretending to be a hero.” ‘Time to take your own advice, Rogers.’ He turned to Fury, “Going to debrief me on them first?”

“Thought I’d let you make up your own mind this time,” Fury replied blandly. “But I will say that most of them have family, kids, out there somewhere.”

‘Fighting to protect their own,’ Steve thought as he followed Fury out of his cell. ‘Maybe it’s not the most heroic of motives but I’ve hardly got room to fault them for it.’

“One last thing,” Fury said as he paused outside the cafeteria door. “The missions you’re being sent on? No one mission is going to change the course of the war. As a cumulative effect they’ll sap the enemy’s strength and give Rhodes’ Avengers the breathing room they need to keep the Earth safe, as a cumulative effect. You go out and die heroically to complete your first mission? Maybe you’ll feel better about Stark but it’ll be meaningless. What the Earth needs from you is not perfection, it’s a good batting average.” Then he threw open the cafeteria door and stepped inside.

Frank Payne was already there. He was sitting on one of the tables talking with a bald, middle-aged man and a twenty-something woman with pink hair. Steve recognized the latter as Diamondback and assumed that the unremarkable man was also a member of Serpent Society, possibly even someone he’d fought.

On the other side of the room a man with close cropped, curly brown hair sat, his posture oozing arrogance. ‘Norman Osborn,’ Steve thought matching the man with pictures from his trial. He frowned as he remembered some of the speculation surrounding Harry Osborn’s testimony at his father’s trial. ‘If he’s here for his son’s sake it’s only because he’s trying to make up for how he
treated the kid before.’

A second woman watched Diamondback curiously. Her hair was also dyed pink, but much longer than Diamondback’s bob and streaked with white. ‘Why can’t women just leave their hair the color nature intended?’ crossed Steve’s mind. “Join the twenty-first century, Capsicle.”

“When will our belongings be returned?” Osborn demanded glaring at Fury, “We’re hardly going to be effective without them.”

“You’ll get your gear in time for your mission and not a moment before,” Fury replied. “Now how about you all play like this is summer camp and introduce yourselves to each other.”

Diamondback sauntered over and looked Steve up and down. “Someone who needs no introduction: Steve Rogers, the former Captain America, murderer.” She glanced at Fury, “I take it you want us to follow him but why should we? We’ve all seen what happens to teammates he doesn’t like. I’m here because I’ve never trusted anyone else to fight for my survival, I’m not about to be used as someone’s sacrifice play.”

“He’s okay Rachel,” Payne interjected. “We can trust him further than Seth here’s successor—”

“Usurper,” the bald man muttered under his breath.

“Oh Seth himself,” Payne gave his former leader lopsided grin and a shrug. “We’re crooks, we’ve followed a lot unashamedly selfish bastards. And you know damn well that I’ve more cause to have a problem with him than you do.”

She rolled her eyes but surrendered the point. “Rachel Leighton, or Diamondback if you please. No powers but don’t think that’ll stop me from kicking your ass. I specialize in throwing knives.” Remembering fighting against her, Steve classified her combat style as being somewhere between Clint and Natasha.

“Frank Payne, I go by Constrictor in the field,” Payne volunteered next. He let his tentacles emerge from his sleeves, “They can lift a car. For those of you who don’t know I’m S.H.I.E.L.D. trained. I survived being burned in the fall, which was his doing,” he nodded toward Steve. “Afterwards I made my way to ACTU, ended up Enhanced in a hare-brained cover and decided I’d had enough of government service.” Steve’s eyes widened at the realization that Payne was nominating himself to bridge the distance between him and the new team.

The last member of the Serpent Society stood and nodded to the others, “I am Seth Voelker, Sidewinder. I was the leader of the Society until that backstabbing Viper got uppity… But that is neither here nor there. I teleport, it is my understanding that you’ll need my abilities to get in and out of our missions alive.” Steve already disliked him.

Osborn and the second woman glared at each other for a moment before the woman shrugged and stepped forward, “Melissa Gold, aka Songbird.” She touched the collar around her throat. “I’m an acoustikinetic, lab-born not Inhuman, I can manipulate sound to generate energy blasts or force fields. I can even use it to fly by creating wings of acoustic energy.”

Osborn glanced up with a deliberate expression of boredom. “You all know who I am. The papers took to calling me the Green Goblin, if you require one of those ridiculous names for me you may use that. I’m a genius, I built the glider, the armor and weapons that I used to defeat Spider-Man in battle after battle.”

“He means when he beat down some high school kid that he confused with Spider-Man,” Songbird
leaned over to whisper carryingly to Diamondback.

“Peter Parker is Spider-Man!” Osborn snarled.

Songbird shrugged carelessly, “Even if he is… Well, I want to see the rematch now that he might be old enough to shave.”

Fury glanced at Steve and he took the cue.

“As Diamondback pointed out, I’m not Captain America anymore, in the field you can call me Nomad.” Steve turned to face Fury, in the process stepping away from the man and aligning himself with his new team. “Director Fury, we will need our gear back before our first mission. Telling each other what we can do in combat is nothing next to seeing it. If you want us to succeed, we need the chance to train together.”

“I’ll see what I can arrange,” Fury said, his expression impassive except for a small smirk.

Thor looked around the barren little room in the Nevada prison, it reminded him uncomfortably of the room where he’d been held by S.H.I.E.L.D. during his exile in New Mexico. So much had changed in his life it seemed hard to believe it had been a mere eight years ago. More had happened in the last decade than in the ten that had preceded it. After a few minutes the opposite door opened and a guard escorted Steve inside.

“Fury spoke with the United Nations and won leave for me to present you with this,” Thor said stiffly holding out a small box. “It is a key, should it accept you, it activates body armor which will protect you from direct effects of sorcerers, even direct effects of the Infinity Stones themselves.”

“A test?” Steve asked drawing back.

Thor looked down, “I have been given to understand even Mjolnir’s test of worthiness would more properly stated as ‘worthy in the eyes of Odin All-Father’. The builder who made these weapons wished assurance that they would be used as he intended, it tests only that you are the person he believes you to be… And all offensive capabilities will cease to function once the Mad Titan has been defeated.”

Steve nodded and stepped forward, “What do I do?”

“Take it up,” Thor replied flipping the lid of the box open.

Steve’s breath caught, his face lost all color as he stared at the paired glowing blue/white triangles set in a slim disks. “What is this?” he choked out

Thor looked grim, “A gift from Niflheim, the realm of the dead. Meant to aid you in defending this planet.”

Steve gingerly reached out and lifted one of the disks from it’s molded setting. On it’s surface it was a match for the one he’d last seen the moment before he’d brought the edge of his shield down on it but it was flat, lacking the depth that had been Tony’s death. ‘How could I forget, even for a second, that there was flesh and blood below that armor?’ As Steve lifted the disk the metal warmed slightly in his hand.

Thor released a breath Steve hadn’t realized the demi-god was holding. “It will function for you.”

Steve looked at the glowing disk in his hand and wondered if were truly a gift or an albatross. ‘Either
way, it’s not my choice to set it aside,’ he decided as he let the weight settle into his hand.

“Prince Thor,” Captain Danvers called as Thor headed toward the area designated for Rainbow Bridge arrivals and departures.

Thor stopped and turned back to face her, “Captain Marvel?” he said curiously.

“If you have a moment I’d like to talk to you about your brother,” Carol requested. “If now isn’t convenient, we could schedule a meeting.”

“What would you like to know?” Thor asked and Carol steered him to her office at the Avengers’ Academy.

Carol took a deep breath, “During the Chitauri Invasion I was sitting in the cockpit of my fighter waiting for the order to engage,” she said. “I wasn’t involved in the battle Loki brought on us but it was a near thing. Now he wants to fight alongside us, says the Invasion wasn’t under his control and he did what he could to sabotage it. From what you said to the UN on his behalf I gather that you want to believe him but do you have anything objective to back up what he says? Something that doesn’t rely on you or your father wanting to believe Loki wasn’t a willing participant in that?”

Thor sat down on the office couch with a thoughtful look on his face. “Father is still angry with Loki for his actions surrounding my exile. For myself, I believe I’ve forgiven him everything except his attempt to kill himself.” A puzzled, hurt look crossed Thor’s face, “If Loki’s words during the Invasion can be believed he, himself has rewritten that moment, choosing to forget that Father and I did everything we could to save him and that he let go, choosing to believe that I pushed him.

“I do not bear a grudge against him for disrupting my coronation and my reaction was no one’s fault but my own. Whatever jealousy might have motivated Loki, in spite of the treason he committed, I cannot say that he was wrong to want to expose my arrogance and foolishness before I could bring harm down on Asgard,” Thor continued.

Carol listened patiently while she waited for him to get around to answering her question.

“Loki hurt me for no reason other than to hurt me, telling me that Father had died,” Thor continued softly. “But I understand that I had unthinkingly hurt him as well, many times, and I was wrong to dismiss those hurts as petty simply because it was not I who bore them. That he would chose to die rather than allow himself to be saved by me hurt much worse than any lie Loki could tell.

“Loki sent the Destroyer against myself and our friends when they refused to obey him and tried to forcibly end the exile my father had consigned me and place me on the throne over Loki. But they did not have the right to repeal Odin’s sentence or to dispute my mother’s choice to make Loki regent while Odin was indisposed. Loki rightfully held the throne, they betrayed Asgard by going against him. To kill them for what they’d done would have been a harsh punishment but few would have spoken out against it if Loki’s heritage hadn’t come to light shortly afterwards.”

“Seriously?” Carol asked.

Thor nodded. “I was eager to restart the war between Asgard and Jotunheim. I did not worry myself with thoughts of those who would suffer or die in such a war, so long as I had the chance to prove myself equal to the warriors of my father’s generation. There was no honor in Loki’s method of seeing to it that my war did not come to pass. He used trickery and deceit to murder the Frost Giant king, his own father by birth. He would have wiped out the people of Jotunheim completely… But with his way only a bare handful of Asir lives were endangered. Recently my father required me to
revisit my history lessons, now I am exceedingly familiar with the toll Asgard paid during our war with Jotunheim.”

“That’s all very interesting but…” Carol prompted.

“You asked for objective proof that Loki was not himself during the Chitauri Invasion of Midgard? I tell you that Loki prefers to have his fights won before he ever sets foot on the battlefield. I thought nothing of his methods at the time but that was because I would have gleefully called together my enemy’s strongest men and offered challenge. I did not question it when Loki’s plan of battle accomplished what I would have desired of a conquest, disregarding that Loki is not I and has his own priorities.”

“So basically you’re saying Loki fought like an idiot and that’s not his normal MO?” Carol asked. Thor looked affronted, “It is an effective tactic, to take on your enemy’s strongest and destroy him, thus destroying his army’s will to fight. But it is not Loki’s style.”
So, got to see “Guardians of the Galaxy” last weekend, really enjoyed it and will integrate it into my plans where I can. So if you remember me using Mantis for one of the Avengers Asia representatives…. um… don’t? Mantis has retroactively changed to Xi’an Coy Manh/Karma, like other mutant characters in this AU she’s now Inhuman. But that’s the only retroactive change as the character hadn’t really been anything but a name drop at this point.

However, I'm just going to ignore the way everyone in GoG apparently has near instantaneous transportation to anywhere with the only drawback being carsickness. In my world there are size and mass limitations on jump ships and even with ships capable of short-cutting there are still significant times involved in interstellar travel. Also different classes of ship have significantly different speeds. Freight ships and other vessels built to transport massive quantities are slower than small courier ships, aka measured in weeks as opposed to months, not in minutes for anyone.

After Fury introduced Steve to his new team he informed them that they'd all be staying in the wing of the prison where the renegade Avengers had been housed pending further notice and that dinner would be served shortly. Then he left.

Steve watched the others finding spots around the table feeling uncertain. ‘Natural I suppose,’ Steve thought. ‘Half of them are here because of me.’ Still, the thought didn't quite ring true.

The three Serpent Society members fell in together easily while Songbird and Diamondback bonded over guys who hadn't taken them seriously and what they'd done in response. Steve couldn't help but think Peggy or Natasha would have joined right in and might have managed more than the subtle squirming Sidewinder and Constrictor were doing in response to the women's stories.

It was noisy. For years, until Frank, Constrictor, had been moved into the wing, Steve had only seen his team and the odd teen who'd been caught up in the system.

To the credit of those like Foggy and Rhodes, almost all of the kids had been released or transferred to the Avengers Academy within forty-eight hours of their arrest.

Clint had been paroled in March. Scott had been kidnapped by the Inhumans a month later and hadn't been back since. Rhodes had taken the time to visit and let Steve and Sam know that Scott was okay, that he'd helped to rescue himself along with a number of kids and that he was on his way to recovering from his injuries. In May Sam had been granted a very early parole due to his aid during the Inhuman escape and the associated prison riot.

For the seven months since Sam left it had been just Steve and Frank. They hadn't had much to talk about but the near silence between them hadn't been hostile. The four newcomers, the chattering between them was startling. The thought of sitting down to a meal with multiple strangers was disconcerting and Steve wasn't entirely sure that it would have been easier if they'd been S.H.I.E.L.D. rather than a bunch of crooks but he was supposed to lead them.
Osborn kept a deliberate, scornful distance from the others. ‘Better off without him,’ combatted in Steve's mind with ‘Don't repeat mistakes.’ But then Tony never chose to distance himself, we chose for him. Still, seeing how Osborn’s isolation appeared, Steve knew he had to join the others, he couldn't hold himself apart and expect them to follow him that had never been how he led.

Steve took the seat beside Frank. Sidewinder was on Frank’s far side, the two women sat across from them and Osborn sat on further down on that side of the table. From his place Steve could comfortably talk to either Osborn or the group.

He listened to conversation a bit, looking for an opening, when it suddenly it hit him. “How do you all know each other?” Steve asked Frank. “You weren’t with the Serpent Society when…” Steve broke off uncomfortably.

Sidewinder cackled. “When you and your bunch of do-gooders busted us and killed Cobra?” he finished for Steve.

“You know, I never imagined anyone could look good while making the landed-fish face,” Diamondback remarked to Songbird who snickered.

“They got off,” Frank explained.

“And I never liked Cobra anyway,” Sidewinder added. “That bastard was plotting against me.”

“You’re paranoid,” Diamondback told him.

“Viper. It’s not paranoia when they’re really out to get you,” Sidewinder shot back.

“But Cobra was a dick,” Diamondback continue over Sidewinder’s justification. “I was making plans to castrate him if I caught him trying to doctor my drink again.” She turned to Steve, “Your group seized everything in the base before handing us over to the police, made a glorious mess of the evidence against us. We lawyered up, claimed it was all a big, horrible misunderstanding…” Her eyes filled with tears, “We’re the Avengers biggest fans, your honor. We wanted to be them. Alright, we were squatting in that old HYDRA base, I mean not everyone can have Tony Stark for a sugar daddy and it was just sitting there empty. We weren’t doing anything wrong. When-” she broke off for a sob, “Poor Klaus.” Then she dropped her sorrowful expression with a shrug, “It was a load of bullshit but sufficiently convincing bullshit that the judge threw the case out.” She smiled sweetly at Steve, “He probably didn’t want us dragging Captain America’s name through the mud… Back then anyway.”

“You did fuck up my secret identity,” Sidewinder leaned around Frank to scowl at Steve. “My old lady turned state’s evidence against me once she knew how I kept her. Wasn’t like she and local cops had ever had a problem turning a blind eye to what happened to that entitled little punk who got my girl pregnant at her prom then dumped her ‘cause he had a football scholarship until Captain America got on my case… I haven’t seen my grandson in years.”

“Serves you right for not hiding the body better,” Osborn snorted. “Only an idiot or a hero depends on ‘everyone will understand why I had to do it’ to stay out of jail.”

“This time they do understand,” Steve said before anyone could remind Osborn of how he’d been caught red-handed. “This is a war. The fate of the Earth is at stake.”

Peter glanced around at his old school group, they’d met in grade school, stayed in the same class through high school graduation and now Felicity, whose birthday came first, was twenty-one and was already planning an epic bar hop for Liz’s birthday because that would be the night they were all
twenty-one. Only six months earlier Felicity had discovered that she had Inhuman blood and had taken a leave of absence from Empire State University to train in using her powers at the Avengers’ Academy.

Peter had been Spider-Man since he was fifteen but now he was an Avenger and, even though he was technically only an intern at Stark Industries until he finished his degree, he already several patents with his name on them from his and Harley Keener’s work in prosthetics. Gwen sat beside him, their bodies touching casually from hip to shoulder, she was an aspiring architect and already making a name for herself as New York remade itself to withstand an alien siege. They were talking about moving in together, trying to decide if the coming war was a good reason to get married right away or a good reason to wait.

Liz, ditzy Liz Allen, was studying international law and had an internship with the September Foundation. Liz, who’d never forgotten Iron Man rescuing her from a kidnapping attempt back in Middle School, was bound and determined to support what Tony Stark had started when he’d decided sign the Sokovia Accords.

There were missing faces. The distance Harry put between himself and his old friends after his father’s arrest had never diminished. And while Peter had made several attempts to integrate Amadeus Cho into the group it hadn’t worked out. He’d been their classmate for the last two years of high school but he’d never quite clicked with anyone socially.

The reason they’d gotten together that evening was to send Flash Thompson off. As the Enhanced Draft crumpled under legal challenges, political missteps and diminished importance as the world’s governments discussed how to best make use of the technology Thor had brought, Flash Thompson had decided that baseline humans needed to step up do their part to defend the planet. He’d enlisted.

“So really I’m pretty much a glorified gas station attendant but I’m gassing up Star Wars shit on the moon! I think we can all agree that I’m way cooler than any of you,” Flash declared. He grinned at Felicity, “Even our own superhero to be is only going to be doing mop-up for the space-jockeys.”

Felicity shrugged good-naturedly, “But I look much hotter in my working clothes.”

“Oh yeah,” Flash agreed dreamily. “Not going to argue that.”

“You're drooling in your coffee,” Liz observed elbowing Flash lightly.

Gwen glanced questioningly at Peter, he shook his head. ‘I probably should tell Felicity about being Spider-Man but not today,’ Peter thought.

Their interaction caught Flash’s eye, “Okay, Parker gets to work on War Machine and helped get Colonel Rhodes walking again. You’re pretty cool, Pete.”

“I’m shocked,” Peter said dryly. “...You didn’t mention that I help with Spider-Man’s gear?”

Flash looked a little embarrassed, “I’m Airforce now, gotta show branch loyalty. Colonel Rhodes and Captain Danvers are the best heroes by far. It totally sucks that the military gave Rhodes a medical discharge while he was still being War Machine and that being an Avenger messed up Danvers’ promotion track.” Felicity and Liz snickered at the rote manner in which Flash recited the primary causes Air Force's ire over how government policies had affected their heroes.

The evening wore on. They talked about their plans for the future and reminisce about high school, middle school, grade school. Talked about calling Harry and demanding that he join them for old times sake as the hour grew later.
“Do you think it was Spider-Man’s fault that Ronin got killed?” Peter asked in a lull that hit around eleven when the staff was starting to give them dirty looks for not getting out of the way and letting them start preparing to close.

Gwen squeezed Peter’s arm tightly, “I think I’m happy that Spider-Man didn’t immediately jump to fighting to kill just because the people he was fighting were aliens.”

“The Chitauri, anyone who’d help Thanos, they pretty much deserve to die in my books,” Felicity said. “Remember 2012? They just came and started killing people, for no reason.” Then she shrugged, “But I don’t know how I’m going to feel when I’m actually face to face with one.”

Peter glanced over at Flash. The former running back was chewing furiously on his lower lip, apparently unable to take a position. Peter felt a surprising sting of disappointment and wondered when he’d come to expect his former tormentor to unfailing, if sometimes unthinkingly, come to Spider-Man’s defense.

“Spidey’s been the poster-child and test case for the Enhanced assisting police,” Liz said. “At the Foundation he’s the one we’re always pointing to as an example for new signees. The whole secret identity thing is sort of a holdover from the dark ages but if the Avengers had of been as careful and conscientious as Spidey’s been- Well, the truth is we needed the Accords. Just because some Enhanced are capable of self-policing doesn’t mean it’s good to start a precedent where untrained, unregulated individuals are running around taking the law into their own hands on a daily basis- But I think there would have been a lot fewer, um, birthing pains expanding the legal system, if the relationship between Enhanced and Baseline humans hadn’t been so tense.” Liz took a deep breath, “That said, maybe Spidey should have thought about going the conscientious objector route, I’ve helped set up the paperwork for several Enhanced who weren’t comfortable with armed service.”

Peter listened quietly, intently as the group continued discussing the clash of morality and warfare.

Clint stood outside an office in an alien shipyard; one of the places where the living creatures were transformed into the Chitauri whale-ships - troop transports, rays - fighter jets, squids - bombers and the mother ships, the giant starfish-like ships that were part aircraft carrier, part brains of the Chitauri forces; with a tablet in his hands making a point of looking busy while subtly keeping an eye on the door across from him and making sure no one got too close. This was the place where armor and armaments were welded onto the massive Chitauri subspecies to prepare them for war, the place where parts of their bodies were modified, hollowed out, to make space for their smaller brethren to ride within them. In addition to being a target in and of itself, the shipyard had specs on the Chitauri’s strengths and weaknesses. Getting that data back to Earth was more than worth the risk of breaking into the facility instead of just observing it from the outside, especially when they’d gotten a lucky break: A few days ago a horde of outside people had descended on the shipyards making a pair of strange faces much less suspicious.

Clint and Natasha had left Vali and Sif with the ship and could only hope that the two of them and the ship would be in one piece when they got back. Clint grimaced, ‘Not actually, mutual loathing you can’t cut with a knife aside, they’re both the stewing type. Think I’d rather deal with outright violence than this passive-aggressive shit they’ve got going.’

A voice came over the intercom, “The annual performance reviews have been completed. All personnel please report to the courtyard to hear the results of the review.”

‘Bureaucratic craps’ the same the galaxy over,’ Clint thought to himself. ‘Damn I love All-Speak. I can’t figure Asir’s issue with magic-users helping with combat, it’s fucking convenient, better even than Tony’s gadgets.’ Of course he and Natasha had been trying to avoid speaking since Vali had
used his magic to bestow All-Speak on them, they’d heard Thor talk and knew they wouldn’t pass for a native but simply being able to understand what was said without any prior exposure to a language was a godsend.

“Hey Nat,” Clint said quietly into his com, “Everyone’s clearing out for some big yearly review announcement. I think I’ll tag along. Gonna look out of place standing here in a couple of minutes.” He fell in with the stragglers heading out to the large courtyard in front of the plant. While the last people entered the courtyard the auditors stood in front of the doors, the stairs putting them above the others.

“Life is chaos,” the auditors began and the crowd repeated it back to them. Clint mumbled along with the others, thinking about how much he really didn’t like creepy state sponsored religions. “Life is flawed. Life is imperfection. Life exists only to glorify death. We live so that we may die.” The crowd repeated the litany three times before the head auditor raised a hand for silence. “We live so that we may die,” he said. “We live so that we may help others to die. It is time to receive your annual assessment.

“Melchor Arex,” Clint watched as the individual called stepped forward. “Your work continues to serve our glorious purpose, you will continue it.” Arex slumped, relief clearly written across his face as he rejoined the crowd.

“Tabor Atreme, your efforts on Thanos’ behalf are no longer necessary. You have earned the honor of death.” The head auditor’s movements were so casual that even Hawkeye didn’t really grasp what he was seeing until Atreme was falling to the steps, blood spurting from his slit throat.

“Pelli Betilli,” Atreme’s body was tossed into a waiting- Clint couldn’t see it as anything but a dumpster- container, a large container set up on one side of the stairs while Betilli stepped up to hear his fate.

And so it went, some people were sent back to their jobs, others were reassigned and others were killed with barely a blink of an eye. Clint watched in horrified fascination, moving subtly through the crowd to make it less obvious when he wasn’t called up. Despite what was said, it was clear that no one felt ‘honored’ to die. Clint wondered if there had been a point where they’d tried to dress it up, actually tried to make those murdered feel like they were receiving an honor or had it always been so unvarnished: Either you were usefulness in Thanos’ insane war against life or you were dead.

“Good to go,” Natasha’s voice whispered in his ear.

“Show’s no good but it’s not like I can just walk out,” Clint murmured back. He estimated the crowd and the now half-full dumpster. -How could they all be so apathetic? Hundreds of people just waiting to be called up on that stage, potentially to be murdered and no one protested, even as they stepped in puddles of blood left from those who’d gone before them.- “Might be another twenty minutes before I can meet up.”

“Remember you’re not holding the car keys, don’t be late,” Natasha replied.

“Might not be tactical,” Clint replied, “but I’m getting some first hand intel on why we have to win. No matter what, Earth has to win.” Even the vaguest possibility of his kids living under Thanos’ rule was nearly enough to make him vomit but that would break his cover and losing this war was not an option.

When Thor returned from Asgard with the Niflheim armorsmith’s response to their feedback Rhodey and Pepper both read it over several times then they stared at each other for a long moment before
speaking. “It’s Tony,” Pepper said. “As if we had any doubts.”

“And he doesn’t want to be rescued,” Rhodey groaned. “He’s ‘fine’ according to this.”

“This is good news, is it not?” Thor asked frowning at Rhodey’s tone.

“Tony was also ‘fine’ when he was dying of Palladium poisoning and more than once when he was bleeding internally,” Pepper said. She gave Thor a look that had the demi-god shrinking away from her, “How do you not know Tony Stark’s definition of ‘fine’ after years as his teammate?”

“So what do we do about it?” Rhodey asked rescuing Thor from Pepper’s ire.

Pepper sighed, “As much as I hate it, as much as history tells me not to trust Tony when it’s his own welfare at stake, Tony is the only one who actually knows the situation.”

“So we trust him to do what’s best,” Rhodey finished. “And pray to God that, for once, he does what’s best for him.” He shook his head, “Even back when Tony was making a career of being a self-centered asshole you couldn’t trust him to do anything that was actually good for him.”

Bucky trailed behind Okoye, one hand against the ear bud he wore, listening to the reports from the Interplanetary Defense teams. All over the globe Avenger and military units were on high alert, waiting to see how many Chitauri ships would make it to the planet and where they would strike but, given their earlier patterns, odds were that Africa or Europe would be the target this time.

“Not just skip-ships, there’s a mother ship parked in orbit out past Pluto,” Bucky relaid as he helped Okoye prep one of Wakanda’s jets for take off. “We might be in for the long haul this time.”

Okoye nodded. This was the start of the two months between when the Chitauri heavy artillery reached Earth and when the Nova Corps’ similarly armed ships would arrive to repel them. None of the Earth-allied fighters currently available had the fuel reserves to make it past Saturn. The last Nova Corps transport had left orbit a month earlier and even if one had been there to courier the fighters out, it would have been a sitting duck for the Chitauri ray-ships. By staying out that far the Chitauri Mothership could send multiple waves of attackers at the Earth, would force them to stay at high alert possibly for weeks although not much more than that if Gamora’s information was to be believed, the Chitauri ships were living organisms, they could survive in interstellar space but not indefinitely and all the surrounding solar systems had been poisoned or destroyed during the Kree-Skrull War.

“They’ve got those Squid bombers we were warned about,” Bucky continued. “The fighters have been ordered to focus on getting them before they get to Earth. I figure SI’s Arc Shields’ll be getting a workout even so.”

Okoye nodded as she ran through her checklist.

“There’s a half dozen whale ships inbound,” Bucky added. “Even one of them gets through that’ll be three times the ground forces that hit Chicago or Nanjing.”

“I think you would not worry half as much if you were coming with us,” Okoye commented.

Bucky shrugged, “You’re probably right.”

“But I am comforted by the knowledge that I leave you to protect my home and Princess Shuri,” Okoye replied. “It was not so long ago that the Black Panther and his Dora Milaje would never have gone beyond Wakanda’s borders.”
“You’re still protecting your home and your king,” Bucky said. “You’ve just started taking the fight to threats. …Is it really so bad to protect more than just Wakanda?”

For a long time Okoye continued her preparations in silence. “It is not so bad,” she finally whispered, “but what if I am not enough? What if everything is lost by taking on too much?”

“Two bombers, sixteen fighters and three transports have breached the exosphere. Invaders are on course for Central Africa,” the Inner-planetary Defense commander relaid over the comm.

“You have to go,” Okoye said. Bucky nodded. He was free of HYDRA’s brainwashing. He’d been tried and exonerated for his actions as the Winter Soldier. Tried and sentenced for his role in Bucharest, Leipzig and Siberia, for going on the run after freeing himself from HYDRA’s control rather than turning himself in. T’Challa, with his country’s support, had demanded that Bucky serve his sentence in Wakanda but when the rest of the world realized that Bucky was being held on house arrest in the royal palace there had been widespread protests. T’Challa dismissed them, saying that Bucky was being held culpable for being the reason for Captain America’s fall from grace more than for his own actions and had stood by his decisions regarding Bucky’s confinement. In the end it hadn’t been worth it for anyone to challenge Wakanda over Bucky Barnes but he wasn’t welcome outside of Wakanda’s borders.

When the attack was pinpointed as targeting N’Djamena, Chad Bucky joined Princess Shuri on the palace balcony. They watched T’Challa and five of the Dora Milaje take off along with three other Wakandan fighter jets, then Shuri gave the order to activate Wakanda’s Arc shield. A short while later they heard reports that the whale-ships had peeled off a thousand miles out from N’Djamena, dropping dozens of Chitauri infantry off to vanish into the savanna in Chad’s southern reaches.

“Take the fight to our enemy,” Tiger ordered as the Africa Avengers assembled in N’Djamena.

“I will lead the hunt for their ground forces,” T’Challa offered.

Tiger nodded, “Take Chandra as well as your Dora. We will handle things here.”

Okoye took the quinjet up, joining the other Wankanda fighter jets in the air along with jets from four other African countries and the two Enhanced fliers among the Avengers-Africa.

While the rest of the air squad focused on getting to the squid-bombers, Okoye flew toward the closest of the three Whale-ship drop-off points in hopes of getting on the trail of the Chitauri foot-soldiers before they could scatter too widely.

Just as their quinjet touched down, T’Challa spotted a lance of pure energy shooting up from the city they’d left behind to skewer a Ray that had darted into the line of fire sacrificing itself to allow one of the squids to begin a bombing run, unmolested.

It took T’Challa’s team the rest of the day and well into the night to track down and eliminate the eighty-odd Chitauri from the first Whale ship. They pitched camp in the savanna when they ran out of traces to follow. “Tomorrow we will begin again, using the second ship’s drop point as our starting point,” T’Challa said as they ate a quick dinner of ration bars.

In the morning Tiger relaid that the other ships had been dealt with but bombers had done severe damage to the city. Outside of the area protected by the Arc Shield, a ring nearly a kilometer wide had been leveled. Another wave of attackers was inbound from the mothership but the attack was expected to target South America, outside of their jurisdiction.

“The team briefings did not provide me with a good understanding of your abilities,” T’Challa
remarked to Chandra as Okoye flew them and five other Dora to the second drop site.

“I reshape matter,” the Zulu woman stated impassively.

T’Challa sighed, he was used to being surrounded by reserved women but Chandra Ku made the Dora Milaje seem chatty by comparison. Still he’d hoped fighting together in a real battle rather than a team training session would have drawn her out. He’d seen her form spears and armor from dust but suspected that was only the barest hint of what she was capable of.

The second day went much slower, the Chitauri had a sizable lead and it took them most of the morning just to catch up with a small group of five Chitauri. The next four were easier to find but only because they’d encountered a group of herders. There was only one survivor left to be rescued by the time T’Challa’s group arrived. The rest of that day and following one went in much the same way.

On the third day they encountered a European dressed in animal skins. “Kraven!” Chandra hissed. The grass of the savanna wound itself around his legs becoming restraining hands. “I warned you never to cross my path again.”

He bared his teeth at her, “Today we hunt the same prey woman. Your beloved beasts are not sufficient challenge to entertain me any longer.” His eyes gleamed covetously, “I won’t leave without the head of a Chitauri to hang on my wall.”

“You are revolting,” Chandra declared.

“But not our enemy today,” T’Challa intervened. “Would you join our party. We do share a common cause, for the moment.”

“I hunt alone,” Kraven sneered.

“Truly I must insist,” T’Challa said sternly. “So that we may be certain that you truly hunt Chitauri.”

“I will not aid you in your kill,” Chandra added contemptuously.

Kraven stared at her for a long moment then nodded, “Good enough, see that you keep the rest of them from interfering as well.”

A call for aid summoned them to a small settlement across the border in Cameroon that was under attack by six Chitauri marauders. T’Challa and Okoye took on one of the Chitauri while the other four Dora helped the villagers find shelter. Chandra reshaped the ground beneath a second Chitauri, dropping it into a pit of stakes before moving on to take out another in a similar fashion. Kraven, grinning manically, leapt onto the back of his target, a small knife held in one hand.

When the battle ended, Chandra had accounted for four of the six Chitauri, T’Challa and Okoye sported several bruises from their battle against the fifth and Kraven was covered in blood, not all of it from the difficulty he’d had sawing his opponent’s head off with a knife barely longer than his hand.

Despite T’Challa’s best efforts there were still scattered Chitauri incidents occurring from Lake Chad through the Central African Republic to the South Sudanese border two weeks later. Similar tactics had Avengers teams tied up hunting Chitauri forces through the Amazon basin and the Gobi Desert until the Milano, assisted by a passing Ravager ship, managed to destroy the Chitauri mothership, presumably eliminating all the remaining Chitauri on Earth.
Everyone's getting in their battle gear. Steve might be calling himself Nomad but there will be no open to the navel, blue and yellow eye-sore showing up. Not approaching Laurell K. Hamilton levels of clothing porn yet, probably a good thing.

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the delay. I’ve had company for the last three weekends and it’s really eaten up my writing buffer.

Steve stared at the dark blue body armor trimmed with a few crimson accents. He remembered a poem he’d read once about the US flag: The white of liberty and equality had been subtracted from the new uniform. Leaving blue for loyalty and faith. But without the ideals of equality and liberty what is it that I’m credited with loyalty to? Red for courage, for sacrifice. For the blood I’ve spilled. No ‘A’ on the cowl, the Avengers wanted nothing to do with him. The shield was there but the star and stripes had been polished away along with the scratches T’Challa’s vibranium claws had put in it at Leipzig, the plain midnight disk would do it’s job but it symbolized nothing.

The box Thor brought him waited on a table beside the shield and the armor, with its ‘keys’, disks so reminiscent of Iron Man’s arc reactor, inside. Steve dressed slowly then removed the first key and installed in the hidden slot at the small of his back. As it snapped into place a subtle shimmer washed over the armor, increasing its strength and adding defense against the direct effects of magic or even the Infinity Stones. The second reactor disk fitted onto the inside of the shield, a reminder for Steve not a symbol for the world, and imbued it with similar properties.

Fury met him outside the equipment locker. “I tried to get your team time to practice with each other and their equipment before we sent you out but the last series of attacks have everyone rattled. We can’t take out the Chitauri Motherships quickly enough to prevent the whale ships from dropping off their raiding parties, civilian casualties rising sharply. Pressure’s mounting to go on the offensive and do something about the raids now, that’s your team.”

Steve nodded. “I understand. Winging it was always my strong suit anyway.”

He went out to the common area at the other end of the hall, in their section of the prison. One by one the others joined him. Songbird in fitted black body armor with a stylized bird across her chest and thigh-high white boots. Osborn in his oddly organic-looking green armor with its mask of a cackling goblin as a helmet. Diamondback in body armor of mottled light and dark greys with a belt and two bandoliers crisscrossing her chest decorated with pink diamonds and heavy with dozens of throwing knives. Constrictor and Sidewinder both wore a base body armor that was a dull orangish-brown camouflage with the texture of scales. While the seams of Constrictor’s armor were a dark blue, Sidewinder topped his with a flamboyant, purplish cape.
“It helps me teleport,” Sidewinder protested seeing Osborn’s disdainful eyeing of the cape. Then he grinned nastily, “We can’t all wear a mask that improves our looks as much as yours does.”

“That’s—” Steve started.

“So your vaulted ‘ability’ is simply that you picked up a magic artifact somewhere,” Norman sniffed seeing nothing about the cape that indicate a tech origin. “I’ll remember to take it off your corpse.”

“Enough!” Steve exclaimed loudly. “We are a team, we don’t—” He cut himself off at the sight of the smirk on Diamondback’s face and the glowing disk inside of his shield reminding him of how the—how his Avengers had ended.

“Call it, Captain.” He remembered that moment during the first invasion when everything seemed to fall into place and later, other moments of effortless synergy. But mostly they’d been six talented individuals striving toward a common goal not a true team. Natasha and Clint had a practiced teamwork but the rest of them? He and Thor’s shield and hammer combination only existed because they’d met as adversaries. Hulk had a protective streak toward the team that Natasha had encouraged at every opportunity but they’d never fully trusted that he wouldn’t turn on them at the slightest provocation. Tony jolting Bruce with a small probe just to see what would happen. Steve still wasn’t sure whether to classify that as trust or insanity. And Tony- Steve swallowed harshly. In the years since Tony’s death he’d reviewed the Avengers’ battles again and again, paying more attention to what Tony did and to how he had interacted with Tony. When the team had run into an unexpected obstacle more often than not, it had been technological in nature and it had fallen to Tony to deal with the problem while the rest of them held off the enemies. Steve noticed in reviewing those incidents, that he snapped at Tony for every delay in a way that he’d never have snapped at one of the others for being slow to dispatch a challenging opponent. Although, when it was Natasha covering the technological challenges on missions without Tony... I didn’t, don’t understand what they were faced with, so I had no patience with it.

Steve sighed, “Learn from my mistakes. We’re going into the field together soon, too soon. We need to understand each other’s roles in the mission and trust each other to do their jobs. If we don’t? If we don’t we’ll tear each other apart before Thanos’ army ever gets the chance. Goblin, don’t assume what Sidewinder does is easy… And can we all just shelve taking cheap shots at each other?” He and Tony might have been under the influence of Loki’s scepter the day they’d met but Steve wasn’t sure if their relationship had ever recovered from the things said that day. “Given that most of us don’t know or don’t particularly like one another, I think professionalism is the order of the day.”

Osborn laughed quietly then the expression melted into a neutral mask, “If that’s how you wish to play it, I’m game… but you might want to use smaller words in the future.”

“And I thought you played to win, Osborn.” Songbird made a show of looking at the clock, “Damn, no second hand, I can’t say how long your resolve lasted.”

Constrictor sighed, “Okay everyone got it out of their system? Nomad’s got a point, save your ammo for the death-culties trying to take our planet.”


She smiled wickedly, “I hear you’re out to stick it to Thanos, if only you had a ship. Guess what? I have a ship.”

Harley took a moment to use his sleeve to polish the arc reactor set in the chest of the Iron Man
Armor. The new armor from Niflheim was bulkier than the Mark XLVI design he’d trained with, incorporating crumple zones so that the armor could be destroyed around Harley without allowing any harm to come to him, it also incorporated some devastatingly destructive surprises for whoever was attacking him if the crumple zones ever got used. “I know all the cliches about guardian angels and you know but Mechanic? This is a pretty concrete way of looking out for me from beyond.” He climbed into the suit using the handholds incorporated into the oversized armor and it closed up around him. “I can almost pretend you’re here with me,” Harley whispered. “Today it’s for real. I’m- I’m- Tony, I’m scared. There’s so much on the line, what if I screw up?”

“You’ll do fine kid.” As the armor locked in place around him Harley found himself inundated with memories of a summer apprenticeship program at MIT that Tony had sworn he hadn’t influenced the selection process. Even so, without Tony Harley wouldn’t have known about the program to apply and without Tony's offer to fly him home on the weekend his mother wouldn’t have agreed to her thirteen-year-old son spending eight weeks on the East Coast. It hadn’t been the cover for spending a summer living with Tony that Harley might have fantasized it being when Tony first suggested it but Tony had been on the plane more weekends than not- “Just dropping you off on my way to Malibu.” -and on the weeks when he hadn’t been able to spare that much time he’d still showed up to drive Harley to the airport.

“On the jet everyone,” Captain Marvel called. “They’ve narrowed it down to the Western U.S., don’t want you all tired out by flying to fight yourselves.”

Harley tromped up the gangplank, ducking as he went through the jet’s door and found a comfortable place in the cargo hold since none of the seats would have supported him and the armor.

Rhodes settled in beside him and opened War Machine’s faceplate. He grinned up at Harley, “Well it’s not quite Veronica, but…”

Harley stuck out his tongue in response. While Tony had beefed up the defensive capabilities of all the armors he’d sent from Niflheim he hadn’t wrapped Rhodey or Happy in quite so many layers of bubble wrap, however FRIDAY’s interface with her new avatar had nearly as much virtual protection to keep damage to the armor from being perceived as pain or shock to her core processors. At eighteen Harley felt a niggle of embarrassment that Tony apparently still saw him as a kid needing protection competing with glowing warmth because Tony saw him as HIS kid and overriding both Harley felt an intense longing to be able to show Tony the person he’d grown into.

Rhodes’ head tilted to the side for a moment. “Okay, it’s confirmed. Las Vegas is their target.” For a moment he looked distant. “Got a lot of memories in that town, not all good. The day before Afghanistan we were there, me trying to present a stupid award and Tony blowing the damn thing off to go gambling.” He shook his head with a wry grin. “I never could stay mad at him, even when I had every intention of it.”

Twenty minutes later the cargo bay doors rumbled open. Rhodes and Harley stood up. “Stick close to me today,” Rhodes said. Harley nodded as his faceplate locked into place.

“They’re pulling their normal trick of splitting off troop ships,” Captain Marvel remarked as she joined them in the air.

“We’re getting better at containment and eliminating the motherships,” Rhodes said. “Just wish I knew what they think they’re accomplishing.”

Harley shrugged as best as he could from within the depths of his armor. “Maybe just driving up the casualties. Isn’t that what Thanos is all about? Death for the sake of death.”
Vision nodded gravely, “That is what we have been told. But he has conquered a nearly unimaginable number of planets, while his ultimate goal might be the end of all life, I suspect his medium term plans are more… pragmatic. We must assume that, somehow, this aids his intention to conquer the Earth. Colonel Rhodes, are we entirely certain that all the Chitauri on Earth die when the mothership does?”

“They did in 2012,” Rhodes said. “But that’s the only guarantee I’ve got to offer.”

As the fliers zoomed to intercept the Chitauri ships Harley found himself falling behind War Machine, Iron Lass, Captain Marvel and Vision, incapable of keeping up with the less massive armors or Carol’s innate speed. Then his eyes widened when the HUD went green indicating he had a targeting lock on one of the bombers. “This far out?” he murmured as fired off several of the micro-missiles from his arm-launcher. The missile pierced the squid’s outer armor then exploded with a muffled bang and the creature tumbled from the sky. “Hot damn!” he exclaimed.

Rhodes shook his head at Harley’s surprise then remembered that the kid had barely been in grade school when SI stopped making weapons. “Tony was one of the people S.H.I.E.L.D. had analyzing the Chitauri remains after the earlier Invasion,” he said. “Nothing surprising about him coming up with a way to defeat their armor.”

In a few minutes the battle was illuminated by the neon from Vegas’ Strip. Vision frowned at the tourists rubber-necking in the streets while police officers and the National Guard tried herd them toward lock-down sites. Rhodes caught sight of his puzzled, disapproving expression. “It’s Vegas, they’re on vacation, everything is less real.”

“They will find the bombs and the Chitauri soldiers a threat of considerable substance regardless of the city,” Vision replied sternly.

“Don’t expect us humans to get analytical at this late date,” Rhodes said and FRIDAY laughed.

“Wasp, bring the Quinjet in,” Captain Marvel ordered. “We’ve got a lot of civilians on the ground. Cho?”

“How may I serve?”

“Warn the military that we’re going to be delayed chasing down strays,” Marvel said. “Reach out to your hacker friends and see if there are any underground Enhanced in the area who’d consider coming in with the Invasion on their doorstep.”

A few minutes later Cho came back, “I’ve got a separatist compound under suspicion of stockpiling weapons, want me to give them a call?”

Marvel grimaced. “Yeah, the last thing we need is a three-way battle.” She took a moment to grab one of the Chitauri Rays by its tail and swung it into its wingman. “Alert them, if they don’t want protection from federal forces do what you can to keep the military cordon away from them.”

“There’s one more thing,” Cho said hesitantly. “We’re tracking a whale ship, toward the northern side of the state. Up by-”

“The super-max prison,” Rhodes interrupted with groan. “And right after Fury sends the vetted ones off planet. Fuck it, call the warden, see if he’s a runners up team to field.”

Wanda pushed the food around on her tray discontentedly. It was a bad day, the sort of day when she hated Dr. Samson for helping to put her mind back together. She missed the psychiatric institute
in New York and Vision’s frequent visits. She missed the foggy unreality where she could make herself believe the everything was okay, that her parents and Pietro were alive and nothing bad had ever happened to her. Vision still visited, still checked on her from time to time, still cared but he didn’t come as often. Wanda reminded herself that Nevada was a long ways from New York but now that her mind was clearer she couldn’t escape the impression that he cared in spite of his better judgement.

She hated the judge who’d heard her case. She tried to explain how she couldn’t control other people’s fear, only her own and he’d given her a completely unimpressed look. “Ms. Maximoff, I agree. You can’t control other people’s fear. What you do is poke at it, as if it were a wolf in a cage. You poke and prod at their fear until it is a raving beast, then you throw open the cage and sit back to watch the chaos. And as you say, you don’t have control over what you unleash so don’t look to me for sympathy when the monster you created comes back and bites you.

“After setting in motion the events that led to Ultron’s creation you aided him until your powers allowed you to discover that Ultron’s plan to destroy the Avengers would also put the entire human race in danger of extinction, turning against him was not an act of heroism, it was an act of self-preservation. You deliberately and maliciously set the Hulk loose on Johannesburg. And afterwards, you hid your culpability in that incident. You willingly joined HYDRA, a terrorist organization. You killed for them to prove your loyalty, you allowed them to experiment on you.

“You claim your time with the Avengers proves that you’ve changed, that you are no longer the revenge obsessed child who stripped Dr. Banner of his control and sent his alter ego rampaging through Africa’s largest city simply because Dr. Banner associated with Tony Stark and you wished to punish him for supplying the US military with missiles that were used in a NATO operation over ten years ago. I have to ask Ms. Maximoff, what did the people of Johannesburg ever do to you?”

Wanda wished for the clarity of ignorance. She wanted back the days when she could believe Stark’s name on the bomb that killed her family was proof-positive of his villainy. She hated the muddy uncertainty of learning that the people behind the bomb had claimed good, humanitarian intentions… Just like she had had at Lagos. She hated facing the fact that while her family had been her whole world they simply weren’t important enough in the large scale of things to have been the missile’s target. Her precious parents had been collateral damage in a fight bigger than them, no different from the families living in that apartment building in Lagos. They’d been forgotten by the world, just like she and her team had demanded that the dead in Lagos be forgotten because it could have been worse, because the Avengers had good intentions. Wanda knew, to the depths of her soul, that her intentions meant nothing to the loved ones of those who’d died. And she hated that truth with all her heart.

“All prisoners-” the announcement broke off as something massive struck the roof of the prison. Wanda stared upwards as the top of the building was sheared away like so much tinfoil. People screamed and ran. Wanda recognized the creature instantly, but the dead Chitauri Whale ship that had hung in Dr. List’s lab in Sokovia didn’t come close to the reality of being in the path of the living behemoth. She covered her head with her arms and ducked beneath the table as bricks rained down from the ceiling.

Spiderman zipped back and forth across the Vegas Strip using his webbing to create a barrier, buying time for the police trying to herd the tourists toward the designated shelters. In their own cities these people would have likely had plans in place if there was an attack but they were on vacation. They didn’t know the city, they didn’t know where safe was and it was Vegas. Spidey got thrown through a door and looked up to see two people fixedly working one-armed bandits, unaware or uncaring of the battle going on around them. “Hey! Alien Invasion on the way! Move it!” he shouted as he rolled to his feet and ran back into the fight.
Moments later, Spidey was yanking a Chitauri away from the fleeing crowd when he heard a muted pop and one of the Chitauri dropped like a stone. “Info on the Chitauri Infantry’s weak-spots is confirmed,” he heard over the comms, followed by muffled sounds of celebration.

“Get snipers into position,” the National Guard commander ordered.

Soon the snipers had set a steady cadence and Chitauri were regularly falling to their bullets. Peter felt a guilty sort of relief as he threw himself into protecting the crowd with determination and left killing the Chitauri to others.

It was chaos in the remains of the prison. In the face of an alien invasion a number of the prisoners had closed ranks with their species and were fighting alongside their former guards. Someone had deactivated the collars restraining those with psionic powers and, as of yet, no one had an effective way of restraining physical powers. The battle had turned into a full power, close quarters brawl between several hundred Chitauri soldiers and the combined forces of the armed guards and their Enhanced prisoners. Of course there were also dozens of prisoners who saw the chance to escape and immediately took it. As well as those who decided now was as good a time as any to settle scores with each other or the guards.

Wanda picked up a gun dropped by one of the guards and started working her way toward a gap in the wall, pausing every now and then to take a shot at one of the Chitauri. It had been years since she’d used a gun but prior to being chosen for Strucker’s experiments she’d been trained as a HYDRA operative and had carried out missions to prove her dedication to the cause. The muscle memory of using a gun was still there and Wanda quickly regained her comfort with it… At least until she noticed the name engraved on the rifle stock.

For a moment Wanda just froze, staring at the name ‘Stark’. Then a Chitauri energy beam came close enough to singe her hair. Wanda smoothly swung the SI rifle up to her shoulder and returned fire. Her bullet smashed through the eyehole in the Chitauri mask, Wanda smiled viciously at her kill. The gun might not have been the most recent thing on the market but the sight was instinctively easy to use, the kick was minimal and the trigger was mechanism was flawless. ‘I’ll rip the nameplate off later,’ Wanda promised herself.

A few days after the battle of Las Vegas Pepper’s glance was caught momentarily by the headlines that came up on her phone: “Thousands dead in Vegas Attack”, “America’s least defensible cities”. Then the elevator dinged, she slipped the phone back inside her purse and walked into the meeting she’d called.

There were several video conference screens and nearly two dozen of CEO’s from major tech companies from around the globe, SI’s primary competitors from the present and from their past as a military contractor. Pepper smiled a greeting as she took the seat left open for her. “Thank you all for coming,” she said. “The war between Earth and Thanos is entering it’s third month. SI’s Arc Shields held up against Chitauri attacks on N’Djamena, São Paulo and Karachi but they don’t cover enough ground. Too much of the Earth’s population is still vulnerable.

“The UN has asked that Avengers engage the Chitauri higher in the atmosphere, try to destroy more of the ships before they reach our cities, our people.” Pepper shook her head, “It’s not going to happen. The physically Enhanced still need to breath. For the most part, they’d be fighting at a severe disadvantage if they went up too high. Meanwhile those who are mechanically Enhanced run into equipment issues at those altitudes. They’re doing the best they can for us already.

“The question becomes, what more could WE be doing to protect ourselves.” Pepper looked around
the room, making eye-contact with each of her peers. “Between us we control a nearly obscene percentage of the planet’s’ resources. So how can we best put that to use to make sure we still have a planet in year’s time?” she asked. Then she sat back and waited.

Slowly at first but with growing enthusiasm plans began to form: Assistance to SI to increase the installation of new Arc Shields. Plans to convert or expand underground transit systems into shelters. Aid to move people out of exposed areas so defenses could be concentrated, assistance battening down the homes that had to be left behind to improve the odds of there being something left to come back to afterwards.

Given that the previous Chitauri Invasion had amounted to a few days’ build up, culminating in one, brief battle that had been handled almost exclusively by a team of four Enhanced and two highly skilled fighters, the governments of the world had been slow to truly mobilize for an extended war. The group Pepper had called together decided to get ahead of the curve and discussed how covert consumer production lines to support the military effort. Plans to pool resources, pool employees. What was extraneous, what was essential. Who to route any Chitauri tech to so that it could be reverse-engineered most quickly. How to share data. Where they could, where they needed to relax their normal practices of protecting their business interests from each other to switch to a collaborative effort against a common enemy.

“Can we expect to see any more Avalon Tech?” an older gentleman asked.

Pepper looked confused, “Avalon Tech?”

“Ms. Potts,” Dr. Franklin Storm scolded, “I have been driving myself crazy attempting to reverse-engineer Tony Stark’s inventions for nearly thirty years. Perhaps it flies in the face of all that we understand to be true but I am a scientist, I do not ignore data: Earth’s new space fleet is based off of technology developed by Tony Stark.”

Pepper nodded jerkily, “But Avalon?”

Dr. Storm’s expression softened. “I don’t know who first came up with the name but I would hazard a guess that it expresses a hope. After all, Avalon is known to return the realm’s champion when he is most needed.”

Pepper suddenly found herself tearing up, she looked down and blinked them back. “Thank you,” she said in a thick voice. “From what Colonel Rhodes and I have determined I think it’s safe to assume that Tony will be sending more help. Until then…”

Chapter End Notes

So yeah, referencing the Avalon Protocols but not letting the comic-verse constrain its use.

The poem referenced is "I am the Flag" by Ruth Apperson Rous
The attacks on Earth are stepped up.

‘Some things never change,’ Steve thought. ‘Hurry up and wait, for example, isn’t one bit different from back during the war.’

Fury had briefed them on their mission, actually six separate targets before they’d return for further orders, geared them up and loaded them on Nebula’s ship in a flurry of activity. But once they were underway there were months of travel time between Earth and Thanos’ outposts since the Chitauri guarded their gates and Odin wasn’t willing to offer Loki’s skywalking abilities to aid their cause.

While they were enroute there was nothing for them to do. Nebula flew her ship and was quite clear about not needing their help with that. “You’re cargo as far as I’m concerned,” she’d told Steve when he offered to help. “Just make sure you blow up satisfactorily once we get where we’re going.”

Steve decided to use the forced downtime to try to get to know his teammates. “Why’d you volunteer for this?” he asked, sitting down beside Constrictor. “From before I had the notion that you’d been burned too badly to be interested in risking yourself anymore.”

“Yeah, I can see that,” Frank said. “Working for S.H.I.E.L.D. did me no favors. Even before you and Romanoff brought ’em down and left me with my cover blown deep in the Urals, I had a fiancee. Came clean to her about what I did right before the wedding and she called it off, didn’t want to live like a dirty secret. Her giving me my walking papers was why I was deep cover when it all went down: Nothing but an empty apartment waiting for me at the end of the day.

“T ook me nearly a year to work my way back home after S.H.I.E.L.D. fell. I had no resources, no one I could trust. I saw the Helicarriers go down on the TV and was lucky enough to find out about the info dump before anyone else found me but I’d been in the field too long to have any idea of who was who back home. I went dark, made it back to the States all on my own then got the lay of the land before admitting to anyone that I wasn’t a casualty. Found out my old girl was raising a kid, my kid, with some other guy.

“By that time things had settled enough that I could go to ATCU and be taken in without too many hoops. Worst choice of my life but I didn’t have anywhere else to go if I didn’t want to stay legally dead. Thought about being part of my kid’s life but… Eh, I wouldn’t have been doing him any favors. Never there when he needed me, lying to him about what I did,” Frank paused to give Steve a toothy smile, “Puttin’ him at risk the next time some bastard went and blew my cover. Every reason his mom had for not wanting me went double for the kid.

“So I went back to S.H.I.E.L.D., I mean ATCU.” He let one of his coils snake out from beneath his skin, “Then they did this to me. After that I don’t owe nobody nothing.”

“So why?” Steve asked.

Frank shrugged, “My girl, she posts the kid’s pictures on facebook. No clue about digital security, that one, I’m tempted to give her some pointers but I like seeing the pictures. Then there was that mess with the Inhumans at the prison. You really wanted to help, to do some good. Reminded me of
why I was in S.H.I.E.L.D. to start with.”

Flash Thompson tried to keep an expression of slack-jawed awe off his face as his new Sargent showed him around the moon base and explained his responsibilities.

“You’ll be on the ground-crew for the retrieval ships,” the older man explained. “They’re the last out the door, that’ll give you a chance to get some experience before we start rotating you onto the high pressure jobs.” Then he grinned toothily, “Not that you’re going to escape trial by fire. We’re tracking five of those damn starfish approaching the Kuiper Belt. You made it just in time for the biggest attack on Earth to date, kid.”

Eighteen hours later the attack began.

“Thanos is my father,” Nebula stated when Steve asked her. “Naturally, I want to rip his limbs from his body, pluck his eyeballs from his skull and crush them beneath my heel. Not just his eye-balls,” she smiled toothily at the thought of it.

Steve made a resolution not to ask her anything more.

After a months of defending against the same attack pattern over and over again it was a shock when the Chitauri changed things up.

Instead of a single starfish that sat on the edge of the solar system pulling strings until the Guardians and, later, heavier Nova Corps ships could deal with it the five Chitauri motherships barreled right in, the rays and squids swarming around them in a dense defensive cloud.

The Earth Alliance and Nova Corps fighters picked off dozens upon dozens of the Chitauri fighters but couldn’t get close to the motherships before three of them split off making landings on Titan, Callisto and Mars.

“So they’ve got a few more guard-ships,” Rocket said as the Milano zoomed after one of the two Starfish still on target for the Earth, “At least they aren’t making us chase them out to the boondocks of this backwater system.”

“I am Groot!” Groot exclaimed pumping his fist in the air.

“You got it,” Rocket agreed. “We can blow up these fuckers in our sleep.” They had taken out the last Mothership before it’s fleet even reached the Earth.

“Groot, put your seatbelt back on,” Quill ordered.

The three foot tree crossed his arms sulkily, “I am Groot.”

“Put it on,” Quill said sternly. “We are not going to blow up any more ships until you’re buckled in.”

Groot turned away, “I am Groot.”

“Put the damn seat belt on and I’ll route control of the topside gun mount over to your console,” Rocket bargained.

“I am Groot,” Groot agreed with a nod.

Once Groot was secure the Milano dove into the thick of the fighters around the leading starfish,
blasting anything that crossed it’s path. In a few moments they had locked onto the hull of the starfish between two plates of armor and popped the hatch.

Drax, Gamora, Mantis and Kraglin were waiting in the cargo bay. Mantis laid her hands on the flesh of the giant creature, “I have given him happy thoughts,” she declared.

“Sexual happy thoughts?” Drax asked as he and Gamora set up a laser to cut their way into the ship.

“Yes,” Mantis said sweetly.

Peter groaned, “Over-sharing!”

Drax laughed, “Are you turning red again, Quill?”

“I’m not the one who’s going to be invading a giant starfish that’s getting it’s happy on,” Peter shouted back.

“But he has not ‘gotten any’ in a long time and he would really like to,” Mantis said.

“We’re coming around,” Rocket shouted.

“Don’t tell me, the other one is a girl?” Quill guess.

“He likes her,” Mantis confirmed. “Sexually,” she added in case there was any confusion.

Outside the battle dissolved into chaos. “What is going on up there?” one of the Xanderian commanders demanded.

“You want to take it?” Quill asked patching the ship-comm into the ship-to-ship communication.

“He is very lonely, he wants to mate and make babies with her,” Mantis explained. “I gave him encouragement to forget his fear of disobeying Thanos and now he wants to have sex with her.”

Mantis’ declaration was met with dumbfounded silence.

“We’re in!” Gamora shouted. “Kraglin, go!”

The Ravager nodded adjusting the fin on his head.

“Impale me again and I will break your nose,” Drax warned. “Or maybe your leg, if that seems more entertaining at the moment.”

“That was years ago!” Kraglin whined. “Accidentally impale a guy with a Yaka Arrow just once and they never let you live it down.” Then he released the arrow and whistled it ahead of them into the Chitauri mothership. Gamora and Drax leapt through the gap after it. Between the three of them they cut a bloody swath through the Chitauri foot soldiers on the mothership.

A massive tremor shook the ship, throwing both Chitauri and the Guardians off their feet. “Apparently the other starfish isn’t in the mood,” Rocket relaid. “Plant extra explosives and we might get ‘em both because he’s not taking ‘No’ for an answer.”

Several minutes later the three Guardians were racing back toward the Milano as the timer on the bomb they’d left behind in the Chitauri weapons depot counted down. “Time to go,” Gamora called snagging Mantis by the collar and hauling her away from the Starfish’s hull.

The Milano rode the shockwave of the explosion away from the doomed mothership.
Osborn tilted his head back, examining Steve. “You were friends with Howard Stark?”

Reflexively Steve glanced over his shoulder at the shield slung on his back.

“He's my friend!”

“So was I.”

“My father made that shield!”

“I liked Howard,” Steve said as if defending himself.

“My father collaborated with him in the sixties,” Osborn said. “I admired him a great deal. Howard Stark was a strong man, never allowed the ramble to make him question his principles. I tried to raise my Harry to be strong.”

Osborn took a well-creased newspaper clipping out of his pocket. “Maybe I went about it wrong. I tried to find Harry allies to shore-up his failings only for both of us to be betrayed. I have to regain public favor. The shark are already circling my son and he doesn't have the ruthlessness to survive on his own.”

Steve’s breath caught as he looked at the picture of a young man with Osborn’s close-cropped auburn curls and an older man standing beside him, a heavy arm wrapped around his shoulders. Steve imagined that the gesture was meant to appear affectionate but he’d seen the same body language in photos of Tony Stark and Obadiah Stane from pictures of Howard and Maria’s funeral through Tony's return from Afghanistan. He didn’t doubt that Osborn had reason to fear for his son.

On the eastern rim of one of Callisto's many craters one of the Chitauri starfish hunkered, it's limbs dug into the surface of Jupiter's second largest moon. Hundreds of Chitauri soldiers and other ground forces were busily digging in, reinforcing their position.

A column of fire stuck the moon's frozen surface raising a massive cloud of steam. When the air cleared a battalion of Asgardian warriors with Thor at their fore stood there. Thor raised his hammer and the Asgardians charged with a roar.

Then, between them and the Chitauri stronghold a wavering portal opened and a horde of Jotun poured out. The huge warriors took up a defensive formation around a squadron of the smaller mages. Thor saw the Casket of Ancient Winters, returned by Odin during his efforts at negotiating an alliance with Jotunheim, open on a pallet suspended between the mages. Their magics filled the air around them with a haze of blues and greens. After a few moments the surface of Callisto began to respond to their power's siren song.

As the distance between the two armies shrank, Thor saw several among his forces and among the Jotuns fall to less than friendly fire. “Pull back!” he shouted. “Regroup for the Bifrost.”

A number of the older warriors sent their prince disapproving glares. “Surrender the field to Frost Giants?” Thor heard one man sneer. Then Fandral was in the dissenter's face, smiling, despite the uncomfortable proximity between his sword and the man’s throat. “You aren’t speaking mutiny against your prince, I am certain,” he said. Volstagg was just behind Fandral with his massive ax and he was not smiling.

As his army began to fall back Thor called, “This frozen waste suits the Jotun disposition. We will find unshared glory in taking the strongholds on Mars and Titan.”
As the Bifrost carried them away Thor saw the Chitauri and Jotun forces collide as the moon’s icy crust began to buck and sway.

“Me?” Songbird asked warily, “Why?”

“I want to get to know you,” Steve said. “We're going to be teammates after all.”

“It’s nothing special, if we’re all going to die I wanna go out fighting,” Melissa tugged absently at a white lock of hair. “Besides, I've got friends you know, their powers weren’t good enough for this gig. Fliers are rare. So I guess, I’m fighting for them too.”

Steve nodded and Melissa gave him another, longer look.

“I was never about hurting people,” she said. “I wanted to stop being a victim, stop being taken advantage of. When I got offered powers it sounded like just the ticket. But when I got caught after that- It was just a little robbery! -But they weren’t ever going to let me out because I was Enhanced.”

The Jotun took Callisto in just over an hour. The Casket of Ancient Winters reshaped the entire surface of the Icy moon, erasing eons of meteor impacts and leaving the moon as smooth and polished as a marble. The Chitauri forces on Callisto were literally swallowed by the moon, sunk hundreds of miles beneath the surface and frozen in its icy heart.

The terrain on Mars afforded the Asgardians no such easy victory. But after three hard-fought weeks the Chitauri Mothership had been eradicated. The battle for Titan had only begun when Chitauri reinforcements arrived, further entrenching their outpost. From their new bastion the Chitauri sent out wave after wave of fighters and bombers to harass the Earth.

Harry Osborn and his head of R&D, Dr. Otto Octavius, stood on the roof the Oscorp with binoculars. They watched the skies as Enhanced fliers, Oscorp Gliders, SI’s EXO Falcons and conventional jet fighters took on the Chitauri Rays and Squids.

“We need to find a way to deal more damage with the Gliders,” Octavius remarked. “If not for their poor offensive capability they'd be superior to the SI wings.”

Harry nodded. “Scooter-style handle bars? Reigns?” he threw out. Firing anything with a kick while flying a glider tended to end with the pilot thrown off.

Octavius shrugged, “Inelegant.” He chuckled, “Stark had a talent, no matter how much he wished to deny it. The EXO Falcons may have been intended for search and rescue but they’re easily weaponized.”

“Maybe the Nova Empire has weapons with less recoil,” Octavius suggested. "Or we could talk to the government about being granted greater access to the recovered Chitauri tech."

“My reasons are my own,” Sidewinder declared haughtily.

He gave Steve a sidelong glance then muttered, “They may not have thanked me for it but I've always protected my family. I'm not about to stop now.”

Beneath the Arc Shield New York City was dark. The six hour battle in the skies above was straining the Arc Reactor’s capacity and the city’s power-grid had been diverted to supplement it.
Matt, Jessica and Luke patrolled just outside of devastation zone at the foot of the barrier, their path illuminated by the barrier's blue glow.

While the Arc Shield was an all but impenetrable defense against aerial bombardment it's protection ended where it met solid matter. Subway tunnels and even the doors in buildings bisected by the shield provided routes for evacuation to continue after the shield went up but they also left the area under the shield vulnerable to ground assault. The Defenders and other New York heroes fought any Chitauri trying to get inside the shield and helped stragglers make it to shelter.

Matt held up a hand and the other two immediately fell silent, waiting for him to direct them. “Someone coming, deliberate but slow,” he said.

“Chitauri?” Jessica asked.

Matt shook his head as he led them toward the sound.

Luke spotted the old man first and offered him an arm to lean on as they made their way to the barrier.

The old man patted him on the arm, “We'll win,” he said confidently. Then he looked around at the ruination spreading from the point where the shield ended. “Once they’re gone we’ll rebuild, maybe make this a green space to remember that we withstood the storm.” They left him at the door to one of the portal buildings. He glanced back at them one last time before heading in, “We’ll win because people like you chose to stand and fight.”

Diamondback smirked at Steve. “I suppose I could do what everyone else is doing. I could try to make you emphasize with me. It would be the smart thing to do, you're the only one of who's not expendable after all. And you play favorites with your teammates.”

Steve shook his head, “That's not true.”

Diamondback gave him a disbelieving look.

“I don’t play favorites!”

“Are you lying to me or to yourself?” Diamondback asked rolling her eyes. “Look who made it out of Leipzig: The one member of your team who’d been proven to be a liability in a fight against the guy you were going to fight. The same guy who walked away from Siberia. Your best friend.”

“I know guys with none of that worth ten of you.” Words spoken in anger, under the poisonous influence of Loki’s scepter, but how many times in the years that followed had his actions proven that those words were a true measure of the regard in which he’d held Tony Stark? How many times had he chose to trust or defend someone else over Tony?

Steve’s posture wilted. “I think most everyone on Earth would be just as happy if I didn't come back from this,” he said.

“If we die they’ll just pick another team for you until whatever alchemy that happened with the Howling Commandos or Avengers happens again,” Diamondback disagreed. “If you die, this initiative is over. No point, no believes that we could succeed at much anything but you have a reputation for never letting anything stop you.”

“I've been in prison for three years,” Steve pointed out.
Diamondback laughed bitterly, “We were all in jail because we lost, because you or someone like you put us there. Everyone knows that the only reason you were captured was because you turned yourself in. You broke your whole team out of the most impenetrable prison ever built with nothing but your Winter Soldier buddy and he was down an arm at the time. Everyone knows that the only thing that’s been keeping you in jail is Stark’s blood on your hands. If not for Stark you and your team would still be out there, calling yourself Secret Avengers or some crap like that, running around doing whatever you thought best and there’d be nothing the government or the UN or anyone could do to stop you because Captain America doesn’t lose and he doesn’t back down.”

Steve found himself wincing at the edge to Diamondback’s voice.

“Maybe for the rest of the world it was about the Accords, about individual liberty versus the good of society, but for you? In the end it all came down to having to pick one friend over the other. If you had even the slightest hope that, someday, Tony Stark would come around and agree with your point of view you’d be sticking to your guns, stubbornly waiting for him, for the world, to give in and agree that you were right all along. The only reason you’re here, now is because Tony Stark’s dead and even you can't expect him to forgive you for that.”

“You don’t seem to like me very much,” Steve muttered.

“‘Cause I’m not sucking up, even if it’s the smart, survival prone thing to do?” Rachel shrugged, “Let’s just say I’ve got reason not to like cops who think that, just because they enforce the law, they don’t have to follow it.”
Coming off the Back Foot

Chapter Summary

Earth's forces strike back at the Chitauri on Titan and Steve's team goes after Thanos’ forces in their own territory.

Chapter Notes

Bruce’s control/relationship with the Hulk has evolved during his adventures with Thor and that shows in this chapter. Ideally I would have another side-story featuring Bruce and Thor and show that actually happening but I was getting impatient to get to the main act so I’m leaving it at ‘there have been off-screen developments’.

Also I’m willfully contradicting the scene in AoS where Sif proves her technological competence by treating the holographic interface like it simplicity itself when we’d seen everyone not named Fitz or Simmons struggle with it. The scene is stupid and annoying. Would you assume someone can use Dos because they’re skilled in Windows? That they could drive a manual transmission if they could drive an automatic? That they could light a fire with flint if they can light one with a match? Making things more user-friendly as the technology advances is a common area for improvement. Thor’s inability to work appliances doesn’t make him dumb or backwards it just means that Asgardian technology has evolved to be more intuitive.

Wanda managed to capture a Chitauri chariot and, by the skin of her teeth, kept it in the air for over a hundred miles, leaving the prison far behind. Pulling herself away from the eventual crash, she saw the lights of a city glowing on the horizon. Pushing herself she covered the distance before the dawn and broke into a sporting goods store on the outskirts of Winnemucca using skills honed by the Black Widow to get in undetected.

She cropped her hair boy-short and traded her prison clothes for a pair of jeans, hiking boots and a camouflage jacket. Wanda thought about smashing one of the gun cases and trading the SI weapon for something, anything else but the guns were well secured and even if she managed it that sort of theft would be likely to attract a lot more attention from the police than a set of clothes that might not be noticed for several days as long as she relocked the door on her way out. Besides, as much as using one of Stark’s weapons, one of the very weapons that killed her family, made her feel like she was betraying their memory it was markedly better than any rifle she’d trained with to date. She did borrow a tool set from the back of the store and used it to pry the name plate off the gun before stealing several boxes of ammo.

She didn’t stay. After completing her make-over Wanda walked back out of town, heading north. ‘I could hitchhike if this thing were more easily concealed,’ she thought scowling at the SI rifle but leaving the weapon behind would mean going back to being powerless and Wanda had more than enough of that in her life. Around midday she found a quiet farm, all of the trucks had been left with the keys in the ignition so it was easy enough to steal one. Two hundred miles north she drove the
truck off the road and left it in gully. She hiked into town and stole another vehicle, this time heading west. She had no destination, no goal, no plan beyond wanting to stay free.

Fandral watched with an expression of bemused disbelief as Thor and Loki bent over a hologram of the Chitauri outpost on the ringed planet’s largest satellite discussing strategy. He could picture the six of them, the Warriors Three, Sif, Loki and Thor, just a decade ago. It was barely a blink of an eye from the Asgardian’s perspective, but so much had changed. ‘Ten years ago, Thor would have called Loki an old woman for wishing to talk before entering into combat- No, Loki would not have tried to offer advice ten years ago, he gave up trying to advice Thor long before then. But now? Thor seeks, not just Loki’s council, but mine and Volstagg’s as well. He has truly grown as a king these tumultuous last few years. And Loki? He looks as wary as cat with cans tied to it’s tail but he’s honestly speaking his mind to Thor rather than employing that silver tongue of his.’

“A little air-support would not go amiss,” Thor said as he studied the holographic re-enactment of their last assault on Titan.

“I am certain the Nova Corps would not begrudge us the loan some of their new ships,” Loki replied. “The latest arrivals can cope with not only Earth’s atmosphere but Titan’s as well.”

Bruce shook his head, “That will solve the problem of the Ray and Squid ships but we still have the Chitauri Chariots to combat.”

“Perhaps Colonel Rhodes might suggest some Enhanced warriors capable of filling the gap in our ranks,” Thor suggested.

Fandral took a deep breath. What he was about to suggest would normally invite healthy doses of mockery, something he already courted more of than was pleasing with his reliance on speed and finesse rather than brute strength. “You might ask the All-Father if he would arrange a unit of archers from Alfheim,” he said. “The spell-work on their arrows is exquisitely destructive.”

Bruce nodded, “He’s right, they’re as effective as any surface-to-air missile I’ve heard tell of.”

“An excellent idea,” Thor declared slapping Fandral on the shoulder.

Loki looked stunned, “But you’ve always scoffed at Alfheim’s archers.”

“I said they had only slightly more place on a battlefield than your magics,” Thor corrected apologetically. “And yet, would that I had a score of battle-mages to command instead of just you. I fear I have been taxing your strength too heavily in our last few assaults.”

“I am no hothouse flower, Thor!” Loki snapped. “I carry my own weight in battle.”

“Aye,” Thor agreed. He reached out to grasp the back of Loki’s neck but Loki ducked away from his touch. “You’ve done your share four times over, Brother. But I am not so blind as I was in days past. Or do you think I do not see you filling in the gaps in my plans with your magic?”

Loki glanced away. “Don’t make so much of it,” he muttered. “I have more to fear than any should Thanos prove victorious.”


“Because I have not changed Thor!” Loki exclaimed. “I am no hero. Heroes are fools who tear themselves apart for ingrates. Anyone who aspires to being one should have a keeper assigned to protect them from themselves. Now, there is a methane lake near their base, they are mining it for...
fuel but with the right approach we can set it ablaze.”

“We’ll time our attack shortly before the next wave of Chitauri is scheduled to reach Midgard’s system,” Thor picked up. “When their strength is at an ebb. In the meanwhile the Nova Corps will continue making bombing runs, weakening them as best they can.

Fandral smiled a bit to himself, he had faith the battle would be glorious and that they would eventually prove victorious.

Steve glanced around the cargo bay of Nebula’s ship. “Are there any questions?”

“Why am I on recon?” Songbird demanded.

“You’re a flyer,” Steve explained patiently. “You can get around obstacles us ground bound can’t and scout the best path for us.”

“So’s Osborn and he’s more heavily armored if he does run to trouble,” Songbird argued.

Steve sighed, “The Goblin is a our tech expert as well as flyer, I need him setting charges.”

Behind Steve Osborn smirked at Songbird, “I’m more important than you,” he said.

Steve rolled his eyes, “Your technical skills are necessary for this mission,” he corrected. “Sidewinder, why don’t you pair up with Songbird. If the two of you encounter any problems you can pull her back to the group instantly.”

“What if the rest of you hit trouble,” Sidewinder shook his head. “It’s best if I stay with the largest group so I can bring the majority of the team back to the ship if we get in over our heads.”

“I can’t carry someone,” Songbird protested. “Pair me with someone ground-bound and I might as well be myself.”

Steve started to point out that Sidewinder could teleport over obstacles that would stime a normal non-flyer but before he could Constrictor spoke up. “Actually, I could handle setting the charges,” he volunteered. Steve looked surprised and Frank shrugged, “I may not be qualified to design missiles but demolition I can do.”

“Okay,” Steve said. “Constrictor sets the charges, with Diamondback and I providing cover. Songbird and Goblin do recon. Sidewinder stays with the main group but has charge of coms, so he can react quickly if the advance team needs to be pulled out.”

“You should keep me informed of your position,” Nebula advised.

“Sidewinder will take us from the ship to the outpost and back,” Steve said. “Why would you need to be updated?”

Nebula smiled toothily. “I’ll be shooting everything I can get sights on,” she said. “Wouldn’t want to take you out by mistake. Especially not before you have a chance to prove your usefulness. My sister practically gushes about her team, I thought I should have one too. Unless you turn out to be dead weight, of course.”

Loki watched with a grimace as Bruce Banner accepted one of the holographic space suits that the Nova Corps had provided for Earth manufactures to duplicate and joined his team. Loki, Thor and
the rest of the strike force contented themselves with rebreathers, oxygen canisters and clothing suitable for the arctic if one were human.

Bruce caught Loki’s look and shrugged, “You and I understand the incendiary device better than anyone else in Thor’s army. We’re each other’s redundancy. And if things go sour the Hulk will drastically increase our unit’s offensive capability.”

“Assuming your beast is capable of comprehending that, for the moment, I am your ally,” Loki replied snidely.

Bruce smiled a bit oddly, “Oh he understands. More than you realize I’d wager.”

“Are you prepared my liege?” Heimdall asked Thor.

“Give us ten minutes before you send Loki’s team,” Thor reminded. In a flash Thor was gone along with nearly a hundred Asgardian and Vanir warriors and fifty Elven bowmen. Loki got a brief glimpse of short flashes before the portal closed, the combined Nova and Earth Space-fleet had already launched their daily attack.

Then Heimdall opened the gate again. Loki, Bruce and a small guard of a half dozen warriors were transported to Titan. The main battle was several miles away from where they arrived, barely visible through the thick orange fog that was whipped past them by a stiff wind. Bruce staggered under the force of the wind but Loki caught his arm and pulled him close so mage’s body broke the wind.

“Just keeping the Other Guy at bay?” Bruce asked wryly.

“Of course,” Loki replied.

“Thor would like to believe better of you,” Bruce said.

“Seeing me bleed has made my not-brother maudlin, and just when I thought we could finally see one another honestly,” Loki said. “For the rest of you, I would be presuming too much to ask you to believe me good or even repentant. Given my reputation, all I can ask is that you believe I act in my own best interest.”

“Poor misunderstood creature that you are?” Bruce snorted. “I think you misjudge your reputation on Earth, rather badly at that. The last time you were here the Other Guy got one whiff of you and decided you were a bag of cats.” Bruce shook his head, “Can't trust a guy like that as far as you can throw them, not even to act in their own best interest. But now? You're not crazy. And I might be more open than you think to hearing why that is.”

The eight of them made their way carefully along the bank of a methane lake. One of the three Chitauri Starfish now based on Titan loomed over them on the top of a cliff overlooking the lake. Ships flashed by overhead, Bruce saw a pilot punch out of one of the Nova space fighters, in the low gravity he kept going up and up until, several minutes later, another ship zipped in and snatched the pilot from the air.

At the foot of the cliff the little group paused. Their escort removed several pieces of equipment, Bruce and Loki quickly assembled them. “Ten second delay on the fuse, judging by the gravity and atmospheric pressure?” Bruce said. Loki thought for a moment then nodded. Bruce programmed the delay, then they heaved the device, basically a weaponized rocket booster, into the methane lake.

When the two of them finished they saw that the other six had broken out climbing gear. “Naturally,” Loki muttered as he walked up to the cliff, a green glow swirling around him. Horizontal icicles sprouted from the surface forming ladder rungs, he started to climb but Bruce reached out and caught
“Can you make them sturdier?” he asked.

“Why?” Loki asked.

Bruce’s eyes shifted to poison green. “Oh, just thought you might appreciate the chance to demonstrate the disadvantages of not trusting you.” He smiled, “If you can trust me, us that is. Your current ladder is a bit... puny.”

Loki’s eyes widened, a small gasp escaped him but the ladder rungs shifted and reformed into ledges twice as thick with five times the surface area attaching them to the cliff-face. Bruce shifted, the Nova space-suit adjusting to fit his increased bulk, then reached out and plucked backpacks from their escort. The Asgardian and Vanir warriors eyed the Hulk warily and didn’t protest as he passed one pack up to Loki then swung two more over his shoulders.

Without the need for climbing gear the two of them quickly left their escort behind as they climbed up to a point just ten feet below the top of the ledge. The higher they climbed the more clearly they could hear the sounds of the ground battle Thor’s division was fighting.

Loki created a much larger platform and they unpacked their gear while the Hulk shrank back down to Bruce. “Can’t blow it up,” Bruce muttered, “It’ll just keep going. Gives it too much time to get airborne.” Loki nodded as the two of them worked to adjusted the shaped charge more precisely.

The work was much more involved than what they’d done to set the earlier charge. Loki gave Bruce a sideways glance. “Do not mention this,” he said. Then his skin turned blue and he stripped off his gloves despite the -175 degree temperatures, unencumbered his hands flew over the device’s keyboard.

Bruce raised an eyebrow, “Judging from Thor I assumed that Asgard developed past using manual interfaces.”

“That’s what you’re startled by?” Loki said. “I- ahh, suppose that when it comes to technology, to use Midgardian terminology, you could say that I am a technician where Thor is a layman.”

“A technician? Not a scientist or an inventor?” Bruce asked.

Loki smiled toothily, “Not yet, but I’m learning… Done.”

Bruce nodded, “Done.” He leaned over the side, “Sorry guys, you climbed all this way up for nothing. You going to take the ladder down? We won’t have anything to keep us occupied while we wait for you this time.”

Their escorts glanced at each other then scrambled down as quick as they could. Loki laughed softly as he followed Bruce back down the ice. Once they were a few meters from the lake Bruce triggered the devices. The shaped charge took out the bluff below the starfish, sending it tumbling, it’s fall strangely slow in the reduced gravity, into the lake and as it sank into the liquid methane the second device went off transforming the lake into a hellish pit of flames. They covered their ears as the starfish screamed in agony and died.

Then Heimdall reclaimed them. The remaining starfish on Titan would be the work of another day.

“Have fun, I know I will,” Nebula said as the rest of the team gathered around Sidewinder. Through the viewport at her back a massive docking station was visible turning slowly in space, Starfish and
other Chitauri ships hung off it like decorations on a particularly malevolent Christmas Tree, glittering in the sullen light of a red dwarf star.

“Remember go to the left,” Steve said.

“Your left or mine?” Nebula asked without a trace of innocence.

Steve frowned at her.

“Yeah, yeah, I’ll remember,” Nebula rolled her eyes, “Find a sense of humor, why don’t you?”

“And give us twenty minutes lead time,” Steve added as he stepped to the front of the team, his shield raised defensively while Sidewinder put his hands on Steve’s shoulders. Constrictor and Goblin flanked Steve, each of them reaching out to lay a hand over Sidewinder’s while Songbird and Diamondback took rear guard, putting one of their hands on Sidewinder’s shoulders. In a flash the six of them were teleported from Nebula’s ship to what Steve’s information said was a weapons’ storeroom on the station. For a moment they held position until they were certain an attack wasn’t imminent. “Goblin. Songbird. Go.” Steve said.

Songbird handed a charge from her pack over to Constrictor and the two flyers took a moment to peer out into the hall then left while Constrictor set the first bomb. Steve listened with one ear to Songbird’s steady stream of descriptions of the terrain from Sidewinder’s comm while he and Diamondback moved to take up positions on opposite sides of the door.

“Done,” Constrictor said. “Either I detonate it or it goes off on it’s own in two hours.”

“Let’s move,” Steve ordered. He was the first out the door, Diamondback followed with several knives ready in her hand, then Sidewinder with Constrictor as rear guard.

“Left here,” Sidewinder instructed when they came to a junction. “Goblin found readings from a large energy source.”

Steve nodded and led them down the hall. They planted a bomb on what looked like a generator and moved on. Four more bombs then they had to cross through a busy sector of the base. “The flyers went high,” Sidewinder relaid. “No one ever looks up.”

From the side passage Steve peered out at the station’s population. Chitauri soldiers were, by far, the most numerous but there were a wild assortment of other beings as well. All of them going about their business, head down and intent on their tasks. There were a few clusters where people had stopped to talk but there were fewer conversations and fewer people involved in the conversation than would be common in any crowd Steve had seen on Earth. “Spread out a little, act like you belong,” Steve instructed. “Don’t stop, don’t gawk.”

“We don’t even get to steal uniforms?” Diamondback asked poutily.

Steve frowned then caught himself. He reminded himself of the Commandos and good days with the Avengers, days when every word out of Tony’s mouth hadn’t felt like a challenge to his authority. “I’m only seeing uniforms on the Chitauri but if you think you can carry off the look…”

“Naw,” Constrictor said. “Just giving you a heads up that we might know a thing or two about not getting made.” With that the three Serpents did their own survey of the crowd. Constrictor got rid of his mask, Diamondback unfolded a hood from the neck of her uniform and pulled it over her bright pink hair, Sidewinder just smirked from behind his full face mask as he silenced his communicator, “Not looking particularly human isn’t exactly a drawback.” The three of them separated and blended into the crowd leaving Steve to try to keep up.
Once they were back to skulking through maintenance chases Sidewinder turned his comm back on then frowned. “Songbird, Goblin you there?” he asked the silence on the other end of the line.

Steve’s eyes instantly sharpened. “‘Port to their last location,” he ordered.

“What if I give away their position?” Sidewinder whined.

“Then bring them back here and we’ll go from there,” Steve snapped. Seeing Diamondback and Frank scowl he added, “Nebula’s going to start shooting the place up any minute now, there’s not much element of surprise to lose.”

Sidewinder went, with an disgruntled set to his shoulders but he went.

**Earlier**

Songbird and Goblin crept down the hallway, Goblin’s glider trailing behind them near the ceiling like a leashed dog. “An AI?” Steve had asked. Osborn snorted, “Do you think I’m Tony Stark? It’s a simple thing. I can set it to follow me a fixed distance and altitude and to come when I call. That’s all.”

Within the confines of the space station flying was an ace in the hole but not a first choice for scouting the terrain. As the pair of them crept down the hallways Goblin went ahead, using the sensors in his suit and in the glider to gather data. Songbird kept up a steady stream of reports back to Sidewinder and the main group. They steered them away from encounters with the Station’s crew and verified the vulnerable point targeted by the infiltration team.

“No way around,” Goblin said as he and Songbird looked out at the station’s crowded central causeway.

Songbird relaid that back as she eyed the obstacle. “High ceilings,” she remarked. “Of course my ability to fly is powered by [acoustikinesis](#), it’s not exactly discreet.”

“Feel free to depend on me.” The Goblin summoned the glider with a click of his tongue and Songbird hopped on behind him, grasping his waist to balance. The crossed the causeway in moments. “The Serpents already have a block within our team,” he remarked conversationally as they resumed their explorations.

“And Rogers?” Songbird asked.

“I think you know as well as I do that asking for his allegiance is not the way to go about getting it,” Osborn said. “He would balk violently at this game of office politics that needs-must be played. Aside from that one, terrible unforgivable mistake he still sets himself apart from us, for if he’s not a good man then what is he? The key to winning him is to shore up the cracks in that image.”

“You aren’t worried I’ll try to undermine you?” Songbird asked.

“You’ll find difficulty in undermining the truth,” Osborn replied. “I have modeled myself on Howard Stark. I inherited mostly debt from father and built an empire on those ruins. My son is unfortunately dull-witted, I never had the raw material to mold that Howard was graced with but I think our good Captain will still leap at the chance to protect even a shoddy expy of the man he left to die.” Then his voice turned suddenly fierce and yet softer. “Harry is an innocent in all honesty. He deserves a future. What do you have to bind Rogers to you with? I’m offering you much if you back me in this.”
“I’ll think about it,” Melissa said. “Since there’s a chance you’re committed. I’m not interested in screwing the rest of the team over but it’s always good to have some insurance against being the one screwed.”

Osborn chuckled, “Are you playing me? Am I playing you? Even between sinners, we’re still busily polishing up our tarnished halos-

“Wait,” Goblin said. “I’ve got a large energy reading that wasn’t mentioned by our spies.”

“Shall we check it out?” Songbird suggested.

Goblin led them down a corridor that ended in a heavy locked door. Songbird leaned close to the lock and began to hum, a moment later there was a crack from deep within the lock. The door swung open and the two flyers could only stare in shock. Hundreds of grey-skinned soldiers wearing the distinctive red armbands of the Nazi party stared back. “What the fuck?!” Songbird exclaimed as she slammed the door shut.

The door bounced off the hand reaching around the door jam. Then the hallway was boiling with zombie Nazis. Songbird let out a piercing scream, blowing dozens of the soldiers back into the ones coming behind them but they kept coming. Goblin leapt on his glider, only to feel a hand around his ankle pulling him back. He sent the glider higher as he kicked at the dangling zombie. It stared at him blankly and kept pulling itself up. Goblin finally lobbed a small pumpkin bomb at it.

He didn't have time to free himself of the severed hand still wrapped around his leg before the next zombie was on him.

Songbird took to the air, using her sonic blasts to drive the zombies back but they packed the hall so tightly that there was nowhere for them to fall, the ones behind the leaders kept pushing them forward until they were climbing over the bodies of those she felled to reach up and pull her from the air.

In minutes both Songbird and Goblin were dragged under by the horde. Countless icy hands tore at them, forcing them to the floor, ripping away equipment and leaving them in rags.

Then the assault stopped. The zombies pulled back enough for them to make it back to their knees. They saw a man’s polished black shoes striding toward them, the long overcoat of an officer swirled around his legs. He wore a heavy metal bracer inset with a swirling orange stone on one arm.

Songbird and Goblin craned their necks back and saw a blood-red skull grinning down at them. “Well, what do we have here?”
Steve reacts to his teammates' peril and the return of an old enemy. Peter aids in New York's defense. Sif and Vali burn time while waiting for Clint and Natasha to collect intelligence.

Osborn watched, heart in his throat, as the Red Skull put his hand on Songbird’s head. The orange gem pulsed and the color drained from her skin, her cheeks became sunken, her hair withered and her eyes turned dull and lifeless. The zombies released her and she lurched to her feet, joining their ranks.

Then the Red Skull reached for Osborn. “Wait!” Norman protested cringing away from the outstretched hand. “I can help you. We’re led by Steve Rogers, Captain America. Send me back. I’ll be your inside source.”

The Red Skull chuckled, “And have you sell me out to him as easily as you offer to sell him out to me? No, I think not. I will send you back to him as a soulless zombie under my command so that he will be forced to tear you limb from limb to stop you from fulfilling my directive to kill him.” Then he sighed, “Although the effect may be less demoralizing than I could hope. Judging from you the quality of his followers has fallen grievously since I last saw my old opposite.”

“No!” Osborn shouted as he struggled desperately.

The Red Skull stopped hand outstretched. He stood in front of Osborn with a look of twisted amusement on his face as he waited until several more zombies had added their strength to those already forcing Osborn to his knees. They grasped Osborn’s head, forcing it back until he couldn’t struggle any more. Slowly, deliberately the Red Skull reached out again. He paused with his palm millimeters from Osborn’s forehead and waited until anticipation wrung a scream out of the man before allowing the soul stone to steal his sense of self away, leaving behind a hollow shell behind.

A moment after Sidewinder teleported out he was back, “Didn’t see hide or hair of either Songbird or the Goblin but they’ve been easy to miss given the fucking horde of Nazi zombies.”

“What?” was all Steve managed over the rushing in his ears. ‘HYDRA, now the Nazi. Did I actually manage to accomplish anything?’

“The whole damn hall filled wall to wall with very dead looking guys in uniforms you’d be familiar with seeing on the other side of a battlefield,” Sidewinder repeated. “Safe to say Osborn and Gold are zombie chow. Moving on, let’s blow this place and hope zombies don’t negotiate vacuum so well.”

“We don’t assume anyone’s dead,” Steve snapped.

“Naw, you only leave a man behind when you decide he’s fine to walk out of Siberia with a flail chest,” Sidewinder shot back. “I’m not risking my life on a lost cause.”
'Everything, always, back to Tony,' Steve thought glancing at the Reactor on the inside of his shield. “We’re not leaving them behind,” he insisted.

Diamondback tilted her head back challengingly. “I didn’t volunteer to die helping you expunge your guilt.”

“You don’t have to come,” Steve said. He took a deep breath, “We’ll continue the mission, keep setting bombs, keep working our way toward their position. When we’re close I’ll break off to look for them on my own. Sidewinder, then you’ll use your powers to skip ahead to the next section of the space station. The three of you go on setting bombs. I’ll call for pick-up once I’ve got the two of them back. If I haven’t called by the time Nebula starts shooting, teleport back to her ship without us. All I’m asking is that you stay on the comms until the station’s gone. Give me the chance to rescue Melissa and Norman, I won’t call unless we’re secure enough for a snatch and grab.”

Sidewinder hesitated until Constrictor elbowed him, “Seth!”

“Alright,” Sidewinder huffed. “Fine, I won’t write you off until this place is so much space debris.”

“Thanks,” Steve said. “I’m going to scout ahead, not far, just clear the next hall or so. They might be moving toward us.”

“Two down, let’s split up even further. Great, classic horror movie tactics,” Diamondback said rolling her eyes.

Steve’s expression hardened, “You don’t need me to get out safely, not with Sidewinder. You don’t want to take the risks necessary to get our people back? Fine! I’m taking the risks for you. Yes, I feel guilty about Tony’s death. Does that imply, in anyway, that I should be less careful of my teammates moving forward?

“Are you upset that I’m going after them because you’re worried about the mission? The Earth? Or are you just worried about your own skin? I’m going ahead so that if the Nazi are moving toward us I’ll hit them first. That will give the three of you time to teleport ahead to continue the mission. Do you understand?”

“Yeah,” Diamondback mumbled looking away.

Constrictor set the next two charges quickly, delaying the group’s progress for bare minutes. Steve ranged ahead of them, searching for any signs of the Nazi zombies. Then Steve notice that his shield was glowing blue. “They will shield you from the direct effects of magic spells or even an Infinity Stone,” Thor had said.

“I think we’re close to the zombies,” Steve warned the other three. “Also they might be caused by magic.”

“Not exactly a shocking pronouncement,” Sidewinder replied after a soft bang that let Steve know that the other three had teleported away.

“Or an Infinity Stone.”

Steve set himself then kicked the door down. Oddly, as he let the shield fly at the familiar, hated uniforms Steve felt settle something in him. The zombies exploded into dust when the glowing shield struck them.

With the shield, with Tony's gift Steve tore through the ranks of the zombie Nazis. With every throw of the shield he he brought down four to six zombie and his body armor was an impenetrable defense
as it also took on a blue glow. He quickly fell into a rhythm: throw, punch, kick, punch, catch and repeat.

Steve was fully in his element. He battled his way through one corridor then two barrack-like rooms and into a large assembly room. Spin and kick. Throw and punch. Duck and catch. In his wake he left floors littered with empty uniforms and thick with the dust of dispersed zombies.

As Steve decimated the crowd of zombies in the assembly room a slow clapping drew his attention to a catwalk arcing overhead. The Red Skull stood there between the zombified Songbird and Goblin. “You!” Steve exclaimed, he hurled his shield at the Skull. Goblin swooped between them. For a moment Steve flashed back to the last time he’d raised his shield against a teammate, to Tony’s expression of terror the moment before it came down.

Then the Goblin twisted, taking the hit on his glider. The impact jolted him off the glider and Osborn fell. Despite the hard landing he immediately pushed himself back to his feet and Steve felt a moment of relief.

Songbird screamed and Steve had to roll to dodge the sonic blast. He reclaimed his shield a moment later but hesitated to throw it at either of his teammates, instead he dispersed a half-dozen more zombie Nazis.

“You have the power to break the Soul Stone’s spell?” Red Skull said, his eyes widening. “Thanos would benefit from this information… But would he kill the messenger? I must think on this. Adieu Captain, I leave with the choice to kill your comrades or allow them to kill you.”

“No!” Steve exclaimed aiming shield for the Skull’s departing back only to have it clang off the closing door.

Goblin reclaimed his glider and unleashed a barrage of pumpkin bombs while Songbird filled the air with her cries. For several minutes it was all Steve could do to dodge. He wove among the remaining zombies letting them absorb the bulk of Goblin and Songbird’s attacks. Where the Zombies had been dispersed with little more than a touch from Steve’s shield they were highly resilient in the face of explosions and sonic blasts.

Steve launched himself into the air and caught the edge of the glider. He flipped himself around, kicked the Goblin into the milling zombies below then used the glider as a springboard to catapult himself at Songbird.

He crashed into her, his weight throwing them both onto the catwalk. Steve kept an arm around Songbird, pinning her arms to her side as she struggled and screamed. The Goblin didn’t hesitate to put his ally in the line of fire and Steve found himself crouched behind his shield trying to keep Songbird’s head angled so that she couldn’t blast the shield off his arm while also covering her from Goblin’s pumpkin bombs. Then she went still. For a moment Steve feared that the device fortifying his armor against the Infinity Gems had killed her but she hadn’t crumbled to dust like the other zombies and in fact her hair, pinned against his cheek had shifted from straw to silken. “Melissa?” he asked hopefully.

“W-what happened?”

The entire station shook under the force of an explosion and Steve assumed Nebula had started her bombing run. She was supposed to focus on the ships most likely to be able to escape the station’s destruction. In the initial plan her attack would have signaled that the rest of the team had fifteen minutes to finish setting charges and get out of there, but with the zombie infestation they’d been behind schedule and Steve wasn’t sure how many planned charges had been skipped because
Sidewinder was trying to steer clear of encounters with the zombies. Constrictor was the only member of the team who actually seemed onboard with the plan so there was no telling how long it would be before they started detonating the charges.

“We’ll sort it out later,” Steve said. He pointed to the door the Red Skull had left by, “For now, can you get that door open? I have to get ahold of Osborn.”

“Zombies!” Songbird exclaimed.

“Still below us,” Steve replied. “Might be a good idea if we had an exit?”

“Right, the door,” Songbird didn’t sound altogether there but she had a solid hold on the railing and the Goblin was back on his glider again.

Steve jumped from the catwalk to the glider. He wrapped his arms around the Goblin and lifted him off his feet while trying to gain control of the glider. It was an uneasy victory at best as Steve used his enhanced strength and reflexes to stay on top of the swaying, bucking platform while holding Osborn captive, hoping that whatever had cured Songbird would kick in before the Goblin could send them both crashing into the crowd of zombies waiting below.

Steve saw the catwalk shudder as another explosion rocked the station but it didn’t have any impact on the glider’s erratic course as he and the Goblin lurched back and forth on the board.

As with Songbird, Goblin stopped fighting after a few minutes. Without the Goblin’s opposition Steve was able to bring the glider close enough to the catwalk to leap back and dragged the other man over to where Songbird had given up on destroying the door’s locking mechanism in favor of just blowing it off it’s hinges.

“Don’t! You need me!” Goblin exclaimed as he came back to himself.

“You’re okay. We’re getting out of here,” Steve assured him as the door gave way to the force of Songbird’s powers. Steve leaned Goblin up against the wall and charged through the opening, looking for a sign as to where the Skull had gone. He saw an airlock and an empty ship bert.

“Sidewinder, I have our missing teammates and I’m guessing about five minutes before the zombies reach our position. Now might be a good time to pull us out,” Steve said activating his comm.

“Better be clear,” Sidewinder muttered, half coming over the comm half in person as he appeared in the hallway between them. Goblin and Songbird quickly latched on to the man and Steve grabbed his arm then they were all back on Nebula’s ship. The purple skinned woman was grinning psychotically as she targeted ship after ship.

“Got everyone? Good,” Constrictor said and hit the detonator. Moments later gouts of flame sprouted from a dozen points on the space station. Secondary explosions followed as the station’s atmosphere bled out into space, bodies mixed in with random debris, three of their charges had been set with the intention of crippling the station’s automated defenses against catastrophic decompression.

Nebula stuck around long enough to finish off all the ships that had been damaged by the station’s destruction but might have been able to limp away if given the chance. Steve would have been lying if he’d said he wasn’t glad that she hadn’t waited for him to give the order.

Remodeled for the war, the once spacious, ultra-modern penthouse apartment of Stark Tower had become a cozy, multi-family dwelling. The two top levels of the tower housed the Pepper and Nettie, Rhodey and his parents, Vision, the Keener and Parker families and Happy Hogan. Although
Marlena Keener was now officially Marlena Hogan and Mercedes was also thinking about taking her step-father’s name. Harley said there was already enough people who insisted on believing he was Tony’s son and changing his name would only confuse the issue further. At times there was an almost dorm-like feel to the place, with the two shared community rooms and the large shared kitchen. The Chos and Stacys had apartments elsewhere in the building while the Pym’s and Paxton-Lang family had rooms at the Avengers’ Academy upstate, although Cassie and Mercedes had become all but inseparable since Cassie’s return from New Earth, either sharing Cassie’s room at the Academy or Mercedes’ room at the Tower.

After the last extended bombardment of New York, Pepper and May were at City Hall discussing setting up more robust ways to tie the Arc Shield into the city power grid so it could draw additional power if the Reactor was maxed out. Peter had been left behind to babysit. He sat on the floor of the upper community room with Nettie across from him. “Okay, now how do you calculate a tangent?” he asked the three and half year old.

“Sine over cosine!” Nettie exclaimed bouncing on her knees and grinning broadly.

“Good j-” Peter was interrupted by the sound of the alarm going off. Nettie pouted a bit but didn’t say anything as he pulled out his communicator and waited for further instructions.

“Western hemisphere,” the coordinator reported.

Peter scooped Nettie up and went looking for a new baby-sitter. Roberta Rhodes met him halfway to the stairs. “We were doing flashcards,” he said as he handed both Nettie and the home-made flashcards over.

“I do math with you,” Nettie declared sulkily.

“And you do edible chemistry with me,” Roberta replied, giving the dark-haired girl a small bounce. “Now don’t make Peter feel guilty about going off to do his job.”

Nettie launched herself back at Peter, hugging him tightly. “Be safe,” she whispered before letting Roberta reclaim her.

“Do we know where they’re going to hit yet?” Roberta asked.

Peter grimaced, “I heard North America, odds are it’s going to be New York again. I think they’ve figured out this is where we beat them in 2012. I gotta go.”

Roberta nodded and Peter hurried down to the quinjet hangar where he and all the Avengers in residence kept their gear. While he suited up his guess that New York was the target was confirmed on both his communicator and across the city wide speaker system that had been installed during the first month of the war.

As he swung out across the city Spider-Man saw the orderly lines of people heading toward their assigned shelters while police officers and trained volunteers suited up and headed toward the portal buildings to defend the area under the Arc Shield from ground attacks. Peter allowed a moment where he tried to decide if he was proud of his city or sad at seeing how people had adapted to living in war conditions. Then Peter shut it down, tried to shut down everything he felt. There was a job to be done.

New York had one of the world’s highest concentrations of Enhanced. There was always talk about how they needed to be redistributed to better protect the world, even against the opposition of the Enhanced who reminded anyone willing to listen that their homes, their lives were built in New York
and many of them didn’t want to relocate, although there were those who stated that monetary reimbursement might swing the deal. The increasingly frequent attacks on New York were providing ammo for those who didn’t want to acquiesce to the demands.

Still, given the number of Enhanced already in the city, Spider-Man didn’t expect the Academy to send reinforcements to help with the ground battle. But, since he was already in the city, he reported in for an assignment. Misty Knight, a former police officer and recent Enhanced with a bionic arm was acting as the liaison between the police and the rest of the NYC Enhanced community. She was talking with Happy Hogan. Happy was in his armor and SI’s security department had training making them equal to most paramilitary organization. Maria Hill and her division of S.H.I.E.L.D. might have largely gone to ATCU, S.H.I.E.L.D.’s successor after the Accords and SHRA became the order of the day, but the years they’d spent at SI left it’s mark on the organization.

Spider-Man saw the original Defenders in a cluster, he’d heard that the whole NYC Enhanced community had embraced the name after the war started. Reed Richard and his three friends who’d gained powers in an accident two years earlier were on their first post-graduation assignment, although rumor was that they’d be posted to one of the Asteroid belt stations shortly. Reed Richards and Sue Storm both had the technical skills to absorb knowledge about the Nova Empire tech that supported the stations. Sue’s powers could double as a space suit for her and her companions while Ben Grimm’s simply rendered him immune temperature extremes and vacuum. Johnny Storm went where his friends did. Dr. Strange was there as well, along with a few of the Acolytes who were charged with the guarding the New York Sanctum. Peter took a moment to wave to Nico Minoru, whom he remembered from the Academy. The girl returned his greeting with a grudging look and he decided that she was still hanging on to the magic vs science users cliques from school.

Spider-Man waited for Knight and Happy to finalize the deployment of SI personnel then asked, “Where can you use me?”

“Spider-Man,” Knight greeted him with a warm smile. “Didn’t know if you’d end up here or at the Academy. Hmmm, I hope you don’t have a problem with Jersey. I could put you closer to Queens but the Arc Shield covers most of the skyscraper dense terrain in that direction and I want you in charge of one of the roving teams outside of the shields.” Peter nodded grimly. For a moment he remembered Ronin and resolved once again to do better by whichever team he was assigned to.

“I’ve got just the group, frankly they could use someone with a little more experience on the team. Come on, I’ll introduce you,” Knight said leading Spider-Man over to a small group. “Black Cat, White Tiger, Armory, you’ll be working with Spider-Man.”

Peter tried not to start when Felicia, who still had no idea who he was under the mask, draped an arm over his shoulders and purred, “We’d be happy to have you as our token guy, Spidey.”

He resolved once again to tell her his identity. “I just saw you at the Academy didn’t I?” Peter rambled. ‘Had there really been enough time since Felicia told us about her powers for her to be in the field?’

Black Cat flipped her hair over her shoulder and grinned, “I mastered my abilities quickly,” she said with a certain amount of pride. Then she admitted, “If I want to keep doing this after the war I’ll need to catch up on the classwork side of things.”

“Both Black Cat and White Tiger both have enhanced reflexes, strength and durability,” Knight explained. “You’re one of the few Enhance who can beat them on pure reflexes.”

“By which she means I cheat,” Spider-Man said. “My danger sense is borderline precognition.”
“But Cat’s strength is only on par with an olympic weight lifter, while Tiger is in the lifting small cars range.

“And we both carry the industrial strength tasers Peter Parker develop from your Avalon Tech,” Black Cat interjected.

Spider-Man nodded. In addition to improved body armor the tech he’d received from Niflheim, ‘From Dr. Stark,’ had included a modified, souped up version of the Widow’s Bite. After working with them for a few weeks Peter had added metal flakes to the formula for his webbing making it possible for him to electrify it. Doing so increased the range of the original Widow’s Bite and the number of uses without reloading although the modified webbing didn’t conduct quite as much of a charge to the target. Studying the data gathered about the Chitauri by all the governments and individuals who were operating under the Accords, Peter realized that he could counter for the loss of sheer power by modulating the current. The Chitauri drones were highly vulnerable to certain currents, to the best of Peter’s knowledge it disrupted their connection with the hive mind as effectively as killing the Mothership did, hit them with the right jolt of electricity and they dropped like flies. Once Peter shared his research over-powered tasers and stun rods became the weapon of choice for ground battles.

“And last we have Armory,” Knight finished. She nodded to the gauntlet attached to the purple-haired young woman’s arm. “The Tactigon can transform into a weapon to match the weaknesses of whatever Armory fights.

“Ladies, I think you all know Spider-Man’s abilities. Listen to him, he’s got years of experience on all of you.”

Sif sat in the back of the skip-ship sharpening her sword, Vali spent his time checking and rechecking the ship’s systems while they waited for Clint and Natasha to make it back from their latest information gathering mission. It had been three days since the spies had left, not a word had passed between the two Asgardians in all that time and Vali was nearing his breaking point.

Finding himself on the receiving end of Sif’s venomous glare Vali remembered one moment of clarity among days spent in a haze of pain and confusion. *His twin stood beside Sif. She put a steadying hand on Narfi’s shoulder, “Don’t worry, you have right on your side. All he has is his magic tricks.” Then she sent his twin into the arena of trial where Vali waited.*

“Why do you hate me so much?” Vali asked. “If anyone could understand fighting against our preassigned gender-roles you should.”

“I’m nothing like you!” Sif spat. *A one-eyed wolf dripping with blood savaged the remains of a fallen warrior, her student. “You’re a liar, twisted, like every man with magic.”*

Vali rolled his remaining eye, “So it’s fine for you to go around waving that sword and endlessly reminding everyone of what a great warrior you are but for Loki and I to practice magic we must be perverse? You believe every hoary tale they feed you about Seidmenn even while you spend your life proving their thoughts on Shieldmaidens to be lies?”

“I earned my place!” Sif’s eyes flashed and her hand tightened on the hilt of her sword. *Barely more than a child, Sif sat in the dirt at her opponent’s feet, “Go home little girl, you don’t want to risk that pretty face of yours.” Decades and uncounted bruises later, it would be Sif standing over one defeated challenger after another.*

“You were allowed to earn your place!” Vali shot back. *Two boys, orphans from Vanaheim who’d...*
been sent to fulfill their people’s duty to provide troops for the Asgardian military, watched as the Lady Warrior Sif, after having defeated three previous challengers, found herself struggling against a huge, scarred fighter whose size belied his speed. The fighter hooked his axe head around her ankle and took her feet out from under her. Then he spun the axe but a moment before the haft would have crashed down on Lady Sif’s head the fighter, and Vali, saw the Crown Prince glaring fiercely. At the last moment he diverted his attack and only delivered a grazing blow. Sif surged off the ground, taking advantage of the moment he was off-balance and brought the point of her sword to his throat.

“I don’t deny that Thor’s patronage was the deciding factor in my being allowed to train with Asgard’s army. Even so, I was honest in my endeavors.” Sif’s chin rose proudly. “I faced my detractors head on and proved my worth. You? You put on a dress and pretended you were a girl.”

Vali felt the Second Prince’s eyes on him again for the third time that morning as he drilled with the other new recruits, and he didn’t think it was coincidence that he drew the Prince’s attention every time he used his magic, even if it were for such a small thing as summoning a breeze to cool himself as the sun beat down on them. So in a burst of recklessness Vali returned the Prince’s look and drew on his magic to restore the energy to his weary arms. Five minutes later the Prince was behind him, adjusting his stance and his hold on his sword while whispering in his ear, “They will notice little hedge witch. Once you move past drills to sparring. Don’t think they won’t.”

“It’s rumored you fight with magic,” Vali dared.

“Mmmm. Stay after the novices are released for the day. Watch and judge for yourself.” Vali did as the Second Prince suggested. After the other novice had finished their drills and left to perform their other duties around the Capital, mostly picking up litter and other menial jobs, the younger warriors, those who had been overseeing their training, turned their attention to advancing their own skills. Under the watchful eyes of veteran warriors they paired up to spar with each other. But as there was an odd number of fighters there was one trio formed, which included the Second Prince. As the trio sparred against each other Vali easily spotted the wisps of green around the Second Prince, the way his opponents stumbled over nothing or were confused by Loki’s after- images, mirages given form by his magic. But Vali also saw the way Loki’s two opponents teamed up against him from the first moment the spar began. He noticed that the veteran monitoring the spar often stepped in to block Loki’s decisive blows but rarely returned the favor for the Second Prince, leaving him to take a beating. Loki found Vali after the sparring session ended. “You make a very pretty young man,” he remarked hopping up to sit on the wall beside Vali, “You do have other options if years of that sort of treatment doesn’t look appealing to you. And even if you do desire a warrior’s path, you need more training in your magic. You won’t get it here.”

“What good did it ever do Loki?” Vali demanded. “He did it your way. He openly studied magic as a man and he studied as a warrior, proving that his magic didn’t make him less capable-”

“He brought sorcery into the battlefield like the monster he was!” Sif exclaimed. “He lied and you lied and the two of you made Narfi lie!”

“My- my sister greatly admired the Lady Sif. She wanted to emulate her but I- I can’t stand by and watch her being manhandled,” Narfi stammered, unable to meet his commander’s eyes...

... Sif put an arm around Vali’s shoulders, “You don’t have to quit. If this is what you want, stick with it. I’ll help you.”

Vali looked up at Sif shyly, “They tested me for magic, the Volur have accepted me as an initiate.”

Sif looked startled, “I didn’t have the talent,” she mumbled.
Vali looked up at her hopefully, “But if you could look after Narfi, he’s hardly bigger than I! Why Volstagg’s axe is larger than my brother.” ...

... “Looks like you lost your little admirer, to Loki of all people,” Volstagg laughed. “Three days now I’ve seen young Vali trailing after him like a lost kitten.”

“And such a pretty little kitty to waste her affections on the lesser brother,” Fandral remarked.

Sif stormed off without needing to hear more. She found Loki and Vali in one of the older indoor training arenas. They were both armed with daggers and traces of magic hung around them, Vali’s skirts were tucked up around her legs to keep from tripping her. Sif didn’t hesitate but drew her sword and attacked Loki from behind.

He ducked her swing but fell prey to the kick that followed it. On his back, her sword just over his heart Sif saw Loki gesture to Vali. The girl slunk away without a word. “What do you think you’re doing with her!” Sif demanded.

Loki rolled his eyes, “What am I doing? Darling Sif, I thought it was only Fandral whose mind lived in the gutter. I’m doing exactly what it looked like: I’m teacher her to fight.”

“She’s a Seidkonur!” Sif accused.

“Ahh, my mistake,” Loki replied, insincerity dripping from his tongue. “You wouldn’t be half so outraged if I were engaged in a dalliance with a girl two hundred years my junior.”

Sif noticed the spell his fingers were weaving too late, she jerked back instinctively at the brilliant flash of light. Loki rolled out from under her sword. While she was still blinking spots out of her vision he slipped behind her, and locked his arm around her, pinning both her arms to her sides, his dagger caressed the pulse in her neck.

“How dare you corrupt her!” Sif spat

“You mean teach her to defend herself? How shameful, giving a magic user the tools to stand up to thugs with swords or axes,” Loki hissed. “How dare I? Is it truly so terrifying Sif? To think that those with magic can handle a sword as well? I’m sure it is, isn’t it? Seeing her or I with fighting you must realize how… superfluous you truly are. We of magic could take over Asgard tomorrow and the only thing preventing us is the ingrained notion that it’s wrong to use Seidr and to fight.”

Then, like a ghost, Loki was gone, leaving Sif doubled over and gasping in an empty room...

... “Is it true? What they’re saying about the Second Prince? That Loki’s, that he was a- a Frost Giant?” Narfi stammered.

Sif and Hogun glanced over at the young soldier. “Why?” Hogun asked pointedly.

“He- Vali- They spent so much time together. Do you think he could have been- Possibly, been using Vali against Asgard?”

“I think you’d better tell us everything,” Sif said.

“Vali, she- HE, Vali, my brother, Loki was teaching him magic.”

“Loki proved he could use magic and still be a fighter and you lot, supposedly his closest friends, were tripping over each other to be the first to betray him when he was made regent after Odin exiled Thor!” Vali exclaimed.
“Loki got Thor exiled and usurped his brother’s rightful place,” Sif hissed furiously.

“Thor nearly started a war! He nearly got himself, the lot of you and Loki killed! Thor got himself exiled and you disobeyed Odin to bring him back the moment Odin’s back was turned,” Vali argued.

“It was Loki’s fault! He goaded Thor into it somehow, I know it!”

“Ch!” Vali spat. “What sort of king cries ‘I was provoked’ when his actions bring disaster on his people? Asgard would have been lucky to have Loki on the throne in Thor’s place if the love showered on Thor wasn’t so blind.”

The guards didn’t knock down Vali’s door in the aftermath of the Bifrost’s destruction and Loki’s fall into the Void, Narfi was with them and opened the door while Vali slept. Vali was bound in magic suppressing cuffs before he woke, a gag being forced between his lips before he could utter more than a confused protest at the rude awakening.

Afterwards Vali would never be able to remember that night as anything but a blur of pain and vicious, hate-filled questions. It felt like an eternity before they even removed the gag, over and over they demanded answers and hurt him for failing to provide them when there was no physical way for him to answer. When they finally took the gag away Vali remembered sobbing and thanking them. They asked him how Loki brought Frost Giants into Asgard. They asked if he and Loki were lovers. They asked what magic Loki had taught him. They asked, if Loki had really cared about him, why had he left him behind? And Vali answered, sometimes he told the truth, sometimes he told them what he thought he they wanted to hear, sometimes he just begged for them to stop.

Then it ended. They put the gag back in and dragged him through the palace to stand before the throne. Vali remembered the Queen’s sad eyes and Odin slamming butt against the floor invoking a burst of power that silenced the room. “He did not knowingly consort with a Jotun, for Loki did not know that he was born of Jotunheim!” Odin decreed. And then, in the end, when the barrage of accusations died down, “Vali of Vanaheim you have lived among us under false pretense for many years but I must allow the possibility that there was no malice in your actions, that you listened and acted with heartfelt sincerity on the words of your Prince, my son. And yet you lied, you deceived. So I sentence you to trial by combat, not to weight the guilt of your actions, there is no question of your guilt there. But the guilt, or innocence, of your intentions must be judged and I turn to the Norns to judge your heart.”

Vali’s awareness continued to fade in and out as the manacles on his wrists and ankles were removed and the gag taken away, as a sword was pressed into his trembling hands. “Your brother betrayed you, because you had magic, because my Loki favored you.” Vali didn’t remember who prepared him for his trial but the whispered words stuck in his head as he was pushed into the arena and saw Narfi preparing to enter the arena to stand against him.

Barton and Romanoff thundered up the ramp at full speed. “Five minutes to get airborne, best case,” Clint exclaimed as Natasha closed the hatch.

Vali spun around and started preparing for take-off.

“Will we finally do battle?” Sif asked.

“I’m not ready for a last stand quite yet,” Natasha replied. “That’s what it’ll be when we fight instead of run.”

“Brace yourselves,” Vali exclaimed, “They can’t follow if I take the paths.”
“Where to?” Clint asked.

“We’ll find out when we get there,” Vali replied.

As the ship leapt into the air, pursuers just breaking the horizon behind them, and dove between two crags, into a space that should have been too narrow for their ship, both Vali and Sif remembered.

Vali stumbled into the arena blurry eyed and covered in bruises still wearing the tattered remains of his dress. Narfi, dressed in the armor of an Asgardian warrior, faced his brother with grim determination. He’d been compliant in Vali’s lies until news of Loki’s true heritage spread and trial was of both brothers.

Narfi stepped forward, raising his sword, “I’m sorry, I’ll make it painless. Just let me end this.”

Uncoordinated, his muscles still spasming from the torturous night he’d endured, Vali parried and his sword was knocked from his hands. He threw himself backward and Narfi’s next blow whistled over his head. Loki’s lessons came back to Vali and he tried to summon an illusion to distract his brother while he recovered his sword but it was a pale transparent thing and Narfi ignored it. He stabbed downward, pinning Vali’s hand to packed earth of the arena before he could grab the sword. The crowd roared its approval as Vali’s blood stained the packed earth.

Acting on the instinct to survive Vali ripped himself free of Narfi’s sword. He rolled and ended up on his back, staring up at his brother. Narfi swung and the blade ripped through Vali’s eye before slicing a deep channel across his chest. Blood and wild mage poured out of Vali and he transformed.
As Spider-Man, Black Cat, White Tiger and Armory patrolled the streets of Hoboken one of the Squids bombers flew by overhead. Armory stopped, braced herself and pointed the Tactigon at the passing ship and fired. To Spider-Man’s surprise the ship limped away trailing smoke and ichor. “Okay, change of plans,” he said staring at Armory. “That is one kickass surface-to-air attack. We can’t let it go to waste.”

“What do I do?” Armory asked.

Spider-Man grinned and pointed, “We get you high, the Triple L Tower. You shoot down the fliers and, trust me, the ground troops will come to us. That’ll keep the Lady Felines and I busy.” He swept Armory off her feet and swung her into the sky. “Ladies, take the lobby. Nobody gets to take the easy way up,” he called back.

For a few feet he scaled up a building. “That’s sort of creepy,” Armory remarked as Spider-Man crawled up the vertical face of the building.

“Really?” Spidey asked as he shot out a new webline and swung them across the street, releasing at the apex of the swing to climb higher and higher, spinning around the tower when they were above all it’s neighbors, until he deposited her on the roof. “Cho? You listening.”

“As always, S&M.”

“And I’m suddenly missing the Colonel calling me ‘kid’,” Spidey groaned. “Why don’t you have a codename again?”

“Just because none of you will call me Maestro…”

“I can’t imagine why,” Spider-Man replied, deadpan. “But contact the aerial units. Tell them they’ve got a friendly neighborhood sniper on top of 30 Hudson Street and it’d be appreciated if they could direct some targets her way.”

“Got it covered,” Amadeus replied. There was a moment of silence then, “Tell your sniper four minutes.”

“You heard?” Spidey asked Armory.

She nodded, “Four minutes.” Right on schedule a mixed Falcon/Goblin unit harried a squid bomber supported by two ray fighters overhead. Armory fired off two shots in quick succession, a clean hit on the squid and a glazing blow to one of the rays, before they were out of range. “Like shooting fish in a barrel,” she said as the squid crashed into the river and the goblins zoomed in to finish off the wounded ray.

“Have fun fishing.” Spidey said leaning over the railing to look at the street below. “Just remember, you’re the bait as well as the hook. Now I’ve got to lay some snares of my own,” he said as he swung over the side of the building. “Cat? Tiger? Are you ready?”

“No worries, we’re in position Spidey,” Black Cat replied.

“We’ve killed the elevators and barricaded the fire escapes,” White Tiger added. “That should route them up the central stair.”
“Sounds good,” Spidey said. “But you’re both melee and the Chitauri do carry guns even if they aren’t terribly fond of them. Do you have enough cover to mix it up?”

“Don’t be such a worry wart,” Black Cat laughed.

“Felicity, take this seriously,” Spider-Man scolded.

“Code names?” Black Cat replied archly as White Tiger said, “Spider-Man, we know how to handle ourselves. The first floor lobby was too open, we’re making our stand at the top of the atrium, on the ninth floor. The central stair will act as a bottleneck, we can hold them here.”

“They’ll break down the doors, scale the elevator shafts or even the walls,” Spidey disagreed.

“Eventually,” Tiger replied calmly. “But you aren’t planning on Armory staying put indefinitely because there’s nowhere the four of us could hold forever.”

Spidey peered over the side of the building, giving himself a moment to think while he scanned the ground for early arrivals. “Cho? Can you do me a favor and hack the security cameras at the Triple L Tower?” he asked.

“Of course I can do it. Don’t underrate me just because you’d rather work with my girlfriend,” Cho sighed dramatically. “I’m on it. I’ll call back when something ugly shows its face.”

“Speaking of which, nice chatting but I’ve got to go to work,” Spidey said as he spotted a squad Chitauri approaching. “Heads up everyone. Armory, your efforts aren’t going unnoticed.”

“I notice you didn’t say they were appreciated,” the Tactigon wielder called back.

“The enemy’s not supposed to appreciate our efforts,” White Tiger chuckled. “How many?”

“‘Bout thirty,” Spidey replied. He watched, crouching on the vertical face of the building from about twenty feet up as they marched into the area he’d strung with webs and, true to his namesake, waited for them to become entangled. When his webs went taught he triggered the charge on his bite and glanced away as electricity lit up the network, frying four of the Chitauri. “I’ve got their attention. Here’s to hoping the bulk will go the outdoor route.”

As Spider-Man had hoped most of the Chitauri went after him. He caught them with his webs, electrocuting them one after another, making sure to pick off anyone who tried for the door, his focus never wavering from the battle. “I thought you were into banter,” Black Cat said when the first wave had fallen without a single one making inside the building.

Peter shrugged even though she couldn’t see him, “I’ve never heard a Chitauri talk. Even if they did, quipping with someone I’m trying to kill?” he shook his head. The excitement, the babble of words that was partially to cover his nerves, partially to throw his opponent off but mostly just because it was him didn’t come any more. He glanced around at the bodies he’d left strewn across the street. He didn’t feel like that Spider-Man while he was trying to come up with the most efficient way of killing Earth’s enemies. He didn’t feel like a hero, he was just someone was doing what had to be done to prevent something worse. ‘A hero would have thought of a better way.’

“Round two,” Spider-Man warned. “There’s more and I didn’t have time to reset most of my traps. Some of them will make it in this time.”

“Can’t have you doing all the work, now can we?” Black Cat replied as she and White Tiger made a final check of their position.
From the roof of the tower, Armory brought another bomber down. Then one of the Chitauri crashed a glider into the front of the building, smashing through the steel shutters. Spider-Man snagged as many of the Chitauri as he could be a dozen still got past him into the tower.

As the drones came up the stairs White Tiger and Black Cat met them midway up the last landing of the open staircase, kicking several of the drone off the side while electrifying others. “Next time I’m bringing my gun,” Tiger remarked as she fought. “Maybe it’s not the superhero thing or even most effective thing against these guys but having ranged weapons would help and why am I wasting years of training for the FBI?”

“I’ll bring it up with Ms. Knight,” Spider-Man promised as he scaled the building to get high enough to leap onto one of the Chitauri gliders that had arrived with the second wave. He electrocuted the pilot then put the glider on a collision course with it’s wingman before swinging back to the Tower. “Maybe she can requisition some of those zappers the Nova Empire been supplying Earth with.”

“That’s ten!” Armory exclaimed.

“You’re making a big stir,” Cho announced over the coms. “Most of the Chitauri ground forces are converging on your location. I’ve directed Cage’s group plus several of the SI units to provide support but they’ll have to fight their way through the guys coming for you. ETA twenty minutes, best case scenario.”

“Thanks,” Spidey said. There was no breather between the second and third wave, just an increase in gliders as the Chitauri made stopping their sniper a priority. “If you see anyone making an end run around the Lady Felines, let Armory know to bug out,” he reminded. “We all abandon ship when they start going around us.”

“We know!” Cho huffed. “Man, you’re uptight today.”

Spider-Man kicked two Chitauri off the wall as he swung across the face of the building leaving them to fall twenty stories to the street below. Inside the building Cat and Tiger fought back to back, holding the stair in deadly version of king of the mountain.

“Okay, time to go,” Cho reported three downed ships and nearly four dozen drones later.

Spider-Man scrambled up the building, Armory met him at the edge of the roof, he wrapped an arm around her waist and swung them around the tower twice before they were low enough for him to deposit her on the roof of the next tallest building in the neighborhood. “Head down we’ll meet you at the street level,” Spidey instructed. Armory nodded and Spidey swung back across to the Triple L Tower. “Ladies?”

Only the sound of fighting answered him.

Spidey smashed through the skylight on the tenth floor where the base of the building narrowed into the tower and lowered himself on a web line until he hung upside down about a dozen feet above the fight. “Why aren’t you moving!” he snapped at Cat and Tiger.

“We’re holding them!” Cat protested.

“You’re overrun, they’re already past you. Armory is vulnerable. We need to regroup,” Spider-Man exclaimed.

“We can’t move,” Tiger said simply. “We can hold the stair but if we give up the high ground? Not so much.”
“I’m an idiot!” Peter exclaimed. He glanced around the room, his eyes lighting on the fire sprinklers. “Get ready,” he said then snagged one of water pipes and yanked a segment out. The broken pipe spilled a torrent of water across the floor. In a few short minutes everyone was ankle deep in the resulting puddle. Spider-Man snagged Cat and Tiger, pulling into the air. As their feet cleared the water Cat triggered her taser and dropped it into the water, the current killed all the Chitauri on the floor. As the Chitauri on the lower levels hesitated to venture into the kill zone, Cat and Tiger climbed the weblines to escape through the skylight while Spider-Man hurried things along by hauling them up. Once they were on the roof he used a web to create a zip line across the street to the building where he’d left Armory.

Together, the four of them fought their way through the Chitauri to meet up with an SI unit and stuck with them until the Chitauri forces dwindled to nothing. Exhausted the four of them regrouped with the other combat teams at the base camp in front of Stark Tower. Dr. Cho’s assistants checked up on everyone, providing first aid and occasionally sending someone inside for more extensive medical treatment.

“We've gotta team up again sometime,” Felicia declared as she accepted a juice box before flopping down on the stairs.

“Seriously? After how I nearly got you killed?” Peter squawked.

Tiger reached over and patted his shoulder, “You did good, for your first field command.”

Peter gulped, “You could tell?”

“Totally, but we kicked ass,” Armory said, slurping down her own juice. “Think someone will bring donuts or should I go get my own?”

Later that night Gwen showed up in the lab to keep Peter company in the lab while he checked over his equipment for any battle damage. After several minutes he glanced up and said, “I’m thinking about- Well not exactly going public with my identity. No big announcement or anything like that. I just might put Peter Parker next to Spider-Man the next time I sign up for a rotation, or take my mask all the way off when the EMT are forcing food on everyone with an enhanced metabolism after a fight.”

When Gwen didn’t immediately say anything he started rambling, “It’s not like I’m underaged anymore, I’ll be twenty in a few months. And with everyone busy with the war they’re probably less likely to check my age, do the math and realize I signed the Accords when I was barely sixteen. So it’s probably a good time to stop hiding actually. Like Liz pointed out, next to no one has a real secret identity, that’s like comic book stuff. Daredevil’s the only other one I know of and he’s sort of half registered but not really and most of the police won’t have anything to do with him so not exactly a role model you know.”

“What brought this on?” Gwen asked curiously. “You’re usually worried about people attacking May or I if it gets out.”

Peter grimaced, “You know part of Aunt May being hired as Pepper’s PA was so she could have security assigned to her without anyone saying it was because of me. Not everyone buys the story about Mr. Osborn being crazy to think I’m Spider-Man you know. So what do we do when we get married? Ask Pepper to hire you too? I mean yeah, there’s some protection for you guy in hiding that I’m Spider-Man but it’s not the same as it was when the Accords first came out. Now we’ve got family members carrying panic buttons and there’s a rotation in the Avengers so there’s always someone on call if anyone needs to use it. And- and I know your dad defends me wearing a mask,
that he tells everyone that heroes are more likely to end up the target of a vendetta because our powers make us stand out more as individuals, but Gwen, you and your mom have been targeted by guys your dad put away. Why should I be able to hide my identity when he can’t?”

Peter didn’t mention the all efforts made to derail vendettas before they ever started. Things like Sue Storm being called in when Sandman escaped or Colonel Rhodes being the superhero lead when the Vulture missed the first check in with his parole officer so it wasn’t always the same hero thwarting the same villain. Or things like the absolute ban on Reed Richards ever being sent anywhere near Latveria since his rivalry with Victor von Doom had been set in stone before either of them had been called a hero or a villain. Keeping things impersonal was one of the stated goals under the Accords.

“We’re not here to engage in pissing contests,” Rhodes had stated after Lagos and a dozen other off the books Avengers’ missions had finally been reviewed, analyzed and the only reason anyone could find for the Avengers being there was the convoluted mass of history between Captain America and HYDRA. There were going to be villains who fixated on a particular hero the moment they met them, those who became a villain because they’d been fixated on a particular hero already. Even during a war for the very fate of the planet there was still the occasional individual who couldn’t look beyond themselves and just had to find someone to blame all their problems on but for four years the Avengers had been trying to structure how they operated to avoid falling into the arch-nemesis trap wherever they could.

“That happened when I was just a kid,” Gwen pointed out. “And it’s been years since most of the protection measures for families were established. Your Aunt and Ms. Potts established a bunch of support groups: For friends and family trying to deal with a loved one being in danger. For Enhanced kids whose parents totally freaked on them. For parents who freaked but still cared enough to try to learn to do better. Watching your aunt pretend that she was just the go-between for Ms. Potts and didn’t have any personal experience guilted you into telling me about being Spider-Man but not into going public. So what happened today?”

“It wasn’t just Aunt May,” Peter muttered. “You knew your dad was hiding something from you and I hated being the reason you two were tense.”

Gwen gave Peter a ‘get on with it’ look.

“I ended up Felicia’s field leader today,” Peter said. “And she still doesn’t know.”

“That has you thinking about telling the world?” Gwen asked skeptically.

“Yeah?” Peter said uncertainly.

“You might want to be sure our friends hear it from you first.”

Almost a week after their first mission together Steve looked around the cargo hold of Nebula’s ship making eye contact with each member of his team. “If I’m wrong just say so but this is what I’ve put together about us: Each of us has someone back on Earth who we’re here to protect. None of you want to die here but I’m getting the idea that you don’t give a damn if the rest of the team does die.”

He waited while the others traded glances. “I don’t give a damn about Earth,” Nebula said carelessly. “And I don’t mind dying as long as I take Thanos with me. But you’re right about one thing, I don’t care if you all die.”

Steve closed his eyes and sighed, “Anyone else?”

“Seth, Rachel and I have enough history to trust each other with our backs.” Frank shrugged, “But
Osborn’s rich asshole who thinks he’s better than the rest of us and I don’t know Songbird from Adam.”

Diamondback shifted a bit closer to Songbird and grinned at her, “Female solidarity, there aren’t enough of us bad girls not to watch out for each other.”

“Works for me,” Songbird replied with a small laugh. “You in Nebula?”

“I don’t need anyone,” Nebula snorted. Then she smiled toothily, “I’m the only one with a ride out of this shithole, you’re all my friends right?”

Even Sidewinder and Osborn allowed a look of appreciation at her reasoning.

“I’m glad to hear that you all get that our chances are better if we have someone watching our backs,” Steve said. “We’ve got five more missions before we head back to Earth and only the seven of us to depend on. We start treating each other as expendable there will be no one left to count on before long.

“We’ve got five more missions. We’ve got no one but each other. We don’t have to like each other but until we’re back on Earth we have to be there for each other.” Steve looked around at the group, “Back on Earth Fury told me that, individually, none of our missions would change the course of the war but as a group they’ll weaken the attacks, giving Earth’s defenders a chance to succeed.”

“Apparently I’m not the only one who thinks you have a deathwish,” Diamondback interjected.

“I’m not trying to get myself killed, I’m trying to make things right,” Steve said. “So if you think we need to scrub a mission we can but we can’t abandon each other, we have to be set to succeed on the next mission.”

“Low hanging fruit,” Osborn said. “That’s what we call it in business anyway. We need to figure out which missions will do the most harm to the Chitauri with the least risk to us.” Seeing Steve’s frown he added, “We can go after the high risk missions later, for now we need to clear the easy stuff. By the way, do we really need to return after just six missions?”

Steve’s look of disapproval faded.

“How much information do you have?” Osborn pressed, “Of course I can’t determine which targets are soft, I’m not a military tactician after all.”

“I’ve got full access to Clint and Natasha’s mission reports,” Steve confirmed.

Osborn looked around at the rest of the group the faintest hint of satisfaction in his expression, “The most damage with the lowest risk,” he nodded to Steve, “And we will trust the Captain to tell us which missions fit the bill. Are we agreed?”
decided to sit out the war in one of the Arc Shielded cities rather than trusting their home’s isolation to protect them. She found an empty gun rack, Wanda wasn’t surprised that weapons were something that made the cut when the owners had been deciding what to take and what to leave behind.

When she left Wanda took the house key she’d found in a bowl on the kitchen counter and spent a few minutes replacing the boards over the broken window. She hid the most recent car she’d stolen in the barn behind the house. Once the car was well hidden Wanda let herself back inside and made herself at home.

Two days later, shortly after dawn, Wanda was coming back to the house from searching the root cellar for anything useful when she caught a glimpse of something slinking past the house. She reached over her shoulder to touch the gun slung there for reassurance. For a moment her fingers caught on the empty screw holes that had once held the SI logo onto the stock of the gun. Wanda huffed at the reminder, ‘Two days staring at the SI logo waiting for Tony Stark to kill us and now I was sleep with a gun that had carries the same name, no matter how I’ve tried to blot it out.’

She followed the brief flashes of movement and the instinct, the remnant of her powers, that told her something conscious, something thinking, something that she should have been able to tear into with the powers that had been stolen from her, was out there. She followed it to the mouth of a lava tube.

Wanda hid herself outside the mouth of the cave, the sort of person who would follow an unknown into a dark hole in the ground wasn’t the sort who made it to adulthood in her war-torn homeland. She sat there for hours before getting her first real look at what had been lurking around her safe house. “Chitauri? On Earth?” Wanda breathed. She spent the rest of the day watching, getting a feel for how large the Chitauri presence was and what they were doing out in the middle of nowhere. When night fell Wanda snuck back to the house and dialed Vision’s number.
I got out and saw “Spider-Man: Homecoming” last weekend. I liked it but I’m too far down another path, especially with Peter’s updated classmates, to really incorporate it. That said, there are parts of Peter’s conversation with Felicia in this chapter that are heavily influenced by my reaction to SP:H.

I liked the updated versions of Liz and Flash, there’s enough of the original character to make it worth giving them the name. New-Flash is much less of a stereotype while still being an asshole and a bully and with Liz changing her racial background provided an effective misdirect to make the reveal both a surprising and an earned plot twist. But there’s nothing about new-MJ that reminds me of the base character, she’s more Hermione Granger for the MCU than MJ for the modern era.

Some of the rumors I had seen about the movie suggested it villainized Tony, I can see how fans might reach that conclusion but I don’t feel as instructed by THIS film to blame Tony, it’s only the carryover habit from AoU, CACW and a bit from IM3. Toombs might argue that Tony’s Damage Control taking his business made him into a villain but that’s fairly typical of villain characterization: They’re people who can’t deal with it constructively when life doesn’t go their way so they blame others for their problems and use that as an excuse for doing things that they know are wrong. Having Toombs blame Tony for his existence is a step up from IM3 where it’s Tony who says he created Killian, (and IM3 was much less ridiculous in it’s scapegoating than AoU or CACW).

‘Failure to communicate’ is something I frequently see listed as one of Tony's mistakes in CACW but I don’t see it: Steve walked out of the meeting at the Compound. Steve chose not to go to Vienna. Steve chose to ignore Natasha asking him to stay out of the Bucky situation. Steve shut down the conversation in Berlin. Steve and Sam chose not to contact Tony (or Rhodes, Vision or Natasha) with the information about the Winter Soldiers. Clint (presumably with input from Steve or Sam) chose to attack Vision without the slightest effort to talk to him first. The only time Tony ended a conversation was when Steve belatedly tried to explain about the Soldiers as a transparent ploy to buy time for Sam and Bucky to steal a plane (after Tony had to know about Clint/Wanda’s attack on Vision) and even then Tony looked into what Steve had said later. Throughout CACW Tony was bending over backwards to try to communicate but Steve wasn’t interested. “Homecoming”, on the other hand, is what bad communication looks like. Tony’s the adult, the burden of communicating is on him and he wasn’t letting Peter know his expectations, he didn’t give Peter the necessary reassurances to let Peter KNOW that he was listening, which given Peter’s age is essential. Tony was trying to be a good mentor but he wasn’t succeeding, which is fair enough. To allow Peter to be the hero of his own movie Tony can’t be that good at watching out for him although he does come through when Peter needed him more than once so he’s not completely terrible at it either. If we’re going to give Peter points for trying to be a good hero even if he spent most of the movie screwing up then Tony gets points for trying to be a good mentor even if he’s not perfect in the role.

My main worry going in was that “Homecoming” would be used to make a case against the Accords but actually Peter’s patrolling was more of an argument that unregulated
heroes shouldn’t be allowed; on the job, self-training shouldn’t be encouraged when the stakes are life and death. Peter’s ineffectual, he was trashing his academic and social life (his future) for nothing. The ATM robbery was Lagos-Lite where Peter jumping in endangered more lives than the crime he was trying to stop but unlike Team!Cap when the fight got out of control Peter’s priorities switched from the criminals to the bystanders (Although Peter was fighting in his neighborhood, he didn’t fly halfway around the world to bust up someone else’s home. Which is an argument in favor of the Avengers needing approval before holding fights in other people’s backyards because Peter’s jumping to the aid of his neighbor not failing to worry about an unnamed extra). The worst of Peter’s screw-ups, the ones with no silver lining, no gains seemed to happen when he was being proactive, looking for trouble. When he was just being aware of the world around him and leaping to help when something happened in front of him, closer to good Samaritan territory, he accomplished more.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

After the first of the missions planned with Osborn’s input, Steve found Diamondback sitting in a dimly corner of the ship with a large view port, cleaning her gear and watching the stars. “It went pretty well today,” he said.

Diamondback shrugged noncommittally.

“Osborn’s surprisingly easy to work with,” Steve admitted guiltily. “I was expecting it to be like working with Tony: The constant arguing about… everything. The endless reminders that he’s smarter than the rest of us.”

“Osborn manages you,” Diamondback said. Steve found himself remembering some of the things he’d learned about Tony, and about Howard, since Tony’s death and wondered if on some level Tony had been competing with him for his departed father’s approval. “He flatters you, emphasizes your strengths so you focus on those aspects and so that you don’t pay as much attention to the aspects where he wants control. He’s not exactly a subtle man.” A smirk flashed across her face, “Like most, he thinks he’s smoother than he is.”

“He wants to look at the Arc Reactors from Niflheim,” Steve said. “He thinks he could replicate them for the rest of you. I don’t know if I should let him, Tony was always defensive about who worked on his tech.”

“Why are you asking me?” Diamondback replied.

“Because I know you’ll tell me what you think not what you think I want to hear,” Steve said.

“You know better than to just listen to people who butter you up,” Diamondback said tilting her head to the side. “I suppose that’s something. Melissa’s talked to me a little about what it was like when she was under the Soul Stone’s control.” She shivered, “I don’t really give a damn what Stark might have wanted, I don’t want that to happen to me.”

“I won’t ask anyone else to fight the Skull,” Steve promised. He ran a hand over the modified Arc Reactor set in the back of his shield, “But giving this to Norman Osborn feels wrong, I need something more than fear as a reason to do it.”

“Just do it,” Peter reminded himself of Gwen’s advice then opened the conference room door and let
himself in.

“Peter?” Felicia greeted him sounding confused. “It’s great to see you but Spider-Man told me to
meet him here and he’s already ten minutes late… You’re not here to tell me I’ve been stood up
right?”

“It wasn’t a date,” Peter replied. “And no, that’s not why I’m here.” He jumped, flipping in mid-air
to crouch on the ceiling.

“You’re?”

“Yeah,” Peter glanced away, his shoulders tensing.

“Since? Shit!” Felicia exclaimed. “We were fifteen when Spider-Man first showed up… Oh man!
Right after your uncle died.”

Peter nodded jerkily, “I got my powers just before... It took a long time before I stopped needing to
save other people to make up for not saving him.”

“All these years and you never told us?” Felicia asked.

Peter grimaced, “Dr. Stark and FRIDAY figured it out. Then Colonel Rhodes and Ms. Potts. They
made me tell Aunt May and George, Captain Stacy, if I wanted to go on being Spider-Man. I didn’t
really tell anyone in the extended Iron Man family but I didn’t really try keeping it secret around the
Tower either. Peter Parker moping the day after Spider-Man had a rough fight happened a few too
many times and it was an open secret with them. I told Gwen when we started getting serious.”

Felicia nodded, “And why me?”

“I’ve been planning to since you got powers.” Peter shrugged, “Just couldn’t find the right moment.
But after being in the field with you I knew I had to make one. It felt wrong with you following me
and not knowing.”

Felicia thought on it for several moments, then she flipped her hair over her shoulder, “Yeah,
keeping me in the dark and letting me flirt with Spider-Man not knowing he’s practically married to
one of my best friends wouldn’t have been cool,” she said.

Peter smiled a little weakly knowing they were good.

“When are you going to tell the rest of the gang?” Felicia asked. “Because I’m not sure what Flash’s
reaction is going to be but it’s definitely going to be worthy of recording for posterity.”

Peter took a deep breath, “I’m thinking about telling everyone. Only, the first thing you thought of
when I told you was about me being fifteen when I started. Covering up that Dr. Stark recruited me
when I was a kid was the biggest reason I got to keep the mask I think.”

“I'm your classmate, of course I noticed. Most people aren’t going to bother to do the math,” Felicia
waved off Peter’s worries. “Except Jameson, he’s enough of an asshole to dig into anything about
Spider-Man that looks off. Only he might not publish it. That you were just a kid is more on Stark
than on you and dead heroes are tough to criticize, especially when they're saving the world from
beyond the grave.”

“Maybe I should wait until I’m thirty or so,” Peter said.

Felicia tilted her head back as she studied Peter, “Why? They were adults, you were a kid it was their
responsibility to keep you safe, not to use you to fight their battles.”

“Dr. Stark took me to Leipzig but I was already going out at night and patrolling before that, that's how he found me. I wanted to do this, no one made me and no one could have stopped me. But Colonel Rhodes and Captain Stacy gave me lower risk ways to help. If they’d tried to shut me out altogether I would have just gone and done things on my own. I don't want them to catch a bunch of crap because they supported me.”

Felicia looked thoughtful, “I guess they didn't have all the superhero classes and training set-up then. You know, the training that takes two to four years to finish if you happen to be a teenager when you get your powers but if you’re like me, and had graduated high school before becoming Enhanced, you can be qualified to be on the street in six months.”

“At fifteen I needed to be out there feeling like I was doing something to help, I needed that,” Peter said. “Most of the purse snatchings, bike thefts and atm robberies that I stopped before I was working with the police? Mostly I was making myself feel better. If I’d gotten someone killed because I was trying to train on the job…” He shuddered. “Good intentions would have been cold comfort, both for them and for me. Looking back, Rhody and George managed me, they gave me ways to be useful while keeping me out of trouble until I’d learn enough to help not hinder, until I’d had enough therapy to be a little bit objective about whether I was actually helping or just making myself feel good. Until I grew up enough to understand that when I put on a mask and go looking for trouble I’m not a good samaritan anymore and that if I’m going to do it, I owe it to the people I’m trying to help to educate myself enough not to make ignorant mistakes.

“I got in before the Accords and SHRA put a system in place to deal with the newly empowered and they dealt with me, but this is better for the people around us. All the good intentions in the world don’t fix moving someone with a broken neck if you don’t understand the risks associated with that action. Depending on the situation maybe it’s the right choice, maybe it’s not but ‘I didn’t realize the danger’ isn’t an answer you want to be giving afterwards. And there are a thousand similar details that you don’t automatically learn when along with gaining the ability to stick to walls and bench press cars. At fifteen I just wanted to help. I’m twenty now, I’ve been working with the professionals for four years and wanting to help means getting the training to do the job right.”

“Plan Z!” Sidewinder shouted. “We have zombies!” He teleported to Songbird and Constrictor’s position then popped all three of them to Nomad, Goblin and Diamondback’s location.

As soon as the pair caught their balance, Steve grabbed Sidewinder’s shoulder. “This is our chance! The Skull is here!” They’d run several missions since their first and never once encountered zombies without the Red Skull being close by.

“I'll ensure the depot’s destruction,” Osborn assured him.

Constrictor rolled his eyes. “Ten minutes with plan Z,” he reminded as Nomad and Sidewinder popped out. Then he leapt on to the glider behind Goblin while Songbird grabbed Diamondback under the arms. The four of them flew towards the largest of the three ammo depots on the asteroid base.

At the point where Sidewinders’ group had first encountered the Zombies, Nomad’s shield ricocheted through the milling horde, reducing dozens of them to dust. ‘Thanos must be missing the Mind Stone,’ Steve thought. The Zombies were practically indestructible for any weapon short of Steve’s Arc Reactor enhanced shield but unlike the people Loki had subverted using the Mind Stone, the Soul Stone’s victims lost their skills and ability to take initiative leaving them incapable of doing more than following specific orders.
Sidewinder hung back letting Nomad mow his way through the Zombies until they were face to face with the Red Skull. “Persistent as always Captain,” he sighed. “It’s almost enough to make one nostalgic.”

“I beat you then, I’ll beat you now,” Nomad declared, he snatched his shield out of the air and hurled it at the Skull. The Skull fired an energy bolt from his side arm and deflected it. The shield rebounded off one of the walls returning to Nomad’s hand.

Sidewinder teleported further back as the zombies began taking notice of him.

Elsewhere on the asteroid the Goblin led the way toward the ammo depot. He dropped pumpkin bombs as they flew over small units of Chitauri while Constrictor used his tentacles to rip another off it’s flying chariot. Songbird, encumbered with Diamondback followed behind. Occasionally Diamondback sent a knife flying at one of their opposition.

“Oh fuck,” Constrictor swore. “Zombies on the right.”

In another quadrant of the base Nomad ducked behind his shield and charged the Skull. Once he closed the distance between them he kicked the gun out of the Skull’s hand. “Do you know the difference between my loyal followers and your two allies who you took back from me?” the Skull asked as they traded blows.

“They never would have willingly followed someone as twisted as you?” Nomad asked.

The Red Skull laughed. “My followers were dead when I used the Soul Stone to call them back to my side,” he said. “And this time, I’ve ordered them to take the time to kill your allies before they bring them before me.”

Steve jerked around, “Sidewinder! Get the others! Get out of here!” he shouted.

“Don’t have to tell me twice,” Sidewinder muttered as he teleported away.

He popped into a hall almost over run with zombies and Chitauri. Goblin, Constrictor, Songbird and Diamondback had been forced into a defensive position in one corner. “Thank you, Saint Jude,” Constrictor breathed. “It was a trap, the bastards blocked our comms before they jumped us.”

“Grab on,” Sidewinder said. “We’re bailing on the mission.” The other four didn’t hesitate and Sidewinder popped them back to Nebula’s ship a moment later.

“What are you doing here?” the cyborg woman demanded. “Where are the explosions and the corpses of Thanos’ men choking on vacuum?”

“It was a trap,” Osborn said.

“You better grab Rogers,” Constrictor urged Sidewinder.

“I’m going, I’m going,” Sidewinder sighed. “Don’t want to disrupt the epic battle or anything.”

When Sidewinder reappeared Nomad was angrily dispatching the zombies. “Your playmate ditched you?” Seth asked.

Steve whipped the shield around, viciously decapitating the last of them. “The Skull isn’t dumb, next time he’ll be ready for a teleporter.”

“You were right, I just can’t corner him on my own,” Steve signed as he straddled a chair in the
maintenance area on Nebula’s ship that Osborn had claimed as his lab. He hefted his shield and the Acr Reactor core housed in it, “If we could make more of these for the rest of you I know we could get the Skull.”

“Mmm,” Osborn agreed without lifting his eyes from the microscope he was bent over. Delicately he used a pair of long needles to pry open the casing from the Arc Reactor that infused the Nomad body armor with the ability to repel the direct effects of magic and countered an Infinity Stone’s powers. Steve settled back and held his tongue while the older man methodically examined the device. Finally Osborn sat back. “I can’t replicate it after all,” he said.

Steve’s jaw dropped. In all the years he’d been teammates with Tony Stark, he’d never once heard the engineer admit defeat in the face of a technical challenge so easily.

“I’ve studied SI’s patents for the full sized Arc Reactors, given the proper resources I could make my own.” Osborn grimaced, “Although I haven’t found a way to do so without violating Stark’s patents. This is different, there is something... wrong... with the miniaturized reactor. I don’t know how else to put it.” He shook his head, “Looking at that, trying to reverse engineer it, there’s something about it that my mind rebels against understanding. To think Stark developed this in a cave while on the verge of death. Truly, necessity is the mother of invention. This is perhaps the most remarkable bit of engineering I have ever seen and I cannot understand it,” Then, jokingly, he added, “Not that I’m willing to have a chest full of shrapnel inching toward my heart to see if I could see the path he saw then.”

“We have to stop the Skull,” Steve said.

“Perhaps, first, you must separate him from the Soul Stone,” Osborn suggested. “As long as he holds the stone you are the only one of us who can safely approach him.”

“Not entirely true.” The two men looked up to see Nebula standing in the doorway. “My siblings and I were all conditioned to be capable of wielding an Infinity Stone,” she said. Then she gave them her predatory smile, “I am willing to wager that I can wrest it away from a second string lieutenant like the Red Skull before he can bring me under its sway. After all, that is the purpose I was raised for: To retrieve an Infinity Stone from it’s guardian, for the glory of Thanos. Although I’m happy to forget the latter part.”

“Wanda,” Vision said sternly as he descended from the sky.


“The authorities believe that you were killed in the attack on the prison,” Vision said. “But I could sense you.”

“You kept my escape from them,” Wanda breathed.

“I did not,” Vision corrected. “They did not believe me or perhaps considered those who still possess powers more concerning.”

Wanda flinched as if he’d slapped her.

“You must turn yourself in immediately,” Vision stated. He reached for her arm.

Wanda jerked back. “You don’t understand, the Chitauri are here!” she exclaimed. “They’re building up forces on Earth. You have to listen to me.”
Vision froze.

“Please Viz,” Wanda begged, “If I ever meant anything to you, you have to listen.”

“I must listen to you because the consequences if I do not listen and you are telling the truth are
immeasurably more severe than if I do listen and you are lying,” Vision replied. “Please show me
what you have discovered.”

Wanda looked at him sadly, “Are my memories of your concern while my mind was ill nothing more
than imagings of fevered mind?” She slung the rifle leaned up by the door over her shoulder and led
the way out into the pungent sagebrush scrubland.

Vision briefly touched an amulet around his neck that Wanda couldn’t remember seeing before. “I
have been given to know that I am not alone in being unable to divest myself of feelings for one who
has done me harm,” he said.

Wanda glanced away, “Ever since those two days when Pietro and I were trapped with our parents’
odies I cannot stand to be confined. No matter how glided the cage or- or how dear the company.”

“You were content enough to stay safely with me until Mr. Barton broke into our home, setting
explosions to draw me away and laying ambushes against me. What did I do that made it acceptable
to treat me as an enemy rather than a teammate?”

“You were holding me prisoner!” Wanda exclaimed.

“I was protecting you,” Vision stated.

“No!” Wanda hissed. “You were protecting those who would attack me from my retaliation! I was
fully capable of dealing with a mob.”

“And then what?” Vision demanded. “Once the mob had been laid low by your powers, once you
had proved them correct in fearing you, what was your plan then? Would you continue meeting
force with force until you could not step out of your door without fearing for snipers? All you had to
do was stay. Third parties were examining events in Lagos, your role in that tragedy would have
been vindicated.”

“They would not have listened to someone like me,” Wanda protested.

“Which was you were being spoken for by Dr. Stark and SI’s legal representatives,” Vision replied
unsympathetically. “But of course you could not trust him to do the correct thing. Although I must
take responsibility for my own mistakes: I should have realized how deeply rooted your delusions
ran. No rational person would have blamed the weapons manufacturer for your parents’ death. I
would have understand had you blamed the United States government for sending their military into
your country, had you blamed either or both warring factions within your country for instigating the
violence that shattered your childhood, had you blamed the one who fired the missile or the one who
had ordered it fired. Had you sought vengeance on one of those parties I would not have agreed with
your actions but I would have understood. Instead you directed all your hate against Tony Stark
simply because his name was written on the missile. Your family would be just as dead had it been
OsCorp technology or even HammerTech, if the missiles had been manufactured in Russia or in
your own country. Perhaps, if the missiles had been sold on the black market, I could understand
your not caring that Tony Stark was cleared of all wrongdoing in the illegal sales of SI military
technology years ago but you never even sought to discover whose hand was on the trigger of that
missile.”
“I know,” Wanda said. She adjusted the rifle strap over her shoulder. “It was never really Tony Stark who killed my parents. I know that now but then? I stared at his name on that bomb for two days, just waiting for it to go off. Several years later, in the orphanage, I saw that name again beneath his picture. I read about how he lived high off the money made by those things that killed my family and I hated him. I hated him for benefiting from my misery. All the fighting in my country? There were too many ever changing factions. I did not have the resources to learn which one was behind that attack. The United States? It was too big, too vague. How could I fight a country? But I saw his picture above that name, the same name that we stared at for those two days, saw him with so much when everything had been taken from us and it was all simple: Tony Stark killed my parents and I had to make him pay.” She looked sad, “It was not a reasonable way to think, I know that, but it was all I had to cling to.”

“It is on me that it took you physically attacking me before I recognized that I was incapable of giving you the help you so clearly needed,” Vision said. “I had foolishly allowed myself to believe that my love and support could be enough to heal the cracks in your mind. When it was no longer possible for me to ignore that, not only had your misplaced hatred not corrected itself, you had infected the other Avengers with your distorted view of Tony Stark, I was angry. When I callously destroyed the misapprehension that served as the cornerstone of your belief system it was an act of retaliation that I regretted almost immediately. I do not subscribe to the eye for an eye system of justice.”

“So I am just a regret to you?” Wanda asked.

“It would be best if you were,” Vision replied coolly. “How much further?”

“It’s over the next ridge, I didn’t lie to you.” A tear trickled down her nose. They climb a last hill and suddenly found themselves looking down on the mouth of a dark cavern. “There,” Wanda whispered pointing out a Chitauri sentry almost lost in the shadows. “Let me have my power back. Together they can’t possibly stop us.”

“I cannot find it in myself to trust you with such abilities,” Vision said. “Go back to the house and call the police while you wait. It is possible that you will earn some forgiveness by turning yourself in.”

“I’m sorry,” Wanda said.

“Are you apologizing for what you have done in the past or what you will do in the future?” Vision asked before sinking into the ground and vanishing from sight.

Shoulders hunched Wanda turned and started hiking back. For almost a minute she paused by the telephone table. She thought about calling the police, turning herself in, giving up her gun, going back to sitting in a cell day after day. She thought about doing what Vision asked, maybe giving him a reason to believe her. She thought about it. “He won’t forgive me,” she said sorrowfully. Then she went upstairs and started packing a bag.

Wanda was halfway to her stolen truck when she jerked as if she’d touched a live-wire. Her bag dropped from her hand and her head snapped back. When her eyes opened they were glowing red. “VISION!” she screamed.

Chapter End Notes
Saint Jude, Patron Saint of Lost Causes
Thor strode across the moon base flanked by Loki and Dr. Banner. ‘No matter how far I run or how I might redefine myself I always end up here, at Thor’s side, half a step behind him,’ Loki thought. Thor glanced back and smiled, grateful if a still a little surprised to see Loki hasn’t vanished like the morning mist. There was less bitterness to the realization than Loki expected.

“I will spell your armor full of lice if you wake me up trying to take my pulse again,” Loki murmured softly.

“Then I will have to learn to move more quietly,” Thor replied, unashamed.

Bruce shook his head but otherwise pretended that he didn’t hear them.

A few minutes later the three of them crowded into an elevator alongside several young men and women wearing military uniforms. ‘Are there no manners on Midgard?’ Loki thought wondering why the low ranked soldiers hadn’t disembarked to make room for Thor’s party.

As the elevator descended into the base one of the young men kept taking glances at Thor, obviously working up the courage to speak. Thor smiled encouragingly. “Mr. Thor, um Odinson, sir? Do you know when Iron Man will come back?” the young man asked. Then he gulped. “Not that it’s not great the way you and all the other heroes are fighting for us,” he said quickly. He smoothed a hand over the Avalon Tech body armor he wore. “It’s just that, with the Avalon Tech and the Arc Shields, the Falcon Units… Well, you’re fighting for us, but Tony Stark gives us the ability to defend ourselves.”

“I am not offended,” Thor soothed the nervously babbling youth. “But, with a heavy heart, I am forced to say that Death does not easily release those who fall into her kingdom.”

“No,” the young man shook his head. “Iron Man won’t abandon us, you’ll see.”

Loki smiled to himself. ‘Absence truly does make the heart grow fonder. I have no desire to share him with anyone- When have I ever had anyone who’s affection I was not forced to share the better part of with Thor? -but if Tony does force me to return him to this realm, he will return to a world that has learned to appreciate him.’

“Loki, when did you become such a fan of Tony’s?” Bruce asked when the three of them were alone again.

“Hmmm?” Loki said questioningly.

Bruce gave him a piercing look, “Back there, it wasn’t the first time I’ve seen you look pleased, practically smug when people give Tony his due.”

“How could I not appreciate a man who made himself a warrior to equal the Crown Prince of Asgard with nothing but his wits?” Loki replied.

Thor looked sad, “Would that the Norns had woven a different fate, I could envision you and the Man of Iron as friends.”

Loki lowered his head slightly, “I believe that I would have enjoyed a cycle that allowed such a possibility.”
Bruce was still frowning thoughtfully at Loki as Thor pushed open the door and walked into the conference room.

“My friends,” Thor announced sweeping into the room. “The Chitauri’s expected reinforcements have failed to arrive. We must take advantage of this moment of weakness and crush their outpost on Titan!”

“What is Asgard willing to commit to this offensive?” General Summers asked.

A grim smile flashed across Thor’s face, “Asgardian pride will tolerate no less than complete victory, particularly when the Jotun forces have successfully cleared their moon of it’s Chitauri infestation. I have a battalion, one thousand men strong, all eager to defend Asgard’s honor.”

General Summers nodded. “You’ll want aerial support,” he said.

Loki tuned out as Thor and the Air Force Brigadier General discussed numbers and timing. He and Thor had already gone over their strategy, given Loki’s history with Midgard, they’d decided that it was for the best if they didn’t make it obvious that he was Thor’s tactical advisor. Rather than risking paying attention and risking the temptation to jump in, Loki reviewed his role in the coming battle. After their early successes on Titan the Chitauri learned to fortify their compounds against sapper attacks. Loki and the Hulk had somewhat similar issues in the field: They didn’t play well with others. But at the same time they were entirely different. Asgardian warriors were used to working around berserkers and they appreciate the Hulk’s raw power. Loki’s powers were most effective when used in a supporting role but he wasn’t trusted to do the job.

Even before his fall, Loki’s rank as Second Prince meant he could only be placed under Thor or Odin’s command, ‘It would have been better had it not been so,’ Loki thought. ‘Constantly placing me under Thor’s command exacerbated my feelings of being in his shadow. I can’t command because I need the freedom to act on my own recognizance. Once battle has been joined I can’t be burdened with managing troop movement and still have the concentration needed to work my magic. A more experienced commander might have appreciated me more than Thor did and the people of Asgard would have paid more mind to my victories had I not always been forced to share them with their Golden Prince... My resentment would not have been so personal had it not always been Thor who took the glory while my contributions were overlooked.’

For the coming battle Thor had placed him in command of a unit of Elven archers. Loki had already discussed things with his subcommander, the unit’s normal commander, and they were both happy enough to allow the fiction of Loki’s command while she would give the orders in the field. Before Asgard’s conquest of Alfheim the elves had fought alongside their own battle mages and the veteran commander was willing to forgo a bit of glory if it facilitated getting Elven mages back among their ranks. ‘Everyone has their agendas, collaboration is the dance of making them align,’ Loki thought to himself.

A few hours later Loki stood in the moon base’s hanger watching as the ground crews swarmed over the fighter craft, readying them for battle. In the middle of it all the Guardian’s Milano gently touched down. As the starship’s gangplank lowered Loki joined Thor, standing slightly behind Asgard’s crown prince as the other party approached. The Zen Whoberis woman stepped forward to speak for the group. “Prince Thor, as Drax, Mantis and myself can provide little assistance to our teammates in a ship-to-ship battle we would offer you our assistance,” she said with deliberate formality

“It was going to be boring,” Drax interjected.

Gamora glared at her companion then turned back to Thor. “Drax and I are capable warriors, as long as he keeps his mouth shut, and I would recommend Mantis’ assistance with pilot retrieval.”
“I can sense distress,” Mantis offered. Her antennas drooped sadly for a moment then perked up, “It is good to be able to relieve it.”

Thor smiled warmly, “Asgard welcomes your aid in the glorious battle to come.”

“You had a Flora Colossus with you?” Loki asked.

Gamora frowned, “Groot is an adolescent and does not take direction well. It is best that he remain on the Milano.”

Drax laughed loudly, “He was not so useless as a sprout. Dumb as a stick but less backtalk.”

Thor looked slightly confused by kept smiling, “Youthful high spirits can be a boon on the battlefield,” he remarked.

Gamora sighed, “Until he’s outgrown the phase of disobeying his elders for the sake of disobeying his elders, he will sit in his room and sulk when the fighting starts as long as I have a say in the matter.”

“As you say,” Thor replied in a bemused tone. “Make ready to leave within the hour. We will travel by Bifrost.

Vision sank into rocky soil and discovered a network of lava tubes below the desert’s surface. The caves were crawling with Chitauri. Vision stuck to the walls, occasionally allowing his face to emerge in order scan the hive but he didn’t confront them, instead he contented himself with collecting information.

The network of stacked and interconnected lava tubes had been transformed into a fully staffed outpost, comparable to the one Asgard’s forces had been struggling to root out on Titan. The Chitauri’s numbers indicated that Earth’s defenders had been wrong every time they’d assumed that killing the mothership had eliminated all the Chitauri foot soldiers who arrived with it, the mass die-off that had ended the Chitauri Invasion of 2012 had not repeated itself. Vision assumed that there must be other massings of Chitauri troops hidden around the planet from the attacks on other continents.

Vision sank deeper into the base, ‘What are they waiting for? What do they expect to accomplish by hiding here?’ He poked his face out of the wall and saw a woman with pale blue skin sitting on the back of what looked like a miniature Chitauri Mothership as if it were a throne, she held a long spear in one hand. Then Vision realized she was looking back at him. In the moment of his realization she threw the spear, it transformed into a bolt of light as it flew. The wall shattered around Vision, leaving him exposed and then, somehow, the spear was back in her hand.

Vision shrugged off the blast as if it were nothing, floating out from the ruins of the cave wall. “Why have you invaded this planet?” he demanded as he opened a satlink to FRIDAY.

The woman threw back her head and laughed, “To lay the corpses of its inhabitants at my father’s feet. For the glory of Lady Death.” Then she smiled at Vision, “To take back that which was stolen from my father. And you have kindly brought it to me.”

She lunged forward. Vision increased his density and knocked the spear’s point aside. He moved to slam an open palm into her solar plexus but she twisted aside, grabbing his arm she threw him. Vision saw the spear coming at him and sank into the floor. He rose up behind the woman and put her in a half nelson. She twisted free, sinuously sliding out of his grasp. She tried to kick his legs out from under him but passed through him as Vision went intangible. She followed up with a strike.
from her spear, Vision phased through it as well but it exploded into a mass of black tentacles so dense that even in his intangible form his molecules couldn’t pass through it.

The net weighed Vision down, pulling him to the floor and tangling his limbs. The woman pulled a strange device from her belt. She crouched over Vision as he thrashed against the net, using it to grasp the gem set in his forehead. “If you had used the Infinity Stone against me you might not have lost,” she said as she ripped the Mind Stone from him.

Vision screamed. The amulet around his neck flared bright blue. A flood of blue rushed from the amulet covering Vision and reaching for the Mind Stone...

“No I know what it’s like trying to gift-shop for me. What do you give someone who already has everything?” Tony asked with a frustrated huff.

Loki laughed, “That is simple, my mother is- was Queen of Asgard, she had wealth beyond even your imaging and courtiers plying her with gifts on a daily basis to curry favor. I gave her things she would not get herself, be they too frivolous or too extravagant.”

“I’ve always sucked at buying gifts,” Tony said. “I end up feeling like gift giving is like tithing, where the value of the gift is supposed to be in proportion to your wealth. I give Rhodey or Pepper something big they get all weird, I give them something small and I feel like a cheapskate... But I’m usually good at making things for people I care about. Well, Pep doesn’t exactly like me making her armor, even if when I make it pretty, but I needed her to be safe. I guess I got what I wanted, giving her the armor told her she wasn’t safe with me so she walked away.”

“Anyway, Vision,” Tony clapped his hands briskly, shoving away the thought of his and Pepper’s ‘break’. “I’m making everyone else something to nullify the effects of an Infinity Stone but he’s got one embedded in his head, can’t see that ending well. He’s got the power of a god, he can be untouchable or fall on you like an anvil. I can’t give him anything to increase his defense or offensive power.”

“If he is so powerful already why must you give him anything?” Loki asked.

Tony shook his head, “It doesn’t work like that. Maybe I was shit at being around for him because I can’t hear his voice without feeling like I’ve been punched in the gut but I can’t give something to everyone I want to protect and not give Vision anything.”

“I will ask Heimdahl to turn his gaze on him,” Loki offered. “Perhaps it will provide you the answers you seek.”

Several weeks later Loki brought up the subject of Vision again. “He struggles with the Witch’s betrayal and his feelings for her.” He raised a hand, “Let me show you.”

Tony nodded and Loki cupped the side of his face, images of Vision garnered from Loki’s hours spent on Hlidskjalf flooded into his mind. “Give him what you gave me when I told you of my role in my mother’s death, give him your understanding,” Loki whispered, leaning in close.

Tony watched as Happy tried clumsily to explain abusive relationships to Vision and that he shouldn’t feel guilty for the love that lingered in his heart even after Wanda had attacked him. He worked on the amulet for weeks. While he was putting the finishing touches on it he started talking quietly. “There were days where I wanted to re-examine every memory I had of Obie in the light of him trying to murder me, everything back to the day I was christened. Then I’d feel like I was going to be consumed by the bitterness of recasting him as a villain in all those years of memories. Some
days I want to think that I did something wrong, something to make someone who I’d always believed loved me want to kill me. Better to think that I did it, that some of the affection I remembered was real, once. Better than to see a spider spinning a web around me my whole life. There were innocuous little things, remembering the candies I liked as a kid, digging out a frozen steak and making me laugh about it after I ended up on the losing end of a bar fight. When I think about those things sometimes I can convince myself that it wasn’t anything I did or that he always secretly hated me, it was just I was in the way of getting what he wanted, what he thought he deserved and whatever real affection he felt for me wasn’t enough to stop him from killing me to get it. That it was about him, not me.”

“It’s up to you how you want to remember what you had with Wanda, maybe it was a real bond, maybe it wasn’t, you’re the one who would know, even if you change your mind every other day. I just want you to always remember that no matter how you two felt about each other it didn’t give her, or Barton, the right to hurt you.”

Tony paused, “One last thing. We’ve got to assume that the Mind Stone is going to be a target. I know you’ll do your best to protect it and I have full faith in your abilities, don’t think I don’t, but if things go wrong… Well, I’ve had too many friends get hurt because I didn’t do a good enough job of looking out for them.”

Thor tried to maintain a serious demean, fitting for a general on a field of battle, but as he brought his hammer down smashing the skull of another challenging adversary it hard to keep his love of combat from showing.

The Chitauri, their forces depleted from a lack of reinforcements, were unable to swarm the battlefield with cannon fodder as they normally did and were deploying more elite troops to make-up for the lack of numbers.

To Thor’s left a Chitauri unit fell into disarray for no apparent reason. Thor grinned, recognizing Loki’s work. Then three more units dissolved into chaos in quick succession. ‘Loki is most certainly outdoing himself,’ Thor thought. ‘I hope those Elves are watching his back, he must be splitting his concentration a dozen different ways to do so much.’

The Milano, along with a dozen smaller fighters, swept by overhead. They were pursued by a number of Chitauri ships but managed to release their payload to bombard the Chitauri encampment. As the explosions shook the ground Thor raised his hammer and urged his men on. They rushed into the gaps in formation left in the Milano’s wake and exploited the hell out of them.

Step by step, Thor’s forces pressed forward until he was standing on top of the Chitauri mothership. Gamora and Drax had hacked a hole through it’s exterior armor and Thor called down the lightning, channelling it into the breach in the creature’s defenses.

Wanda rushed back to the cave where she’d found the Chitauri. Seeing several Sentries at the mouth of the cave, she reached into their minds. Their thoughts were alien, it was difficult to understand what they feared and the Chitauri weren’t alone in their minds, they were all interconnected. Bursting with her newly restored powers she refused to be denied. Wanda pressed deeper, reaching for the primeval fears that transcended species.

And then Wanda’s powers connected, for a moment she caught a flash of a looming figure, "The reaper," their minds gibbered and there were so many, the fear so deep that the backlash knocked Wanda off her feet. But given the effect Wanda’s momentary defenselessness went unnoticed. The Chitauri boiled out of the base, fleeing in a blind panic.
Wanda shook off the shock to her system and pressed on into the deserted base. She followed the feel of the few remaining minds down into the network of caverns. She used her powers to levitate herself through a hole in the floor then she felt her heart freeze. All her hopes of reconciliation, of someday, withered and died.

Vision lay on the ground wrapped in black tentacles, a gaping hole in his forehead where the Mind Stone had been. A woman stood nearby pounding a blue crystal that had consumed both her hand and the Mind Stone against a wall in an attempt to shatter the crystal. From the moment her powers had returned Wanda had known that something terrible had happened to Vision, but seeing him like that, his attacker standing over him, Wanda shrieked in outrage, red lanced out of her hands and smashed the other woman into the wall, shaking loose a rain of stones from the ceiling.

The other woman stood up and cracked her neck. She made one last, futile attempt to free her hand then grinned toothily at Wanda. “Will you put up a better fight than he did?” she asked.

“I’ll kill you!” Wanda screamed, tendrils of her magic whipped out around her in an uncontrolled frenzy of fury. They crashed into the walls and ceiling, shattering rock as they lashed at the woman. The blue skinned woman ducked and wove effortlessly between the fiery tendrils of Wanda’s magic. She flipped over one as she reached for her spear- And would have retrieved it except her dominate hand was still trapped in the blue crystal.

In the moment of hesitation when she switched hands one of Wanda’s tendrils caught her. Wanda sent her power burrowing into the other woman’s mind but she found no fear, only a fanatic’s dedication and a name: Proxima Midnight, Child of Thanos. ‘Dead,’ Wanda thought and threw her against the wall with all of the strength she possessed.

The black net ripped free of Vision and reformed as a spear in Midnight’s off hand. Wanda flung her hand forward and a cannon ball of red energy flew at the other woman. She ducked under Wanda’s attack and flew forward, spear extended. At the last second Wanda tried to shove it aside with her magic but the point of the spear still drew a thin, red line along her side, cutting through the leather jacket, clothes and skin like a hot knife through butter.

The pain struck a moment later. As Wanda’s body convulsed her already uncontrolled power went mad. The cavern shook and there was almost no space not filled with the witch’s blood red magic. Proxima Midnight backed away, the Mind Stone still sealed, within her hand but inaccessible. “I have what I came for,” she muttered before leaving Wanda to her fate.

After several minutes the storm subsided. Wanda collapsed beside Vision. “Outside of family- you were the only one who never- abandoned me,” she whispered. “I just wanted- Sorry- Never- never wanted to hurt you. Couldn’t stand- a cage. Sorry- Hurt you- Inevitable, with- with you caring about- him. If- there’s anything- after- I’ll apol- if you- if we- Wasn’t him- Just an easy- Just want to be okay- With you.”

The last thing Wanda saw as her vision went dark was petite metal feet running toward them.

Iron Lass, FRIDAY, crashed to her knees beside Vision, her hands scabbling for the amulet around his neck, “Good on you, Boss,” she breathed in relief as she pinged the Mind Stone-inspired hard drive and felt a response from Vision.

Once the amulet was secured in a compartment in her armor FRIDAY turned her scanners on Wanda but found no signs of life. For a moment, a very long moment given FRIDAY’s processing speed, she stared at the two bodies lying on the floor. She slung Vision’s body over one shoulder, ‘Maybe Dr. Cho can use it to make him a new one,’ and Wanda’s over the other, ‘It’s the right thing to do. There might still be something that can be done for her. Klamath Falls is closer but the
Loki leaned against a boulder watched smugly as Thor called down a massive lighting bolt and the smell of charred starfish began to waft across the battlefield. The battle had been long and hard fought but they’d won, ‘And there’s none with eyes who could deny that I did my part,’ Loki thought brushing a strand of sweat drenched hair out of his eyes. His helmet sat on the ground beside him and he was happy to be free of its weight. The unit of elven archers who had been assigned to Loki’s command also relaxed as the battle wound down. Heavy units moved in to help finish off the critically injured mothership while other forces concentrated on eliminating remaining pockets of resistance.

When the attack came it was over in a moment. An elite Chitauri unit with chameleon-like camouflage abilities appeared already in and among Loki’s unit. They struck without hesitation or mercy, slaughtering the archers before they could muster a defense. Loki was on his back, a collar locked around his neck before he knew what was happening. As he watched the Chitauri disposed of the Elves’ bodies and assumed their forms with one of their number taking on Loki’s own appearance.

“Convenient is it not, how you frequently flaunt your ability to hide yourself from Heimdahl's sight?” a voice that shook Loki to the marrow of bones asked. “If Thor and his companions vanished from his all seeing gaze for a few seconds it would raise suspicions, but with you? It is just Loki being Loki.”

“The Other,” Loki breathed, “You’re dead. I verified the rumors.”

“Even past death I serve my Master,” The Other said. “As you should have, if you were smart. But given all the time you have and will spend breaking under my hands, I think you should use my name. It is Corvus Glaive that you should beg for mercy, for death.” Then he smiled cruelly, “Not that I will grant it to you.

“Call the Watcher of Worlds,” Glaive ordered his men. “Summon the Bifrost. I will follow with this wretch.”

Loki watched helplessly as the Chitauri who looked like him called for Heimdahl. In a moment the Bifrost was there, a steady gate to allow the whole unit to pass through, to invade Asgard.

Then Glaive was dragging him forward, into the gate. Loki wriggled free and slid through the warped boundary of worlds created by the Bifrost, not falling, but making his own path between the worlds, trying to get ahead of the Invasion, to warn Tony and Asgard of what was coming. Trying to stop Glaive from retrieving the Tesseract and the Infinity Gauntlet from Odin’s vault.

Trying and failing.

Rhodes kept a close eye on Harley while the two of them and several military units fought to contain the Chitauri fleeing north before they reached Klamath Falls or Medford. Captain Marvel, Spider-Man and Komodo were south of the outpost Wanda had discovered, trying to prevent those fleeing in that direction from getting to Redding.

Thanks to Vision’s warning the Avengers had already been enroute when he went offline. When they lost contact with Vision, Rhodes had put a call in to the closest military installations for back-up. By the time he was finished with the call, FRIDAY had gone AWOL. They hit the California-
Nevada border just seconds before the Chitauri all went insane, fleeing their secret base in all directions, killing anything that got in their way. The small communities of Tulelake, Merrill, Dorris and Worden were gone, from what Rhodes had seen he estimated casualty rates among the local farmers and ranchers was at least eighty percent. Given the Chitauri were in a blind panic, Rhodes suspected, somehow, Maximoff’s powers were behind it and wished the young woman a speedy trip to hell.

Mortar shells exploded around them. Harley, Iron Man, was handling himself well, quickly targeting and taking down any units that proved too much for the military’s tanks. They were holding the line Rhodes realized but the Chitauri weren’t stopping, wouldn’t stop until every last one of them was dead.

“Colonel,” Amadeus Cho reported over the comms, he sounded shaken and almost entirely unlike himself, “The Chitauri are launching major ground attacks on New York, Wakanda, Moscow, New Delhi, Cusco, Seoul and Cairo. All Enhanced and Military forces are being mobilized, everyone, everywhere. The whole world is under attack.”
Chapter Summary

The Avengers Academy comes under attack.

Chapter Notes

Does anyone know where I could find the text of Toomes' villain monologue to Spider-Man? I'm thinking about writing some sort of rebuttal to the notion that what he was doing was no different from Tony/SI pre-Afghanistan.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Previously in “Lima to Stockholm”:

“All along, your end game was going to be sending me to Thanos with a bomb in my chest,” Tony breathed. “You know I can't take your word that the war’s that bad.”

“To sit on Hlidskjalf would drive a mortal insane but I could attenuate the vision it grants, if you have that much trust in me,” Loki offered. After a moment he added, “I plan to go with you. The war is going poorly, I will act as if I am foolish enough to believe that Thanos would take me back if I offer him something of sufficient worth.”

“Me,” Tony realized. “Why would Thanos care about me?”

“There is power in names, Merchant of Death,” Loki replied. “You are an acolyte of the mistress he so ardently courts.”

Tony stood on Hlidskjalf, Loki behind him, the demi-god’s hands over his eyes. “Prepare yourself,” Loki said. And then Loki screamed.

Tony’s mind was assaulted by hundreds of images, the sight of everything in the universe pouring into his brain all at once, it dwarfed even the normal maelstrom of thoughts that whirled through his brain. Being Iron Man had taught Tony to focus on one moment, not to allow his thoughts to dart off on a thousand different tangents. The practice was enough, just barely, for him to shut out enough of information streaming into his brain not to be driven mad. He saw a Chitauri fleet several months’ journey from Earth and thanked the fates that Wanda had triggered the attack early as he could easily picture the Earth falling if the Chitauri army had attacked with air support. He saw an ancient world. He saw a doctor pulling a sheet over Wanda’s face. He saw the rise and fall of an empire. He saw the woman Vision and Wanda fought hack off her own hand then bore through the stump of her severed wrist to retrieve the Mind Stone from it’s crystal prison.

“My merchant,” a feminine voice like a rattling of bones whispered in Tony’s ear and he flinched. “Do not shy from me. Without death, life would crowd upon life until all that is would beg for surcease. My Acolytes are not agents of evil. You are called, were born, to address an imbalance.”
And the images kept pouring into his mind.

Jim Paxton glanced at his ‘troops’ with a wry twist to his lips. He was a tenured police officer, a commander with more than ten years of experience under his belt. He was a baseline human without any advanced technology to make up for it. He’d ended up in charge of the Academy’s defense force, the assignment given out to those members of the Academy to keep them from rushing off to battle.

The two senior members of his unit were both sixteen: Abby Boylen, Cloud 9 was in his firearms class and a natural marksman who could summon a flying cloud. Kamala Khan, Ms. Marvel for her idol, was a metamorph who had gotten her powers young and never wavered in her determination to become a hero, even after being kidnapped. Humberto Lopez, Reptil, was fourteen and could take on characteristics of various dinosaurs. Jimmy Santini, Batwing, was a twelve year old flyer. And Molly Hayes, Bruiser at least this week, was ten with the strength to rival most adult super soldiers.

Kamala and ‘Berto were ready, it was just a question of age and whether or not the war justified waiving those requirements for the two of them. Abby wasn’t, if she was put in the field her skill as a sniper was going to get put to use. When Jim read her psych-eval what it said to him was that Abby was a good kid, give her the order and she’d take the shot because she was inclined to trust authority figures but for the same reason she wouldn’t be okay with it later. She was a sheltered sixteen-year-old kid and they had no right to ask her to kill someone but if the war went on much longer they would. ‘Well, it’s not hard to dehumanize the Chitauri,’ Paxton thought with touch of self-loathing. ‘And we can always hope that by the time she has to pull the trigger, she’ll be doing to protect her home not just because her superior told her to.’ Jimmy and Molly were just too young. ‘Younger than Cassie, and I’m supposed to take them into a firefight?’ Cassie, Maggie and Mercedes Keener were inside the compound along with Hank Pym. There were also a dozen UN combat support personnel, Maria Hill and her division of former S.H.I.E.L.D. agents, who’d been held back to help defend the Academy if it came to a fight.

Hank came in, just ahead of Agent Hill, he was wearing an Ant-Man helmet. “They’re coming,” he said.

“My information says the same,” Hill confirmed.

“A few hundred of them broke off from the main army and are headed straight toward us, according to my sentry-ants,” Hank finished.

Paxton took a moment just to gather his feelings about what was going to happen and put them aside. “We defend inside our Arc Shield perimeter. If they break and go around us, that’s a victory.” He took a deep breath, “I’ll go explain it to the kids. What happens outside of the shield is outside of our jurisdiction.”

“Death is renewal. Death is the old making way for the new. But it is the nature of life to want to extend it’s moment, to cling tenaciously. I do not hate life for being true to itself.

“Once upon a time there were a magnificent and brilliant people bursting with life, they called themselves the Titans. Like so many others the desire to live longer pushed their society to new and ever greater heights of achievement. As they added years then decades to their lives my sibling, Eternity, attempted to withhold the blessing of new life from them but they defeated him. Their planet grew crowded with life but they were not deterred. Their span of life grew and grew until they only came to me from violence or accident. They made themselves hardier so that accidents could almost always be corrected and they only entered my realm through meticulously planned intention.
They did not choke on their excess of life as they were meant to, they built ships to pierce Infinity and spread among the stars, crowding out younger, lesser life-forms.

“And so as they had rejected Eternity’s efforts to provide balance within his own house, I, his antipode twin, stepped in.”

“The Chitauri are burrowing under the shield,” Hank reported distractedly. He put his hands to the helmet on his head, commanding every ant he could reach to swarm the invaders, sending them into the Chitauri’s eyes and mouths, their noses and ears, and every other orifice to bite and bite and bite.

Over a dozen of Chitauri died under the ground as they dug. Their fellows shoved the bodies aside and kept going. The first three Chitauri to break into the Compound grounds died after a few steps, overwhelmed by the venom pumped into their veins. The next twenty were blinded before they emerged from the crude tunnels but that didn’t stop them from doing damage. The first casualty among the UN forces died within minutes of the Chitauri emerging from their tunnels.

Hank saw the battle from the perspective of the ants. He saw men huddled behind hastily thrown up breastworks of sandbags. The men threw wires and lightning at the invaders causing them to fall dead. He saw the Chitauri build their own barricades around the mouths of their tunnels with the bodies of their dead. The armor encasing fallen Chitauri provided shelter to their living comrades until there were enough invaders within the Compound Shield to rush the men. The Chitauri scaled the sandbag walls and dove among the men with energy rods and slashing mandibles. The ants understood the Chitauri’s willingness to die for their brethren more easily than they understood men but the men smelled of Earth and the Chitauri did not so they accepted Hank’s directions and protected their home from what was other.

More of the men died then there was a reptile-mammal smelling that raced among the Chitauri, ripping and tearing. There was lightning from flying men. The men who had been there originally rallied around their reinforcements. The battle between the men and the Chitauri poisoned the Earth, regardless of who won the Ants would have to move on afterwards. The bodies of the men could have been worthy food but the Chitauri were not of Earth and not suitable and their blood soaked the ground.

“I called acolytes from within the Titan people to address the imbalance. A cult arose that believed, to be precious and worthwhile, life must have an end. At first those within the cult all decided for themselves the proper allotment of life. They studied their history and their bodies in great detail to determine the natural span of Life and how to end it. Once they had had what they determined was their share of life, they came to me of their own volition.

“The practitioners of this new religion sent out missionaries into the populace. They found converts, Life without end is not a guarantee of paradise. Entrenchment, stagnation. Where the stars had allowed them to escape the uncleared old choking the literal life from the new, they could not escape the metaphorical choking, old ideas choking out the new. And those who wished for change, for renewal were receptive to my acolytes call: Come, leave the old behind. If life will not change leave it behind.

“At first the others looked on my acolytes and their converts as self-defeating lunatics. But when they saw that Ideas could survive where flesh and blood perished they began to fear. They tried to correct their thinking but those who choose to embrace a new faith are ardent. Those in power among the Titans institutionalized those who would embrace me, then incarcerated them to quarantine the Idea that Death is necessary aspect of All That Is.
“Adversary breeds dedication. As time went on there arose great proselytizers among my acolytes and they built consensus among the True Believers until a ‘correct’ answer had been decided on. Once they were ‘sure’ of when death should come they began to forcibly take the lives of any who took more than their allotment of life.

“War broke out. My followers were small in number but they had knowledge of how to kill and little fear of being killed.”

Cassie Lang huddled between her best friend Mercedes Keener and her pet ant in the security control room near the center of the Avengers Compound. Her mother was next door, helping in the infirmary, and Jim was outside making sure they stayed safe. Dr. Hank sat at table nearby with an Ant-Man helmet on while Agent Maria stood in front of the security screens, issuing orders to her men. “Wasp and Ant-Man are on their way back but the Chitauri will hit first,” she warned.

Cassie caught sight of Agent Mike on one of the screens. His rifle shot crackling blue spheres as he took down one of Chitauri after another. He watched Saturday morning cartoons with Cassie and Mercedes and begged them not to tell anyone that he still liked ‘kid shows’. He fired over and over again, the steady cadence was almost hypnotic to Cassie, but they kept getting closer to Agent Mike. He broke his rhythm to yank a grenade off his belt, the explosion drove almost all of the Chitauri back but one, ichor gushing from a severed limb, charged out of the smoke. Agent Mike raised his gun and fired but the Chitauri slammed him through the concrete wall of the Reactor building. They both fell in a tangle and neither rose again. “Breech, Southeast corner of the Reactor,” Agent Maria relayed coolly. A moment later two more agents appeared in the gap to take Agent Mike’s place.

There was a commotion outside the door. Cassie saw Kamala, her arms stretched out to form a wheelbarrow-ish thing. Jimmy, who was in Cassie’s classes since they moved to the Academy, lay in Kamala’s arms, his bat wings torn, blood pouring from a gash on his forehead as he made pained gasping noises, like he’d cry except it hurt too much for crying.

“We’ve lost the arc shield,” Agent Maria declared. “Bug out, nothing left to protect here.” She turned away from the screens without a second thought. “Girls, head for the garage,” she told Cassie and Mercedes as she gave Dr. Hank’s shoulder a quick shake. “I’m busy!” he snapped. Agent Maria pulled to his feet and steered him out, shooing Cassie and Mercedes in front of her.

Cassie’s mom was in the process of transferring Jimmy over gurney. “No time,” Agent Maria said. One of the medics pushed Maggie aside and injected something that made the boy’s breathing easier. Kamala trundled him off toward the garage while Mom pulled an injured agent’s arm over her shoulders and helped her limp down the hall.

In the garage Cassie saw Jim and Abby, who braided her hair standing, in the doorway with several more agents firing at the Chitauri while a few more agents hurried inside. Jim ducked back behind the door jam, pulling Abby along him a moment before a red bolt scorched the wall behind where they’d been standing. Abby gestured and her flying cloud raced past her to become a fog to obscure the Chitauri’s sight.

Agent Maria loaded Dr. Hank into one of the back seats in a van then went to help get the injured loaded. Cassie and Mercedes buckled themselves in next to Dr. Hank. ‘Berto raced out of the fog on raptor legs with Molly on his back and they tumbled into the van in front of Cassie’s. Her mom climbed into the seat in front of her with the woman she’d been helping as the Agent driving the van started the engine.

Three vans and a pick-up started driving slowly out of the garage, with their side doors still open. Cassie tried not to think about why there were so few agents with them. As they passed through the
gap those still fighting the Chitauri leapt in.

“Fly ahead. Go high, scout out the road ahead!” Jim told Abby as he jumped into Cassie’s van.

“The bloodshed among the Titans curbed their relentless expansion through the cosmos, but the obscenity of their deathless lives still remained. I walked among them once again but only in the guise of War. It was not long before they forgot that the war had started over the question of whether or not Death should be a part of life and became obsessed with which of them could kill more of the other.

“Generation after generation was born and grew to maturity as the war of the Titans grew ever more bitter and vicious until one was born among them who would become my most zealous acolyte. Thanos was born.

“I do not remember if he was born to the side that had once professed that life should conclude with Death or to the side that venerated eternal, unending, life. I had long since ceased to favor one side over the other. They both worked my will with great vigor. It does not matter which dogma gave birth to Thanos, only that he was born.”

Jim Paxton knocked the passenger side mirror off the van to give himself a better field of fire as they sped up the Compound road, trees and Chitauri soldiers flashing by. Maria Hill and another Agent riding in the pick-up at the front of their convoy had brought bazookas. In the sky above Abby raced head, calling out targets for the two of them. Then a telephone pole crashed down between the pick-up and the front van. It caught the hood of the van, the driver swerved and the van rolled. The other two vans skidded to a stop.

“Crowd up!” Paxton ordered as he threw open the door. He ran over the rolled van and tried to muscle the side, now top, door open. Small fingers curled around the crack he’d managed to open, Paxton leaned back and the door was ripped off it’s rails. He offered Molly his hand, lifting the ten-year-old powerhouse out of the van. ‘Berto clawed his way out next with Deinonychus claws. “You’re doing great, Molly,” he whispered.

On the other side of the pole, the pick-up braked hard. Maria Hill blew up the end of the pole furthest from the toppled van, clearing the road while the other agents and Cloud 9 held back the Chitauri.

From inside the rolled van, Kamala handed up Jimmy, then two injured Agents up to Paxton who passed them down to Molly and ‘Berto. “I think the driver’s dead,” Kamala said swallowing hard. Paxton nodded and the four of them helped the injured over to the other vans.

Mercedes and Cassie climbed over the back of the last seat in their van, squeezing into the trunk area with Cassie’s oversized pet ant. Molly helped Jimmy into their seat then joined the other two girls in the back. Kamala, ‘Berto and one of the injured agents headed for the last van while a few of the healthy agents from that van ran to join those in the pick-up.

Paxton was just about to pass the last injured agent up to Maggie in their van when a group of Chitauri broke out of the shrubs along side the road. The grabbed the two men and dragged them away from the vans, while more Chitauri started reaching into the van. Hank sent out a reserve of his most vicious ants to drive them back.

“Daddy-Jim!!” Cassie shrieked. The others in the van watched in shock as Cassie’s pet ant shrank and the girl started to grow. Molly threw open the van’s backdoor and shoved Cassie out while she still fit, before she could crush Molly and Mercedes. The speed at which Cassie was growing seemed
to increase exponentially and a heartbeat later the twelve year old was as tall as a two story building. From her new vantage point Cassie could easily see the Chitauri dragging Paxton to the ground. She reached over and batted them away. Then Cassie picked her stepfather’s limp body up and tucked him in the crook of her arm like a doll.

“We’re going to be overwhelmed,” Maria Hill said. “We have to move.”

Kamala scrambled up Cassie, using her abilities to stretch from one hand-hold to the next until she was perched on the younger girl’s shoulder. “You’re going to have to run after the vans, think you can do that for me?” Kamala asked.

Cassie nodded.

“We’re good! Go!” Kamala shouted. Doors slammed on the vans, Cassie kicked a few of the Chitauri out of their path and they took off toward the City again. Behind them a column of thick black smoke rose from the Compound site.

“Thanos would not be bound by the beliefs of his forbearers. In him was born a new religion, a worship of Death that would chill even the most adherent of those who had preached the belief that Life should embrace Death,” the woman said through Loki’s mouth as Tony tried to tear his eyes away from the dwindling team of Enhanced children and ex-SHIELD, ex-SI, Accords support personnel making their last ditch bid for the safe haven of a city that was about to come under attack itself.

Chapter End Notes

It’s much less painful when decide who to kill off on Team!Cap… Oh, don’t need you for the story, how shall you die? With the Pro-Accords side there’s a lot more agonizing… Ah, I can’t kill you, but, but someone has to die, but, but...

In the comics Cassie has powers because she was conceived after Scott became Ant-Man, since that won't work in the MCU she gets them from years of exposure to the Pym Particles in her over-sized ant.
“Thanos was born and I noticed,” Death said. “Never had one been born to draw my eyes like he did before.”

For a moment Tony felt like he was outside his own body. He could see himself standing in front of Odin’s throne, Loki’s hands over his eyes. Tony could see the rigid set of the demigod’s body as it tried to reject the entity using it as a conduit.

Tony saw armies of Chitauri moving towards a half dozen of Earth’s cities, all ones protected by the Arc Shields. He saw Earth’s forces scrambling to repel the invasion, casualties and collateral damage mounting steadily in the areas they marched through as various Earth air forces pounded the Chitauri ground forces. He saw Rhody’s Avengers, Harley and the Spider-kid included, finishing off the disorganized Chitauri army at the Northern California border before racing back to the East Coast as quickly as they could fly. He saw the convoy of survivors from the Compound racing ahead of the Chitauri, the injured bat-kid getting steadily weaker while the guy in giant girl’s arms remained worrisomely still. Tony saw Pepper and her daughter, their daughter, in the Tower.

“Just moved the gym equipment off to one side;” Dr. Helen Cho told Dr. Samson.

The towering green-haired man picked up a combination weight machine like it was an empty box and carried over to one wall just as May Parker got off the elevator with a group of sixteen to twelve year-olds. “I’ve got a group of hands ready to help,” May declared.

Dr. Cho pointed to four of the oldest kids, “You three are in charge of setting up beds. Three columns, forty-eight inches between beds. The rest of you come with me, I’ll put you to work soon enough.”

On the other side of the room Stephen Strange had a cellphone cradled against his shoulder, “They don’t have much bed space and only two surgical teams but they’re people are all used to treating enhanced. If a patient is stable enough to travel you should be routing Enhanced casualties here and they’ll send as many baselines to Metro-West as possible.” He paused for a moment then said, “I’ll be joining the combatants shortly… I wish I still had the skills to be of use here.”

Pepper hurried through with Nettie balanced on her hip, “Dr. Cho, office levels four through eight are being converted to house the incoming refugees. Roberta, David and a few others are setting up the thirteenth floor for the younger children.”

“Is there any word from the Avengers?” May asked.

“FRIDAY contacted me,” Pepper said closing her eyes for a moment. “She’s secured Vision’s body and his programming. She’ll bring him home. We lost the Mind Stone to Thanos, I’ve let Everett Ross and Accords committee know. He warned me that the Nova Empire will be wanting to read us the riot act over that. They’ve been pressing to have Vision relocated to someplace secure… Maybe they were right.” Pepper shook her head. “The others are dealing with the Chitauri there as quickly as they can then they’ll come back here. We have to hold out without our heavy hitters until then.

At least with Thor’s victory on Titan we shouldn’t have to worry about bombers.”

“Thanos’ birth passed unremarked among his people.” Tony frowned. Now that she was talking about Thanos Death seemed less detached. “He was neither prince nor of any of the great houses.
But he was my disciple.

“Even as a child he killed the Deathless and laid them in my temples as offerings. Before he was of age he joined the ranks of Titan warriors. He was fearless on the battlefield and dedicated each and every kill to me. When the time between battles grew long he still gave me my due.”

Black Cat watched from a rooftop in the outskirts of New York City as the Chitauri army approach like a plague of oversized locust. A part of her felt like she'd been transported to some sort of nightmare world as she watched a squadron of US fighter jets scream by overhead and saw debris and Chitauri soldiers thrown in the air by the explosions that followed close behind the jets. It wasn’t the first time bombs had fallen on New York in the months since the first Chitauri ships had been seen in Earth’s skies but it felt different when it was their own planes dropping the bombs, when their own government decided to sacrifice their cities to win the war. When those few who spoke out against it had no alternative plan to offer. ‘Wars are something that happen somewhere else, in the Middle East or Eastern Europe, not within sight of the Statue of Liberty.’

There had been a steady stream of refugees coming in from the surrounding area for most of the morning but it had trickled off in the last hour. One final convoy came through, a giant girl, two vans and a pick-up full of Accords support personnel, the Chitauri barely ten minutes behind them.

“I’m missing our token guy,” Felicia said to distract herself from her thoughts. “What about the rest of you?”

“It’s not the same with Spidey off being all Avengerly,” Armory agreed with a nervous grin.

White Tiger nodded.

“I am feeling terribly unappreciated,” Dr. Strange announced wryly.

Felicia grinned at him, “We love you, it’s just that you’re… old.”

“Hard to relate to,” Armory added, deadpan.

Stephan put a hand over his heart and groaned theatrically. Then the radio crackled to life and all joking disappeared from their demeanors. “Civilians are ninety percent evacuated back to the Shield but we’re going to try hold the city,” Misty Knight announced. “The air force has been called back, ground forces are free to engage.”

“That fire escape looks like it’s got a decent field of fire,” Tiger suggested to Armory, pointing to a five story building hemmed in by several two and three stories.

It didn’t take long for the Chitauri to reach their position. The four quickly developed a routine. Armory, positioned high above the street, would pick off the Chitauri as they came. Strange opened portals to other dimensions, places where the Chitauri will be a meal for the ditizens assuming they didn’t drop dead the moment the portal closed. Black Cat and White Tiger chucked the Chitauri into the portals for him.

Exhaustion took its toll as the battle continued with surcease. Cat was a hair slow to block and took a glazing wound across her thigh. Strange had caught an energy blast and it would have been bad if not for his cloak, he still looked a little singed. Tiger was favoring an arm after being thrown into a building. Armory’s arm burned where were her weapon joined the flesh. But for nearly an hour they held their ground against innumerable Chitauri.
“Thanos gained renown. He was still young when he was made general of his side’s forces but he
didn’t care. All he cared for was keeping my eyes on him. When the casualties were too few he
sacrificed from his own people to sate me.

“The war among the Titans had been at a stalemate for a thousand years. Neither side could gain an
advantage. Still, their battles checked their people’s population growth and brought a new, if not a
pleasant, equilibrium between to Eternity, Infinity, Oblivion and myself. Thanos broke the deadlock.
Within three years of being given control of his people’s military, they were marching on their
enemy’s capital.

Foggy Nelson sat in the back of a school bus with three other baseline volunteers, all of them trying
to look more at home in combat gear than they actually felt. He’d heard that most of the other
Shielded cities under attack had given up the territory outside the Arc Shield without a fight, leaving
those living outside to evacuate on their own, but New York had the highest density of Enhanced
anywhere in the world. Police and Military forces guarded the gaps in their shield while teams of
Enhanced created a second perimeter outside of the city to hold back the Chitauri army.

“Okay,” Foggy’s team leader said, one hand still pressed to the comm unit in his ear. “We’ve got
sixteen life signs on this block, time to go find out what’s keeping them from evacuating.”

Along with the other volunteers, Foggy hopped out of the back of the bus. Almost as soon as he hit
the ground he spotted a family trudging up the road, each parent had a toddler in their arms. The
father had a slightly older child riding on his back as well where the mother had a large backpack
probably containing their necessities. “I got it,” Foggy said. He ran over, “Let me help get you on the
bus,” he said and the mother let him take her bag.

“Jenny went after the cat,” the father started explaining tiredly, “Finally found her then the damn car
wouldn’t start. Everyone else had bugged out.”

“It’s okay,” Foggy assured him. “You made it.”

“Mrs. Wilshire, she was my first grade teacher,” the mother rambled. “Said ‘Who’d want to bother
with an old lady like her?’ she stayed last time. When we went to check on her after the aliens had
been driven back... Blood, everywhere. Kept thinking they were going to get us too.”

“You’re going to be alright.” Foggy gave her a hand on to the bus then passed up the backpack. “I
need to look for others who had trouble evacuating,” he said then hurried off.

He saw another of his teammates helping a woman in a wheelchair out of the building. “Hey, Mr.
Lawyer, we’ve got a tinfoil-hat claiming the whole Thanos thing is government hoax to restore
Captain America as a propaganda tool to control the masses. You want a crack at him or do we just
hand him a Darwin Award and keep going?”

Foggy sighed, “I’ll see if I can talk him into anything. Call me if you need help with someone who
wants to be rescued.”

He headed into the building and was glad to find that the guy wasn’t actually wearing a tinfoil hat.
“They just want you to think there are aliens so they can say Rogers saved the world and let him go
back to being their enforcer.”

“Didn’t he end up in jail for refusing to submit to anyone else’s authority?” Foggy asked making an
effort to sound honestly curious.

“That’s what they want you to think, it’s probably even what he thinks,” the man declared. “But
HYDRA, they’re everywhere, so when they want to bring the hammer down on a place it’s easy to feed him info about how they’re there, because they are there and everywhere else, then off go the so-called ‘Avengers’ and smash the place, POW!”

“So there are no aliens and no reason to go?” Foggy asked.

The man nodded firmly.

“But what if there really are invading aliens?” Foggy asked. “What happens to you then, if you stay here?”

The man wavered then his face settled in a stubborn look, “They want us all out of our houses so they can plant bugs.”

Foggy searched for another argument knowing in his heart that they’d lose the guy.

“Injured incoming!” the team leader relayed. “Get everyone on fast, we’re meeting a flyer partway.”

“You can debug your apartment later if you’re right,” Foggy said. “If you’re wrong there’s no coming back from dead.”

“I’m not some gullible sheep,” the guy said.

“If you change your mind the nearest Shield portal is the subway on 123rd,” Foggy said and walked away.

As he emerged from the building he saw Jessica Jones half flying, half jumping toward them with a body slung over each shoulder and a trail of blood marking her path. She crashed to her knees in the middle of the street doing her best not to drop her passengers. The man in blue and orange looked like he’d been gutted. The blue skinned woman’s arm was torn off at the shoulder. Foggy felt guiltily relieved not to recognize them as he and several of the others, including the team medic, ran over to help. “There’s more,” Jessica said preparing to turn back.

“Is-” Foggy broke off.

“He’s busy kicking ass,” Jessica replied. She took a running leap into the sky, fell for a moment then started gaining altitude.

The medic worked quickly, putting a compression bandage around the man’s torso. “Get him on the bus, let’s make her next trip shorter,” she said as she started preparing a tourniquet for the woman.

“What about us?” one of the passengers asked.

“We trust the ones still fighting to keep them back long enough,” Foggy said.

“Thanos was as ruthless in victory as he was at war. He crushed his enemies, won the war but my alters were never left empty. The population of the deathless Titans, held in check for a millennium by their war, began to decline. For ten thousand years they had been ascendant, multiply like a virus as they spread across Infinity. Under Thanos’ rule their tide finally, finally began to ebb. And I was pleased.

“The Titan empire collapsed in on itself. There were ceremonial sacrifices in the temples to appease me. In the night whole planets died and none could say why but I saw the hand behind it and smiled upon him.”
The convoy from the Avengers Academy pulled to a stop just outside New York City's shields. Maria Hill had called ahead and there were EMTs waiting, along with Scott Lang and Hope van Dyne, to help transport the injured to hospitals inside but there was nothing they could do for the twelve-year-old Jimmy Santini who had died from his injuries during the mad race to the city.

“Cassie-honey, you need to let the doctors take Jim,” Maggie called up to her daughter choking back her tears. Maggie had seen her husband’s head practically wrenched off his shoulders before Cassie’s powers had manifested. She could see the limp, unnatural way his body hung in Cassie’s arms but no one wanted to tell the little girl that her rescue had come too late.

“Do your thing, shrink her,” Maria Hill demanded storming up to Hank’s van as the old scientist pulled his Ant-Man helmet off.

“How?” Hank demanded.

“We can’t get her inside the Shield,” Hill argued. “They can’t risk shutting it down, even for a few seconds, to get one kid inside and they’ve blocked or collapsed any passages that she could fit through to keep the Chitauri out.”

“None of which changes the facts,” Hank snarled. “She shouldn’t be able to grow without using Pym Particles and all the data, except that ant of hers, says I’ll kill her if I shrink her without a suit. Do you think I’m not doing everything I can? You barely know Cassie but she’s practically my granddaughter! My home is hers, she likes sitting in my lab asking me questions. Don’t you dare suggest-”

Scott went over to Cassie. He found himself avoiding Maggie’s eyes as he triggered his store of Pym Particles and grew to Giant Man. Scott gently eased Jim Paxton’s body out of Cassie’s arms. “Come on Baby Girl, time to think small,” he said desperation creeping into his voice.

While Scott continued pleading with Cassie Hope shrunk down to the Wasp and joined Kamala on Cassie’s shoulder where the older girl had remained perched since Cassie’s powers manifested, providing her with direction and a calming presence. “Kam?” Hope whispered. “You need to gather the rest of your team and get them inside the Shield.”

Kamala looked from Cassie to Abby, Molly and ‘Berto on the ground. “We’ll take care of her from here out,” Hope promised. Kamala frowned but gave Cassie as much of a hug as she could manage and climbed down while Hope took her place. “Hey Cass,” Hope began. “I need you to remember how you felt right before you grew okay?”

“There’s got to be a portal building with loading dock doors on the outside of the Shield,” Hank told Maria. “If not? Then we knock a hole in a building big enough to let Cassie inside.”

“Then what?” Maria demanded. “All the large holes in the perimeter were sealed because we can’t defend them! She grew without a suit, isn’t that evidence that you can shrink her without one?”

Kamala huddled with the other three Academy students for a moment before leading them over to Maria and Hank. “If Cassie can’t get inside the Shield we’re not going either,” she declared. “We’ll stay out here and help her fight.”

“No you’re not,” Maria stated flatly. “Sacrificing five instead of one so you can feel better about ‘losing together’ or whatever other dumb shit is going through your head is not tactically sound. You’re going to get inside and live to fight a battle where you might actually make a difference.”

“Are you going to tell that to her parents?” Kamala demanded.
Maria’s mouth thinned. “It’s a different situation,” she said.

Scott put his hands on Cassie’s shoulders, “Look at me Cassie-Baby. Look at Daddy, like this,” he said as he started shrank then enlarged again. “Now do with me, for Daddy.”

Mercedes slowly wiggled out from the back of the van where she’d been largely forgotten in the chaos. Her face was ashen and her eyes were red. She walked carefully, gingerly, over to where Hank and Maria were arguing. “Dr. Hank?” she asked timidly, tugging on his sleeve.

“Mercedes? What are you doing here?” Hank exclaimed. “You should already be on your way to the Tower.”


Hank stopped marching Mercedes toward the nearest gap in the Shield.

Mercedes held up a normal sized ant. “I kept him safe.” She sniffled, “Keeping an ant from getting smushed was all I could do.”

Hank carefully held out his hand for Ant-zilla to crawl on. “You did a good job Mercedes,” he told her. “Hill! Get Mercedes and the other kids inside!” he added handing Mercedes over to Maria as he hurried toward Cassie. “I’ve got an idea of what happened now!”

“You’d better hurry,” Maria warned. “The front lines are collapsing as we speak.”

“War returned to the Titans, a war against Thanos.

“My champion found allies among those lesser peoples whose growth had been stunted by the shadow the Titans cast. They were candles beside a bonfire but they were many and they aided him.

“More importantly, I had once again picked a side to favor. And I favored Thanos far and above his allies. He burned so bright in my sight.

“Thanos won that war as well. And then there was one.”

Amadeus Cho stood at the center of the Tony’s lab in the Tower, every holographic and physical interface was in use streaming data from across the beleaguered city into the lab. The cacophony of incoming reports from the various teams mixed with images of fighting. Readouts graphed the power draw from the Arc Shields and maps highlighted any energy expenditure as possible indications of hostile activities.

It had been J.A.R.V.I.S. then FRIDAY’s role to absorb all that data, filter it down to keep Tony’s attention on what was important. FRIDAY couldn’t do that and be the primary pilot for an armor. No one had expected her fill-in to be a human being.

Helen Cho came to S.H.I.E.L.D.’s attention, not for her revolutionary work in biological tissue engineering, but because of her son. Amadeus had been tested and checked for evidence of Enhancement since preschool. Every few years someone had come back and retested him because they simply hadn’t been able to accept the results: Amadeus Cho was a baseline human, he was genius with an unusual knack for calculating probabilities. Once he started studying physics, classical mechanics, he applied it to the world around him with ruthless accuracy. A.I.M. and HYDRA started competing with S.H.I.E.L.D. to recruit him before Amadeus was old enough to go to middle school. He incorporated human elements into his system without hesitation, predicting emotional responses
with only a twenty percent loss of accuracy. Figuring someone was going to make him join something Amadeus picked the Rising Tide as he didn’t disagree with what he knew of them and they provided him with advanced warnings whenever other groups got a little too interested in him. He took to running away whenever he expected the latest alphabet soup organization to turn up on his doorstep.

After the Accords and SHRA became law Amadeus allowed himself to tested one last time then he signed and left it to the committees to haggle over his classification. Easy to say Amadeus Cho wasn’t Mechanically, Biologically or Supernaturally Enhanced. His intelligence wasn’t of alien origin. But did he count as Gifted without a genetic or physiological quirk that they could point at to set him apart from baseline humans? Was he Talented like the Bartons or Castles of the world who stepped into the fray with nothing more than their skills and determination, and perhaps, insanity? Did it even matter?

Amadeus Cho didn’t have powers that could level a building—He could level a building with several minutes to study the construction and a few household chemicals, but that wasn’t the same. Was it? - He wasn’t going to go toe to toe with the next lab accident reject to run wild—Why would he when he had a telephone and a girlfriend with a rolodex of Enhanced on speed dial, including teleporters, to get someone better equipped for a brawl involved? -Amadeus was just the Avengers’ coordinator, a fill-in for when FRIDAY was in the field. Wasn’t he really just a glorified telephone operator?

Rhodes rolled his eyes and let the stupidity play out without intervention in the hopes that the various villainous organizations that had been interested in Amadeus would also believe he was harmless because his abilities were intellectual rather than physical.

“Mr. Cage, we’ve got Chitauri inside the Shield. I need your team to five blocks north in ten minutes. Engage and push them east. Captain Stacy, you’ve got fifteen minutes to get snipers in place at Jamaica Station. Ms. Wing, you’ve got company as well, Roy Wilkins Park terrain favors your team and they’ll be there in ten minutes. Mr. Hogan, I need the Centurion’s sensors where Murdock Ave intersects the Arc Shield, we’ve got a hole somewhere in that region to plug.” Amadeus rattled off, his eyes never pausing as he moved from one view screen to the next. “Vulture, National Guard unit at Van Cortlandt Park needs aerial support. I’m sending a glider unit as well, they’re going for the Bronx Arc Shield generator.’

Amadeus spun around as he saw movement on one of the subway cameras. His eyes widened in alarm, “Ms. Potts, Agent Morse, there’s a unit headed for the Tower Reactor, fifteen strong. I’m sending interceptors but…” he said even as he keyed up com-channels for the nearest units.

“Understood,” Bobbi Morse replied.

“There was one Titan, one of the deathless obscenities, left. To forever secure his place as my most favored acolyte all Thanos had to do was kill that last Titan. To do as his most ancient forerunners had done and recognize when he had exceeded the life allotted to him but Thanos balked at that and I turned my eyes from him.

“In a deluded attempt to regain what he had lost Thanos destroyed his allies. He buried my temples under the rotting corpses of sacrifices that would have come to me in their own time. Like a fool, the more I turned from him the more obstinate he became, clinging ever more tenaciously to his chosen course.”

The Tower’s Arc Reactor illuminated the room with its electric blue glow that was duplicated in the miniature reactor high on Pepper’s chest. Her armor was fully activated. Bracelets and anklets unfolded into repulsor gauntlets and boots. Relays, normally disguised as gems, earrings, hairpins, a
delicate chain belt, generated translucent blue shields to serve as her armor. Beneath the blue of her shields, Pepper’s skin glowed a coppery orange from the Extremis in her modified genes.

Because the Arc Reactor and Arc Shields were the keystones of New York City’s defenses ATCU had been put in charge of their defense. Pepper and her small team of technicians were supported by Bobbi Morse, the cyborg Deathlok and a team of dedicated ATCU operatives.

“Agent Morse!” Amadeus voice rose with urgency, “The Chitauri aren’t going for the Arc Reactor! They’re attacking the grid!”

While he proceeded to give Bobbi the best intercept path, Pepper turned to the SI team, “Ready for this?” she asked.

The grizzled, older man who led the technical team grinned, “Ma’am, I was a Seabee before Tony hired me, I trained the rest of them: Construimus, Batuimus - We build, we fight.”

Pepper smiled back, her eyes fierce. “Then let’s get to it.”

Bobbi’s team of agents took the lead. “Remember, small ordinance only,” she said as they got close. “We don’t want to finish sabotaging the shield for them.”

As soon as they were through the door, the agents, Morse and Deathlok started firing on the Chitauri. While the baseline agents found shelter to keep firing from Deathlok waded into the thickest concentration of enemy soldiers like an unstoppable force. Morse flicked her staves out, she moved through the Chitauri, slipping under their attacks and responding with her own. Together they physically drove the Chitauri back from the cables that took power from Arc Reactor to the city’s shields.

Pepper’s team dove in the moment the Chitauri were pushed back from the cables, smoothly switching the load to yet-undamaged redundancies and replacing the components that the Chitauri had already gotten at. Extremis and armor blazing, Pepper set herself between her technical team and the fighting.

Blue cracks of energy marked the Agents’ kills. Deathlok grabbed a Chitauri soldier and snapped its neck before shooting two more with the guns in his forearms. Bobbi crushed another’s windpipe before switching to an adapted taser.

One of the Chitauri made a break for Pepper’s team, a grenade in hand. Pepper snatched up a discarded length of pipe, Extreme turned it red-hot in seconds. She rammed the pipe through the Chitari’s eye then brought both of the shields generated by her palm repulsor units up to create a V, channeling the explosion away from critical components and the combatants.

“A pipe?” Bobbi asked when the fighting died down. “Why not use repulsors?”

Pepper shook her head. “I can use them either as a shield or as a weapon,” she said. “I can’t instantaneously switch from one to the other.”

“Thanos failed in his service to me and I turned from him. My favored acolyte had become full of himself, puffed up with his own importance. He conceived a plan to summon me to kneel at his side like a concubine when it was he who should come to me as a supplicant. He decided that the way to win back my favor was not to submit to my will but to slaughter all that lives and dedicate his perversion to me.

“When the Titans refused to submit to the balance of comos Eternity failed to address the greedy in
his house and so it fell to me to relieve the Universe of an excess of life. I called forth Thanos and favored him in his endeavors but he was not content to be a counterbalance. I am not Eternity, like you my Merchant, I prefer to clean up my own messes. My overzealous acolyte will fall, my siblings need not bother themselves to fix the mistakes of MY house.”

“The Tower is standing. The Arc Shield is holding. There are Chitauri inside the shield but we’re holding them back. We’re holding the Arc Reactor, the Shield generators, the Tower,” FRIDAY reported as the Avengers raced back to New York.

They flew over bomb cratered neighborhoods, over streets strewn with bodies where the Chitauri had come too quickly for evacuation. Fifty miles from the perimeter of the shield War Machine, Captain Marvel, Iron Man and Iron Lass launched themselves out of the quinjet, speeding back toward their city, their family. Fifteen miles out they hit the area New York’s Defenders had tried to hold the city. Chitauri bodies littered the streets, like driftwood after a flood. But mixed in with the alien bodies were police officers, soldiers and the occasional bright, blood stained body armor of one of Earth’s superheroes. Rhodes tried to take comfort in how few civilian bodies were seen on the battlefields. The fallen had done their job, they’d kept those who didn’t have a fighting chance safe, they hadn’t died for nothing.

Cold comfort when he recognized dark, curly hair and a bionic arm. Misty Knight, New York’s primary liaison between the police and Enhanced lay dead where she’d fallen. Behind her was an segment of the subway where the tunnel had been ripped open to allow access from the surface, it would have been a highway for the Chitauri to stream into the city, passing under the Arc Shield but Knight and a mixture of police and Enhanced had held the Chitauri army off until their allies had collapsed the tunnel behind them, sealing the gap. Rhodes had worked closely with Misty Knight since SHRA passed three years ago. But the battle was still ongoing, there was no time to mourn the loss of a friend and trusted ally in both battle and politics. “Mark the spot,” Rhodes murmured quietly to his onboard computer. “We’ll come back for her once we’re done.”

Spider-Man and Komodo remained behind on the Quinjet only because carrying them would have delayed the fliers. By the time they reached the Shield, the other four had already engaged the Chitauri swarming over New York’s primary line of defense. The Chitauri sought out gaps in the Shield and tried to force their way past the city’s defenders. They dug into the concrete, trying to create their own passage in. They attacked the Shield itself, trying to overload it.

“Good thing I had a nap on the flight back,” Komodo remarked. “Nothing like a cat nap to refresh a body between marathon bouts of slaughtering alien invaders.”

“Amadeus, how’s the Shield’s strength?” Peter asked his eyes straying from the Chitauri to the quinjet’s missiles. “You think it’s up to playing anvil?”
Late but long, and honestly a little exhausting to write.

Feels a bit like I should add a “Not Wakanda Friendly” tag for this chapter.

“So this big murder/suicide thing Thanos was supposed to be doing. Was he actually in on the plan or did you just expect him to figure it out on his own?” Talking back to the entity possessing Loki was one of the hardest things Tony had ever done.

He supposed, in Afghanistan, that other people might have found it easier to let themselves believe that the torture would stop, that they’d be allowed to go home, if they just complied. But Tony already knew what happened after assholes had what they wanted from you, he’d known from the start that defiance was his only chance.

Walking into his Tower to face Loki with only his wits? Running his mouth to buy time while J.A.R.V.I.S. got him functional armor? That had been simple. Giving Odin a piece of his mind about the All-Father’s less than stellar parenting style while he’d been the god-king’s prisoner? Tony hadn’t thought twice about it.

Standing up to Rogers after the implicit threat of a log ripped apart with bare hands- Tony honestly couldn’t remember if he’d been afraid of Rogers then or if the fear had only come later, after Siberia, after he had proof, in broken bones and icy cold abandonment that the threat wasn’t an idle one. ‘I must have still believed Dad and Aunt Peggy’s stories, that Steve Rogers was a good man and that it was safe to disagree with him regardless of his powers, when I brought that too-earnest kid to the airport.’ Tony knew he couldn’t have always felt afraid of Steve Rogers but for the life of him he couldn’t remember when the thought of disagreeing with Captain America became something he had to classify as a risky behavior… Not that that had ever stopped him from doing a thing.

‘I should be afraid to argue with Loki,’ Tony thought, ‘But I’m not. He values me. He LIKES me. Even if he locked me away again I know he’d come back. Doesn’t matter which side of the door he’s on, if there’s a locked door between us Loki is alone. Rapunzel might be the one locked in the tower but only because the witch can’t bear the thought of being without her. Er, I make a lousy princess and even I can recognize that it’s not exactly a healthy relationship model but… I know what it feels like to always be the first abandoned, the first sacrificed but never anyone’s first choice. Loki will never abandon me. For once I’m the best, well, the only friend.’

But right now, this wasn’t Loki. This time, Tony held no illusions of safety, no belief that the entity, that Death, wouldn’t or couldn’t swat him like a fly if he annoyed her. But this whole ‘My Merchant’, ‘Acolyte’ thing… Well, Tony just wasn’t the devout, obedient type and Death or not she was going to have to accept that. Or erase him from existence, which Tony had no doubt she could do.

And even as he spoke Tony was still being bombarded with images of Earth under siege.

Sefu sat outside of the community building, the only one in his village with electricity. The adults
were gathered inside, clustered around the radio but Sefu could hear the news drifting through the open window. The alien army that had appeared to the south in the Congo had crushed a military force in Kivu before crossing the border into Uganda the day before. Everyone was holding their breath, waiting to hear what would happen next.

Through the static the reporter’s voice came on, “UN forces and the African Avengers team are moving to intercept the Chitauri Army moving toward Wakanda—” Sefu thought back to the map on wall of his school room, their village was between Kivu and Wakanda. “However, UN forces are divided between the six Chitauri armies. The militaries of the major powers have sent the bulk of their air forces to respond to the closest threats. There is little air support available to oppose the Chitauri in East Africa and South America—”

“We have just learned, Chitauri forces have engaged the UPDF outside of Kampala. The capital city’s Arc Shield was damaged during an attempted coup by anti-government forces earlier this month after Chitauri bombers inflicted heavy damage on the northern region of the country. Standard military forces are attempting to keep the Chitauri at bay but we are receiving reports of heavy casualties.”

“That’s barely more than a hundred miles to the west,” one man muttered worriedly.

By mid afternoon there was no communication was coming out of the capital. “Sefu, get your sisters, collect as much water as the four of you can carry,” his mother instructed. “I’ll see what food we could take with us.”

“They could come here?” Sefu asked. He looked around and saw the fearful looks on most of the adults’ faces. “Where will we go? Kampala was the nearest Shielded city. The Arc Shields were supposed to keep the aliens away!”

“Wakanda,” his mother said firmly. “We’ll go to Wakanda, they’ve never been defeated and- and they’re sending out aid to their neighbors. This time they’ll help. They won’t turn us away with the aliens behind us.”

Sefu hurried off and found his younger sisters outside their house. The eight-year-old Nea was teaching her five-year-old sister Tabia to make dolls from grass. “We’re to get water,” Sefu informed the girls.

“But that’s a morning chore!” Nea whined.

“Mama says we’re leaving,” Sefu informed her. “In case the aliens come.” He grabbed the family’s water containers and shoved the smaller ones at his sisters, harrying them down the path to the community well. Fifteen minutes later the three children returned lugging the water with them to find their mother waiting with bundles of food and a neighbor family of three, a boy about Sefu’s age, his mother and infant brother, who had a bicycle. They loaded the bike’s baskets with water for both families and hung the food off the handlebars.

Sefu grinned his best friend, Jel, as the two boys took charge of the bicycle, pushing it between them. Jel didn’t smile back, “We’re men,” he whispered to Sefu. “We should stay and fight.”

“With what?” Sefu’s mother demanded tartly. “You have sticks and stones, the aliens defeated tanks with ease.”

Jel only looked more rebellious. His mother sighed, “How will we get the little ones to Wakanda without you boys to help?”
Tony watched as Thor shouted for Heimdahl and received no answer. He saw Pete Wisdom step back to allow the Crimson Dynamo to take the lead in coordinating the European Avengers with the Russian military to prepare for the defense of Moscow. He saw Sabra and Arabian Knight quarreling about how to divide their team to defend both Cairo and Delhi only for Wong to step out of a portal and inform them that Kamar-Taj would see to the Chitauri in India. He saw the Asian Avengers bogged down in politics as they argued about whether or not they could cross into North Korea to deal with the Chitauri discovered there.

“Thanos drew my attention because he always seemed to understand my intentions,” Death said. Tony remembered believing that he and Steve both argued with each other because they both wanted to determine the best course of actions… And if Tony almost always gave in in the end? Well that was just because Steve was Captain America and he was just Tony Stark, perpetual screw-up.

Sam Wilson stood in the back of the conference room in the South American Avenger’s hall in Goiânia, eyes glued to the words scrolling past on the wrist screen that let him communicate with Redwing, wishing his Portuguese was better. He reached up and patted Redwing’s casing grateful, for the translation upgrade that had been added to the drone when he came back to Sam.

“Samuel Wilson,” Thor said gravely more the alien god-Prince than the boisterous golden retriever of a man Sam had heard described by the original Avengers. But even though he was addressing royalty only a small part of Sam’s focus was on the Asgardian, he simply couldn’t tear his eyes away from Redwing, perched on Thor’s forearm like the hunting-hawk he was. “Prince Thor,” he said then could help but add, “Redwing, you been getting into trouble without me?” with a tentative smile and if his voice was a little choked up no one was asking him to admit it.

The drone lifted off from Thor’s arm and went to hover in front of Sam. His eyes were drawn to the glowing red triangle set in Redwing’s casing. “Aren’t those normally blue?” Sam couldn’t help but ask.

Redwing made a self-satisfied chirp. “I am told that he found the color unbecoming,” Thor said, a trace of amusement creeping into his voice. “Per his request young Mr. Keener provided a ruby quartz window over the reactor, as well as a few other adaptations to aid you in your new posting.”

Sam glanced at Thor in surprise then back to Redwing. “You’re coming with me buddy? I figured you’d found a new partner.”

Redwing flew around Sam several times, scanning him.

“I was given a message for you, Samuel Wilson,” Thor stated, his expression turning grave once again. Then he handed over an archaic looking parchment, only the moment Sam touched it the elegant calligraphy began scrolling across the paper like a reader board, “Redwing was not made for you, he was entrusted to you. Redwing is one of Tony Stark’s oldest Artificial Intelligences, only J.A.R.V.I.S. and Dum-E have been active longer. He was not programmed to mimic human intelligence but as a learning system he is mature and able to make choices for himself. He was your partner for over a year, if any has the right to judge if you’re worth a second chance, it’s him.”

“Your gift from Niflheim is unique,” Thor told Sam. “You may have heard that the others incorporate the same sort of magic as Mjolnir to ensure that they are not misused but yours is built into the honorable Redwing. The upgrades you have been given include your wings as well as those integrated into Redwing himself but should he chose to forsake you they will all cease to function.”

“Were you able to follow?” Yo-yo Rodriguez asked after the briefing was over.
Most of the team spoke some English and could communicate with Sam if they chose but for general communications they used Brazil’s official language but Sam was learning and Redwing helped greatly. Sam found that mostly missed hearing English in the conversations around him, the lack of it was a constant reminder of his exile.

“The Chitauri army is marching on Cusco, they’re about three thousand strong. We’re expecting a combined air force with planes from most South American countries and US planes stationed in the Caribbean. They aren’t used to working as a team but given that they’re mostly going to be bombing a ground force that shouldn’t be an issue,” Sam summarized. “Did anyone have a clue what Thanos wants with Machu Picchu?”

North Korea died before a decision could be reached about whether or not to try to save its people. The Asian Avengers hurried to get into place to defend Seoul while the Chinese army attacked the Chitauri from the rear once North Korea was a moot question.

In Russia, the Chitauri came out of the Volga Uplands south east of Moscow. The cities of Penza, Zarechny, Kamenka and Morshansk fell before any resistance could be organized but Ryazan was evacuated. The Russian army and the European Avengers prepared to make their stand against the Chitauri in the first Russian city to fall to the Mongols in the twelfth century. “Not an auspicious omen, eh?” Pete Wisdom remarked to no one in particular.

In India the Chitauri had hidden their growing numbers in the Thar Desert, west of Delhi. As soon as they crossed over into the fertile Indus-Ganga Plain the casualties started mounting rapidly. When Wang and the other sorcerers arrived they found themselves immediately absorbed into the effort to evacuate. They used their sling rings to open portals, transporting hundreds of people out of the Chitauri’s path while the conventional military focused on setting up a defensive formation. One of Wong’s subordinates ran up to him, “The London Sanctum says they need time to disperse the population we’ve sent there.”

“Then send them to Hong Kong until they can,” Wong said his frown added, ‘Why is necessary for me to tell you these things?’

Sabra stared out at the wave of Chitauri streaming across the Great Sand Sea toward Cairo. “Once again a plague of locust descends on Egypt,” she murmured. The Arabian Knight nodded, his eyes also fixed on the coming horde, “Although this time neither of us reveres the one who sent this plague.”

“Seems like you’re giving me a fairly non-cryptic set of instructions,” Tony said, trying to focus as his mind was flooded with dire images from Earth. “Kill Thanos. Yay! The day is won! Or am I missing something?”

Sefu and his family been walking for most of the night when they were caught in the headlights of a car. Quickly the little group crowded to the side of the road. The car bounced by, driving faster than was safe on the heavily rutted dirt road. Several minutes later another car passed them and then another. Before long it was a regular traffic jam, the one lane dirt road was packed bumper to bumper with cars traveling east, away from the capital.

Inevitably one car hit a pothole wrong and blew a tire. Dozens of people from the vehicles trapped behind the disabled car scrambled out and grabbed hold. “I can fix it!” the driver protested futility as he and his passengers jumped out. A few seconds later the car had been rolled out of the road, there was a crunch of glass as the windshield buckled. The car rolled completely and landed back on it’s wheels, then everyone was rushing back to their own vehicles. Several of the passengers from the
disabled car managed to cram themselves into other vehicles and the traffic started moving again. “I could have fixed it,” the driver whispered to himself. Then with a determined look he climbed back into the car and tried the ignition. When the motor turned over he smiled with relief, “I can fix it.”

“What happened? Where is everyone going?” Jel asked an older man who’d stayed with the disabled car.

“There were too many,” the man said shaking his head. “For every ten that fell to our Avengers there were another fifty behind them. Without the Arc Shield there was no way for them to hold the city.”

The driver was struggling with the soft ground and his jack. Sefu shoved the bicycle into his sister Nea’s hands then grabbed Jel and hurried off to scavenge for a piece of wood or corrugate to distribute the car’s weight.

“How far behind are the aliens?” Sefu’s mother asked.

“The Fire-Wielder, Labaraa, and the Matter-Shaper, Splice, were making a good fight of it, giving the others favorable ground to fight from. But it took less than two hours for the Chitauri to push them out of the western half of the city. Even the Avengers, they get tired, I wouldn’t count on them holding the eastern half for as long.”

With the boys’ help the driver was able to change his flat tire before too long, only twenty minutes. “We have room, now, if don’t mind ducking a bit,” the driver offered with a grimace as he looked at the damage to the roof of his car.

“Thank you,” Jel’s mother said. They kicked out the broken front window, secured the bike and their supplies to the roof then crammed inside. Sefu ended up with Tabia on his lap crammed into the back seat along with Jel, Nea, Jel’s mother and the baby. The traffic from the city was starting to thin out so they were able to get back on the road with only minimal difficulties. The car’s overburdened shocks meant every bump in the road was clearly felt as they crawled toward the border. They were still making better time than they would walking that distance. They drove through the night, at one point Sefu looked back and thought he was seeing the dawn only to realize the glow on the horizon was Kampala burning.

Then they heard explosions coming closer and felt the ground tremble. A car flew threw the air and crashed to the ground to one side of the road. There were screams of metal on metal behind them but there was nowhere to go, the car in front of them filled the road, going around would almost certainly result in getting stuck in the soft ground off the packed road. Sefu hugged Tabia as tightly as he could and waited helplessly for whatever would come.

There was a massive bang and one of the aliens was standing on the hood of the car. It ripped the roof off like it was made of straw. The alien tore the driver out of his seat and he screamed once before a wet crunching silenced him forever. Jel kicked at the door trying to get it open. Sefu saw the old man try to shield his mother, their blood sprayed the backseat as the alien stabbed it’s weapon through both of them. Sefu pushed Tabia out after Jel and Nea. He reached back to take the baby from Jel’s mother.

Sefu saw the alien’s eyes on him and knew he was going to die. Then there was a clawed hand erupting from the center of the alien’s chest. The Wakandan King tossed the dying alien aside and leapt over the car to confront the next one. His fearsome bodyguards flanked him, driving a wedge into the alien forces.

“Go! Go!” Jel’s mother exclaimed breaking the momentary shock that had taken Sefu. She pushed Sefu out of the car in front of her and the baby then gathered the other children and started herding
them off the road and hopefully away from the fighting. But there was fighting all around, people screaming and more explosions, no way seemed truly safe. So they just kept going. Sefu picked up Tabia and slung her on his back, it was easier to not think about their mama dead in the car they’d abandoned with her weight reminding him of why he had to keep going. Jel kept ahold of Nea’s hand and tugged her after him. A woman with long dark hair flew overhead casting a gentle light on the fleeing crowd and Sefu felt calmer, the crowd grew less panicked. Sefu grabbed Nea’s shoulder so they wouldn’t be separated. Jel kept leading them onward with his mother at the rear with the baby.

Later, when Jel’s mother stepped in a meerkat burrow and broke her leg, the glowing woman’s power still held sway. “Take the baby,” she said, smiling through the pain. “I’ll catch up with you later.” It was a lie and they knew it was a lie but in the moment, with the soothing light shining down on them they let themselves believe. Jel took the baby and the five children allowed the press of bodies to push them away from his mother.

Onward, ever onward, toward the Wakandan border and the promise of safety.

Thor fiddled with Mjolnir’s handle nervously as he, Bruce Banner and as many Asgardian warriors as possible crowded on to the Milano and the other ships capable of surviving entry into Earth’s atmosphere. Asgard was unreachable and Loki’s unit had been found, slaughtered. Thor didn’t know whether he should take comfort or be fearful that Loki hadn’t been among the dead. “My brother is likely dead,” Thor muttered. “I should be flogged for the part of me that wonders if he may be the cause of Asgard’s silence.”

Bruce gave him a tired look, “With Loki’s record? What else can you think?”

Three hours outside of Moscow Pete Wisdom hummed tunelessly to himself as he lanced two Chitauri’s throats with his hotknives. There was a line of tanks at his back, lobing artillery shells over the hand-to-hand fighters into the mass of Chitauri backing up beyond the hastily erected barricades around Ryazan. Swordswoman and Union Jack flanked him and the Crimson Dynamo flew overhead, getting the most out of his ranged armaments.

In Cairo the Chitauri dove into the Nile in droves tunneling through the soft, silt riverbed to go under the Arc Shield before the city’s defenders were able to respond. A thin, hunched man with purple skin and white hair followed the first wave of Chitauri into the city, ordering the invading forces to the east bank of the river. Sabra, Arabian Knight, their teammates and a unit of Goblin Gliders raced to redeploy, leaving the conventional military units in the dust.

Ships off the coast of South Korea shelled the Chitauri army, trying to thin their ranks before they reached Seoul. “I imagine this is stirring up bad memories for a lot of people,” Xi’an Coy Manh commented to her Korea teammate Ami Han.

“My grandfather was in the war,” Ami said. “But my grandmother says humans have always come up with pretexts to fight one another, that they have learned to do more damage but the causes are as banal as ever. I wonder if she views this war differently.”

Wong and his Sorcerers fell back and fell back, evacuating everyone they could until they’d been pushed back to New Delhi’s Arc Shield. They turned and ran across the last stretch, the zone of leveled buildings left by previous aerial attacks on the city. A few of the sorcerers resorted to their sling rings to teleport across the barrier created by the shield but most headed for buildings on the perimeter, taking up defensive formations just inside the doors. Outside a unit equipped with Falcon wings took to the air, bombarding the Chitauri as they advanced.
Upon reaching the Shield the Chitauri army simply broke and went around it like water rushing around a stone. “The city isn’t their target,” Wong realized with a feeling of dread. Beyond New Delhi lay Uttar Pradesh, one of the most densely populated states in all the world. The territory protected by Delhi’s shield was already teeming with refugees and he was certain the shielded cities of Lucknow and Varanasi were equally crowded. “We must go,” Wong told his Sorcerers, “We must continue the evacuation.”

Along with Tony Death watched as hundreds died on Earth in a matter of minutes. “This is not what I want,” she said. “The aspect of War is only one of my faces and not one I would choose to be dominated by. But it is the only face Thanos knows. He knows no other way to achieve death and so you will be my avatar of war and bring death to him. As in that cave where you built the first Arc Reactor… And when you perfected it while you were again on the verge of death, you will have my favor. Your mind opened even beyond its normal expanse to glimpse beyond into the very working of the universe.” Death tilted Loki’s head to the side and smiled slightly, “Or did you think that everyone’s mind races at optimal clarity when the hand of Death is on them, my Merchant?”

The deserted city of Cusco was at Sam’s back as he stood off to one side, slightly removed from his team. In front of him he watched as the Chitauri crawling over the fields surrounding the city. In the distance he could just barely see the shimmer of the Arc Shield over Machu Picchu, the people of Peru deciding to place the shield to protect the ancient wonder and evacuate there rather than over the modern city.

Several jets lined up for a bombing run, shrieking overhead. A massive being with leathery skin and short thick horns on his head leapt out of the ranks of Chitauri and landed on one of the jets. He punched the wing and sent the jet reeling into it’s wingman taking both out in a massive fireball. The being leapt out of the flames howling triumphantly.

“Isso?... Não é Chitauri,” one of Sam’s teammates, Victor Mancha observed. The young man had been born with only one arm and both his legs had ended shortly below the knee. In the summer of 2015 his prosthetics started improving themselves. Victor hadn’t told anyone, within a year the prosthetics had completely integrated themselves into his body giving him super strength, electricity projection, flight and he could interface directly with computer systems through the electronics in his artificial limbs.

“O problema é que é isso,” Sunspot decided. He was already in his charged form, a black hole of absorbed solar energy. Roberto de Costa was the only super strong individual Sam had heard of who didn’t have enhanced durability to go along with his strength, but he could project energy blasts.

“Pode valer a pena,” Yo-yo said. She had short distance superspeed but was pulled back to her original position after a heartbeat. She switched to English, “Sam, you ready? We’re almost up.”

“I should help clear a path to the big guy?” Sam checked.

Yo-yo nodded, “You and Victor both.”

Sam nodded and launched himself into the air along with Redwing. Victor followed suit using boot-repulsors that reminded Sam of Iron Man except, instead of using his hands to stabilize his flight
several repulsor units unfolded from the sides of his legs to provide balance. Falcon and Redwing peppered the advancing Chitauri with micro-missiles on a narrow path to the big guy, Victor flew after them electrifying any Chitauri who escaped the missiles.

Yo-yo grabbed Poison around the waist and the two vanished in a burst of speed. For a moment they appeared three-quarters of the way down the path Sam and Victor had opened, Yo-yo released Poison an instant before she was pulled back to her original position and Poison ran on ahead. “Let her come!” the big man shouted, gesturing the Chitauri to back away.

Poison stalked forward, smirking. The Chitauri’s leader towered over her but she met his eyes fearlessly. Her eyes took on a venomous yellow glow, for a moment the leader was staggered then he straightened, “A good shot girl but nothing to Black Dwarf, who has survived Thanos’ conditioning.”

Poison turned and started to run as Black Dwarf raised his fist. Sam dove out of the sky, grabbing her under the arms and sweeping her away. “Thanks. My powers go after that,” she said in halting English. Sam swooped to the side, evading the Chitauri-head Black Dwarf through after them like a cannonball and deposited her behind their teammates.

Death gestured to the body she wore, to Loki. “The changes this one made to you when I allowed him to take you back from me restored the years your history had taken from your life-span and even increased it slightly. You may live to see a century. But your life-line has not been extended so greatly as to offend me.”

“That’s good to know,” Tony said distractedly, his mind whirling with thoughts of what she would have demanded had Loki done too good a job of bring him back from the dead and the idea that he apparently had been given a do-over with regards to the life-shortening damage he’d taken from the shrapnel not to mention years of heavy drinking and partying. Also there was the memory of everything he’d learned about how the Vanir had extended their lives and the suggestion that Death wouldn’t start trying to kill them all if he brought that back to Earth… Once he’d beaten Thanos. If that didn’t kill him. If he could leave the prison (safe-haven) Loki had created for him in Asgard… Events on Earth pulled his attention back.

A small unit of Chitauri had made it into Seoul and taken down one of the Arc Shield generators before they could be stopped, the reduced circumference of the Shield turned the World Peace Gate into a gaping hole in the city’s defense. Collective Man combined into his giant form barring the Chitauri from entering the city through the gate. His fellow Avengers arrayed themselves around his feet.

One of the Chitauri knocked Swordswoman’s blade aside. She spun around trying to get her sword back into position. A little ways away both Wisdom and Union Jack saw she wouldn’t be fast enough. A hotknife slide beneath the Chitauri’s raised arm as a bullet entered its eye. Neither were soon enough to stop the Chitauri’s finger clenching on the trigger. Its weapon discharged, Swordswoman fell, a smoking hole in her chest.

Crimson Dynamo sped back toward his teammates. The Chitauri attacked the remaining heroes with renewed fury. Wisdom went down under a dozen attackers. “Fall back!” Union Jack shouted and the tanks started retreating even as he was dragged down. The Dynamo landed heavily and started firing, ten hotknives erupted from the Chitauri surrounding Wisdom. He stood among the falling corpses, blood running down his face. While Dynamo covered him Wisdom grabbed Swordswoman and Union Jack. Not bothering to check if they were alive or dead he tossed them on the nearest tank.

Using their Sling Rings Wong’s sorcerers kept jumping ahead of the invasion, evacuating as many as
they could. They tried not to think about how many they had failed. In the air above the Goblin Gliders and jets did what they could to weaken the Chitauri but it wasn’t enough.

The thin, hunched Chitauri general led his forces on an unstoppable march from the Nile to the Giza Pyramids. He effortlessly undercut both the Middle Eastern Avengers and regular military forces’ efforts to oppose him.

Sefu plodded mechanically after Jel as morning wore on. They’d been climbing up into the hills for what felt like an eternity. Nea tramped along beside him, Sefu knew her little feet had to be killing her but she didn’t complain and he was so proud of her. Tabia’s small weight on his back felt crushing but he couldn’t bring himself to think of asking her to walk on her own for a bit.

The sun was hot in the sky and Sefu thought longing of the water lost with the car. He didn’t let himself remember anything else about the car. The calming effect of the light-lady’s power had diminished as the night wore on but exhaustion kept panic at bay. Everyone Sefu could see looked as tired as he felt, as if thinking about keeping on putting one foot in front of the other was all any of them could manage. The sky was still regularly lit by explosions, they could still hear fighting behind them but no one had the energy to care.

Then there were hundreds of warriors racing toward the frontlines, traditionally dressed but wielding high tech weaponry and using a mixture of vehicles out of a science fiction story. The Wakandan army had arrived. Sefu tried to muster a smile for his sisters, a feeling of relief that reinforcements had arrived and maybe the aliens wouldn’t be able to get past them or at least would be slowed until the refugees could reach the Wakandan Arc Shield but all he could do was keep walking forward. He felt like if he lost momentum he’d simply collapse where he stood.

Forward, forward, always forward.

An unidentified feeling of dread welled up from the pit of Sefu’s stomach, the baby in Jel’s arms started crying and Tabia sniffled against the back of his neck. Jel’s steps started to lag and Sefu pulled slightly ahead of his friend.

Nea tugged on Sefu’s arm, “There’s something bad there,” she said.

“Mama said we’d be safe in Wakanda,” Sefu replied and that was that. They kept walking, ignoring the nebulous feeling of fear at what lay ahead. There was a concrete terror behind them and their mother’s words overrode their instinctive fear.

On one of the four defensive platform built in the asteroid belt between the Sol system’s fourth and fifth planets Tanak Valt, a Centurion in the Nova Corps, finished his report on the situation on Earth. “Nova Prime leaves the decision in our hands, to destroy the Earth now or to join the battle for the planet,” he told his subordinates.

“We have to do something,” Sabra insisted. “Yes, If we destroy the Safa Hospital Shield Generator we’ll lose the eastern half of the city but we’ve already lost it! They are inside the Shield, if we destroy it remaining three generators will cover the city west of the Nile. They won’t have the river to get past us again.” Arabian Knight looked out across the city, “It grates to surrender so much, so easily,” he said.

Wong oriented himself after yet another jump to stay ahead of the Chitauri army, “If they continue on this path, they will march into Kamar-Taj tomorrow,” he realized.
The Crimson Dynamo cocked his head to the side, listening, as he and Pete Wisdom continued as the rear guard for the military’s retreat. “We are ordered to fall back to the Koltsevaya Liniya,” he relayed. “They are surrendering all but the heart of Moscow.”

Collective Man shoved the supporting columns of the World Peace Gate apart, bringing the structure tumbling to the ground and sealing the gaping hole in Seoul’s defenses.

“Well it’s not like I’ve got any particular moral objection to getting rid of a guy who’s out to kill my planet, my family not to mention every fucking living thing,” Tony said. “So I’ll kill Thanos for you, likely blowing myself up in the process if I go along with Loki’s scheme.”

“If you employ my stolen offering’s plans,” Death echoed.

“May I provide an opinion?” Dentarian Rhomann Dey asked the Centurion. His superior nodded. “Even if the planet falls the Chitauri ground forces are no threat to our installations, they cannot prevent us from carrying out our final resort. So why rush? Until the next wave of the Chitauri armada arrives we lose nothing by not destroying the Earth. Why do harm when we still have the chance to help?”

The battle for Cusco had been lost. Only a forth of the original Chitauri forces remained but Black Dwarf could equal an army by himself. Almost all of the regular army forces that had fought alongside the Avengers were gone; jets ripped from the air, tanks torn apart like tissue paper. Sam and his team had been forced back until the Machu Picchu arc Shield was at their backs.

“Breech that Shield! I will be the one to restore the Time Stone! For Thanos! For glory!” Black Dwarf thundered.

“Is the Time Stone really there?” Sam asked.

Roberto shrugged, “Don’t know but we can’t let them get further. Most of the region is sheltering in Machu Picchu.”

“We won’t,” Sam assured the young co-leader of the South American Avenger team. Once he was back in the air he switched his com so he was only talking to Redwing. “You got any ideas on how we’re going to pull that rabbit out of our hat buddy?” he asked.

Then Sam’s gaze focused on the arc reactor set in Redwing’s casing. “I’m having a terrible idea,” he said. “We can take that out right? How much of an explosion would it make if we set it to overload?”

Sam glanced down at the screen on the back of his forearm that tethered him to Redwing. //Radius=0.5km, 60PJ force. Reactor overload if improperly removed following this unit’s forced deactivation.//

“Shit,” Sam sighed. “I guess that plan’s no good, even though the Arc Shield would survive it.”

Black Dwarf marched up to the Arc Shield and punched it. The shimmering surface bloomed with color as it repelled the force of the blow but held. Elsewhere Sam saw Chitauri start to burrow into the ground and remembered reports of how the Compound had fallen. Victor landed among the burrowers and electrified the ground. Sam saw another group trying the same stunt and launched a dozen micro-missiles into the holes they’d started turning them into graves.

Sunspot ran up and punched the massive Chitauri general in the side. Black Dwarf skidded backward then threw his head back and laughed. Sunspot threw blast after blast of solar energy at Black Dwarf, only for him to plow through them. Black Dwarf emerged from the smoke, much too
close to Sunspot. Yo-yo vanished, she appeared at Sunspot’s site a moment too late. Black Dwarf punched him in the chest, Sunspot flew backward, his body splattering the Arc Shield with blood as his bones were shattered by the force with which he struck it. Sam saw Yo-yo’s expression of horror in the moment before she was drawn back to her starting location. Black Dwarf took a moment to raise his arms in triumph before turning his attention back to the shield.

“I don’t have anything beyond my terrible plan,” Sam said.

Redwing chimed to get Sam’s attention. He glanced down at his wrist, //Execute Sam-plan?//

Sam switched his com to the team frequency. “Yo-yo, get everyone in the lee of the Arc Shield when I make my move,” he said. “Five minutes on my mark. Mark.”

“Don’t know how the afterlife works,” Sam muttered to himself. “But odds are Stark’s going to have the chance to punch me in the jaw shortly. And if I didn’t already deserve, I will now.” He and Redwing dove toward Black Dwarf. “Hey! Big and Ugly!” he shouted.

“You challenge me little bird-man?” Black Dwarf smiled broadly.

Sam gave him a confident, cocky grin in return. “You think I can’t?”

“I do not care. I will crush all those in my path, worthy or not,” Black Dwarf replied.

Redwing beeped, indicating time and slid back the ruby quartz window over his arc reactor. Sam fired a burst from his wrist-mounted machine gun, pulverizing little drone’s processor then reached out and ripped the reactor out of his carapace with no finesse.

Sam felt the Reactor heat up instantly, burning his hand even through his glove. He threw it at Black Dwarf then ducked reflexively, pointlessly, as the world went white.

Death released Loki and he fell away from Tony, choking and gasping, his skin a shade of bluish-grey that Tony couldn’t imagine was healthy.

In Uganda, T’Challa turned to face the Chitauri once again, his energy and determination restored as the Wakandan army fell in behind him. The past two days of slow retreat had whittled away at the Chitauri army, although at a tremendous cost. But now, finally, he could stand firm and end this.

The Milano shot through the sky over Seoul, it’s cargo doors opened as it swooped low over the Chitauri’s amassed forces. Thor leapt out of the ship closely followed by Hulk, Gamora, Drax, Kraglin and several dozen Asgardian warriors who’d managed to cram themselves into the ship’s hold. As the last of the Asgardians hit the ground, Quill swung the ship around, a few minutes later Three Dog Night’s “Joy to the World” pounded through the Milano’s external speakers as Rocket and Groot took aim at the Chitauri.

As the battered line of tanks approached the outskirts of Moscow the Crimson Dynamo shot up into the sky, unable to believe what his sensors were telling him. Led by the Red Guardian a veritable army of Russian Enhanced stood ready to repel the invaders. The Dynamo shook his head as his sensors reported their identities: Darkstar, Ursa Major, Powersurge, Perun, Omega Red, Sputnik, Sibercat, Fantasia and many others. Enhanced who’d fought for the USSR in the Cold War only to vanish in the chaos as the Soviet Union collapsed, others who’d been wanted as political dissidents or simply as criminals, all assembled and ready to fight against the Chitauri. Dmitri landed by Darkstar, “I thought you legends but you’re real?” he asked. “You’re here?”

“This is our motherland, how could we not return on a day such as today?”
Wong watched, slightly bemused, as hundreds of Doombots joined the battle against the Chitauri. When one of the green-accented robots landed next to him he remarked, “I’m surprised, they were headed away from your country.”

“Today,” Doom’s voice, as relayed by the bot’s speakers, had a mechanical quality. “But Doom is not a fool who would allow his enemy to gain a foothold when it could be prevented by a timely, and merciless, response.”

Ebony Maw stood atop the Great Pyramid, empty handed and scowling as he watched nearly a hundred Nova Corps ships descend on the city. “Time for a strategic withdrawal,” he sighed.

Sefu blinked wearily at the tall, severe woman barring the small pass through the bowl of mountains into the safety of the Wakandan valley that lay beyond. The shimmering opalescent arc shield glimmered just a few inches above her head. A single wide beam, easily brought down by the pull of a lever, stopped the Shield from closing off the pass.

They’d seen others walking back down the path with expressions of stunned despair, had been warned that they’d be turned away but it didn’t seem possible. “The aliens are killing everyone,” Sefu told the woman, exhausted and confused. “And Mama said Wakanda helped people now.”

A pained expression briefly crossed the woman’s face, “Wakanda agreed to take in five thousand refugees, the number that came exceeded that limit sixteen hours ago. You must find somewhere else.”

“Where?” Sefu exclaimed.

The woman held out five canteens full of water and a small backpack. “There is another pass, two days walk to the north. It will take you through the mountains to Kenya’s border.”

“Mama said…” Sefu repeated. He felt tears welling up in his eyes and tried to force them back.

A pale, strange man with a metal arm stepped out of the shadows. “You’re really sending them packing, Okoye? They’re just a bunch of kids.”

The woman stared at a point just above the strange man’s shoulder, “The ruling council agreed on a number. Wakanda cannot help everyone, if we tried it would be our people suffering.”

The man grabbed the pack and canteens and stepped out of the pass.

“Where are you going James?” the woman asked.

“Thinking Wakanda’s border could use a little less guarding right now,” the man said. “I’ll see ‘em into Kenya, get the Shield between them and the Chitauri even if they aren’t allowed inside it. Maybe see if there are any other groups like ‘em needing a guide to safety.”

“You can’t leave.”

“I’ll come back when there aren’t kids being turned out to die.”

“You’d really go?” the woman asked quietly.

“Halfway out the door, doll.”

The woman lost a fraction of her foreboding posture, “They can’t go to the city but perhaps we could allow them to wait out the battle here on the outskirts of the shielded area.”
The man gave her a small smile, “We don’t even have to tell anyone that we let ‘em sit here and sort out where they should go next while the fighting was still going on.” He turned to Sefu and Jel, “There’s a barracks over this way. Why don’t you get some rest.”

Sefu started crying, he couldn’t help it. The man scratched his head and glanced back at the woman. She made a small helpless gesture. He signed and crouched down in front of Sefu, “Hey, hey, none of that. You did good. You got the little ones here safe,” he stated, his tone awkward and flat as if he didn’t quite know how to be comforting even if he knew the right words. “It’s gonna be okay now.”

Tiger glanced at T’Challa as the Wakandan army turned the tide of the battle, “You couldn’t have called them earlier?” he asked bitterly.

The Doombots had even less regard for their continued existence than the Chitauri. Whenever they were in danger of being deactivated they self-detonated taking their attackers with them. Craters, mechanical and Chitauri parts dotted the ground where they fought.

Omega Red strode forward passing the retreating tanks. His tentacles came to life as he met the Chitauri, growing ever stronger as he fed from their life-force. Once he was well away from any of his allies he set loose his death spores. “For Mother Russia!” Red Guardian shouted the gathered Enhanced charged. The tanks and other military forces halted their retreat and redeployed. “Hn, suppose patriotism has its moments,” Wisdom remarked to himself as the armies clashed.

Kraglin perched on the shattered ruins of the Peace Gate. He whistled and an glowing red arrow threaded it’s way through the fighting. It torn through Chitauri armor and flesh as easily as it pierced the air. Thor stood hammer raised, lighting dancing around him. The Hulk, Gamora and Drax looked for worthy foes and substituted numbers where they couldn’t find any who could stand before them.

Tony waited for Loki to recover himself, then in a lightly scolding tone that experience told him was most effective for getting the God of Mischief to capitulate, he asked, “So, when were you planning on mentioning that my daughter isn’t a figment of my imagination?”

Yo-yo didn’t have a chance to ask Sam for the details of his plan, let alone question it. “Mark!”

She started running, grabbing up the surviving military personnel one by one and dragging them back to her starting spot. From there she shuttled them behind the arc shield. With each trip she took a few normal steps toward their shelter. Her heart was pounding in her chest by the time she was done.

Poison had long since retreated inside the Shield, her power spent for the day. Yo-yo caught a brief glimpse of Falcon confronting Black Dwarf. With seconds to spare she grabbed Victor Mancha away from his task of eliminating the burrowing Chitauri. Her chest felt like it was on fire as they snapped back to her previous location. Yo-yo doubled over clutching her chest. Victor picked her up and blasted off, the two of them tumbled into the lee of the arc shield as a massive explosion rocked the mountain.

The Hulk raised both arms to the sky in victory and roared a challenge to the universe. Behind him the Milano swept in for a landing after chasing down a last fleeing group of Chitauri. The ship landed, Quill, Rocket and Groot joined the other heroes. “So where’s the after-party?” Quill asked.

Red Guardian used a shield adorned with a double-headed eagle to behead the last of the Chitauri and a massive cheer rose from assembled forces. Peter Wisdom took a moment to light a cigarette
before slipping away from the incipient celebration to find out if either Union Jack or Swordswoman had survived.

For several minutes no one moved. They all huddled against the far side of the arc shield, pressing up against its throbbing surface as it struggled to dissipate the energy from the explosion.

Outside of Machu Picchu Yo-yo and Victor tentatively crept around the Shield toward the slope where they'd done battle a few moments earlier. There was a gaping bite taken out of the mountain side. Dirt was crumbling into the hole. The Arc Shield had extended downwards as the explosion had eaten the ground out from under it and had prevented more than a few meters of damage inside its perimeter. But outside of the shield there was nothing left for nearly a kilometer. At the bottom of the crater lay Black Dwarf, most of his torso was gone. As for the rest of the Chitauri army, Redwing and Falcon? No trace of them remained.

In Uttar Pradesh the last surviving Doombots took to the air and silence descend. Slowly, cautiously the survivors, both combats and bystanders, stepped out into the open to survey the damage and begin counting the dead.

War Machine looked around the battle-scarred streets of New York. “Get some sleep,” he told his team. “We’ll need to get back to work in the morning. This time we can’t assume that there aren’t still Chitauri lurking around. Even one, inside the Shields the next time we get an aerial attack could be devastating. Get some rest while you can, we still have a lot of work to do.”
“Laura didn’t say ‘I love you’ before I left,” Clint said as he satted up at the ceiling over his bunk. They’d been on the run for nearly two months, since their spying had been discovered. They were still managing to get some information back to Earth but it wasn’t so easy and they had to spend a lot more time running and hiding now.

“Once she found out what I did for a living she was always pretty superstitious about stuff like that. Laura never let us sleep on a fight, never let me leave the house without saying that she loved me.” Nat rolled over on her bunk to let him know she was listening.

“Some of it was knowing it was possible that I could die on a mission and never wanting to risk that the last thing we said to each other would be something we’d regret,” Clint continued. “Some of it, some of it I think was thinking that something WOULD happen if she let me leave with things not right between us. I guess I always took advantage of that. Whenever we fought I knew all I had to do was take a mission and she’d find a way to make it right before I left.

“Laura tried this time, like always, but it wasn’t okay. It’s still- I think she wants me to come home safe but not to her. If I make it back, if she can find a moment when she doesn’t feel like she’s jinxing me, she’s going to divorce me.” Natasha thought about saying that Clint didn’t know that for sure. “In that case you’d better make it home,” she said instead. “If you knew something was wrong, Laura certainly knew. If she does have that superstition, don’t give her anything to feel guilty about.”

The ship jerked. “Not one of Vali’s scheduled jumps,” Clint said.

“They must have found us again,” Nat agreed.

As Nebula’s ship zoomed away Steve watched another of Thanos’ outposts explode behind them with a feeling of deep satisfaction. Around him his current teammates erupted into cheers. Over a dozen motherships dead, several thousand Chitauri troops who’d never set foot on the Earth, it had been a good day.

“We’re in deep space for the next seventy-two hours right?” Frank asked. Without waiting for an answer he wandered off into the depth of the ship and returned a few minutes later with an ill-matched assortment of cups and a bottle of home brew. “This calls for a celebration.” Steve’s knee-jerk reaction had been to shut down the whole build a still project but seeing Osborn helping Constrictor with it he’d kept his mouth shut. Anything that scuffed the line in the sand between Osborn and the Serpent Society trio had its upside. That had been two months ago, now Steve accept a coffee mug full of the hooch with nothing more than a small shake of his head.

Steve remembered a cramped bunker barely inside the Allied lines and a ‘liberated’ wine barrel, the Commandos relaxing between missions while Peggy and Howard respectively brought them new info and new tech in preparation for their next foray into German territory. He remembered Tony’s party after Loki’s sceptre had been retrieved, before Ultron.
Sidewinder and Osborn were talking to each other, why Steve couldn’t imagine. He started to get up, ready to head off trouble but Songbird beat him to the punch, she inserted herself between the two men and Steve relaxed. Just because they’d all recognized that they shared a common goal didn’t mean Osborn and Voelker suddenly stopped aggravating the other by existing.

“Beyond the Pale: Outside the bounds of morality, good behavior or judgment; unacceptable,” Falsworth watched Dum Dum over the rim of his cup with a small smirk and Steve wondered how that posh accent could sound so fascinating in Peggy’s warm voice but so grating when it was Falsworth running his yap. “In other words, Irish.”

Gabe and Morita both grabbed Dum Dum and yanked him back into his seat before he was halfway to his feet. Steve put a hand on Falsworth’s shoulder and squeezed just a bit too hard to really be considered friendly. “Durgan isn’t the only one whose family came over from Ireland.”

A clod of dirt hit Steve in the side of the head and exploded to rain dirt down on Falsworth with unerring aim. “Save it for the Nazis, the lot y’,” Bucky ordered. “I’m trying to drink here.”

Somehow, waking up surrounded by the legend the Howling Commandos had left behind rather than the people, Steve had forgotten. Even those who’d still been alive when Steve was found had been so changed by age, when they talked about old days and the Commandos they were repeating the sanitized versions of the stories they’d told to their grandkids. Somehow, between the ice and the Avengers, Steve realized he’d adopted those romanticized versions as plain truth. But watching Songbird insert herself between Voelker and Osborn before they could start in on each other Steve found himself remembering petty things like Junior had snored like a foghorn and the foul smelling cigarettes had Morita smoked whenever he had the chance. He remembered how much he’d hated it when Howard flirted with Peggy. He remembered, that while they’d been carefully mindful in rejecting the prejudices against people like Jim Morita, Gabe Jones or Happy Sawyer, they hadn’t thought twice about ragging each other about nationalistic stereotypes. Even further back Steve remembered coming home to his ma swearing if he EVER saw that Bucky Barnes again it’d be too soon only to have her laugh in his face and remind him of the last ten times he’d said the same thing and how quickly it had blown over.

Steve knocked back his drink, just as happy that his metabolism kept him from feeling the alcohol. Nebula told them they were untraceable once they were off the grid of jump gates but Steve couldn’t quite shake the knowledge that they were behind enemy lines even when reason told him that the vastness of space meant they were a needle in a passel of haystacks.

He watched Rachel laughing with Frank. She shrug out of her torn battle armor, leaving the jacket hanging loose around her waist while she remained covered by what amounted to a sports bra. When she felt Steve’s gaze on her, she lifted her glass and gave him a slight smile.

After showering off the battle grim from Sokovia Steve stood in front of his closet, “What the hell is dressy-casual?” he demanded of the skies. Just because his ma had raised him better than to swear in a lady’s presence didn’t mean…

“If I might be so bold, Captain?” J.A.R.V.I.S. intruded. “The steel blue shirt with black jeans would be appropriate.”

“Thank you,” Steve replied stiffly. He always felt slightly discomforted by reminders of the program’s omnipresence in the tower and he missed his D.C. apartment. Steve would have liked to get someplace of his own in Brooklyn but Tony had offered them all extravagant suites in the tower. Savings aside, without a source of income, Steve really couldn’t afford to turn his billionaire teammate’s offer down.
He looked in his closet again then sighed and went with J.A.R.V.I.S.’s suggestion. He would have rather they had done something like the shawarma after the Battle of Manhattan, just the team, wearing whatever they had on, relaxing after a mission. Even Tony’s most restrained notions of a party were over the top. Fancy dress, caterers, an open bar, dozens of guests... Steve always felt a little like he was back in the USO on display again whenever he was around strangers... Tony always invited groups of WWII vets as well, Steve was certain it was some sort of jab at him but the joke was on Tony, he always ended up enjoying talking to them.

Steve knew he’d been uncomfortable with Tony’s style of social events and he’d always assumed that the other Avengers felt equally out of place but looking back he had to wonder. Thor was a prince, Tony’s parties probably weren’t that lavish in his eyes. Natasha’s extensive background in undercover work meant she looked equally at home in ball gown or in rags, and the truth was Steve had never known her well enough to know what her real comfort-zone was. Bruce was uncomfortable in any social setting, possibly even more uncomfortable in an intimate gathering of friends where he couldn’t fade into the background. Steve sighed, at least he could be sure that Clint had been as uncomfortable as he was, there were always numerous pretty dames at Tony’s party and none of them exactly shy. It couldn’t have been comfortable for Clint given that the man was secretly married.

The parties hadn’t really been that bad, no worse than having a drink that tasted like paint-thinner with his current teammates and pretending to like it given the effort that had gone into making it. No worse than smiling and nodding when the Commandos started trading stories about women, Bucky had only come in second to Howard when it came to sheer number of conquests. At least Peggy had always been able to cut that topic off with a single look when they started getting too lewd.

As the party wore on, Melissa and Rachel tried to include Nebula in what Steve had to guess was some ‘girl-talk’ judging from the way they’d shooed Seth off, and from Nebula’s slightly bemused expression. Steve was sure it would do her some good to have a conversation about something besides murder and mayhem, no matter how unaccustom she was to the notion.

Frank set up a dart board, “Who’s up for a little friendly competition?” he asked giving the other guys a toothy smile.

“If you’re that eager to be embarrassed,” Osborn replied taking the challenge.

“Count me in,” Steve said. The differences among his current teammates were more severe than among either the Commandos or the Avengers- They were criminals for goodness sakes! -But the months in space with only each other to rely on papered over those differences and they were starting to reach the point of being willing to drop their guard with each other.

It was late, they’d drank the barrel of wine down to the dredges. “I’m just saying-” Pinky repeated, slurring his words.

“Tovah oyfn tish-,” Howard laughed, his normal carny-bark absent for once. Then he grimaced, “Oy Gevalt! Fuck, I mean fuck. Just pretend you didn’t hear that ‘kay? Always forget to sound properly American when I’m drunk.” He grinned engagingly at them, his eyes slightly unfocused by alcohol, “I can practice with you guys right? I can trust you.”

The Avengers had found camaraderie in fleeting moments, during the Battle of Manhattan, when they found a new HYDRA base, but not the day-in, day-out the way it had developed among the Commandos. Between battles Tony had gone back to his world of board meetings and product development. Bruce would vanish into the lab or just take off on a walkabout. Thor would leave to spend time with his Jane. Meanwhile Steve, Natasha and Clint had been left at loose ends after the fall of S.H.I.E.L.D. The Avengers had never truly gotten to the point of being comfortable enough
let go of their defenses. Steve thought it might have been the difference in their situation or maybe it was inevitable given their bad start. “We’re not a team. We’re a chemical mixture that makes chaos.”

The next morning the team, most of them nursing hangovers, gathered in the cargo bay of Nebula’s ship which they’d converted into a lounge/conference room to plan out their next raid. Steve looked around carefully, meeting each of his teammates’ eyes. “Based our last mission I think we’re ready to go after the Red Skull. For the last month we’ve been deliberately picking targets without the holes in the Chitauri’s control where the Red Skull has his zombies, we’ve even backed off from a couple targets because we read Infinity Stone energy on the long range scanners. We decided that we needed time to gel as a team before we took him on. I think we’re ready.”

Osborn frowned thoughtfully. Over the past few months Steve had learned to appreciate the businessman’s risk/benefit analysis of their missions. He also appreciated that Osborn thought about his suggestions before agreeing or dismissing them. In light of what Rachel had told him about his teammates, Steve wondered if the obvious consideration was done for show or if Osborn really thought that much slower than Tony had. “Fury has been sending less information,” Osborn commented. “There are significant drawbacks to every target we’ve got left. But we’ve agreed that we’re not going back to Earth while the Soul Stone is in the Red Skull’s hands.”

“Some of our intel is getting stale,” Frank remarked. “It’s just the Widow’s team out there. They look into a place, they move on. We don’t have anything like ongoing surveillance.” He pointed to one of the targets projected up on the wall. “This place has the blackout regions and we had eyes on it six weeks ago. I say we take it.”

Steve remembered how nerve wracking it had been to send Peggy ahead, to let her do her job as the Commando’s recon expert. This was worse. Peggy had rarely been more than a few hours from their location, he knew he could get to her if she called for backup and she’d never gone under for more than a week. Steve hadn’t seen Clint or Natasha in more than a year, they had no expectation of backup if things went south and they wouldn’t come up until the war ended or they were discovered. Their team reported information to Heimdahl and Asgard relayed it to them, somehow. -Once Steve had seen the shadow of an eight-legged horse as a capsule dropped out of nowhere in front of Nebula’s ship- Six weeks ago Natasha and Clint had sent information, it was as close to confirmation that they were okay as Steve would ever get. It made him feel oddly guilty that his heart didn’t twist the same way it had whenever Peggy was the one taking risks.

Nebula glanced up from where she was cleaning the connections on her hand. “Your Red Skull is hiding things from Daddy-dearest,” she sneered. “The Red Skull hasn’t reported our activities back to Thanos?” Steve checked. “How can you be sure?”

“He’s failed to stop us.” Nebula held up her detached prosthetic with an ugly smile, “Thanos likes signs of his displeasure to serve as a visible motivation for everyone else to do better. Did Red Skull seem to be missing anything when you ran into him last?”

Steve grimaced but he didn’t dispute Nebula’s knowledge of Thanos. “Alright, we have to assume that the Red Skull is as eager to have another shot at us as we are at him.”

Seth Voelker stared at the various targets pinned up on the wall, “If we don’t see Infinity Stone energy at the target we’ll lay in wait for him.”

Osborn sighed in disgust. “We could be waiting forever, coward. We attack the base and move on until we find him.”
“Let the Skull pick the spot where we confront him? I don’t think so,” Voelker scoffed.

“He’ll have no reason to assume that we won’t stick to our pattern and run the moment we catch wind of him,” Osborn argued.

“How’d you get caught again?” Voelker asked with an unpleasant grin. “Going crazy trying to take down a stupid kid when you should have biding your time, weren’t it?”

“Boys, boys, boys,” Melissa Gold interjected. “We all want the same thing. So let's not make it personal.”

“The advantage of waiting is we get to pick where we confront the Skull,” Frank said.

“But there's no guarantee that he'll come,” Steve said glancing toward Osborn for confirmation that he’d understood the older man’s point.

Rachel smirked. “We could encourage the Skull,” she said. “Give him a bit of a pattern to see, aim him at a place of our choosing.” She nodded toward Nebula, “After all he needs to get us if he wants to keep Thanos happy right?” It was something Jacques might have suggested, drawing on his experience with the French Resistance.

“So we need a place,” Frank said. “I still like this one. Take a look…”

While the team debated tactics and timing- “How smart is the Red Skull?” Gold asked Steve. “I mean, how obvious should we make our trail of breadcrumbs?” -Steve felt a creeping realization sneaking up on him. His team was arguing, spiritedly even, and it reminded him of the Howling Commandos. It reminded him of the Commandos more than any of the Avengers’ strategy sessions where everyone had respectfully listened to his plan, except maybe Tony...

And suddenly Steve felt sick. He ended the meeting rapidly, suggesting they all think a little on the possibilities discussed then reconvene after lunch. As soon as he could without being totally obvious Steve rushed back to the maintenance corridor he’d been using for a quiet spot on the ship.

He’d held the Avengers up to an idealized memory of his previous team and found them wanting. Tony had wanted the debate, the arguing about the best way to achieve their goals, their shared goals, but Steve had regarded it as a threat. Tony had wanted the sort of team the Commandos had been and Steve had shut him down, repeatedly, demanding the team accept his every decision as an absolute.

Steve remembered the hint of fear in Natasha’s eyes the moment before she’d turned her Widow’s Bite on the Black Panther. He remembered Lang offering a diversion that could have ripped him in half and accepting the danger to his teammate without a second thought. He remembered leaving the teammates who’d followed him without question behind to be captured, leaving without a backward glance to see Rhodes fall. He remembered Tony’s eyes, no doubt in them that Steve was capable of killing him, he remembered walking away and proving Tony’s fears true. That was the team he’d built, either ready to throw their lives away for him or afraid of him. Either way, he hadn't been able to muster more than a superficial connection to any of them.

“So you just noticed that the Avengers were your rebound?” Steve turned and saw Rachel leaning against a wall watching him fall apart.

“You came to check up on me?” Steve asked, caught between disbelief and hope.

Rachel shrugged uncomfortably, “I guess you convinced me that you're interested in more than just dying heroically, you’re trying to make a difference. So, for right now, we’re on the same page.” She
grinned a bit wildly, “And it’s a war, who’s to say there’s going to be more than right now for any of us?”

Loki reached unsteadily toward Tony as they stood on the throne of Asgard, images of the battle for Earth barely faded from their eyes. “The Earth is in a war of attrition with an intergalactic empire,” Loki protested. “Perhaps nothing desperate had occurred at the time the Odin-Clone told you that my last resort was necessary but with the Gauntlet and Tesseract in Thanos’ hands it was inevitable. I predicted it, you just saw it happen.” He glanced away, “I told myself otherwise but it was always inevitable. In every battle the Earth held its ground... but at a cost. A thousand Chitauri are nothing in Thanos’ eyes. He would willingly spend that many lives for each life on Earth taken and in the end he would still be victorious. It might delay his conquest of the universe by a millennium but Thanos is immortal, he can afford to wait.”

“I know,” Tony said quietly.

“What?” Loki was caught completely wrong-footed and Tony found himself feeling a bit guilty. Half of his face blown away and replaced with ice that forced him to remain in his Jotun form, barely minutes from being possessed by Death herself, Loki Silvertongue was far at his best. It felt a little like taking unfair advantage and there’d been too many times someone had caught Tony when he was vulnerable, he didn’t like doing the same to Loki. But-

“I asked when you were planning on telling me that Pepper and I had a daughter,” Tony repeated using the tone he’d developed to scold Loptr over the years he’d spent in Asgard. Tony remembered the incandescent fury he’d felt toward Rogers when he realized that the man had kept important, personal information from him and wondered where that fury was now. Then he shrugged, ‘The God of Lies lied to you. Aren’t you the special one?’

Loki wilted. “I’m sorry.”

“Why? I don’t even understand why you’d want to keep it from me,” Tony pressed, needing to understand. ‘Look at that, I guess I trusted him after all.’

“You want me to make weapons to do, frankly what I’m best at, to shift the course of a war. Why wouldn’t you tell me I’d be protecting my own child?”

“I thought you would leave,” Loki mumbled, staring at the ground. “The ones you asked about it, I told you they were fine, were coping with your death. I didn’t lie! But- I told you that they didn’t need you back. I told you so you wouldn’t have reason to go. I didn’t want to fight you. I thought, if you knew about the child, you would try to escape. I was watching when you last spoke with Barton.”

“You have a wife and kids. Why didn’t you think about them?”

“I also couldn’t be in the same room with my old man for five minutes without one of us picking a fight,” Tony replied. “Knowing there was a baby out there that I could fuck up if I left Asgard? Pepper is so much more the responsible adult in our relationship. Her, I’d trust with a kid, no question. Me? Not so much. If I’d know, it might have done a better job than that shitty trick you pulled, making me feel like I was drowning if I stepped outside of this suite.”

“Why would you think that?” Loki exclaimed. “You’re the best thing that ever happened to Loptr.”

Tony briefly considered making a crack about people who referred to themselves in the third person but given Loptr and Lady there was always the possibility that it might just be truth in advertising for
Loki to referred to them as separate people, at least in the MPD sense if not in the literal sense like Odin had turned out to be…

Sort of. If Tony understood the Odin-clone correctly he was Loki’s idea of who Odin was, only somewhat influenced by the real Odin who was likely being held unconscious by Loki’s magic somewhere. Odin, but Odin trapped within a warped image of himself. Odin forced to live as the image of himself that he’d created in his adopted son’s eyes. “Loptr’s dad is an asshole, and Harley’s left, so… Low bar.”

A surprised chuckle escaped Loki then he shook his head, “I don’t believe that.”

“What? Odin being an asshole?” Tony asked.

“Scandalous that you would say such of the All-Father… but true,” Loki said savoring the words. Then a look of uncertainty filled his blood-red eyes. “What happens now?”

Tony shrugged. “Now I build the most badass bomb of all time and we go pay Thanos a personal visit. I’m not planning on letting my daughter grow up in a warzone.”

He grinned a little, “Wilson preempted you by the way. I’ll have to do something to upstage him, naturally.” Tony’s expression became slightly distracted, “Shaped charges, fragmentation, etc. I’ll think of something good…”

Loki started to smile, then his expression fell.

“You’re lucky you know, that I’ve already been making the Arc Reactor flatter,” Tony rambled. “Your plan would have run into a major roadblock if I had to do more than inlay it into my breastbone. Suicide bomb or not I don’t think I could have knowingly let you, let anyone, shove something four inches into my chest again… It was the thickness of it that killed me in Siberia, even if it wasn’t actually in me anymore. Always was a weak point in the armor, too solid and nowhere to go but into me. Bucky-boy triggered one of the little surprises I’d installed for anyone who tried to take it from me. The new armor is set to extract retribution from anyone who tries to destroy it as well. Too bad I’m not likely to have the armor when Thanos and I have our chat… Hmm, have to do something about that.”

"Even when I win, I lose,” Loki murmured. “I may gain my freedom from Thanos but I’ll die. Worse yet I won't be able to keep you.”

Tony grinned wolfishly. “Don't count us out so quickly. Besides, who knows what Death has in mind. We might still be hanging out after even if we both croak.”

Chapter End Notes

“I grew up on the lower East Side. My father sold fruit. My mother sewed shirtwaists for a factory. Let me tell you, you don’t get to climb the American ladder without picking up some bad habits on the way. There’s a ceiling for certain types of people based on how much money your parents have, your social class, your religion, your sex. And the only way to break through that ceiling sometimes is to lie, so that’s my natural instinct- to lie.” - Howard Stark (Agent Carter S1E4) . That line could suggest that Howard’s family background was Jewish, at the least it places him in a Jewish neighborhood.
Tokhis oyfn tish: Yiddish for Put up or shut up

Oy Gevalt!: Four letter word of your choice.
Spider-Man took a moment to duck into a converted corner of one of SI’s cubicle farms where Black Cat and White Tiger were recovering with minor injuries. There were locked file cabinets beneath desks with computers shoved back into corners to make room for medical equipment. The two cots barely fit inside the cube with a narrow walk space between them. Black Cat’s thigh was wrapped in bandages while White Tiger’s arm was in a sling and her ribs were wrapped. Armory sat between crammed between the two cots looking relieved and a little guilty, there were a few blisters where her weapon joined to her flesh but she was otherwise unharmed. The neighboring cubes, and most of that level of the Tower were filled with a mixture of Enhanced and Baseline suffering similar minor injuries.

“Our favorite token guy!” Felicity said with a cheerful wave

“Colonel Rhodes told me to get something to eat then I’m supposed to join the clean-up crew,” Spider-Man said forcing himself to smile back. “I figured I had time to check up on my teammates.” Then he glanced down, unable to maintain the facade. “Sorry I wasn’t there with you.”

“None of that,” Tiger said sternly, “You have responsibilities beyond us. Taking care of them is not slacking. It is not your fault we got hurt.”

Peter sighed, “Thanks, I needed to hear that.”

Tiger shrugged as if to say it was only natural.

“Go kick some Freakazoid butt for us,” Armory said. “Make sure they don’t come crawling back again.”

Peter nodded, he hoped his mask covered up his lack of enthusiasm.

On his way to the elevator Spider-Man passed a couple of kids in their early teens helping another person injured in the invasion hobble over to one of the few empty beds left. In the lobby Dr. Strange was overseeing triage as injured continued to be brought in. Most of those injured in the fighting had already been seen to but they were still finding indirect injuries: people caught under collapsed buildings, injuries from accidents while fleeing the Chitauri, injuries from the hostile terrain that was what was left of the city outside of the Arc Shield.

Spider-Man met up with Rhodes, Captain Marvel, Komodo, Happy, Harley and Jessica Jones in the courtyard in front of the tower. “One more coming,” Rhodes said to Harley who was shifting impatiently, making his armor clank. A moment later Scott Lang darted out of the tower, his helmet tucked under his arm. “I thought you were helping your daughter?” Rhodes asked.

Scott flinched violently, his thoughts flying back to scene inside the building’s basement garage.

“I wish it was you!” Cassie screamed at Scott.

Her size started to fluctuate as she hit and shoved at Scott, driving him back toward the elevator.

“Cassie, you need to calm down,” Maggie pled.
Hank glanced toward the ceiling and said, “FRIDAY, get a shield around Ant-zilla, don’t let him transfer the particles to her.”

“Boss-Lady! We need Rescue in the garage!” FRIDAY called, both over Pepper’s comm channel and over the room speakers to let them know help was coming.

A few moments later Pepper ran in, her armor in the process of unfolding around her. “The ant! Isolate it,” Hank explained pointing and Pepper used both of her repulsors to wrap Ant-zilla in an arc shield. Everyone signed in relief as Cassie stopped growing at just over seven feet.

Hope watched Mercedes and Kamala Khan join Maggie to comfort the distraught girl while Hank called for FRIDAY to display readouts of the data gathered on both Cassie and Ant-zilla when she started to grow. Then she glanced toward the elevator and quietly stepped inside, nudging Scott’s hand away from button that kept the door open as she did so. He was on the floor, knees pulled up to his chest, practically hiding below the control panel.

“Cassie doesn’t really mean it,” Hope offered.

“Pretty sure she does.” Scott replied as the elevator started up. “If I had to choose between the guy who’s been in jail for literally half her life or guy who picked up the pieces while he was gone I’d choose for me to be dead too... Could you stay and help, Hope?” Scott pled. “I’m only gonna make things worse here, that’s obvious.”

Hope sucked in a deep breath between clenched teeth, certain she was making the wrong call but-

“Rhodes is expecting me in five minutes.”

“Hope was doing Cassie more good than I was,” Scott said in a dull voice.

Rhodes eyed him critically, “Your head in the game?”

Scott straightened and pulled his helmet on. He gave Rhodes a short nod.

“And while I’m on the subject, Jones, you were on the frontlines for nearly twenty hours.”

“Then I got drunk and crashed for four,” Jessica replied. She sketched a sloppy salute, “Working with a hangover is just SOP, Colonel.”

For a split-second Rhodes was back in grad school. “Tones, it’s Finals Week!”, “And if I weren’t drunk I’d be so bored I’d have to kill myself. Stop being a hen Platypus.” Rhodes gave Jessica a half-hearted glare, “Fine. We’re retracing the Chitauri’s path. They emerged from the Atlantic between Bay Shore and the Avengers Academy. Lang, you got one of your winged ants handy?”

Scott nodded.

“Okay, we’ll split up into a ground team and an air team. Lang, you’re with Keener, Danvers and I. Jones, with Spider-Man, Komodo and Hogan. Spider-Man, you’re in charge on the ground.” Peter glanced from Happy and Jessica, both notably older than he was, to Rhodes in surprise and dismay.

“How do you manage to emote behind a mask kid?” Jessica asked.

Happy bumped Peter’s shoulder lightly, “Hey, I don’t have a problem with taking orders from you. This is a little outside of my area of expertise and you’re the one who’s been prepping for it since you were sixteen.”

“If that’s settled?” Rhodes asked and received nods all around. “Lets go.”
They met up with a National Guard unit at the edge of the Arc Shield then moved slowly east, scanning the deserted buildings and the rubble for life-signs. They paused twice to dig people out: A pair of Enhanced who’d collapsed an overpass on top of themselves to keep the Chitauri away after their retreat had been cut off. A family who’d opted to lock themselves in their basement to sit out the invasion rather than evacuating and had been trapped when a bomb aimed at the Chitauri destroyed the house above them, the bomb had been a lucky break in Spidey’s opinion, he’d seen other houses where the Chitauri had found the people hiding in them.

As they entered what had been Peter’s old neighborhood in Queens Spidey felt a hollow ache opening up in his gut. The devastation wasn’t so total as to render it unrecognizable but that only made it worse. The grocery store where he used to shop with his Aunt and Uncle, its front face blasted outward, the roof sagging dangerously. The playground nearest to their apartment, a Chitauri corpse sprawled over the merry-go-round. The streets lined with burnt out car husks and more bodies, both Chitauri and human.

“There will be another unit behind us to gather the fallen,” Rhodes reminded several of the Guardsmen as they hesitated to walk past the bodies of those who’d died protecting the city. “It’s our job to make sure they’ll be safe while they’re carrying out their duties.”

A half hour later they found their first Chitauri hold-out. “Got something on the scanners boss,” Happy said, his heavy armor half turning toward Spider-Man.

“Another rescue?” Spidey asked, starting to wave some of the National Guard troops over.

Happy shook his head, “Registering movement and non-Earth native metals.”

Spider-Man held up a hand to halt the Guardsmen. He swallowed nervously, “Okay, Mr. Hogan, do you have schematics for the building?”

“FRIDAY will have them…. Now,” Happy said. He pushed a few buttons and a projector in his suit’s arm displayed a holographic layout of the building. He pointed and the data from his scanners added the potential hostile’s location.

“Better than the Marauders Map,” Spider-Man commented. He gestured to the map. “Okay, three ways out of that basement…”

Constrictor looked up from the scanners he was manning for Nebula. “Guess we won’t need those breadcrumbs after all. The Red Skull’s here, or at least the stone is.”

Steve hesitated, “It’s not the spot we picked but we should have the element of surprise.”

No one said anything. No argument. No question. Everyone had their say during the planning, fought and quarreled and picked each scenario apart, sometimes just to be contrary. But now, with the mission literally seconds away they were silent.

‘Probably no one else wanting to make the call,’ Steve admitted to himself.

Mentally, Steve reviewed the mission. Their intelligence was old, if Steve was calculating times correctly he’d still been in prison on Earth when Natasha and Clint had gathered the data on this base and they’d done it through stolen reports rather than first hand observation. The last fact had made Frank’s skin crawl, but neither Osborn nor Voelker had shared his reservations. Nebula been on the base once but that had been years ago, before she’d turned on Thanos. She remembered it as a sleepy, far-flung outpost of Thanos’ Empire but back then Thanos had been making war on a different front. Rachel hadn’t liked the openness of the base’s architecture, an anomaly in the
Chitauri-dominated ranks, but had to admit that it was ideal for their team’s fliers. Steve took a deep breath, “The mission’s a ‘Go’. We’re taking the Soul Stone today.”

Spider-Man swung himself down to the loading ramp behind the building where the likely-Chitauri was hiding. He wrenched open the man-sized door then used webfluid to jam the roll-up door and to net up his own entrance behind him. “I’m in,” he said softly into his comm as he crawled across the ceiling. “Everyone in position?”

“Ms. Jones and I are ready,” Happy reported.

“See if you can chase it my way,” Komodo said. “After what they did to ESU I can’t wait to get some back.”

As he crept deeper into the building, checking each shadowy room for the Chitauri, Peter opened a second com channel. “Colonel Rhodes, we have one Chitauri trapped beneath small factory. 170th and Liberty. I’m sure we could capture him, or her. Do they have females Chitauri? I’m rambling. I’ll shut up now. But it would be useful to capture one alive right?”

Rhodes sighed heavily. “With their hive mind we have no idea what taking one prisoner might reveal to the rest of the Chitauri. Besides what would we do with it? We take it prisoner, then what? Study it? Reopen ‘Thunderbolt Ross’ labs on the Raft? We don’t have anything like diplomatic channels with Thanos or the Chitauri, we won’t be able to return it to its people. No prisoner exchanges since they don’t take prisoners—”

“So we shouldn’t either?” Peter broke in.

“Loki during the invasion of 2012, that was the closest the Chitauri came to talking,” Rhodes replied. “A glorious purpose: To kill every goddamn living thing. Does that sound like something we can find common ground with? I’m sorry kid, I’m not authorizing a capture.”

“So understood,” Peter said stiffly then cut the comm.

Tony woke up to the sound of someone, Loki, standing just inside the bedroom area of his room, shifting uncertainly from one foot to the other.

“Can I—” Loki broke off. “Not a proposition, just—”

‘Nightmares,’ Tony filled in mentally. The demigod looked like shit. Shoving food at him and telling him to get some rest after being possessed by Death, after they’d talked about what Tony had learned and how he planned to move forward, apparently hadn’t been the right suggestions.

“I’d change to Loptr but you’d scold me,” Loki pled.

“Assuming I got the chance before you dropped dead when the blood flow to your brain was cut off,” Tony remarked as he shifted over to make space on the bed.

Loki hurried to accept the offer. “I thought you’d be angry with me,” he said.
“I’m mad,” Tony confirmed but he wrapped an arm around Loki’s shoulders anyway. “But… What do I do with you? I don’t have much experience with this, you know. With someone else pulling crazy bullshit to keep me in their lives. I’ve got two modes: Either I don’t give a damn about people or I’m doing whatever the hell I can to get them to stay… I mostly give people shit: Art work, cars, money, compounds… Body armor and weapons that every military on Earth wishes they had access to… A scapegoat whenever they needed it… But hey, apparently kidnapping gets better results.”

“Perhaps because we are both insane,” Loki allowed.

For a moment silence held. Then Loki said, “It wouldn’t harm me to shift. My heart, or at least the region holding the large vein which returns blood to it, has been a block of ice since Svartalfheim.”

“Do you have ice shards in your eyes as well?” Tony mumbled half to himself.

“Which of your Midgardian movies are you comparing me to this time?” Loki asked, his voice slurring as he slumped against Tony.

“Fairy Tale, there might have even been some version of it around when you hanging out on Earth playing god to us poor Dark Age humans,” Tony said. Then he added, “Not the version I’m thinking of, that one’s rift with Christian themes… Er, you probably wouldn’t like it.” He flushed, “Why don’t you just look blank like Thor or angry like Rogers?”

“I understand the entertainment in insulting a person while demonstrating their ignorance, leaving them unable to make a fitting response,” Loki replied curling in on himself and shifting his form to Loptr. “But I want to know what you think of me.”

“At least stay blue,” Tony protested as he let Loki’s child-form curl up against chest. “I can understand your Jotun form having antifreeze in the blood but when you look Asir all I can think about is chunks of ice floating around in your veins ready and waiting to give you a stroke or a heart attack at any moment.”

Loki made a distasteful expression but allowed himself to shift into his birth species.

“The story, it’s a saved by the power of love thing,” Tony admitted.

“Disgusting,” Loki replied promptly. He snuggled closer to Tony, taking advantage of his current form’s small stature and tucking his head beneath Tony’s chin. “I’m going to sleep now.” After several minutes he added, “Love only ends in pain.”

Tony carded a hand through Loki’s hair until his breathing evened out. He waited nearly twenty minutes after he was certain Loki had fallen asleep then shifted him over to curl up around a pillow while Tony headed toward his work bench. “Don’t want to give you any false hope kid, but… let’s see how far I can take the whole smart bomb concept… Communication, Love… Union? Reunion?… I want to see Pepper again, meet that daughter of ours… Just gotta take out Thanos without going along for the ride. You and me both, not leaving anyone behind this time.”

Dr. Strange leaned against the front desk in the SI building lobby. He let his head fall back and closed his eyes for a moment. Three days of fighting, now they were approaching the forty-eight hours since the bulk of the fighting had died out. For the last twelve hours he’d been managing triage for the Tower medical facility.

Even with his magic Stephen knew he’d never be the surgeon he had been but this was all assessment and maybe fixing the occasional rushed bandage job. His loss of dexterity hadn’t taken his medical knowledge. ‘Maybe before I would have considered this beneath me… Well, honestly,
there weren’t many surgeons in the world who could hold a candle to me. I’d like to think, in this situation, I’d still be doing whatever I could to help. Before the accident I WOULD have been better used doing surgery not triage, but not anymore.’

He straightened and looked around for any new patients. Strange saw Spider-Man sitting on one of the benches that had been pushed back against the walls to make room for stretchers in the center of the lobby. The young hero’s head was in his hands, his posture slumped. Strange walked over to him, “Injuries?” he asked.

“Huh?” Spidey asked.

“Are you hurt or just taking a breather? I don’t have all day,” Strange demanded.

“Er, um, breather,” Spidey stammered.

“Be sure you move if an actual patient shows up,” Strange replied turning to go.

“Is there something wrong with me?” Spidey asked. Strange frowned, he was about to remind the younger hero that he’d just said that he wasn’t injured when Peter continued. “My friends are hurt, the home where I grew up is destroyed and I still don’t want to kill them. Everyone else I talk to hates the Chitauri like- like- um. They talk about killing them like it’s no different from mosquito remediation.”

“It’s a normal defensive mechanism to help cope with the reality of warfare.” Strange sat down on the bench beside Peter. “But not everyone develops it, pre-existing disposure, too introspective, bad survival instincts. Shortly after I began studying magic there was an attack on several of our Sanctums. I defended the Sanctum of New York, becoming the Master of the New York Sanctum in the process as I was the only defender who survived the attack. I killed a man during the fight… I’m a doctor, I take the Hippocratic Oath seriously. My teacher, the former Sorcerer Supreme and one of her disciples who had been instrumental in my instruction in magic, they didn’t understand. They called it ego and cowardice that I was… upset… by what I’d done.”

Peter watched Strange with baited breath.

“The Ancient One wasn’t wrong questioning my motives in becoming a doctor. I was more interested in the prestige and the money than in helping my fellow man.” Strange shrugged, “I don’t like most people, they’re stupid and short-sighted, not to mention blinded by the preconceived notions… I do include myself in that last category at the least, although desperation made me more willing to look beyond my own beliefs about the world. What the Ancient One failed to understand was if we all approached our position and power from perfect motives and immense wisdom then things like the Hippocratic Oath would be irrelevant. It is because we bring our self-interest, our ego, our fallible hearts to the table that we need reminders of our limitations, codes to adhere to when the right path is unclear. When I swore my oath neither I nor anyone else expected that one day I would willfully take a life, the part my academic adviser most felt the need to stress upon me was: I will not be ashamed to say ‘I know not,’ nor will I fail to call in my colleagues when the skills of another are needed for a patient's recovery.” Strange smiled wryly. “The Ancient One wasn’t the only insightful mentor in my past.”

Dr. Strange’s expression lost all trace of humor as he turned to face Peter directly. “I chose to accept the responsibilities of the Sorcerer Supreme, knowing that I might be called on to kill again. I’ve chosen to be a combatant in this war, believing that my actions are a necessary evil in preventing something much worse. ‘First, do no harm’ isn’t actually a part of the Hippocratic Oath, although there is an injunction against playing God. That, I believe, has only become more pertinent given my, our, abilities and position. It would be all too easy for us to decide that we, above all others, know
who is deserving of death and which lives are most worthy of being saved.

‘I’ve made my peace with killing Kaecilius’ follower. It was no heroic act, no arrogant execution, it was simply an act of self-preservation. The other sorcerer, he was more experienced than I, he had experience in fighting on the astral realm that I lacked. I was too desperate, too terrified, to look for a solution beyond attacking him with every trick, every bit of luck and coincidence that fell in my path. I killed him because he was trying to kill me and I was scared, period. There was nothing admirable about what I did, but nothing heinous either.

“The day I can take a life without remorse, without considering what I should have done differently… Is the day I name my successor as Sorcerer Supreme, because I will no longer be fit to hold this responsibility. I can only hope that should that day come, I will retain enough of myself to step down… Or that laws like the Sokovia Accords will serve as a check on my arrogance.

“Spider-Man, do not let anyone tell you that it’s cowardice to resist the thought that killing is the best or only solution. It may be all that we have thought of and a necessary evil for that but it is never the best way.”

Chapter End Notes

I’m stretching Hans Christian Anderson’s “Snow Queen” a bit with the frozen heart/shards in the eyes reference: “When one of these tiny shards flew into a person’s eye, it stuck there unknown to him, and from that moment he saw everything through a distorted medium, or could see only the worst side of what he looked at, for even the smallest fragment retained the same power which had belonged to the whole mirror. Some few persons even got a fragment of the looking-glass in their hearts, and this was very terrible, for their hearts became cold like a lump of ice.” Of course it’s love that melts Kay’s heart and his tears of remorse that wash the shard from his eyes.
“What are you doing? Can I help?” Loptr asked staring wide-eyed at the spool Tony was using to draw thinner fibers from the fiber optic cables he’d torn out of the walls.

“Careful it’s hot,” Tony warned the boy off reflexively before reminding himself that Loptr was, in truth, Loki.

“Can I do something else?” Loptr asked, accepting Tony’s limitations without argument.

Tony wondered if Loki was more sensitive to heat in his Jotun form, or simply so immersed in his current form that he’d forgotten he wasn’t actually a child. Tony gestured to a table in the back of his workshop where the rough outline of a human body, Tony’s body, had been sketched along with a network of lines. “Can you cut the cable to those lengths? Minimize intersections, they add defects and I don’t want to spend a lot of time splicing them together.”

Loptr nodded eagerly. But as he studied the layout an expression more reminiscent of his adult face formed. “This isn’t what I asked you to make.”

“Nope, I had a better idea,” Tony replied carelessly. “Still has to fit inside my body so be precise when you’re measuring.”

Loki looked between Tony and the design laid out on the table.

“Trust me,” Tony assured him ruffling the boy’s hair.

Loptr ducked his head away from Tony’s hand. “Cut that out,” he complained as he got to work.

Wong caught up with Dr. Strange as the younger sorcerer crashed on the couch at the New York Sanctum, exhausted from another day of pulling double duty as both one of the city’s doctors and the leader of the Magic-Users coalition.

“Are you aware of what the Chitauri were seeking?” Wong asked.

“The conquest of Earth, the end of all life, etc, etc,” Strange waved him off.

Wong frowned, “They have a more immediate goal,” he stated. “They overran the Avengers Academy where the keeper of the Mind Stone made his home and had a base near where the Scarlet Witch, whose powers were derived from the stone, was imprisoned. We are told they ambushed one of the Asgardian units on Titan and used them to launch an attack on Asgard, the resting place of the Space Stone. They marched on Kamar-Taj where the Eye of Agamotto, the Time Stone, was kept for the last six hundred years, on Machu Picchu, where it was housed for a thousand years prior to that, and they attacked New York, where you, it’s current guardian resides. In Seoul they ransacked the Temple of Cyttorak, whose gem possesses a similar magical signature to that of an Infinity Stone. The Pyramids of Egypt are built to hide the mystical signature of anything buried within, the Golosov Ravine in Moscow does the same naturally.”

“Thanos is collecting the Infinity Stones,” Strange sighed. “Well, I’m not about to hand over the Eye. What more would you have me do?”
“Thanos is an evil on par with Dormammu, he must not be allowed to succeed,” Wong said. “You must take the Stone and leave this realm. Even if Thanos possesses the skills to follow you, finding you in all possible realms will be no easy task.”

“I have too much to do here,” Strange argued. “I’m our representative to the Accords council. I have patients to care for, the New York Sanctum to defend. I can’t abandon that!”

Wong frowned, “You are responsible to more than this planet, more than this realm. The Vision refused when he was begged to retreat, to take the Mind Stone from the front lines of Earth to safety for the good of the Universe. Now he is fallen and the Stone is in Thanos’ hands.”

Strange removed the amulet holding the Eye, “Then you take it. I will stand in the gate and deny Thanos entry.”

Wong stared at Strange for a long time, “The Earth may well fall,” he warned.

“Then I fall with it,” Strange replied.

“As you will.” Wong accepted the Eye.

“Then I fall with it,” Strange replied.

“The Soul Stone is our only priority,” Steve reminded his team one last time. “There are two bases on the planet so we’ll split into two cells and search them both. Sidewinder, as soon as you drop us off, jump back to the ship and wait. When one group spots the Red Skull we’ll regroup.”

Sidewinder turned to glance out the port at the planet spinning below then his eyes widened, “Is that thing pooping?” he exclaimed, pointing toward one of the dozens of Motherships loitering in the system. “Disgusting!”

Nebula rolled her eyes, “If it were Thanos wouldn’t need layover planets like this one,” she said. “The Great Ships’ passenger chambers aren’t fully integrated into their gastrointestinal tracts. They’re an example of forced evolution, neither their biology nor Thanos’ design fully dictates their form. They’re riddled with dead legs and their walls are semi-permeable. Toxins from their passenger’s waste products, both gaseous and solid, build-up in their bodies until it endangers both passengers and the mothership itself. They have to spend twenty-seven Kltz out of every-” Nebula broke off at the blank looks she was receiving. “Primitive Terrans, basing everything on their planet,” she muttered. “For every two-hundred and forty of your diurnal cycles the Great Ships have to spend ninety cycles purging themselves near a planet with an ecosystem compatible with their passengers needs. First they off-load their passengers, then they purge their system into space. Afterwards they enter the planet’s atmosphere to replenish both water and air systems via absorption. The simplest and most effective way to refresh the Great Ship’s passenger sustainment system is to repeat the purge and replenish cycle several times but there are labor intensive ways of getting most of the crap out in a rush.”

“So it’s footsoldier poop, not mothership poop?” Sidewinder said. “I stand by what I said: Disgusting.”

Steve cleared his throat pointedly.

“Yeah, yeah,” Sidewinder rolled his eyes. “Nebula, Constrictor and Songbird to the base on the northern continent. Then Nomad, Goblin and Diamondback to the base on the southern continent. Keep my ears glued to the comm and -Hn, we need a name, team spirit and all that shit- jump the lucky half over to the Red Skull party. I know the plan. Let’s go.”
Nebula’s team clustered around the teleporter and they were gone. A moment later Sidewinder reappeared alone. “Next stop Nazi-zombie hangout thirty-two,” he said as he grabbed Steve’s shoulder. Goblin and Diamondback flank the teleporter.

They reappear in what had looked like a repair bay in their intel, a large space with lots of parked equipment and low traffic. The moment Steve felt his feet hit the ground he raised the shield slightly and scanned the shadows for attack. It wasn’t enough.

The atrium light blazed to life. The Red Skull was there, standing in front of them. Steve heard a too familiar whistle-thunk past his cheek and an arrow buried itself in Sidewinder’s eye. As the teleporter slumped against his back, Steve’s horrified gaze followed the arrow’s path back to the archer crouched on one of the beams high above.

Three weeks earlier

“It might be time for us to call the game,” Natasha said as Clint pulled her up into a vent moments before the mindless horde chasing them turned the corner.

Clint slid the grate more firmly in place, “You’re not getting cold feet just because of a couple hundred Nazi Zombies?” he asked lightly.

“They predicted us,” Natasha argued. Their unit wasn’t equipped to infiltrate an orbital base. They’d spent the last year using planet bound installations, usually factories and other military support facilities, to mine for information about targets that would damage Thanos’ ability to make war. It had taken time and effort for them to find a planetary base with several black-zones that they’d grown increasingly curious about as the year went on. But someone else had already worked out that, eventually, they would have to come to this base to learn what they wanted to know and had taken advantage of that fact. “They were waiting for us. And now that we finally know what’s hiding in the black-zones… I want someone to pick my brain rather than just sending a report,” Natasha said. “I’m not asking myself the right questions, I can feel it.”

“Well, either way, this mission is a bust,” Clint sighed. “Time to head back to the ship and make our reports. Fury’s definitely going to be interested in hearing about Thanos teaming up with Steve’s old, dead, playmates.”

Two days later

Sif paced back and forth in the confines of their ship. “They’re late. And the base was a beehive two days ago.”

“I could scry for them,” Vali hesitantly offered.

For a moment Sif was caught flat footed. With Thor as their leader, she and the Warriors Three had always been able to ask Heimdall to employ his all-seeing eyes to scout for them as needed but she was aware that other Asgardian Warriors regularly went to völur or seiðkonur to seek visions to aid them on their quests. She also knew that, if one didn’t have the throne’s favor, getting access to that sort of magic could be a quest in and of itself. “You have that sort of magic? I’ve never seen Loki-”

“Why would he reveal himself to you?” Vali asked. “You had Heimdall, Thor could request a viewing from Queen Frigga at his leisure. Prince Loki kept nothing vital from you, only the knowledge that he could see without another’s aid. I have to set up.” He dug through his locker and returned with a small silver bowl and a knife carved from the fang of a Lindworm. He set them on
the galley table then went back and wrenched open Clint and Natasha’s lockers, he dug through their things and came up with Natasha’s brush and Clint’s electric razor. “The waters of Asgard would be better but this will serve,” he said as he drew the knife across his palm and spilled a small pool of blood into the dish. He swirled the dish, setting up a careful, controlled current in the fluid. The runes carved into the bowl began to glow. Vali blew across the surface of the liquid and it turned clear. He dropped a hair from Natasha and Clint onto the surface of the liquid.

Sif leaned closer and saw: Clint dragged from a high perch by a multitude of grey, boney hands. Natasha lying limp and still under the archer’s body, her hair like a spill of blood over the concrete.

“It’s visions of things to come,” Vali said. “We still have time. But not much, I don’t have the skill to look more than a day ahead. Maybe not even that, I know my limits but never when a moment falls within them.”

“Then we go,” Sif declared as she wrapped her sword belt around her. It was almost a relief, she had never been the type to enjoy a waiting game and the past year had been nothing but waiting. Waiting for the two spies to make a mistake, waiting for Vali to fail to slip them out, waiting because in this game a warrior’s skill was a last resort. For a year, Sif had waited, knowing that when her skills were called on it would only be because they’d failed. She was the exit strategy when they reached the point where their team could do no more to aid in the war against Thanos. It had been the longest year of the more than a thousand Sif had lived. She wasn’t glad that they’d failed but like rubber band finally snapping after being stretched too far, she relaxed because it was finally over.

Grimly Vali a pair of long knives into his belt then followed Sif down into the city.

‘We pressed our luck too far,’ Natasha thought. Her cheek thinned and her head hung low as she watched the Red Skull’s- The Red Skull! How? -boots. Her arms were twisted behind her back, held fast by several of the Skull’s implacable zombie soldiers, her knees ached from long hours of being forced to kneel on unforgiving concrete.

“Tell me, girl, how the good Captain Rogers comes to be commanding a team of murderers and thieves,” he commanded. “Tell me and spare yourself.”

“I won’t tell you anything,” Natasha spat.

“Hmm, perhaps a reminder of what awaits you before I put you under again,” he said, unruffled. The Skull turned to where Clint stood complacently. His skin was grey and lifeless, the front of his shirt covered in vomit. The Skull gestured and Clint put his hands behind his back. He went to his knees without resistance as two of the other zombies moved to restrain him. Then the Skull raised his gauntlet and stroked the malevolently glowing orange stone set in it. “Release.” he ordered.

For a moment Natasha’s heart rejoiced as the pink of life returned to Clint’s face and hands. Then he threw back his head and screamed. He continued screaming, his voice breaking into harsh gagging sounds as a vein in his throat burst and he began coughing up blood and still he screamed.

The Red Skull strode over to Natasha, his shiny boots clicking sharply against the pavement. He stopped directly in front of her and one of the zombies holding her in place yanked her head up by her hair, forcing her to look at him. He reached out with his gauntleted hand and cupped her cheek in a parody of a caress, pressing lightly into the fresh swelling. “Tell me about Steve Rogers… Or it’s your turn.”

Natasha kept her expression blank but she couldn’t prevent her heart from speeding. The Skull smiled, a horrible sight, as he stroked his thumb along the underside of her jaw, feeling her pounding
pulse. “Maybe next time,” he said and the stone’s glow intensified. Natasha’s eyes turned dim and dull. The zombies released her and her hands sagged at her sides, other than that she didn’t attempt to move.

Clint was still making harsh rasping noises in the back of his throat. The Skull slapped him to get his attention. “Look at what you did,” the Skull laughed. Clint’s head came up as if on a string.

Natasha stood up and shambled over. Traces of her normal, sultry, grace remained ingrained in muscle memory, watching her move made Clint think of desecrated art. She tilted her head to the side and her hair spilled away displaying her swollen and discolored cheek.

Clint moaned. The injury wasn’t really much, he and Natasha had done worse to each other to maintain a cover. Objectively, the bruise on Natasha’s cheek was nothing but it was proof that he could be ordered to do worse at any moment. For Clint that possibility was worse than the sickening wrongness of being under the Soul Stone’s power.

The Skull leaned over and whispered in Natasha's ear then handed her a knife. She straddled Clint’s thighs and started slicing open his shirt leaving thin lines of blood on his shoulders.

“I’ve yet to determine exactly what functions in my zombies,” the Skull remarked. “Perhaps next time I put you under we’ll experiment.”

The Skull watched while Natasha continued cutting Clint's clothes away.

“Or you could tell me about Steve Rogers.”

Sif’s mouth pursed unhappily as Vali’s magic settled over her. When they’d been young, Loki had suggested similar plans many times but Thor had always rejected them, claiming it was dishonorable to use illusions to get past their enemy’s defenses. As they grew older, Loki quit offering it as a suggestion and sometimes they’d wake up on the morn of a planned siege only to find the castle’s defenses already brought low and Loki waiting for them, having slipped in under the cover of his magic and slain their enemies in their beds. Dishonorable, yes but there was a ruthless efficiency to Loki’s plans that couldn’t be ignored… ‘Loki hadn’t been completely immune to the joy of a hard fought battle,’ Sif remembered. He’d generally reserved his worst for those battles they couldn’t afford to lose. ‘I don’t want to lose today,’ Sif thought. ‘I won’t shame myself by returning home without my teammates. I don’t want to die here, having accomplished nothing in the war against Thanos. Loki’s student is the only backup I have and we’re against an entire Chitauri base.’

As they walked through the city that had grown up around the planetary base Sif caught sight of her reflection in a polished window, a grey-skinned Sakaar in unadorned black work clothes stared back at her. She set her shoulders and stalked toward the base’s main entrance, Vali at her side, as if she had every business being there.

They made it through the first checkpoint without challenge. It wasn’t a surprise, the work group that should have shown up at that moment was lying dead in a canyon five rost outside of town. Thanks to Vali’s illusions they looked exactly like them, even supplying the two members of the group they didn’t have bodies to fill. Hopefully, they would have the people to fill those spots soon.

Once they were in the base it was harder, All-Speak let them understand all of the half dozen different alien species working on the base but if they spoke they wouldn’t sound like native speakers. They kept their heads down and tried to give off the vibe of very busy people, heavily pressed for time. They knew the location of the black-zones that Natasha and Clint had been determined to investigate but they couldn’t know if the pair of spies had run into problems there or
else where, if they were held there or had been taken somewhere else.

When Sif and Vali reached the outskirts of one of the black-zones they let themselves into one of the service chases and allowed the disguise to drop. Worker-bees didn’t go into the black-zones, no one did. They moved faster once they were out of the public view. Through a vent grating they spotted a crowd of soldiers in black uniforms. “What are Midgardians doing here?” Sif wondered.

“There’s something wrong with them,” Vali said. “Just looking at them makes the seidr in my veins recoil.”

Sif rolled her eyes at Vali’s reference to his magic but the Midgardians didn’t shift their weight or even blink as much as a living being should. But the sounds of shouting gave them direction and they didn’t waste time considering why the Midgardians were so wrong.

“You can’t!” Clint protested violently. When Sif and Vali peered through the grating they saw Natasha gasping for air, held down by two of the off Midgardians. Clint slammed his head back into the face of one those holding him prisoner. He broke the other man’s nose but the off being didn’t even flinch at the pain and Clint’s efforts were for not. Another man, wearing a similar uniform but with a blood red skull in place of a human face, stood at parade rest between Natasha and Clint. He watched Clint’s struggles dispassionately.

There would be more strategic moments to enact a rescue if they watched and wait, Sif didn’t doubt that. But there was something in the way Clint fought which told her it was now or never. “For Asgard!” she shouted as she burst out of the chase. For a moment, thanks to Vali’s illusions, it looked like an entire Asgardian war party was with her. But the strange midgardians didn’t even blink in the face the berserker charge. They waded into the fight without hesitation and the illusions were quickly dispersed. Sif’s swords sliced through the Midgardians easily. These Midgardians though, they didn’t stop, didn’t falter even as their limbs fell to the floor. Sif switched to taking head whenever she could.

The Red Skull fell back, left his flunkies to do the fighting.

While Sif confronted them head on, Vali worked his way around the edges until he was in position behind the quartet holding Natasha and Clint. The pair holding Clint had his arms twisted back and stretched between him, trying to limit his struggles by threatening to dislocate his shoulders. Natasha was still quiet between the pair that held her but her eyes were on the fight. Vali drew his knives and with a smooth motion drove them through the brainstem of each of the pair holding Clint. The moment their hands went slack the man launched himself into the fight with an animalistic ferocity. Vali withdrew his knives and with a smooth motion drove them through the brainstem of each of the pair holding Natasha. She shrugged free of their hands, grabbed the knives before they could recover and ripped them sideways, severing spinal cords. “We have to get out of here! Go!” she shouted.

They ran. Sif cleared the way, slashing through anything that got in her path. Clint and Natasha came behind her, keeping the pace despite their injuries. Both managed to acquire guns before they’d gone too far. Vali was the rear guard. He cast illusions of them, created false trails to minimize the number he actually had to fight.

And it worked in the black-zone. Despite not reacting to pain or possessing any survival instincts the zombies were no stronger than a normal human. With Sif’s strength, her swords and the rest of the team’s backing, as long as they kept moving the zombies couldn’t swarm them. The zombies didn’t think ahead to corner them and they treated each of Vali’s illusions as if it were real. But once they cleared the black-zone the Chitauri were a different story. The Chitauri were waiting. They’d sealed passageways, turning the base into a labyrinth of dead ends. They let the quartet run themselves
ragged doubling back. Rather than pursuing them down those dead end corridors, the Chitauri gathered their numbers and laid in wait for the quartet’s return.

“We’re not getting out like this,” Natasha said once they’d managed to fight their way back out of a third dead end.

“There was an atrium where they repair enhancements on the large ships,” Clint said as he dropped a spent gun and picked up two more from Chitauri corpses. “I can give you some cover there, if someone can blow a hole in the wall.”

“Given a moment, ten minutes, to concentrate I can put a hole in the wall,” Vali said.

Clint nodded sharply. “Ten minutes, you got yourself a deal.” As they fought their way to the atrium both Natasha and Clint grabbed as many weapons as they could carry. When the ceilings opened up into a hanger Clint leapt up, caught a strut and pulled himself higher until he had command of the room. Natasha tossed the guns she’d collected up to him one after another. “Keep going,” she said to Sif and Vali. “This is the kill zone. We set a bottleneck past it.”

“Outer wall’s on your left,” Clint called down as he sighted and fired at the first of the Chitauri to reach the atrium.

Natasha, Sif and Vali holed up in an alcove against the outer wall. While Vali prepared himself to create their exit, Sif and Natasha planted themselves at the entrance of the alcove. They kept the Chitauri in Clint’s kill zone. Clint balanced comfortably on a high, narrow strut, a gun in both hands, firing constantly and every shot a kill-shot. He easily picked off every Chitauri who tried to climb up to him and still kept down the numbers pressing Natasha and Sif.

“I’m ready,” Vali announced in a distant voice.

Clint started moving closer to the other three, knowing that the Chitauri would change tactics once they realized their prey wasn’t cornered. But without his constant stream of fire Natasha and Sif started to lose ground.

“Go!” Clint shouted. As Vali’s magic reached out, disrupting the molecular bonds in the wall and turning it to dust he called to Natasha, “Tell Laura and the kids… I loved them. I’m sorry. Tell ‘em whatever you think’ll help.”

Chapter End Notes

Rost - Old Norse unit of measurement, literally the distance between two rest stops, so varying with terrain but roughly equivalent to a mile.
Surreal week. I woke up smelling smoke but figured it was the furnace coming on for the first time. Went into work way early Monday because my son’s daycare was going to be closed for Columbus Day and I wanted to try to get in eight hours before I needed to trade off with Dad at midday. Roads should have been empty at that time of morning but it was bumper to bumper traffic going the other way. Got about half way in and saw the flames over the hills to the east. Switched from canned music to the news and that was the first I heard about the fires.

So far I’m out of the evacuation areas, watching the reports and hoping for the best for a number of friends who live further north.

Things had gone wrong, of that Nebula had no doubt. It had been almost a cycle and Sidewinder wasn’t answering comms. She had the means to summon her ship by remote but didn’t dare use it on this planet, not with literally dozens of Chitauri motherships, and hundreds of troop transports, fighters and bombers using the planet for their R&R. Without an actual pilot at the console her ship would be a chew-toy for them. Without a ship or a teleporter they couldn’t rendezvous with the other team, there was an ocean between them.

“No sign of the Red Skull,” Constrictor remarked. “Do we take that as a good sign or a bad one?”

“If he’s not here, then the other team’s tangling with him,” Songbird reminded him. She turned to Nebula “Do those Chitauri gliders have the range to get us across the ocean. They’re probably a little too busy to meet up with us.”

“The gliders don’t carry enough fuel,” Nebula replied.

Constrictor blew out a deep breath, “I may not be a tech wizard like Osborn but there’s a simple solution: Gas cans.”

Nebula looked thoughtful, “The more weight we carry the faster we’ll burn through fuel. And the gliders won’t fare well against a fighter ship. Still might be our only shot.”

“As long as my voice holds out I can provide camouflage,” Songbird said. “So, now we steal a glider, or two depending on the weight-thrust ratio.”

“I know ‘strength in numbers’,” Constrictor said. “But even if we manage to rejoin with the other team how does it solve our basic problem of getting off this damned planet?”

“We take the Soul Stone,” Nebula said. “I’ll use it to control one of the Transports, have it fly us back to my ship.”

“So it’s do or die,” Songbird sighed. “That’s the problem with following someone lucky, they don’t have backup plans.”

“Naw, it's heroes,” Constrictor shook his head. “They always figure what they’re doing is too important to fail. They don’t worry enough about getting out alive.”
Maggie stood between Hank and Pepper, her hands on Cassie’s shoulders, staring at the casket holding her husband’s remains and hating everything. She’d married Jim Paxton knowing, accepting that his job put his life in danger. She’d loved Jim’s determination to do the right thing, to make the world better and she never would have asked him not to.

To be honest Maggie had fallen in love with Scott Lang for much the same reason but Jim had the patience and discipline with work within the system. And Maggie, somewhere between the twenty-year-old who married Scott Lang and the nearly-forty-year-old who’s married Jim Paxton, she’d grown up. She’d learned to appreciate the realist who understood that most of the world’s problems weren’t easy to solve and knee-jerk reactions, emotionally satisfying as they might be, rarely provided real improvement.

Maggie had known today was possible when she’d gotten involved with a police officer, she’d accepted that. Everyone was doing their best to be supportive: Hank, Hope, Marlena and Happy, Pepper and May, who’d both been where she was at. Mercedes had been glued to Cassie’s side every moment possible and Maggie loved the little girl for her empathy. Scott was hovering on the perimeter of her awareness, wringing his hands and Maggie tried not to be annoyed by his lost, helpless desire to help.

Still she hated it. It was all wrong. She’d known it could happen but- And now that it had. The kids, the surviving kids, from the Academy were serving as pallbearers. Maggie could only think how much Jim had to have hated that he hadn’t been able to keep those kids out of the fighting. Cassie had been involved in the fighting! Captain Danvers and Happy Hogan were delivering eulogies instead of the men Jim had served alongside for years in the SFPD, they were all on New Earth and a large part of Maggie wondered why they had bothered coming back to the Earth.

The rough sketch Tony originally had been working from evolved into a three dimensional model of his body. Wire stands supported the optical cables as they snaked around holographic representations of Tony’s ribs spiraling outward from the arc reactor embedded in his breastbone. “The sternum is already artificial, with my improvements and without the electromagnet, it won’t need to go any deeper than that.” Loki was fairly certain that Tony kept mentioning that fact because he needed the reminder.

The bulk of the intricate network of fiber optics would be concentrated in Tony’s torso, just below the skin. But a few strands would climb up the back of his neck, following the spinal column before branching off to curl over his ears, ending in a ring around his eye sockets. Other strands would travel downward and outward, including his legs and arms in the network. Loki stepped back from the model, looking at the network with a mage’s eye and saw something like the patterns underlying reality that he used when walking between Yggdrasil’s branches and wondered exactly what Tony was making.

Staring at the shimmering, almost complete, network Loki felt a ball of ice forming in his stomach. He forced himself to shift back to his adult form, suspecting the conversation he needed to have would go better for both himself and Tony that way.

“Can you voodoo this all in place?” Tony asked, coming up behind Loki. It made the mage wonder if Tony had been waiting, consciously or un-, for him to resume his adult form for a conversation of his own.

Without waiting for Loki’s response Tony immediately dove into a ramble, “It doesn’t need to be very deep under my skin, but it’s got to go in as a piece. Those full body scarifications look pretty cool on you but I’d rather not, you know. That’s a few hundred more cuts than I really want to see
inflicted on myself and it’s not that I don’t trust you but I don’t trust you, or anyone. Fate of the universe, I’ll do it if I have to, believe it or not, avoiding pain where possible is a goal of mine.”

“Can you make a second one?” Loki broke in before he could have second thoughts. “In case, just in case. What do we know? Thanos might decide to torture me first. I quite agree with you about avoiding pain. And a second shot would good in any case.”

Tony hesitated for a moment. He looked Loki up and down. “I mapped your magic when I made your gorget and Loptr’s pauldron. This isn’t the same purpose but I’ve already done the groundwork to keep your magic from interfering with it. But won’t Thanos suspect that something is up if you show up with one of these implanted in your chest?” Tony tapped the arc reactor in the center of the holographic model.

“Oh yes,” Loki drawled. “It would be terribly suspicious for me to want something which would render me immune to the worst Thanos could do to me. Do you think we had such a trusting relationship that it would make him leery if I were to try to gain an edge against him.”

“Yeah, okay. I know, at worst, you did what you had to survive. The minimum you had to do.” And Loki felt a burst of warmth that Tony believe he hadn’t ever been a willing eager ally to Thanos. “Still, you should know this is a bit of a Star Trek III moment.”

Loki gave Tony an exasperated look.

“Pop-culture reference to a persistent rumor that the first above ground atomic bomb trial had the potential to destroy the Earth. Annoyed the hell out of my Dad, that line, he was involved in that test, you know… Which doesn’t actually do anything to lay that rumor to rest.” Tony’s grin was slightly maniacal. “In other words, I’m taking a gamble. I think this will work, practically positive. Your bomb wasn’t going to work. Wilson had the same idea and just managed to take out one of Thanos’ generals. If my read on Thanos is anything like right, he’s stronger than all his generals combined. This, on the other hand, will kill him, that I’m sure of. There’s even chance that we’ll survive it. But if I’m wrong this could go very, very badly. In the end it all comes down to trust. Am I right to trust? Do you trust me? ’Cause maybe I’m in the wrong Star Trek movie altogether.”

“I trust you,” Loki replied easily. “Will you make a second device?”

“Yes.”

Yo-Yo Rodriguez looked over the notes she’d written up one last time, reading it over out loud in heavily accented English. Then she reached for the phone and dialed a U.S. number. “Mrs. Wilson?” she asked when an older woman answered the phone.

“This is she,” the woman answered, her voice tight as if she’d already guessed.

“This is Elena Rodriguez, field leader for the South American Avengers. Mrs. Wilson, I deeply regret to inform you that your son Sam was killed during the recent fighting. His sacrifice stopped the attack on Machu Picchu, saving thousands of lives, my own included. I- I’m deeply sorry and my prayers are with you and your family.”

For several moments Yo-Yo listened while Mrs. Wilson’s breathing caught in repressed sobs, waited while the older woman tried to bring her emotions under control. “Will you- Sam’s, Sam’s body. Will you send him home to me?”

Yo-Yo squeezed her eyes shut. “I’m so sorry,” she repeated. “There was no body left.” She wondered if it would be better or worse to offer to collect some of the ashes from the crater,
assuming some of them had been Sam. She wished Roberto was still there, she already deeply missed her co-leader, as if missing a limb.

They made it out.

Steve shoved his Arc Reactor enhanced shield into Diamondback’s hands and for a moment it seemed like it would work, then the glow around the shield flickered and died. He took two long steps, shoving away the zombies already converging on her and pulled her tight to his body, sling the shield over his arm to cover her.

As they fought to keep from being pulled under by the zombies or perforated by Hawkeye’s arrows Diamondback barely held Steve back. She moved with him, reading his intent from his body almost before the the thought formed. They fended off grasping hands and ducked and wove to evade arrows using both the shield and the zombies as cover. Steve knew they shouldn’t have succeeded. Even if he’d been encumbered, with the archer holding the high ground, the best Steve could have hoped for would have been a draw. They’d played the scenario out dozens of times in practice sessions Steve could have throw the shield and hoped to score a hit on the archer. His odds of taking Clint out where in three and Clint had a perfect record, taking Steve down every last time the sniper had managed to get a position that let him command the battlefield. But that was Hawkeye, while muscle memory kept the zombified archer’s aim as perfect as ever his movements were slow and he’d lost his nearly prenatural ability to predict how a target would move.

While Steve and Diamondback fought to stay alive. Osborn snatched the teleportation cloak from Sidewinder’s body then employed every once of the glider’s maneuverability to get up above the zombies. He tossed a pumpkin bomb that left the structure the archer and Red Skull were standing swaying, dangerously unsupported. A second bomb blasted a hole through the roof for the Goblin’s escape.

Steve and Diamondback took advantage of Hawkeye’s momentary disadvantage and plowed through the zombies. They forced their way to a second story window. Diamondback shattered the glass with a handful of thrown knives then Steve grabbed her around the waist and dove through. He took the brunt of the fall on his shield, then rolled to his shoulder, smoothly tossing Diamondback onto her feet. “Run! I’ll cover,” he ordered. She didn’t hesitate, heading straight for the trees.

Steve glanced back as he reached the tree line, estimating angles and Clint’s position. There was a chance he could free the archer only to have the man immediately plummet to his death given his precarious perch. He turned and ran.

The three survivors of the initial assault made it out of the ambush site, out of the base and into the wilds of the planet. In the distance Steve saw one of the motherships, a creature nearly the size of a city, wallowing in a shallow sea. The smaller airships; bombers, fighters and transports whooshed by overhead and for a moment Steve caught a glimpse of what they could have been. Magnificent and strange. For just a moment, seeing them in outside of battle, they were something to be wondered at rather than feared and hated.

Steve spotted a shallow cave in a wall of sea-side cliffs and the three of them took shelter there to regroup. Osborn immediately set to work examining Sidewinder’s cloak. “I loathe magic!” he exclaimed throwing it aside a half-hour later. Steve’s mouth twitched involuntarily as he remembered Tony voicing similar sentiments more than once in the past.

Diamondback picked up the cloak and folded it over her arm. “So, what now?” she asked. “We don’t have a way back to the ship or the other continent to regroup with the others.”
“Their ships are more animal than tech,” Osborn said. “I can’t work with that.”

“I don’t know how we get out of this,” Steve admitted. “But the Red Skull is here, the Soul Stone is here. If all we can do is grab that and throw it in the ocean, or a volcano if there’s one handy, we need to do it. And I can’t leave Clint under the Skull’s sway, not after what Loki did to him.”

“So we’re rescuing him to give him the option of slititng his throat and throwing himself in the ocean?” Diamondback asked. “I mean, with our resources saving him seems pointless.”

“It would be worth it not to be one of those things,” Osborn stated. “You haven’t had the pleasure, yet.” He paced back and forth in their cave for several minutes. “I won’t have that thing on Earth. It is here, so are we. I say we put an end to it here and now.”


Diamondback sighed heavily. “Yeah. Yeah, I’m in. If the only thing left that we do is go out with style let’s make it worth my time. Just say no to Nazi Zombies taking over the Earth.”
Previously (Last chapter of “Lima to Stockholm”):

“You’re not Loki.” Tony powered up his armor.

“My son should have remembered that I see even from the depths of the sleep he bound me in.”

“Odin,” Tony accused. “But Loki would have noticed-”

“I still sleep,” Odin stated. “Loki created this construct to be me and so it was vulnerable to my influence although it would go too far to claim that I am able to control it. It has been… educational to find myself constrained by my younger son’s perception of me.” Odin looked down at himself. “I lack the magic to create such a thing but from within I was able to adjust it to draw the energy for its existence from myself rather than Loki. It saps the resources I need to free myself from the enchantment that binds me to sleep but doing so allowed me some influence over events more quickly.”

“Where are the bar, the restaurants, the entertainment?” Constrictor muttered keeping his head down as he walked along a street in the town that had grown up to support the base they’d been set to invade before the mission went sour. He, Songbird and Nebula had liberated overalls from some of the locals, the better to blend in.

Nebula snorted. “Where do you think you are?” she said. “Life is not for enjoying, it’s a sin that is expiated by the killing of others.” Her eye was caught by a woman, hunched over and hurrying down the street.

Constrictor and Songbird traded a puzzled look as they changed course to discreetly follow the woman back to her home. Nebula took three long steps and caught the woman’s door before it could close. “You’re going to hide us for the day,” she stated.

The woman’s gaze flicked up nervously. “Why wouldn’t I just scream for the guards?”

“You’re pregnant and you’re fool enough to try to keep it,” Nebula replied. “You call for the guards, I point out your condition. I doubt the standard procedure for dealing with an unauthorized pregnancy has changed in the last few years: Abortion via gutting the mother.”

The woman’s shoulders slumped. She stepped back and let them into her barren, one room apartment.

“Seriously?” Songbird asked as she passed by Nebula.

“Under Thanos’ rule murder is an act of worship, giving birth is heinous crime,” Nebula said flatly. She turned to the woman as she lowered her hood. “Get someone to deal with your problem. If you manage to make it through the gestation without being caught? Well, a squalling brat is harder to hide than a bump. You will be caught and killed. Thanos will take the child and raise it as his own, reminding it everyday that we are all parasites gnawing away at the fabric of the Universe and you, its parent, had the temerity to believe that it was worth adding to the burden. That it has a filial duty to redeem your stupidity, your arrogance by proving you correct. Most likely it will die cursing you for bringing it into this existence or if it beats the odds it will become one of Thanos’ dread lieutenants.”

The woman drew back from them, huddling up in one corner of her room and staring from behind
her stringy hair with fearful eyes.

“How the hell hasn’t anyone overthrown the psycho bastard?” Songbird asked.

“How an evil dictator can be rebelled against,” Nebula said with a shrug, “But what do you do against a mad god? You humans are fortunate in your ignorance. Thanos has been steadily expanding his empire since before your planet began it’s rotations around Sol but you didn’t know so the thought of opposing him doesn’t reduce you to trembling impotence.”

“Lucky us,” Constrictor said drily. “We’re steal the Chitauri flying sleds tomorrow night I take it? You’re absolutely sure there aren’t any cargo planes we could grab instead?”

Several realms away along realities’ Z-axis, Tony Stark picked up his newest arc reactor design and weighted it in his hand. He tilted it on edge and eye-balled the thickness. It didn’t matter that he knew the new design was precisely 0.236 inches thick and weighted 0.658 pounds, he still needed to see it, to feel it.

‘It’ll only just penetrate the breastbone. Won’t compromise lung capacity or press into the heart. It won’t be like before, not even the improved version that didn’t come with heavy metal poisoning as a feature. Assuming I kill Thanos without killing myself in the process... Assuming I’m not putting my trust in the wrong places, for what? The dozenth time? Easily that... Assuming all that, I could remove it again afterwards.’ Tony glanced at the rest of the hardware that was going into his body, ‘Well, assuming I still have an in with the Asgardian monarchy.’ Loki assured him that, with magic, they could relocate the network of cables into their bodies without actually cutting anything open and ‘Hey, I guess I don’t hate magic afterall.’

Tony had been reminding himself of all those facts at least twice an hour for the last week because the plan was a go. He was going to walk into the operating room on his own two feet and let it happen. ‘Because it’s the right thing to do. It was necessary to save life, the universe and everything. Because Loki would probably knock me out and do it anyway if I balked... Aren’t friends great? Eh, He’s still one up from Fury’s Itsy-Bitsy Spider.’

He turned the arc reactor over in his hands again, ‘I’m going to walk in under my own power. Anything else would be much too undignified... Where’s Rhody when I need him? No way he’d let that pass without asking about where my dignity was when... Well I won’t presume to pick the incident, I’m sure he’s got more than a few on the tip of his tongue.’

A realization hit Tony for what had to be the hundredth time since he’d been shown the situation on Earth and the edge of near panic faded into wonder, ‘I’m going to do it because Pepper and I have a daughter and I will not let her grow up in a warzone.’

T’Challa walked into the auditorium where the UN General Assembly had been called to an emergency session in the wake of the massive Chitauri attack on the Earth. As he made his way to his place among the delegates he noticed a number of disapproving and unfriendly looks being directed toward him. From the tension among his bodyguards, they’d clearly noticed as well.

Thor, Colonel Rhodes and Tanak Valt, the commander of the Nova Empire forces, stood near the podium, quietly talking. The Secretary-General called the session to order and invited Rhodes to take the podium. The Global Leader of the Avengers had debrief all the regional Teams via video conferences earlier in the week and quickly summarized what the various teams had faced, the damages they’d taken and their current readiness to fight if needed.
“We’ve traced seven of the eight Chitauri armies back to their origins and cleared out their strongholds,” Rhodes concluded. “The army that attacked New York originated in the Atlantic Ocean, we are currently reviewing available Enhanced to form an underwater strike force. Meanwhile we have submarines from the US, Canada and several European countries searching for the location of their base.”

“Do you have a timeline?” the Secretary General asked.

“It’s a big ocean,” Rhodes replied. “We’ll have the team assembled within the week but I can’t make any promises about when we’ll find the stronghold. We’re focusing our search off the east coast of the United States. The attack was triggered by Wanda Maximoff and Vision’s discovery of the Chitauri encampment in northern California. We don’t know exactly how fast the Chitauri can move underwater but we have to assume that the Atlantic encampment was no more than a few hours out from Long Island.”

“Is it confirmed that Thanos has the Mind Stone?” Valt asked frowning severely at Rhodes.

The Colonel took a deep breath, “The Mind Stone has been taken, Gamora confirmed that Vision fought one of Thanos’ lieutenants.”

“We warned you!” Valt exclaimed. “And the Time Stone? Is it gone as well?”

“I’m told that it has been removed from the Earth,” Rhodes stated heavily. Vision had wanted to protect the Earth. They’d all supported him, defending his right to self-determination, selfishly, because he was one of the planet’s more powerful protectors. Now they had to face that the Universe might suffer for their choice. “Should we expect any sort of response from the Nova Empire?”

Valt pursed his lips, “What’s done is done. The Earth continues to consume Thanos’ forces as it bars his path forward. Nova Prime’s reasons for supporting Earth’s war have not changed.” Valt paused, “But should the Earth falter, know that there will be fewer voices raised in support of giving you the benefit of the doubt.”

Rhodes nodded grimly.

Thor stepped forward, “Asgard’s mission on Titan was successful, no Chitauri survive on any of your solar system’s moons. But our victory did not come without cost. My brother’s unit was ambushed and slaughtered. I have reason to believe that their attackers used my brother to summon the Bifrost and open the path to Asgard. I have been unable to make contact with Heimdall or my home realm since the battle.” Thor’s eyes were dark with worry but he didn’t bring up his fears for his home. “A thousand of Asgardian warriors remain at Midgard’s disposal but we have not the Bifrost for transportation between the bodies in your solar system and we are forced to assume that we are cut off from further support of the other Realms. Moreover, the Tesseract was on Asgard, if she is fallen we must assume that it, also, is in Thanos’ hands.”

“So he is halfway to his goal,” Valt summed up. “The Soul Stone was already in his possession. He has reclaimed the Mind Stone and taken the Space Stone. The Power Stone is under the protection of the Nova Corps, Asgard assures us the Reality Stone is safely hidden and Earth assures us that the Time Stone has been moved to safety. We must pray that you speak true. With all six Infinity Stones none may hope to stand against Thanos. We stand little enough chance as it was. With Tesseract in Thanos’ hands Earth is no longer a bottleneck. He can open portals, bypass this planet entirely.”

“But he will not,” an echoing voice broke in. Victor von Doom strode down the stairs to the front of the auditorium.
“Dr. Doom, the United Nations thanks you for your assistance in India but-” the Secretary-General began.

“The Mad Titan could use the Tesseract to make Earth irrelevant to his plots. He could gather the other three stones and return to Earth with power to make a god weep. But he will not. Such a victory would curdle in his stomach, soured by pride, so says Doom. We may cause set backs for his armies, as the Avengers did in 2012. Win, possibly years of reprieve. But make no mistake this war will not end. As we came to this point today, we will always return to this point. Until the Earth kneels or Thanos is destroyed there is war between us.”

Doom’s armored boots clacked loudly against the marble tile in the silence he left in his wake as he walked back to his seat.

“We-” the Secretary-General began then stumbled in the void Doom had created. He cleared his throat and began again. “There is the matter of determining the aid needed in the areas devastated by the recent attacks."

A representative from the committee assessing the areas that had borne the brunt of the latest Chitauri invasion stepped forward and took her turn at the podium.

“Seoul, India, Egypt, Central Africa have all suffered heavy civilian casualties, each region has tens of thousands of injured. Additional medical aid is urgently needed.

“The death toll in India would have been immeasurably worse without the aid of Kamar-Taj but approximately thirty-five million people were evacuated from the region, most to Hong Kong or London. It’s unprecedented. No one has starved, yet, that we’ve heard of.” The committee representative took a deep breath, visibly collecting himself from the recollection of millions of terrified people streaming out of the London and Hong Kong Sanctums into the streets of the cities. No one had starved in the days since, but in the initial rush nearly three thousand had been trampled. “Logistics is the most pressing challenge. People are sowing together blankets and hanging them between buildings, across the streets to provide some shelter, but London and Hong Kong are in complete chaos, the cities have been effectively shut down. Water, food, sanitation. Neither city can support the current population density. We can’t get the supplies we do have where they’re needed. Flighted Enhances and helicopters are the only things moving in either city. We need to return these people to their homes or distribute them across the globe more evenly and it won’t be possible without Enhanced support.”

“I’ll send Dr. Strange to talk with you about what’s needed from the mystic community,” Rhodes said. “Along with contacting anyone who’s registered any sort of ability that looks particularly suited to the issue at hand.”

‘As much as Registration became a point of contention in many countries as they established laws to enforce the Accords, there are undeniable advantages to having an index of abilities and contact information available,’ T’Challa thought. He wondered how they would have assigned teams to the more challenging situations without that sort of administrative structure.

“The issue of displacement is less immediately critical in Central Africa, without the use of teleportation to aid the evacuation, the evacuees dispersed as they fled but it is a larger long term problem. The deployed military forces and Africa’s Avengers held back the Chitauri long enough to allow evacuations but the prolonged fighting means we’re dealing with a battlefield more than a thousand kilometers long, encompassing dozens of small villages and two major cities. There’s nothing left to send the evacuees back to.” The speaker turned to T’Challa, “Wakanda’s close proximity to area and modern facilities would make it the most advantageous place to stage restoration efforts out of.”
T’Challa thought about the refugees his country had already taken in, his population increasing by a percent overnight. More than that, it had been hundreds of years since Wakanda had taken any outsiders into their society, maybe the occasional lost child, desperate enough to find their way to the point where the border patrols began but the ones the guards took pity on were uniformly young enough to be integrated into their society as fully as anyone born Wakandan. These people would be coming into Wakandan society as adults, their educational levels a complete unknown, their abilities and interests unknown…

T’Challa grimaced, Wakanda was a small country, a city-state in truth. They’d been truly blessed by Bast when the Vibraniun meteorite had fallen to the Earth, leading his ancient ancestors to Wakanda. The isolated and protected valley in the Eastern Rift Mountains had arable planes, plentiful fresh water, Vibraniun of course but also a sufficient variety of mineral wealth to allow them to be self-sufficient. Without a need to trade Vibraniun Wakanda had been able to horde it as an unmatched military edge. They’d recognized the value of self-sufficiency early in their history and kept their city compact to preserve farmland. They had controlled population growth to match their resources. Wakanda had recognized that her people were a resource as great as Vibraniun. With such a small society everyone was necessary to their country’s success. Children were tested for aptitudes early and matched with educational programs to allow them excel, their talents developed to match Wakanda’s needs. As they grew older, individual interests were taken into account but it was the rare individual whose interests strayed too widely from the talents they had already spent years developing, unusual enough that Wakanda had always been able to indulge those who opted to struggle against their natural bent.

‘But now Wakanda will be forced to deal with a significant fraction of outsiders taking up lives within our society. They will be fixed in their own beliefs, unmolded by Wakandan culture. And now the United Nations asks to have, perhaps, hundreds more outsiders setting up camp in my country?’ T’Challa practically shuddered at the thought. ‘It isn’t that we don’t want to help. That was why my father started sending relief workers to our neighbors. We simply don’t want our culture polluted by the outer world.’

“Wakanda help?” T’Challa’s sharp ears picked up the scoff from somewhere behind him in the auditorium. “As if those stuck up bastards ever helped anyone, except for the purpose of looking down their noses at the rest of the continent.” T’Challa felt his cheeks grow hot at the realization that derogatory aside was barely a distorted mirror to his own thoughts.

“Of course, Wakanda will assist our neighbors in rebuilding,” T’Challa heard himself saying. Then he amended his stance, “Perhaps building a base camp outside of the Wakandan Valley? Even in this modern age we are still not easily accessible except by air.”

The committee head looked disappointed but only said, “I’ll direct the subcommittee dealing with your region to contact you,” before moving on.

“Russia lost several cities in the path of the Chitauri’s march on Moscow to house-to-house fighting. However, the large number of local Enhanced who came out of hiding during the battle have been helping to relocate the evacuees. Moscow intends to follow New York’s example and increasing the population density in the area protected by their Arc Shield. To that end they are requesting a fourth Shield Generator to expand the shielded area.

“Seoul also requests a new Shield Generator to replace the one lost in the battle and another unit to expand the area they can protect. In addition they require assistance rebuilding the section of the city that was destroyed when they lost their third generator.

“Cairo is looking for technical assistance in preventing the Nile from being used to bypass the arc
shield a second time. In a worst case scenario they would consider creating two shielded areas, one on either side of the river but, as the shields form in a dome, keeping the shield from encroaching on the river would mean sacrificing the very heart of the city.”

“Doom would be willing to assist the researchers of Stark Industries in solving this conundrum,” Doom announced winning appreciative murmurs from the other dignitaries.

Colonel Rhodes frowned at the man, “While we’re all grateful for your recent military assistance in India, you’re not going anywhere near Stark Tower and I think you know damn well why.”

‘The kidnapping of Antoinette Stark,’ T’Challa supplied mentally as Doom nodded gracious acceptance of Rhodes’ refusal.

“In Peru, the military’s decision not to engage the Chitauri in the evacuated city resulted in relatively low levels of damage to Cusco. However their conventional military forces suffered severe losses. The region will require external support in the event of a second attack.”

‘South America also lost two of it’s more experienced Enhanced on a team that had been thin to start with,’ T’Challa thought to himself but it was Rhodes’ problem to deal with.

“New York has been preparing the area under the Arc Shield for higher density occupation for more than a year now, some of the short-term shelters are being refitted for longer occupation but their evacuees are cared for. Their primary, urgent, concern is the fortification of subway tunnels and perimeter buildings that leave the Arc Shield vulnerable to ground attack.

“As for the attack on the Western United States, the speed of the attack meant that there was no time to evacuate and almost no survivors within the perimeter established by the North American Avengers. However, damages outside of the perimeter were minimal. We recommend cording off the razed area indefinitely...”

Songbird started humming under her breath, her power a gentle whisper of ‘nothing to see here’, as Constrictor and Nebula pried open the door controls to the Chitauri’s hanger.

“Damn this place is a pain,” Constrictor muttered. “Any other place, I don’t care how strict the official austerity crap might be, there’s always plenty of ‘entertainment’ to be infiltrated. These poor saps actually do consider being alive a luxury. Maybe Strike Team: Delta aren’t the bozos I’ve calling ‘em since the Widow burned S.H.I.E.L.D. to still be collecting information after a year in this hole.” He snorted, “Just the Peter Principle in action; good enough agents but you put ‘em in a position to make the big picture calls and it all goes to hell.”

Nebula attached several wires into a port in her arm and a moment later the door slide open. She peered into the shadowy hanger. “In for maintenance,” she said pointing to one line of chariots. “Those are ready for pick up.”

“Okay let’s get to syphoning gas,” Constrictor said, handing out canisters to Songbird and Nebula.

“You’re making me feel like a kid again,” Songbird said lightly as she started looking for a gas cap on the nearest of the first set of Chariots. A tense twenty minutes later they were screaming out of the hanger on their stolen vehicles, knowing that it would only take a few minutes for the hive-minded Chitauri to know that it was none of theirs piloting them.

They sped out over the ocean, barely skimming the waves as several ray ships zeroed in on them. “Go ahead,” Nebula ordered, turning her chariot to confront their pursuers. She took down one ship with a well placed shot and the others fell back warily.
“It’s only a matter of time before they regroup try again,” Constrictor said.

Just then a ship rose out of the water in front of them. The rear hatch opened and Natasha Romanov waved them closer. “Get in, they’ll be on us in a few seconds.”

Odin watched Master Healer Eir prepare an operating theatre for two patients on his orders. He looked over the devices that would soon reside in the Midgardian engineer’s body and that of his second son. In the intricate pattern of lines and nods he could almost see purpose. Whatever it was that the Midgardian had built, it spanned the bridge between technology and magic. ‘Frigga would have understood,’ he thought his wife’s absence a deep, unending ache in his soul. Magic was Frigga realm and Loki’s, not his. Although Odin wasn’t ignorant of magic, or any other thing that he might fight or bend to his use, it wasn’t his area of expertise. ‘The Dwarves might also be able to tell me what it is intended to do, what using it will do to my son.’

“Just so you know, if we come out of this looking anything like a Cenobite it is totally NOT my fault,” the Midgardian joked to Loki as the pair walked into the operating theatre in an obvious if incomprehensible effort to cover his nervousness.

Odin waited until Eir had put Loki under sedation in preparation for the procedure. Then, with Loki’s influence and control of the clone-body he’d created to steal Odin’s throne at a nadir, Odin stepped forward. The words were on his tongue to order Eir not to proceed with implanting the device into Loki, to tell her that the Midgardian was enough. “Take all precautions, this may be our only hope of defeating the Mad Titan,” he heard himself saying. Odin caught a brief glimpse of his reflection in the polished table where Loki lay unconscious, there was no sign on his face that he was likely sending his youngest son to his death. ‘For the good of Asgard I would sacrifice either of my sons should it become necessary. But how did I convince Loki that I do not care whether he lives or dies?’

Diamondback crawled through the base’s vent on her stomach. As Steve had speculated years ago when he’d first fought against her, Diamondback’s skill-set landed her somewhere between Natasha and Clint, she wasn’t as good at ranged combat as the archer or as good at hand to hand as the Widow, but she could fill either of their roles for her team and she was much, much better at stealth than either Steve or Osborn could ever hope to be.

She blocked a fan blade then shimmed through the gap. For a moment she paused to check the scanner Osborn had rigged up to detect the Soul Stone’s energy emissions. It took her most the night, creeping through air ducts, triangulating position from the readings, for her to pinpoint the Red Skull’s quarters in the base. “You got my tracer?” she whispered into her comm.

“We see you,” Steve replied.

“We won’t be doing it the easy way,” Diamondback sighed. “He sleeps with it on and I’m not that kind of thief.”

“It’s nothing we weren’t expecting,” Steve said. “Don’t move, we’re coming straight down.”

“Give me a second!” Diamondback protested scurrying backwards until she was braced under a structural support. “Now maybe you won’t bring the roof down on me.”

“Bombs away!” the Goblin laughed, allowing the madness that lurked under the businessman’s exterior to come out and play. A moment later a string of explosions rocked the facility.
The Red Skull grabbed a gun from his bedside table and shouted for reinforcements. Diamondback pictured the Goblin’s pumpkin bombs drilling through the floors above. Plaster jumped on the ceiling then Nomad crashed through using his shield, his weight, terminal velocity from his dive off the back of the Goblin’s glider as a battering ram. He rolled to his feet, eyes fixed on the Skull.

Nomad pressed forward, taking the fight to the Skull and the Goblin tossed several smaller bombs through the hole they’d made, hoping to disrupt the Skull’s backup. Diamondback readied a brace of throwing knifes edged with a paralytic neurotoxin, she could only hope it would work on zombies.

Outside the Goblin circled around for another pass. Zombie-Hawkeye stepped out onto the roof and raised his bow. The arrow whistled through the space occupied by Goblin one erratic swerve earlier.

Steve charged the Red Skull, hunched behind his shield to fend off bullets. He saw Clint through the gaping hole in the roof, lining up another shot at Osborn, the archer’s movements were smooth and unhurried. It flashed through Steve’s mind that Clint would likely fall to his death if he were freed from the Soul Stone there.

Steve started to run as he ratcheted back the shield. Diamondback cleared his path with a dozen thrown knives. He flung the shield and leapt, grabbed a protruding strut and threw himself upward, reaching out to catch Clint as he fell.

The shield struck Clint in the gut a half-second before he released his arrow. He should have doubled over at the impact.

Three Weeks Earlier

“We’ll lose.” As Hawkeye dropped one Chitauri after another he remembered Tony’s estimation of the Avengers’ chances in the face of another alien invasion. “Then we’ll do that together too,” Steve had replied.

“Sorry Cap, not my style,” the archer murmured as he watched Natasha, Sif and Vali slip through the gap in the wall. Once they were through he fired both guns into the stone just above the arch Vali had melted into the wall causing the already severely weakened structure to crumble. Dozens of Chitauri were caught under the falling masonry.

Clint grinned weakly, it would take some digging before anyone went after his team. Then he turned and faced the horde of enemies climbing up to pull him down. “Come and get me bastards,” Hawkeye challenged unleashing shot after shot, scoring kill after kill.

One Chitauri climbed high above the archer, coming at him from his blind spot. At the last moment, Hawkeye spun on his perch and grabbed his attacker’s weapon before launching him into the air with a well placed kick. “Thanks, I was running low on ammo.”

The Chitauri gave up on direct confrontation and attacked the beam Hawkeye was perched on. As it gave way beneath him the archer leapt, grabbing for another hold and missed. He fell nearly fifty feet, landing flat on his back on the concrete. Clint felt his organs popping like water balloons on impact. ‘Guess I didn’t need to save that bullet,’ he thought.

As the shield struck Clint’s gut his flesh dissolved away from it, his aim never waiver, he released the shot even as he crumbled to dust.

“No! No!” Steve screamed as Clint vanished and Osborn tumbled from his glider, an arrow through his throat. The Red Skull laughed. “No.” Steve stated as he summoned the shield back to him and
turned to the Red Skull. “You don’t walk away from this.”

“Oh my dear Captain, have you lost yet another… and another of your lackies?” the Skull asked mockingly. “You really must learn to be less attached. These lesser beings you surround yourself with serve no purpose but to puff up your ego.”

Clint crumbling to ash. Osborn falling. An arrow sprouting from Sidewinder’s eye. “No more,” Steve’s voice rumbled deep in his chest. His shield and body armor burned blue at the proximity of the Soul Stone.

Forty minutes later Steve stumbled out of the compound in a daze. The Chitauri drew back from him in fear. The Red Skull’s severed arm, the bracer with the Soul Stone, still on it hung from Steve’s hand, still dripping blood.
Despair and Resolve

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Steve trudged forward his grisly trophy in hand. He couldn’t remember if there’d been a volcano on the continent but he was going to keep walking until he found one then throw the Soul Stone in it. Throwing it in the ocean didn’t feel extreme enough.

The Stone pulsed maleficently and the blue glow surrounding Steve brightened in response, he noticed neither.

“I won’t have that thing on Earth. It is here, so are we. I say we put an end to it here and now.” Osborn had said. Villian that he’d been, after experiencing what the Soul Stone could do, he’d been willing to die to keep it away from Earth, away from his son. Sidewinder and Clint -Clint, oh God, Clint- had been parents as well, he had to believe they’d have felt the same. He owed it to them to destroy the Stone. If a tainted victory is all I’ll be allowed, I still have to- I have to do this. For my team. They can’t have died for nothing.

The Chitauri fell back from Steve, from the Soul Stone. He didn’t notice. Just kept putting one foot in front of the other. With difficulty he raised his head and scanned the horizon, looking for a cone or a trail of smoke to indicate a direction to a volcano. He’d had an eidetic memory ever since the Serum. He couldn’t remember if he’d seen a volcano when he’d looked it the continent from space.

The Red Skull shooting at him. Crouching behind the shield, pressing forward. A knife sprouting from the Skull’s hand. Leaping into the opening. A lucky elbow sending his shield spinning away, two fingers snapping as it was jerked out of his hand. The pain felt good, felt real.

Grappling on the floor, both of them throwing punches whenever they got the chance. Bursts of sharp sensations burning up his arm, a reward for every time he connected. He managed to pin the Skull beneath him and he kept punching. Hitting that mocking face over and over again- “Oh my dear Captain, have you lost yet another? You really must learn to be less attached.” -until there was nothing left. Red and grey splattered across the floor like an abstract expressionist painting, a lone eyeball staring blankly out of the spill of colors.

There had to be a volcano, he needed it. He was going to keep walking until he found it. Throw the Soul Stone in it. Destroy it. For his team. His dead team. The Soul Stone couldn’t make it back to Earth. He owed them a victory.

‘Rachel!’ Steve thought. Sidewinder. Osborn. Clint. ‘She’s dead, everyone’s dead.’ Tony. Bucky. Peggy. The Commandos. ‘Everyone’s dead.’ Bringing his hand up to his comm was harder than it should have been. Until there was confirmation she was alive but he knew she was dead. Everyone was dead. “Diamondback, report.” His voice broke. He held his breath. He didn’t expect a response.

Tapping, regular tapping, came back over the channel, it was like catching a lifeline. Steve’s head jerked up, his eyes sharpened. “Coordinates!” Steve stripped the bracer off the Red Skull’s severed arm and put it on his own arm as he oriented himself, the orange glow of the stone combated the blue of the arc reactor to create a muddy, reddish brown.

Then he was running. The remaining zombies were like rundown wind-up toys scattered in his path. They burst into clouds of dust without so much as a twitch if he got too close to them. ‘Clint, no.’ Rachel’s coordinates led him out of the Red Skull’s segment of the base. The Chitauri fell back,
chittering among themselves, at the sight of the Soul Stone in their enemy’s possession. He pushed forward, it was too easy probably a trap, but he couldn’t bring himself to care.

Rachel was sliding out of the vents and he was catching her before her feet hit ground. And he shouldn’t, not now in the middle of hostile territory, probably not ever, she barely tolerated him, but he was, pulling her into his arms and kissing her between murmured exclamations of “You’re not dead. You’re not dead.” And she was laughing hysterically, “I thought I was dead,” and kissing him back.

And it really was not the time, a shot from the Chitauri reminded them of that fact. Reflexively Steve pulled the shield up to protect them. Everyone else, dead. “You can’t have her!” Steve snarled. He lunged at the Chitauri who’d shot at them. The Soul Stone pulsed the moment his hand made contact with the alien, it’s eyes clouded over, apparently dying on its feet at Steve’s touch.

The Soul Stone’s orange light cleared a space for itself against the blue of the Arc Reactor based protection on his body armor. Steve’s arm burned where the Stone’s wild, twisting power broke through.

The zombified Chitauri turned on its hive mates. It was what Steve wanted. The Chitauri were too alien for Steve to read their expressions but their cries of shock and dismay crossed species boundaries. It was nothing Steve would ever want.

Watching the Chitauri hesitate before defending themselves against one of their own, Steve told himself it was no different from what he’d asked Wanda to do to the HYDRA operatives they’d captured. But they had only asked Wanda’s victims to betray HYDRA with words. When it was HYDRA he’d been able to tell himself that, either they were freeing them from HYDRA’s brainwashing or they were the sort of people who’d made Bucky into the Winter Soldier. With Wanda he’d been able to tell her to do it and think nothing more of it. But this? Steve could feel the Soul Stone, like an angry djinn, bound to his wishes but full of malice.

Diamondback grabbed Steve and tugged him away while the Chitauri were distracted.

“You should- You should be away from me,” Steve said after a few moments. “The Skull would have had some sort of personal craft. You should find it. Go get the others, if they’re alive, get back to Nebula’s ship. Get away. I- I’ve got throw this thing is a volcano. Or something.”

“Did your brains get scrambled while you and the Red Skull were beating the hell out of each other?” Rachel demanded. “Why the hell are you bothering with this Mount Doom shit? We’re safer together. We take the Skull’s personal getaway vehicle. We go get the other half of the team and high tail it for Nebula’s ship. We can toss the One Ring in the sun as we blow the system if you’re really that determined to get rid of it, a star’s hotter than a volcano anyway.”

“I- You’re right.” Steve’s shoulders slumped. “I’ll- I’ll help you find the ship.”

The Chitauri tried several more attacks, all the while maintaining a cautious distance from the Soul Stone. Rachel stuck as close to Steve as his shadow, so they could share the shield’s shelter in a moment. He found himself reaching out to touch her, to assure himself that she was really there, really not dead more than once as they scoured the base. They found the Red Skull’s ship gutted by explosions, the Chitauri having guessed their intentions and blown it before they could claim it.

Steve and Rachel stood in the door of the hanger, leaning against each other for a moment as they watched their escape go up in flames. “We have- We have to go,” Steve said wrapping a hand around Rachel’s arm.
“Go where?” Rachel asked.

“I don’t know,” Steve admitted. “We have to get the Soul Stone away from them. Hide it, destroy it, somehow.”

Rachel nodded. With the Chitauri’s reluctance to get close to the Soul Stone’s wielder they were able to escape back into the wilderness of the planet, back to the shallow cave. “A volcano?” Rachel asked after several hours of silence between them. They sat slumped against the back wall of the cave, slumped against each other.

“You have any ideas how to find one?” Steve asked wryly. “I guess we should walk toward the mountains. Better odds than trying to swim to an island right?” It wasn’t a plan, not even a Hail Mary. “We could look for smoke- Gotta keep moving. If I stop- Don’t know if I’d- Can’t let them die for nothing-”

Then Rachel’s mouth was on his, silencing him, making him realize he’d been talking out loud. And Steve was returning the kiss. ‘Rachel wasn’t dead, yet.’ Their hands started wandering over the other’s body, warm and alive and there. That was motion, of a sort, as well.

Tony sat around the corner, out of sight, listening as Loki made his play.

“You have seen that your pathetic champions’ stand against Thanos is futile and now you try to come crawling back to us?” Corvus Glaive sneered from beneath his cowl.

Tony knew what he said was true. The Earth’s various militaries were unified against the external threat. Rhodey and his Avengers were brilliantly giving it their all. They had the Nova Empire’s aid. But the Earth was one planet, Thanos had the resources of thousands to throw at them. The Nova Empire would only support the Earth as much as it served their own interests. They would never throw all their resources into a pitched battle to stop Thanos before he took the Earth, not when they could destroy the Earth and win, possibly decades, to prepare for their own planets’ defense.’

“I think you’ll find that I do not come empty handed,” Loki replied. “Do you remember the man with the star in his chest who was immune to the Mind Stone’s influence? Earth’s Merchant of Death? I assure you that he does indeed bare Mistress Death’s touch. Would Thanos not appreciate having the one who has replaced him in her favor at his mercy?”

There was a long pause. Then a set of coordinates. “Deliver him and it is not outside of the realm of possibility that you will be spared some of Thanos’ disappointment in your performance and your cowardly flight from his chastisement.”

‘Game on,’ Tony thought.

The Soul Stone pulsed, illuminating Steve and Rachel’s forms as they slept entwined together.

In Steve’s dreams he was back in Siberia. Iron Man’s face plate snapped down but the armor was improbably transparent, it did nothing to mask the grief and betrayal that filled Tony’s expression. Or the spike of fear and rage as Bucky leveled a gun at Tony. Steve felt like an unwilling puppet as he saw himself wrap a cord around Tony’s neck and bodily yank the other man out of the air. This time, unlike in reality, he could hear Tony’s vertebrae cracking, he could see bruises blooming as Tony’s cheekbone impacted the inside of his helmet, then the back of his skull as head rebounded.

Unconsciously Steve pulled Rachel closer, burying his nose in her hair to blot out the dreams. Siberia, Tony, was morass he couldn’t afford to lose himself in. He had to keep moving, destroy the
Stone.

The muddy, muted light from the Soul Stone spread, seeking the gaps in Arc enhanced body armor shoved aside in search of human contact.

Stark glanced at Loki’s scepter. “It feels good, yeah?” he asked Thor. “I mean, you’ve been after this thing since S.H.I.E.L.D. collapsed. Not that I haven’t enjoyed our little raiding parties, but…”

“No, but this...this brings it to a close.” Thor sighed.

“As soon as we find out what else this has been used for,” Steve heard himself saying. “I don’t just mean weapons. Since when is Strucker capable of human enhancement?”

“Banner and I'll give it the once before it goes back to Asgard. Is that cool with you?” Tony offered and Thor nodded in agreement.

Flashes of the party. The battle against Ultron. A room taut with fear and anger, accusations hanging heavy. Thor stormed in and grabbed Stark by the throat, lifting him off the floor, throwing accusations, “This could've been avoided if you hadn't played with something you don't understand.”

Steve grimaced in his sleep. He wanted to shout at Thor to let Tony go, that he’d given Tony permission to study the scepter just a few hours earlier. But now, when things had gone wrong, it was all on Tony for playing with things man was not meant to know? The words caught in Steve’s throat choking him with helplessness as the scene played out without alteration.

“Only when I’ve created a murder bot,” Bruce said.

“We didn't. We weren't even close. Were we close to an interface?” Tony had protested.

“Well, you did something right. And you did it right here. The Avengers were supposed to be different than S.H.I.E.L.D. ” Hadn’t he wanted to know more about the scepter, about what it had been used for?

Three years blurred by in a heartbeat, to a moment when Steve had nothing but time. After a session with Samson, digging into the Ultron event, Steve found himself seeking out Scott Lang. “What does it mean if a computer program doesn’t have an interface?” he asked the engineer.

Scott shrugged, “It doesn’t have the means to connect with anything else. It’s like a car engine without a drivetrain, you can turn the engine on and it’ll run but it’s not attached to the wheels so it doesn’t do anything.”

“Then how could Ultron have taken over that Legionnaire and go on to threaten the whole world if his interface wasn’t done?” Steve pondered out loud.

“Ultron couldn’t,” Scott stated. “I mean, that’s what the UN investigations team determined. The Vision testified that the Mind Stone has an elementary sentience and a desire to be used, so the most likely scenario was that the scepter co-opted the incomplete Ultron program to give itself purpose after you guys took it from HYDRA. You and Thor apparently weren’t available but this Marie Hill chick testified that Stark asked Thor before attempting to analyze the scepter so the investigation concluded that he hadn’t been negligent. There was just no way for him to know what the Mind Stone was capable of before he started studying it and scanning it was what activated it… Of course there were a lot of people who said Stark must have bought off the investigators.”

The Soul Stone pulsed more rapidly. Steve groaned as images flashed behind his eyes.
Falling backward in time, before Ultron, back to the beginning. Bad beginnings. “You may not be a threat but you better stop pretending to be a hero,” he snarled in Tony’s face.

“A hero? Like you?” the other man spat back. “You’re a laboratory experiment Rogers. Everything special about you came out of a bottle.”

“Put on the suit. Let’s go a few rounds.”

Sweat broke out on Steve’s forehead as memories were dragged forcibly to the surface.

“You know Ultron is trying to tear us apart, right?” Tony demanded, as if he wasn’t the reason Ultron existed in the first place.

“Well I guess you’d know. Whether you tell us is a bit of a question.” But Tony wasn’t the only one that had kept secrets, who had private side projects.

“Banner and I were doing research.”

“That would affect the team.” That Howard and Maria Stark hadn’t died in an accident affected the team.

“That would end the team,” Tony exclaimed. “Isn’t that the mission? Isn’t that the "why" we fight, so we can end the fight, so we get to go home?” And Tony’s words just hit too close to the vision that had been inflicted on him.

He grabbed a log and ripped it apart with his bare hands, anything to shut Tony up. “Every time someone tries to win a war before it starts, innocent people die. Every time.”

But Ultron hadn’t been Tony trying to create a deterrent. “Anybody remember when I carried a nuke through a wormhole? Recall that? A hostile alien army came charging through a hole in space. We’re standing three hundred feet below it. We’re the Avengers. We can bust arms dealers all the live long day, but, that up there? That’s...that’s the end game. How were you guys planning on beating that?” They’d driven the Chitauri back, closed the portal and cut off their immediate path to Earth. But the Avenger hadn’t won that war, they’d only set Thanos’ timeframe back eight years.

Eight years that they could have been using to prepare for Thanos. Sidewinder, Osborn, Clint all dead. Nat, Frank, Nebula, Songbird odds were they were dead as well. Trapped and hopeless, Steve knew it was only a matter of time before he and Rachel joined them. All that was left for them was to destroy the Soul Stone before they were hunted down and killed. His team’s death couldn’t be for nothing.

The Stone throbbed dragging Steve’s attention backward.

Confronting Stark and Banner with the Maximoff twins at his back. “I’m gonna say this once.”

Stark, refusing him. “How about "nonce"?”

“Shut it down!”

Disobeying his orders. “Nope, not gonna happen.”

“You don’t know what you’re doing.”

Questioning his judgement, “And you do? She’s not in your head?”

Pietro using his power to take the choice out of their hands. A bullet stealing the floor from under the
speedster’s feet, Clint siding with Stark and Banner against him. Pietro had the right idea: if they wouldn’t willingly submit he’d force them to. Who did they think they were, questioning Captain America? A glimpse of a conference room a year later. One hundred and seventeen nations demanding his capitulation. “If we can’t accept limitations, if we’re boundary-less, we’re no better than the bad guys,” Tony insisted.

Siberia, inescapable back to Siberia.

“He’s my friend.”

“So was I... Stay down. Final warning.”

“I can do this all day.”

Iron Man, prone beneath him. Beating on the helmet until it gave way, the transmitted force invisibly fracturing Tony’s skull more than once. Yanking back control, slamming the shield down on the reactor not Tony’s face. A dull crunch of metal giving way, the reactor destroyed and dim, sunken into the chest plate. Already cracked ribs, compromised years before Steve ever met Tony, breaking... Condemning him to a slow death instead of an instantaneous one.

A pattern, an escalation. Threats into violence, death, the natural culmination of the path they’d started on the first day they’d met.

“No,” Steve moaned waking Rachel. She shook his arm then drew back when she noticed the Soul Stone, pulsating in time with his racing heartbeat. “NO!”

A sacrifice willingly offered but not claimed. A change of opinion. Shawarma.

Steve’s defense was met with laughter.

The battle done, the Avengers going their separate ways. Basically strangers still after that single battle. After exploring the 21st Century for a few months Steve would return to S.H.I.E.L.D. He’d come to know Natasha and Clint on a string of shared missions. He’d watch the news as Stark’s Malibu home was destroyed and the man prematurely declared dead but the fight against the Mandarin was over and done before he knew where to go to help.

By the time he saw Stark in person for the first time since Manhattan there was already a secret lodged behind his breastbone: Howard Stark murdered, Fury’s murder at the Winter Soldier’s hands referenced a second later. Implications, hints, nothing solid. There was no rational reason to withhold the information from Stark... Except if the hints were true. Fear, unacknowledged, carefully unexamined, fear that Stark was a danger to Bucky, underlying every interaction he’d have with the man as the Avengers truly came together as a team in the wake of S.H.I.E.L.D.’s fall. Only they didn’t. The team was broken from the start, because of him. Ultron put the writing on the wall. Zemo punctuated it.

“Your death amounts to the same as your life; a zero sum.” Zola was wrong, without him the Avengers, the Earth would have been stronger, more ready. Should have died in the ice. Tony. Should have died with the Serum burning in his veins. Clint, Osborn, Sidewinder. Should have died of any of a hundred different ailments that had plagued him before. Bucky.

‘Why don’t you die now? Before you do any more harm,’ the insidious whisper carried his own voice.

“Steve!” Rachel shouted. His eyes moved rapidly behind closed eyelids. His heart was pounding so heart that she could see distended veins throbbing over his temples. She slid her hands under his
body armor, using it to shield herself as she tried to remove the Soul Stone’s bracer from his arm.

“Allow me.” Rachel looked up in shock. Nebula reached down and pulled the bracer off. The cyborg’s head fell back as she slipped it on her own arm. “You’re mine,” she declared. “You will bend to my will.”

Rachel sighed in relief as Steve’s pulse began to slow, the strain on his heart easing as he was relieved of possession of the Soul Stone.

Natasha and Songbird eyed Steve and Rachel’s dishevelment with similar expressions of disbelief. “Do I have to have a talk with both of you about professionalism?” Frank asked with a smirk.

Chapter End Notes

Yes, Steve's thought process is very mucked up in this chapter. Between shock and the Soul Stone trying to defend itself from his desire to destroy it his head's a mess... He might have taken Coulson's death in stride (well they barely knew each other) but the other 'soldier' he'd lost was Bucky and it didn't take him long to throw himself in the void after Bucky fell off that train.
Nebula disappeared shortly after claiming the Soul Stone, leaving the others to sort themselves out. “Should she be taking that?” Sif asked eyeing the tracks Nebula had left behind her once they noticed the Cyborg’s disappearance.

“She has more reason to hate Thanos than any of us,” Constrictor assured the Asgardian.

Natasha frowned, “Do we need to worry about her being reckless?”

Songbird shook her head, “Bloodthirsty yeah, but not stupid. She had a plan for how we’d get her ship back using that thing.”

“Is she going to come back?” Sif asked.

Constrictor and Songbird glanced at each other for a moment before Songbird replied, “Yeah, probably.”

“So we wait,” Natasha decided. She turned toward Sif, “Let’s get Steve on your ship, in case things go wrong.”

Sif nodded and Constrictor helped her carry him on board. Frank felt slightly embarrassed to realize that the girl was doing most of the heavy lifting and he’d been relegated to assisting with awkward bulk as Steve was a large man. They deposited him on one of the two bunks at the back of the Asgardian ship and Natasha claimed a spot on the bunk by his hip.

Songbird glanced from Natasha to Rachel, cocking her head a bit in a silent question toward her teammate. Rachel shrugged nonchalantly and dropped onto the other bunk. Frank sat down beside Rachel. “So what happened to the plan?” he asked as Songbird found a patch of wall to lean against and Vali twisted around in the pilot’s chair to face them. Sif stood in the ship’s door like a sentry.

Rachel’s lips thinned. “It went to hell about half a second after we arrived when a zombie archer iced Sidewinder.” Natasha flinched minutely. Rachel continued bringing the others up to date. Steve regained consciousness as Rachel started on the three of them going after the Red Skull, he stayed silent, using grogginess as an excuse to let her tell them what he’d done to the Skull. He clearly remembered staring down at the wreck he’d made of his old enemy but most of the fight was a blur, ‘Everything after Clint. I have to tell Natasha.’ Steve felt sweat break out on his forehead. “Nat,” his voice was a weak croak. “I didn’t save Clint.”

“The archer was dead before we ever saw him,” Rachel added quickly. Songbird cocked an eyebrow questioningly.

Natasha closed her eyes. “We’ll have to Laura and the kids,” she said after a few moments.

Steve felt something like acid crawling up his throat, Osborn and Sidewinder had families who would need to be informed too. He knew it was his duty but he’d never had to deliver that sort of news before. He’d gone down with the Valkyrie before finding the words to tell Bucky’s little sisters about his fall.
“Are you sure?” a nervous man in a suit asked. “They’re more likely to take you seriously as a scientist in your other form.”

Melati Kusuma sneered down at him, her tail twitching. “You mean a girl in a wheelchair won’t scare the big, bad generals?” She walked up to the podium, brought up her slides and waited while the man introduced her to an audience of dozens of representatives from the world’s militaries who had been tasked with ensuring that there were no more hidden Chitauri strongholds on the Earth. Colonel Rhodes was sitting in the front row, he smiled reassuringly and gave Melati a thumbs up.

She brought up a slide showing pictures of a Chitauri footsoldier, a Whale ship and a Mothership overlaid with pictures of DNA segments, identical segments highlighted, for each. “My study of the Chitauri has revealed that they possess genetic markers that transcend apparent species differences to indicate hives.”

She advanced to an image of the Chitauri attacking Las Vegas from earlier that year as well as the attack on Chad. “The study of bodies from each major battle against the Chitauri shows all combatants at each attack shared identical markers but there are variations between the markers of different Chitauri armies.” More pictures of DNA segment appeared. There were markers at the same locations but with subtle differences paired with each army.

The next slide showed Chitauri from the Las Vegas and Chicago attacks side by side along with their DNA markers indicating two different armies. Melati advanced the slide and arrows showed the two armies merging into the force that had emerged from Northern California in the most recent attack. A number of different DNA segments were shown beneath the Northern California army with indications that a new marker had been grafted over an older one. The older Chicago markers had all but disappeared but the marks associated with the more recent attack on Las Vegas were easier to pick out. Next Melati brought up a picture of the small Mothership discovered in the Lava Beds of Northern California along with a number of Chitauri egg cases also found at the site, the DNA markers were a match for the grafted markers but with no sign of a graft. “Chitauri motherships appear to have the ability to, for lack of a better word, ‘adopt’ adult warriors into their hives.

“So what does this tell us?” Melati asked rhetorically. “We’ve analyzed the bodies of Chitauri from every engagement in the solar system. With every attack on Earth the Chitauri were seeding the Earth with their foot soldiers. The Chitauri army that attacked Machu Picchu was a division of the Northern California Hive and the one that attacked the Pyramids was a division of the hive that ravaged central Africa, possibly explaining why those attacks were led by non-Chitauri generals.”

Melati noted that she was losing her audience. “But that’s mostly speculation. The most critical information gathered from my data is that the genetic markers indicate that we have six different motherships on the Earth. The ones in Northern California, Russia and India have been dealt with. The remaining three Motherships are most likely located in North Korea, Central Africa and the North Atlantic Ocean.”

Melati saw approving nods and renewed interest. “There is one more finding that I think bares relating,” she continued. “The Chitauri who attacked New York do not have any signs of having grafted markers, either they were born in their current Hive or have been a part of it for so long that the signs of earlier hives have been completely overwitten. We know that the three motherships already discovered on Earth have been small, probably young. From that, I would hypothesize that the North Atlantic Mothership arrived on Earth during the Invasion of 2012 and has been cultivating it hive’s strength since then. I think when we find their stronghold we have to be prepared for a hive that has had eight years to dig in to our planet. It won’t be easy to root them out.”

Melissa caught Rachel stretching her legs outside of the Asgardian ship while they waited for Nebula
to come back. “You seem suddenly loyal to Rogers. Is he that good in the sack?”

Rachel rolled her eyes, “Hooray-I’m-not-dead sex is always good but I’ve done it before. He’s,” she sighed. “He wasn’t what I expected. I mean, sure, he’s the sort of idiot who’d stare blankly if you asked him ‘Right for who?’ But he isn’t cynical at all, he really does try to do the right thing.”

“By the people who are real to him,” Melissa qualified.

Rachel shrugged, “I’m sleeping with him and I can tell you he doesn’t do that often. He’s done right by our team. Best he can,” she added acknowledging their latest mission. “It’s more than I can say of a lot of guys I’ve gone with.”

“Stark probably thought he mattered too,” Melissa cautioned.

“It’s not like I see this lasting. Assuming it’s not a one off, it won’t last past the war,” Rachel admitted. “They’ll let him go back to being a hero and my pardon won’t last a month past my pay for this gig running out.”

“Don’t sell yourself short,” Melissa replied. “We’re doing as much as he is for the war effort. If they take him back I’d wager that they’ll give us a shot as heroes too.” She grinned, “You know, I just might try it. The skill set’s pretty much the same as villaining but you don’t have to put up with shit if you’ve got something, you know, a cause you give a damn about.”

“We are in such deep shit,” Harley breathed as he stared through the ocean’s depths at a Chitauri Mothership that look around the size of Memphis. And just like a city, the ship was teeming with life, tens of thousands of Chitauri going about their business.

“Where’s Atlantis when you need it?” FRIDAY agreed.

“If Atlantis actually existed they might decide the Chitauri’ll destroy the planet slower than humans anyway,” Amadeus remarked tangentially over the comms. “Did you know there’s a floating island of waste plastic in the Pacific that’s bigger than Texas?”

“Yeah, great. Pollution boo!” Harley grouched. “How does that help us deal with a city! Of Chitauri on Earth. Who all look comfortable underwater by the way. There’s only a handful of Enhanced who are any good under water. And how many subs exist in the world? ‘Cause I think we might need all of them.”

“Thor’s Asgardian army,” FRIDAY suggested. “They were less restricted by the environment on Titan than a human would be.”

“Worth asking,” Harley replied. He glanced over his shoulder, in the direction where he knew three US submarines were lurking in the distance, hidden by the murky waters. “With what we’ve got today all we’d do is let them know we found them while we die.”

“I’ll let the Navy know we’re stymied for today,” Cho said.

Nebula came back after forty-eight hours. She arrived with a very unhealthy looking whale ship and a wide, demented grin. “There were twenty Motherships rejuvenating themselves on the planet. I got them all,” she said. “They don’t spread the stone’s effect to their Hive but they still control the Hive, so no matter. I’ve given them a list of Thanos’ bases to attack. It’s a long enough list that they should all be destroyed before they’ve finished their task.”
“You- you’re using the Soul Stone?” Steve asked, horrified.

“Of course,” Nebula scoffed. “The Infinity Stones aren’t simple trophies to be displayed on a shelf. They desire to be used and won’t be mastered by any who would refuse that.”

“Then it’s even more urgent that we destroy it,” Steve insisted but he felt an uneasiness in his gut.

Nebula laughed, her voice harsh and hard. “The Infinity Stones come from a time before the Universe. How do you hope to destroy something that survived those birth pains?” She stroked the glowing orange stone affectionately, “I know of a dozen more layover planets like this one. I wonder how much of Thanos’ army I can turn against him before he comes after me himself.”

“You can’t-” Steve began. Natasha put a hand on his shoulder and it was like the ground beneath him turned to quicksand.

“My team just spent the last year digging around this part of the Universe and what we found,” Natasha shook her head. “Can you honestly say you’d stand a chance against Thanos? Even with the Soul Stone in your possession?”

Steve tried to focus on their discussion but he couldn’t hear past the roaring in his ears. It seemed so obvious to him that using the Soul Stone was wrong, something repugnant but what if he was wrong? Nebula seemed convinced of her ability, he couldn’t hear what Natasha was saying but she didn’t look like she was dismissing the notion out of hand.

All his life Steve had known the right course of action, he’d never had any doubts. He’d recognized bullies at a glance even back when his attempts to thwart them had been less than glowing successes. He’d known he was needed out on the frontlines, known the regulation keeping him out of the army were wrong. He’d refused to back down, Erskine found him and Captain America was born. When the Maximoff twins had helped him with that train in Seoul he’d known that they were redeemable. Without them Ultron would have won -without them Ultron never would have gotten so far-. Clint would have died -Clint dissolving into dust-, Wanda had been a valued member of the team for over a year -she was poisoning our minds against Tony the whole time-. As soon as he saw Ross at the Compound Steve had known that the Accords were no good -Rhodes and Potts made the Accords work-.

Even with Tony- The moment Steve heard about Tony’s death he’d known he’d handled Siberia all wrong and the only possible correct course of action was to turn himself in. In the bunker, when that video started playing, he knew he’d played it wrong when he’d kept Howard’s murder from Tony but it hadn’t been as if he’d spent the years following his encounter with Zola thinking about deceiving Tony, he’d put the information about Howard’s murder out of his mind almost immediately. There’d been times after that when he’d been searching for Bucky and the thought would cross his mind that it had been Bucky who killed Howard but he’d always pushed it away before reaching the point of consciously considering what that could mean for the team, for Tony. After Tony’s death, when he’d had to think about where it all went wrong, about how he should have handled it, Steve had always reached the conclusion that where he’d gone wrong was he’d been too much a coward to think through the implications when Bucky was involved.

When Bucky was involved Steve couldn’t think, he just felt. That realization had made the Accords a bit more palatable. The realization that underneath the bullshit of people like Thaddeus Ross there was a genuine good intention of guarding against those moments when no one could be expected to think clearly. In the intervening years Steve had made peace with the thought that the Accords had garnered public support because Ross had masked his agendas behind reasonable sounding rhetoric about accountability and checks and balances. He’d come to believe that Rhodes and Potts had stolen control of the Accords from the Rosses of the world by turning their own rhetoric against them
and forcing the Accords to be what they claimed to be. Steve had reached a sort of peace with that understanding. He had been trying to be a better leader, to listen more and be less influenced by his feelings about his teammates. But now, suddenly, he found himself wondering if he even knew right from wrong, if he ever had.

“No,” Songbird was saying when Steve managed to pulled himself out of his own head. “I’ve had that thing used on me. I want no part of it.”

“She’s right,” Steve latched onto the welcome support. “Even in a war there are some things you don’t do.”

“Not this war,” Constrictor disagreed and it hurt. Steve had felt like Frank would always have his back, the other man had done so much over the months to help Steve bridge the gap between himself and his team. “The other guy’s end game is the end of all life, period. We do whatever has to be done to take that sucker down.”

Nebula glanced around at the others, “There are two ships,” she said. “If you’re squeamish I have no need of you.”

Natasha nodded, “It makes sense. This isn’t the place or time for a fight over ethics.” And Steve flinched as if she’d kicked him in the gut. Natasha sighed, “That said, I’m going back to Earth. I owe it Clint to tell his family.”

“I wish to make a difference in this war,” Sif declared. She turned to Nebula, “I am a strong warrior, if you have need of my sword I’m yours.”

“I have to get close enough to touch to make use of the Soul Stone,” Nebula said. “I can use you.”

Vali tilted his head back, “You’re not going to harp about honorable battle?” he challenged Sif. “This is what Loki trained me for.” He turned to Nebula, “I have magic: Illusion, misdirection, world-walking. I’m more useful than her.”

“If the two of you can get over yourselves we could use both of you,” Frank stated. “Good teams have a variety of talents to call on, for balance. Specialists are for single missions where you know most of the variables. This ain’t that.” He glanced at Nebula, “Course, if magic-boy is with us you’re going to have to give up your ship so the rest of them can get home.”

“Sticking it to Thanos is all I care about,” Nebula replied. “They can take it if I don’t have to listen to them whine.”

That only left Rachel and Steve found himself holding his breath as he waited for her to declare herself. Rachel’s eyes flickered over Melissa, noting the way the other woman couldn’t seem to tear her eyes off of the Soul Stone, the revulsion in her expression. “I’m out,” she said turning away from Nebula’s group and Steve discovered he could breathe again.

Chapter End Notes

Yes, Steve is over correcting, going from too much certainty that he knows best to hesitating to even state his beliefs.
The trip back to the Earth, via too many gates and some of them not well maintained, smugglers’ paths, was nauseating, mind shattering and short.

“I didn’t really expect to see it again,” Natasha said staring out at the spinning blue globe.

Steve’s gaze caught on the thick cloud of debris floating around the planet and its moon, a graveyard of dead ships left behind after numerous battles. The damage to the Earth itself was hinted at by night-side cities with rings of blackness around them. Steve had seen the wounds left behind from the cities uprooting themselves to flee to New Earth before but they were still as raw as when he’d started his mission almost half a year earlier. “Did we do any good out there?” he asked.

For a brief second Steve caught a look in Natasha’s eyes that made him wish he’d never opened his mouth. Then Songbird shouted from the cockpit, “We’re being directed to dock on the moon.” And the moment was gone. “Do what they tell you,” Natasha said. “Rigorously. We’re in without orders. I gave them Fury’s code but they’ve still got to wonder exactly how our mission was compromised and what we might be bringing back with us.”

They guided Nebula’s ship into the docking bay and were met by an armed squadron and escorted to a quarantine area where they stayed for the next three days while they were interrogated on everything they’d seen and done by generals, scientists and members of the Nova Corps. Fury and Rhodes showed up eighteen hours in and no one doubted that they’d dropped everything to get to the moon that quickly.

Steve knew that Rhodes and Wilson had spoken several times in the years since the Sokovia Accords came into being but the extended debriefing was the first time Steve had been in the same room as War Machine since his trial. Rhodes was professional, he let Fury take the lead in the questioning but did occasionally ask for clarifications or introduced new lines of inquiry. Steve answered Rhodes’ questions as completely as he could while trying not to stare at the robotic-exoskeleton braces that Rhodes wore to allow him to walk, he didn’t want his guilt to be misinterpreted as rudeness. Somehow, the visible evidence of Rhodes’ injuries, still present after four years and everything Rhodes had accomplished as the Avengers’ commanding officer, wasn’t something Steve had expected. An outside observer would have been more likely to assume that two men had never met before rather than realizing that Rhodes had been a member of Steve’s Avengers for a year.

On the third day, as the debriefing drew to a conclusion, feeling like he was breaking an unspoken taboo, Steve asked Rhodes, “How are Wilson and Lang doing? Did they settle in okay with their teams?”

Rhodes froze.

“There’s a lounge down the hall,” Fury suggested. “Romanov and I have somethings to go over in private.”

Rhodes nodded. “I’ll tell him,” he said and Steve felt dread creeping up on him.

“You two have freedom of the base,” Fury said to Rachel and Melissa. They got the message and made themselves scarce while Fury escorted Natasha to the conference room he’d commandeered as an office and Rhodes directed Steve to the lounge in the quarantine quarters.
Rhodes gestured for Steve to sit down then took a chair across from him. “Sam Wilson and Wanda Maximoff died in the week of August 16th during the Chitauri Uprising,” he stated bluntly. “Ms. Maximoff had escaped from prison several weeks early and discovered a Chitauri stronghold in the western United States. Risking recapture she informed Vision of her discovery. The two of them went to investigate the stronghold. Wanda was killed during the ensuing battle, we hope that Vision can be restored to himself but we have to assume that Thanos has the Mind Stone back. The discovery of the Chitauri prompted the Uprising, resulting in attacks by seven different Chitauri armies that had been amassing around the globe. Sam Wilson died in a successful suicide attack on one of Thanos’ generals. His actions ended the attack on Peru and his is our only major victory against one of the Black Order.”

“Casualties?” Steve distantly heard himself asking.

“I’ll send the report,” Rhodes said. “Barnes didn’t see combat in the Uprising. The issues with Wakanda championing him haven’t resolved. Officially he’s completed his sentence and enjoys all the privileges of Wakandan citizenship, unofficially, he’s a member of their elite fighting unit but he’s not welcome in any other country on the planet.” Rhodes shrugged, an unwilling trace of humor creeping into his expression, “Unofficially, because the Dora Milaje don’t accept men into their ranks but they seem to like Barnes well enough.”

“Buck always was good with dames,” Steve said to himself, wondering if he could let himself hope that it meant that his closest friend had regained some of his former self. “How’d the others fare?”

“There were losses on all the Avengers’ teams. As to those you’ve teamed up with: Lang’s fine, he’s settling in well on my team,” Rhodes decided against mentioning Jim Paxton’s death and how the fallout was affecting Scott’s relationship with his daughter. “We’ve lost contact with Asgard. Thor’s here, along with a small Asgardian army, doing as good as can be expected when there’s a strong possibility that his country’s fallen to Thanos. Dr. Banner’s attached to Thor’s command. Loki’s unit was slaughtered immediately prior to the attack on Asgard, we didn’t find his body so he’s either been with Thanos all along or he’s been captured. King T’Challa fought with the African Avengers, he’s got a political blackeye but that’s it.”

“Sam died,” Steve said as the information sank in. “Has anyone told his mom?”

“Sam’s team leader spoke with her. His remains were returned and have been interred in D.C.” Rhodes decided against the specifics details that they’d buried an urn containing ashes collected from the sight where Sam had been vaporized.

“I have to talk to Clint’s family, Osborn and Voelker’s too,” Steve said. “Am I allowed to do that? Or is my team supposed to go back to Nevada until our next mission?”

“I’ll arrange something,” Rhodes sighed. He’d planned on leaving what happened to Steve and his team now that they were back on Earth up to Fury. He’d assumed they’d disappear into S.H.I.E.L.D. or one of its successors, along with Natasha and he wouldn’t have to think about them again. But Steve had a duty to the people who’d died under his command and- Rhodes fought to urge to rub at his temples. ‘Why does S.H.I.E.L.D. always have to be a headache?’

Rhodes was used to working with the part of S.H.I.E.L.D. that had followed Maria Hill, first to SI then to the UN as they settled into life under the Accords but he’d always known that Agent Hill had never really stopped reporting to Fury. And Fury was useful, he was good at showing up with desperately needed resources at just the right moment but Rhodes suspected that no one really saw all of Fury’s cards. Fury had been operating on his own game board since the WSC died. Tony had trusted Fury, trusted him to be a pragmatic asshole who prioritized the Earth’s survival over everything, but Rhodes didn’t know the man and he’d had enough of shadow governments and
“I’m betting they have some sort of cantina,” Melissa commented as she and Rachel left the quarters they’d been assigned on the moon base for the first time.

Rachel was about to reply when she was spun around and roughly shoved against the wall. “What are you doing with Nebula’s ship?” a green skinned woman demanded.

The curly-haired man trailing behind her smiled apologetically as he pried the woman’s hands off of Rachel, “What Gamora means is ‘I’m extremely worried about my sister. She left with your team but you came back without her.’ What happened?”

“I’m not worried,” Gamora muttered as she let Quill put a polite distance between herself and the two human women.

“Of course not,” Quill agreed patting her forearm.

“If you value that hand you’ll stop patronizing me,” Gamora growled.

Quill turned back to Rachel and Melissa, “Can you do me a huge favor and distract her?” he pled.

“We captured the Soul Stone,” Melissa replied. She frowned at Gamora, “Your sister took it and went on a crusade to see how much of Thanos’ army she could turn into her mindless zombies. We didn’t feel like having a civil war so the part of the team that didn’t agree with her plan let her go.”

Gamora turned pale, “That idiot!” she exclaimed. She turned to Quill, “We have to go after her. By now he has at least one Infinity Stone, if not two in his possession. And it’s Thanos! He could easily take her and the Soul Stone. Nebula always the weakest of us.”

She stalked away. Quill paused for a moment, “Hey could you pass that on?” he said. “I don’t think she’s in the mood to wait and, well, the Earth’s where I’m from but the Guardians are my family and that means their sort of scary relatives are family by extension.” He shrugged, “Can’t let Nebs run her neck into a noose on her own.”

“What do I tell Laura that Clint died for?” Natasha asked as she sat down across from Fury.

Fury pulled up several files, “The information from you and Barton procured was used to direct Rogers’ team, they took out a dozen of Thanos’ outposts and kept a hundred and seventy-four Chitauri Motherships from making the trip to Earth. Your information on the vulnerabilities of Chitauri armor, particularly Barton’s ability to pair weak-spots with the best calibur weapons to take advantage of it, has helped our baseline military forces to be effective against them, the way they weren’t in 2012. Your team did good work,”

“Our information,” Natasha smiled then reached up to wipe away the tear that had escaped her eye. “I’ve gotten spoiled. I wanted to tell Nate, Lila and Cooper about what their father DID not what he enabled others to do.”

“It’s a better story than the one where he ends his career in disgrace and slinks off into obscurity after a stint in prison,” Fury pointed out.

Natasha nodded, accepting the seemingly harsh statement as comfort.
There were times Steve didn’t enjoy his enhanced hearing. “James, do you hear me? I DON’T WANT HIM IN THE TOWER.”

Rhodes had gone into the next room to make some calls and arrange permission for Steve and his team to be on Earth while their next deployment was determined. In light of the months of service they’d already performed it had been easy enough for Rhodes to persuade the Accords Committee to consider it a probationary period before they were given their promised pardons. Fury needed time to examine potential replacements to fill the holes on Steve’s team and determine the best way to deploy them, he hadn’t objected to allowing Steve, Natasha, Rachel and Melissa a little shore leave while they waited, so long as they were supervised. But-

“Pepper! I don’t like them either but Romanov infiltrated Thanos’ Empire over a year ago and Roger’s team has been on the frontlines for six months without a single friendly port of call. They lost three men and had four more go AWOL -I’m sure they meant well but-” Steve could hear the frustration in Rhodes’ voice. “Everyone always means well. Anyway, the group Rogers brought back to Earth came home to the news of more deaths. They’re shocky and exhausted, mentally and physically. Rogers has a responsibility to the men he lost and they need some down time.”

“The Tower is my home, it’s Nettie’s home. I don’t want him here.”

“Rogers would never hurt Nettie. Hell, you know he’d probably burn down half the city protecting her to just ease his guilt over Tony.” Steve flinched hearing the echo of Rachel’s estimation of his personality, his flaw in Rhodes’ words.

“I don’t care! I don’t want him anywhere near Tony’s daughter.”

“Where else can I put them?” Rhodes demanded. “An Avengers-Ranked Accords signatory has to be with them at all times. The Academy was destroyed. Rogers’ teammates have family in the US so I can’t exactly send them to Wakanda… So what do you want me to do? Have them camp out in Foggy’s office?”

“Rand Enterprises,” Pepper suggested after a moment. “Danny’s converted some of his office space to a barrack for his extended team as needed. Put them up there.”

“Yeah, okay. That’ll work.” The relief in Rhodes’ voice reminded Steve that regardless of his regrets and his efforts to do better there was no taking back what he’d done, no way to make things right.

“The Bartons are staying at a S.H.I.E.L.D. base, along with a number of other S.H.I.E.L.D. families,” Fury said handing over the coordinates to Rhodes. “Even before we had evidence that the Chitauri were hiding in remote areas there weren’t a whole lot of people who wanted to live isolated and unprotected while the war was on. Worrying about being discovered by an enemy of S.H.I.E.L.D. is less a concern than worrying about becoming a Chitauri casualty because you just happened to be in the wrong place.”

“I’ll see you in New York in a few days?” Steve said to Rachel sounding uncertain.

“I could go with you for Seth,” Rachel offered. “The Serpent Society wasn’t the sort of thing where you introduce your coworkers to your family but I knew him for more than a few years.”

“You should get some down time in while you can,” Steve declined.

Natasha silently joined Steve and Rhodey at the hangar, she hadn’t had much to say since Clint’s death.
Rhodes greeted their pilot and copilot warmly and, as soon as they were underway, he separated himself from his former teammates to join them in the cockpit. “David, Kate, how’s the posting?”

“It’s not where I saw myself after I left the Academy,” David admitted, “but I didn’t really believe the Earth would be involved in a war like this. It’s an okay compromise. I still wonder if maybe I wouldn’t do more good as a researcher.”

Rhodes nodded, “Dr. Richards’ team is stationed on one of the Nova Corps satellites so he and Sue can study their technology between battles. I’ll ask if they could use a pilot who also has the credentials to join their research team. What about you Kate?”

Kate started, dragging her attention away from the passenger compartment hatch. “I- Thanks for sponsoring me,” she said. Then in a rush, “Is it true, the rumors about Hawkeye? Is it okay if I talk to them? It’s just…”

Rhodes nodded, “His family hasn’t been informed yet so we’re trying to keep it quiet. They should hear in person not from base gossip or a news report.” He remembered Kate ‘introducing’ herself by sneaking into the Academy and sniping half his class in an attempt to prove that she had what it took to be one of them even though she was baseline human. “Go on, I’ll keep David company up here,” he said sliding into the copilot’s seat as Kate abandoned it.

Once the hatch to the cockpit closed behind her Kate found herself staring at a patch of decking near the Black Widow’s right boot. “I heard- About Hawkeye,” she blurted out. “I wanted to tell you - um- I was eleven in 2012, grew up in Manhattan. I -ah- felt so scared and helpless. I’m not a super-genius and the odds of being Inhuman or having an accident that makes you Enhanced not dead aren’t exactly good. But I saw Hawkeye out my window, taking on the scary aliens with a bow and arrow, because he was just that good of shot. He didn’t need huge caliber because he had precision… I always had better than average aim, so I started practicing, seriously practicing. I’m the first baseline human to graduate from the Academy, because I wanted to be an Avenger, even though I didn’t have powers, like him.”

Having said her piece, Kate was about to make her escape back to the cockpit. “Thanks,” Natasha said, her voice husky. “You’re a pilot?” she asked.

Kate nodded, she took one of the back-facing seats across from the two former Avengers. “Well, copilot, gunner, sort of. David and I are on extra-vehicle retrieval. Turns out really good aim is more important for snagging our people if they have to eject than it is for blowing up ships. They get a second shot if they miss, I usually don’t.”

Steve felt a little less shaky after talking with Kate Bishop on the flight from the Moon to the underground S.H.I.E.L.D. base in the the midwest. Natasha also seemed better for meeting the younger woman. When they arrived the base was lively in a way that Steve wasn’t used to from S.H.I.E.L.D. There are quite a few people about who don’t radiate ‘special ops’ the way S.H.I.E.L.D. agents inevitably do, and that wasn’t even counting the kids.

Coulson met them at the landing pad. “War Machine, Nomad, Black Widow,” he greeted them using their code names to sidestep Steve’s lack of rank. “The Barton’s quarters are this way,” he said as he fell into step beside Natasha and there was no doubt in Steve’s mind that he knew. Coulson led them through a maze of corridors, the murals painted on the walls made it easy to tell when they move from the military operations area into the civilian quarters.

They knocked at the door and after a moment Laura Barton answered. She’d been heavily pregnant the last time Steve had seen her, but other than having regained her figure she hadn’t changed much
in the intervening years, there had always been a core of steel to her. For a moment Laura stared past them as if looking for something more then she stepped back, “Come in. The kids should be out in a moment, we were just getting ready for school.”

Steve remembered how out of place he’d felt at the Barton farm, fresh from Wanda’s vision and trying not to face the knowledge that he’d given up on the dream of that sort of home and family a very long time ago, before the ice, maybe even before the war. He wondered if the Bartons felt as awkwardly ill-fitting here in this home carved out of a military base as he’d felt there. Then the three kids came in. Five-year-old Nate stared at the intruders in his home with innocent curiosity and a shy smile for Natasha. Cooper, who almost looked like an adult to Steve’s eyes and Lila, a teenager now, watched them warily.

“I’m sorry,” Natasha began, talking mostly to Lila. When she was done Cooper nodded once, turned around and walked out. Lila’s lips were pressed together tightly and there was a gleam of tears in her eyes. “Why don’t you stay home from school today, honey,” Laura suggested. There was something brittle about the girl as she walked back into her room. Nate just looked vaguely confused. He leaned against his mother’s leg as if he sensed her distress but couldn’t understand it. ‘Another kid who grew up without a dad because of me,’ Steve realized.

“I’ve got at least a week or so before I get new orders,” Natasha told Laura. “Do you want me to stay or go?”

“Stay,” Laura said. “You—you’re still a part of this family Natasha.”

Rhodes piloted the jet that took himself and Steve out to Cleveland, where Seth Voelker’s ex-wife lived, along with his daughter and grandson. There was a car waiting for them at the base. “Just tell her straight out,” Rhodes advised as he drove toward the suburbs. “There’s no softening that he’s dead and odds are seeing us on the doorstep will be enough to get her suspecting what happened. Don’t drag out confirmation. Take your cues from her if she wants to hear more. Ask if she wants to call someone. Normally you’d be writing a letter and a local officer would deliver it but S.H.I.E.L.D.’s never been regular military and your team isn’t even standard for S.H.I.E.L.D.”

The house was a split level ranch in an older neighborhood. It was normal, bland even and in the six months Steve had worked with Sidewinder he’d rarely seen the man outside of his tactical gear once Fury returned it to him. It had been easy to picture Seth Voelker as the erstwhile leader of the Serpent Society, it was much harder to see him as the man who had come home to this house. Rhodes stood behind his shoulder as Steve knocked on the door.

The woman who opened the door was older and she looked at him with suspicion in her eyes. “Ma’am, may we speak with Mrs. Voelker?” Steve asked, reasonably certain that he was but not wanting to make assumptions.

“It’s Ms., Ms. Fischer these days,” the woman said. “But I’m her. Say what you’ve come to say.”

Steve took a deep breath, “Seth was killed on our last mission,” he said. “Do you want to call someone?”

“Better end than I expected,” Ms. Fischer muttered. “These last six years, since I found out ‘bout that Sidewinder crap, I’ve been waiting to hear he was killed in a shootout with the cop or some vigilante hero, or maybe shot in the back by his crew.”

“He was a valuable member of the unit,” Steve said.
“So his ‘abilities’ turned out to be good for more than emptying safes.”

Steve nodded, “He died instantly,” he offered.

Ms. Fischer’s face grew more pinched. “My daughter’s home. You can leave, we try to keep... all this, away from her kid.”

Steve took it for the dismissal that it was and followed Rhodes back to the car.

Their next stop was New York, Rhodes decided that Harry Osborn could wait a night so Steve wouldn’t be jetlagged when he delivered the news, especially after crossing Brooklyn. Steve’s hometown hadn’t suffered as much damage as Queens, most of the borough had been under the Arc Shield so there’d only been a few incursions by Chitauri to deal with. But there was still the deadzone just outside of the Shield’s perimeter where the city had been leveled and even inside the shield it was clear that the city had been under siege. Rhodes remembered the shock when he’d first realized that this wasn’t going to be like 2012, that they wouldn’t have time to rebuild between attacks, that their cities were going to be war scarred. ‘Best for Osborn’s kid as well as Rogers to give him a night to collect himself.’

The Rand building was almost as relentless modern as Stark Tower, but where the war had turned the Tower’s first floor lobby into an emergency and medical triage center, Rand’s lobby has become a dispensary for refugee supplies. Steve had learned earlier that most of the big office buildings safe in core of the city were hosting some of the people displaced from the surrounding areas.

Almost as they walked through the door a man with curly blond hair stepped out of the elevator to meet them. “Colonel Rhodes!” he called out, voice full of open welcome. “Ca- er, Nomad, we’re glad to have you.”

Steve nodded, “Thanks…”

“Danny Rand, or Iron Fist if you’re into using call signs. Daredevil’s a stickler for them. Your teammates arrived this morning, safe and sound. Luke and Jessica took charge of feeding them and getting them settled in the barracks. Um. It might be a little crowded. Most of the team’s here. We lost-” Danny broke off, looking away.

Steve suddenly wanted to volunteer to go somewhere else if he were intruded but a glance at Rhodes reminded him that he would definitely be intruding at the other option, so he said nothing.

Rhodey shook his head, “I just can’t imagine anyone else in Misty’s place.”

“Yeah,” Danny said thickly.

Rhodes left Steve with the Defenders, the next morning he came back with a younger man in tow to escort Steve to OsCorp.
“Peter, you sure about this?” Rhodes asked.

Steve sat on the opposite side of the car, eyes on the window to give Rhodes and the kid he’d brought along the illusion of privacy.

“No,” Peter admitted. “But- Harry always has people around him, he doesn’t have many friends.” Happy glanced over his shoulder, catching Rhodes’ eye for a moment, they both knew exactly what Peter meant. “Things haven’t been okay between Harry and I for a long time. Still, he was my best friend for most of my life, I want to be there for him, if he’ll let me.”

“I get it,” Rhodes said. When they arrived at OsCorp Peter hung slightly back, behind Steve and Rhodes. Rhodes talked quietly with the receptionist for several minutes and then they were sent up.

Norman Osborn’s, now Harry’s, office was richly appointed with dark oak paneling, marble floors and heavy leather furniture. Steve could picture Norman running his business from that office like a king ruling over his realm but Harry was barely more than a kid and the office overshadowed him. ‘I’ve been on my own since I was eighteen. I never really fit in anywhere,’ Steve remembered writing to Tony in a letter that would never be delivered. It hit him that, like Harry, Tony had been orphaned on the brink of adulthood. He wondered if Tony had been as oppressed by Howard’s shadow as Harry clearly was by the weight of Norman’s legacy. It had an almost a physical presence in that office, weighting, judging Harry’s every action.

Dr. Otto Octavius, OsCorps’ head of R&D and XO since Norman’s incarceration, stood at Harry’s side with an arm around the younger man’s shoulders. And Steve felt a sudden urge to rip that arm off. He’d seen that same body language, possessiveness masquerading as affection, in dozens of pictures of Tony and Obadiah Stane and he knew that story had ended in kidnapping, torture and multiple murder attempts. History, all too often, repeated itself... if people weren’t vigilant.

Steve remembered Bucky’s offer of a place to stay after his mother’s death and he remembered hating the thought of being a charity case, even though he’d never doubted the genuineness of Bucky’s friendship. He thought about Harry, and Tony, both of them with more material things than anyone could need, surrounded by people who were only there to take from them, to use them. It was a different lack, a different hurt but- These waters were filled with sharks and Harry looked so young, his inexperience no different from blood in the water. -but still real lack, real hurt. Trust issues because what other choice did they have? Surrounded by so many people were only there for what they could get. ‘Were we any better?’ Steve remembered how much of himself Tony had poured into the Avengers and how they’d kept him at a distance in return. Taken the equipment upgrades, the luxurious living spaces, everything Tony offered… Except for his friendship. Remembered how easy it had been to believe the worst of him, with Ultron, with the Accords. ‘He doesn’t know the difference between saving the world and destroying it. Where do you think he gets that from.’ Remembered how easy it had been to decide to keep what he’d learned about Tony’s parents from Tony. ‘I guess I thought – by not telling you about your parents I was sparing you, but... I can see now I was really sparing myself.’ Steve firmly pushed thoughts of Tony back, now wasn’t the time.

Harry Osborn wasn’t Laura Barton or Sidewinder’s ex, with their years of knowing that, someday, that knock on the door would come. Harry was staring at them, trying to mask his emotions and failing, he knew why they were there and desperately wanted them to prove him wrong. Norman
had been in prison for three years before their mission started and there’d been strong suspicions that he’d been anything but a good father before that, still Harry clearly did not want them to say that Norman wasn’t ever coming home.

Steve straightened. “Norman Osborn was killed in action, fighting against Thanos’ forces under my command August 24th, 2020. I’m sorry for your loss,” he said formally then waited for Harry’s reaction.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw Peter edging toward Harry’s side of the room. “Harry, I’m so sorry,” Peter breathed.

“How?!” Harry demanded turning to Peter, his voice cracking. “Dad tried to kill you!”

“But he’s still my best friend’s dad,” Peter said. He glanced down, “I still remember the guy who found time to take the two of us to practically every kid museum in New York.”

Harry’s frame jolted as a harsh sob forced its way out of him then Peter was wrapped his arms around him as Harry buried his face against Peter’s shoulder.

Rhodes herded the rest of them back out into the waiting room outside of the office. Octavius resisted for a moment but Rhodes glared him into submission, Steve made note that he wasn’t the only one who didn’t like OsCorp’s XO. And so the three of them sat in opposite corners, not speaking to each other and trying not to listen as Harry broke down.

Loki touched the center of his chest, running his fingers over the ridges of the arc reactor.

“You get used to it,” Tony said coming up from the back of the ship. “The old one was a lot worse, instead of shaving a divot into your breast bone to make it fit, you punched right through, then shoved the heart and lungs over to make room.”

Loki stared at Tony in horror. “What could have induced you to do such a thing to yourself?”

“Nobody asked my opinion beforehand,” Tony replied with a small shrug. “It was done to keep me alive… For a few weeks, so that I could build weapons for the people who made it necessary. I improved it, created Iron Man and killed them. But I didn’t save the person who gave me the chance to be better,” he added sadly.

“It, this, it isn’t bad,” Loki said pressing a hand to the reactor again. “I was just thinking.”

Tony slid into the seat next to him and tilted his head back, waiting.

“I’ve been afraid for… A very long time,” Loki admitted. “Afraid of Thanos. Afraid of the nothing in the Void when I would not die. Afraid of myself, of the monster I found living under my skin. Afraid of the sort of king Thor would make. Afraid of confirmation that I was not loved.” He touched the Arc Reactor set in his chest again. “We are going to Thanos but, finally, I am not afraid.”

Tony remembered times he’d gotten to that point, when there was no room left for fear because you had the means to take action. Times when all that was left was the will to succeed. He grasped Loki’s shoulder and smiled reassuringly. “The rendezvous will be soon, how should we play it?”

Loki hesitated, licking his lips nervously. “They will believe that I have betrayed you by bringing you to Thanos. If you are hostile toward me they may see it as an opening to turn you to their side.”

Loki’s twisted his fingers together. “If they offer you the opportunity to torture me, you should not refuse. Either they will take me to Thanos that he may punish my failures or they will bring you to
him to satisfy his curiosity about Mistress Death’s interest in you. You may receive more curtsey if you seem to hate me as much as they do.”

“And if they want me to kill you?” Tony asked quietly.

Loki’s answering grin showed too many teeth, “I would gamble that it is a test. If they ask you to kill me a blade or bullet through the eye would be a much more kind death than I expect they have planned for me. And for that reason I would bet my life that they will stop you before the blow lands.”

“How did it happen?” Harry asked, red eyed and thick voiced. Peter hovered protectively at his side.

“He died instantly,” Steve offered wondering if it was wrong that he didn’t want to name Clint as Osborn’s killer.


“He wanted to protect you.”

“You’re lying,” Harry said dully. He turned to leave.

“I’m not,” Steve protested. “Your father talked about you all the time.” He grimaced, “Some of it wasn’t good. That you deserved the chance to, um, run his business into the ground on your own, not to be overrun by aliens or zombies.” Steve tensed, waiting for an explosion, Rhodes and Octavius eyed him questioningly.

“Well, at least that sounds like Dad,” Harry said turning back.

“We saw a chance to take the Soul Stone from Thanos,” Steve said. “Norman had seen what it could do. He didn’t want it making its way back to the Earth. It was a trap, your father was shot, he died before he hit the ground but we managed to turn it back on them. The Soul Stone’s in the hands of someone who will use it against Thanos now.

“Your father was the team’s strategist,” Steve elaborated seeing that Harry was listening. “He was a good fighter and a great technical resource to the team.” He carefully didn’t say, ‘Almost in Tony’s league.’

“Thanks,” Harry said. He shifted from one foot to the other, clearly done with the conversation but uncertain as to how to get rid of them.

Peter glanced between Rhodes and his childhood friend, “I’ll get home on my own. Later.”

Rhodes nodded. When Happy was driving them back to Rand Enterprises Steve asked, “Was I wrong not to mention Clint?”

Rhodes gave him a disgusted look, “Because Red Skull used Barton as a mind controlled puppet to pull the trigger on Osborn, just like HYDRA used your friend Barnes to murder Tony’s parents? Well, since Barton’s dead, since you’re not expecting Harry to foot the bill for searching for him, to look the other way while you break the law for him, to welcome him with open arms if you find him. I don’t see the harm of leaving it at Osborn was killed fighting the good fight against Thanos. You didn’t perpetuate a lie about how Harry’s father died by not giving him every last detail.”

Steve looked away. “I’m sorry. I know I can never make up for Tony’s death-“
“You’re right, you can’t,” Rhodes broke in flatly. “Look, I went into that debriefing more than ready to find fault with you. But what I found was, for them, you’ve been a decent CO. I didn’t see any hint of you favoring one team member over another… So, you learned your lesson. At the cost of my best friend.” Rhodes shifted in his seat, the gears in his leg braces whirring softly. “You’re living proof of how dangerous a myth can be. Maybe it’s not your fault that you were just a man and not the legend that grew up around your name. But from where I’m sitting, we’d all have been better off if you’d never been recovered from the ice.”

Steve flinched.

“After your contribution to this war maybe the world forgives you but I won’t.” Rhodes shook his head, “Every milestone of Nettie’s that Tony misses, every time I see Pepper alone when Tony should be beside her, every holiday gathering where there’s a hole in my family, I remember it’s because of you. Whatever wisdom you might have gained from Siberia is a poor trade for what we lost. I will put up with you for the sake of the world, do my best to support you and your team because you fall under my command. But Tony died because, for him, you were a lousy CO and a worse friend. For that, I will never forgive you.”

Harry scrubbed at his face in the bathroom off his father’s office, making a futile attempt at washing the red from his eyes. He stared at himself in the mirror for several minutes. After Rhodes and Rogers left he’d sent Dr. Octavius away. When he turned off the water and came back into the office Peter was sitting by the window, waiting. “Pete? There’s something I want to show you,” Harry said.

Peter hopped up and hurried over, “What?”

Harry reached under his father’s desk and typed in a code on the number pad hidden there. A secret door slid open. “Dad wasn’t the official test pilot for the Goblin Gear,” he explained. “He needed a practice facility where no one would see him training himself on it before—Before everything.” The room Harry revealed was Norman Osborn’s private lab, one corner dominated by a simulator. “I’ve been practicing,” Harry said. “And I want to do something in this war, for my dad.”

“You are doing something,” Peter argued. “Do you need me to pull up the statistics on how effective the Gliders have been? OsCorp is the one supplying them, improving them.”

“And you’re one of the lead researchers working on new weapons to use against the Chitauri,” Harry said. “But that’s not all you do… Please don’t try to lie to me Pete, I know you’re Spider-Man.”

Peter fidgeted nervously then sighed. “I’m planning on going public as soon as I get chance to tell our old friends the truth. Flash has leave next week. I figured I’d wait ‘til the second get-together so I don’t steal his thunder.”

“Yeah, I can see how he’d have a coronary if you revealed Spider-Man’s secret identity without telling him.” Harry grinned a bit manically, “I want to be there when he finds out that Spider-Man’s number one fan spent all K thru 12 bullying him.”

“Flash got better,” Peter protested. “He’s been practically a nice guy since our senior year.”

Harry looked away. “I missed out on a lot.”

“You didn’t have to stay away.”

“Juggling board meetings and classes? It wasn’t like I could pretend to be a normal kid anymore,”
Harry argued, talking too fast.

“Was it my fault?” Peter asked softly. “I thought you were mad at me, that’s why I didn’t push past that first letter.”

Harry let out a sickly laugh. “I’m so messed up Pete,” he said. “I sob all over you because he’s dead and I’m- I’m so glad you came. But if Dad wasn’t dead I’d be afraid to talk to you in case he tried to kill you. What Captain- er- Steve Rogers said, I know Dad thinks- thought I couldn’t make it and I wanted him to be proud. I call Ms. Potts for advice sometimes, on dealing with OsCorp’s board, dealing with my top researchers. She even pointed me towards some of SI’s old military contacts, the ones she thought were reputable. I call her because you trust her and she’s helped, because I wanted to show Dad but if he ever- If he’d found out I was getting help from her-” Harry broke off with a shudder. “How can I be scared of him and want him back at the same time?”

Peter wrapped his arm around Harry’s shoulders not knowing what to say, only capable of being relieved that he couldn’t relate to being afraid of someone you loved, of a parent. “You should go to Colonel Rhodes, apply to the Academy if you want to go out and fight as an Enhanced, like Harley did,” he said. “But I’m planning on trying something, something I don’t have approval for. If you want to help, I wouldn’t say no. I mean I haven’t even got up the nerve to ask anyone else for help yet.”

“What are you up to, Pete?” Harry asked.

Peter licked his lips nervously. “This war against the Chitauri, we’re treating it as all out warfare. Either they die or we die. And everytime I ask about another option I get told there aren’t any: We have no common ground with the Chitauri. There aren’t any lines of communication.” He took a deep breath, “Well maybe the reason we think that there’s no common ground is because we haven’t talked to them.

“We’ve all heard what Ms. Gamora and Loki said about what Thanos wants and sure, we can’t come to terms with someone who wants the whole Universe dead, but I can’t image all the Chitauri want that. One individual crazy I can buy, even a cult of crazies where he’s sold his generals on this kill everything plan. But I just can’t buy that there are whole peoples out there who want to destroy everything, including themselves,” Peter said passionately. “We’ve got to talk to them to find out what it’d take to get them to desert Thanos. And no one I’ve seen is interested in doing that.

“Harley tells me there’s a whole city of Chitauri sitting on the bottom of the Atlantic. From the Avengers’ meetings I know it’s going to be another three weeks before we’re ready to attempt an assault. Before our people get that attack together, I’m going to go talk to them.”

Thor had just finished seeing his troops settled in on the Earth when Bruce caught up with him.

“Thor, after the Convergence did Loki come back from the dead or did he fake his death then?”

“Colonel Rhodes and the Lady Potts also asked me about resurrection,” Thor replied cautiously. “I told them it would be ill-advised to use the means at Asgard’s disposal on one like Friend Tony. But the prohibition against reviving certain personalities... They could have illustrated the description of those who are not to be resurrected with a picture of my brother.”

Bruce began to say something then stopped and tried again. “There were incidents I observed, small things but they add up. I’m convinced that Loki learned technology from Tony. I’ve been trying to think how that could be possible and all I can come up with is either they were together in Niflheim or your father is lying to us and Tony’s on Asgard.”
Thor scowled, “You do not understand what you are accusing Odin All-Father of.”

“No, I don’t,” Bruce said calmly. “But I do know that Loki has been in extended contact with a Midgardian engineer, one who happens to share over a half dozen different quirks with Tony Stark. So when do you think they met? Before the invasion of 2012? Between the Convergence and the Civil War? Or after Tony’s death?”

Thor looked like he wanted to argue but couldn’t. Then the sky split open and an eight-legged horse was standing in the center of the Asgardian encampment. A massive cheer rose from the troops until the rider swayed in the saddle. Thor started running. He caught Odin as the older man toppled from his mount. “My son, you must stop your brother… The fool is fixed on killing himself.”

Chapter End Notes

Well, I got around to seeing Ragnarok… It was fun to see, lots of fantastic visuals but I walked away feeling like it offered nothing to think about and had zero emotional impact (Thor seemed to grieve his hammer’s loss more than Odin’s death or the end of his relationship with Jane?). It was a complete popcorn flick: sparkly but hollow.

If I take the movie in pieces there were lots good things in the mix: I liked Valkyrie and Hela as characters. I’d take Valkyrie with Bruce and/or Hulk over Natasha any day... It was done so it felt like there was offscreen development rather than that it came out of nowhere. The bit with Valkyrie and Hulk play-fighting actually did work to convey fondness between them (chemistry with a CGI character, amazing). Strange’s cameo was fun. There was nothing particularly jarring or contradictory about learning that Asgard’s benevolence was a pretty facade pasted on by the victors after a war of conquest.

But the humor wasn’t really my thing and IT NEVER LET UP. On the good side it wasn’t like they were picking on any particular character, instead they put ALL the major characters, Thor, Loki, Bruce and Hulk, through a humiliation conga. Then you’ve got the nonsensical sequence of events surrounding Loki’s “Because it’s my nature” moment: Loki’s helping Thor. No, Loki lured Thor into a trap to better his standing on Sakaar… Okay fine, I suppose they do need to remind us he’s supposed to be the villain. Thor defeats the trap, leaves Loki in paralyzing pain for an indefinite period of time. The MOMENT Loki is freed from the torture Thor left him in, he rounds up reinforcements and goes to Thor/Asgard’s rescue… Wait? What? Why would Loki betray Thor then turn around and immediately help him/Asgard? Literally, the torture device is turned off, Loki stands up and the first words out of his mouth are aimed at recruiting help. Even if he’d decided that the Grandmaster was a burnt bridge there’s a whole Universe out there or he even could have used the chaos to situation himself favorably on Sakaar without the Grandmaster, but no, Thor tortures Loki after Loki betrays him so Loki decides to help Thor. My head hurts but I’m not outraged on Loki’s behalf because the whole thing just defies logic.

Then there’s the Asgardian military. As I understood it, Thor’s superpowers are BECAUSE he’s Asgardian. He might be an olympic athlete verse a deskjocky level above the average Asgardian citizen, but he wasn’t supposed to be superhuman when compared to another Asgardian. And Hela’s the villain so, okay she’s stronger than Thor. But Hela versus the ENTIRE Asgardian military… Well Hulk versus the National
Guard would have been a more even match. No wonder Loki tried to use the Bifrost to wipe out Jotunheim, the military forces at his command were beyond pathetic.

The trailer for BP made it look like Wakanda isn’t just a first world country, it’s more futuristic than Asgard, maybe because it seems to have more of a sci-fi feel where Asgard, despite ostensibly being an advanced alien culture feels more like a fantasy setting. With Wakanda, the clothes and vehicles wouldn’t have been out of place on Star Wars Core Worlds or a Star Trek Federation planet. The new trailer didn’t do anything to erase my image of Wakanda as inward focusing to the point where it’s hard to see them as heroic.
Mission Go

“It was only after Loki left Asgard with the Armorsmith that his enchantment was weakened and I was able to break free of my enforced sleep,” Odin finished his tale.

“I just want to be sure I’ve got this straight,” Rhodes said glaring at Odin, “You basically willed yourself out of a Snow White impersonation then dragged yourself halfway across the universe because you’re opposed to Loki helping out on a suicide mission that you’d happily assign to Tony?”

Odin sighed, “Mortals exist to die,” he said patiently. “I am impressed by the Armorsmith’s ingenuity and determination but he is a mayfly and Loki is my son.”

“Adopted,” Fury remarked. “I recall Thor was forthcoming on that point while Loki was embarrassing you with his… shenanigans… Trying to set himself up as Supreme Mugwump of our planet.”

“Can we get back to the part where Tony Stark is back from the dead?” Everett Ross asked. “At least for the moment.”

“Really Ev?” Rhodes signed. “Half the planet recognized the Avalon Tech Thor’s been bringing us as Tony’s work months ago. The only questions were how we were going to get him back and when to try.” He turned back to Odin, eyes narrowed. “What King Odin seems confused about is that, while our lives might be shorter than his, they’re still valuable to us. We aren’t sacrificial goats to be led to the slaughter.”

Thor winced, he wondered if Colonel Rhodes had spoken with Jane about her visit to Asgard or if it was just coincidence that prompted his choice of words.

Tanak Valt, Commander of the Nova Corps forces stationed in the Sol system, bowed formally before addressing Odin, “Your Majesty, I must ask: What are the risks if this plan fails? And what are the benefits if it succeeds?”

“Loki’s plan is the Universe’s best chance of ridding itself of the cancer that is Thanos,” Odin stated. “And if the Armorsmith fails we are no worse off than we are now.”

“Then may I ask, does your son’s involvement lessen their chances of success?” Valt pressed.

“Loki’s involvement is unnecessary!” Odin thundered.

Valt pursed his lips, “I am deeply sorry Your Majesty but you are allowing emotion to cloud your judgement. The lives of two men, no matter who they are, is a price the Nova Empire would gladly pay to remove the threat of Thanos. By your own verdict the possible gains if we allow them to proceed unmolested are immense and the risks minimal. The Nova Corps will not support you.”

Odin turned to Thor, “Your brother has sought death ever since learning his true heritage, why do you think I hid it from him? When you brought him back to us after he threw himself into the Void I was angry true, and Loki’s words only fanned the flames of my fury higher, but I was angered by what he’d done to himself as much as I was by his actions on Midgard. I sentenced him to a cell to keep him safe from himself. After you released him from that cell, how long did it take Loki to find a spear to throw himself on?”

Thor’s face drained of color at Odin’s words.
Fury gave Thor a sidelong look as he said, “One manipulative bastard to another, Your Majesty: You’re rewriting history. I want to know the truth. Why are you so desperate to save Loki now?”

Odin tilted his chin up and remained stubbornly silent.

“Forget Loki,” Rhodes spat. “It’s his plan, let him blow himself up for it. Tony’s the one I’m worried about. Loki spent years keeping him from his family, isolating him, manipulating Tony into being willing to play suicide bomber for him. Tony’s the one who needs rescuing. And we need him,” he added in appeal to Valt, Fury and Ross. “The Avalon Tech is Tony’s. All our most effective weapons in the fight against Thanos originate with Tony Stark.”

“He has a point,” Fury said. “If this fails and we lose Tony Stark, and all his future inventions, in the process? Remember that he is the one who developed devices that can counter an Infinity Stone’s effect.”

Valt looked thoughtful, “This Stark was also the inventor behind the Mind Stone container known as Vision, correct?”

“That’s right,” Rhodes confirmed. “Tony created the synthetic person known as Vision.”

“No other being within modern memory has successfully created a device that could contain the power of an Infinity Stone,” Valt said thoughtfully. “The heirlooms that house the Stones are perhaps more precious as the Stones themselves because, unlike the Infinity Stones, they can be destroyed…”

“So what’s this about?” Harley asked when Peter invited him out for lunch instead of the two of them taking a quick break from sciening to grab something in the Tower’s cafeteria.

Peter had the good grace to look uncomfortable. “I want to try talking with the Chitauri,” he said. “And every time I’ve brought up other ways of dealing with them, besides killing them, no one listens.”

“They’re basically animals aren’t they?” Harley said doubtfully. “I mean they don’t try to talk to us do they? They just come here and start attacking.”

“They wear armor. They use weapons. They modified other species so that they could travel between planets,” Peter argued. “I know I won’t get anywhere talking to a drone but there’s a queen in that Atlantic stronghold isn’t there?”

“And you need me as a guide to that stronghold,” Harley realized. “And FRIDAY’s been leery of your ideas ever since you nearly got yourself killed.”

“In my defense, I was sixteen then. Teenagers are forgiven lapses in judgment,” Peter pointed out.

“Now you’re the ripe old age of twenty… Happy Birthday by the way.”

“You’re late,” Peter remarked. “It was a couple weeks ago.”

“Yeah, we had a party planned, but…” Harley trailed off without say “But the Chitauri Uprising happened.”

“I have nearly five years of experience now,” Peter continued. “I know the Chitauri attacked us first and maybe they’re as evil as Thanos, maybe this blows up in my face but it’s a risk I’m willing to take. You and FRI saw a whole city’s worth of Chitauri down there. We’ve got massive starships showing up in our Solar System every couple months, dozens that are already on their way here with
thousands of life forms on each ship. If there’s a even a chance of resolve this without massacring all
those beings, we have to try.”

“What about your life?” Harley asked. “They’re the enemy, you’re my friend. They attacked us first.
I don’t think it’s worth losing you just to give them one more opportunity to prove that they’re
monsters.”

“It’s worth it to me,” Peter argued. “For my peace of mind, for the rest of my life, I need to know that
I did everything I could to prevent unnecessary deaths, the Chitauri included. Besides, it’s not a
given that I’m going to get killed if this goes bad. Isn’t the whole superhero gig about beating the
odds? I’m recruiting a team, I’m not planning on going solo.”

“What?” Harley asked.

“So far?” Peter asked. “Um, a Goblin Glider pilot-“

“Like that’s helpful underwater,” Harley snorted.

“He’s got the full armor,” Peter protested. “Hopefully an Iron Man class armor…”

Harley rolled his eyes, “Like I’d let you be that stupid on your own. Yeah I’ll come, provided!”

Harley held up a finger.

Peter waited.

“You need an exit plan,” Harley said. “If your plan for if they don’t want to talk is ‘wing it’ I will
report you. I will tell Rhody. I will tell Ev Ross and leave you to endure him trying to come off as a
hardass. I will tell Gwen… I will tell your Aunt May! She’s as scary as Pepper.”

“Point taken,” Peter agreed. “In and out we need a sub and someone to drive it…”

Rhodes looked around the meeting hall where the North American Avengers and Defenders had
assembled, video screens linked in the other Avenger teams. “So,” he addressed the room. “This
morning we learned from King Odin of Asgard that Tony Stark is alive, for the moment. He and
Loki left Asgard three days ago with a plan to assassinate Thanos. Odin has informed us that Tony
deviated from the original suicide bomber plan to do something that might be survivable… But to the
best of our knowledge he didn’t think to include an exit plan.

“Thor and I have been given approval to take a small team and go after Tony,” Rhodes closed his
eyes briefly. “We don’t have approval to get in the way of his attempt on Thanos, only to try to
retrieve him afterwards. After discussing the issue, representatives from Asgard, the UN and the
Nova Empire concluded that it could be disastrous if Tony fell into the hands of Thanos or any of his
generals.”

Carol Danvers stood up, “Correct me if I’m wrong but that sounds a lot like we’re being told ‘Save
him if you can, make sure he’s dead if you can’t’.”

Rhodes nodded then he shrugged, “We’ve got approval to go after him. I intend to bring Tony back
alive or die trying. I need a couple volunteers to fill out my team.”

Almost as one the entire auditorium came to its feet. For a moment Rhodes’ eyes met Pepper’s and
he saw she was as overwhelmed and awed by the show of support as he was. “Okay… I guess we
need some guidelines. Um… If you’re under twenty-five sit down. You’re kids, there’s a good
chance we aren’t coming back plus I want experienced operatives. Anyone with kids counting on
them is also out. Carol, I’m turning responsibility the Avengers over to you, as of now you’re in charge of Earth’s Enhanced forces.”

“In other words, you’re telling me I’m out?” Carol asked.

“You’ve been my second for years, you’re a trained officer. I can’t think of anyone else I’d trust more with the Earth,” Rhodes said.

Bruce stood up, “I can be a medic or an unstoppable force of nature as needed. I’ve also worked with Loki in the past.”

“You’re in,” Rhodes said.

“I owe Dr. Stark a debt,” T’Challa offered.

“Have you spoken with Wakanda’s council, Your Highness?” Rhodes asked pointedly. “No.”

Steve stood up along with Natasha. “We’ve spent time in Thanos’ Empire and we have a smugglers ship available.” He turned to Rhodes, “I know you don’t like or trust me, but I swear to you that I will do everything in my power to bring Tony back.”

Thor leaned close to Rhodes, “I believe his sincerity and with the disappearance of the Guardians of the Galaxy, Lady Nebula’s ship is the best suited for this mission.”

Bruce sighed deeply, “I hate to be a drama queen but the Other Guy can’t be on a team with the Black Widow.”

“Me?” Natasha exclaimed.

Bruce straightened his glasses, “Natasha, I’m sorry but... The first time we met you came to me under false pretenses. You used a child to lure me out. You told me you came alone, you lied. I convinced myself to trust you anyway. I lowered my guard around you, let you in. I told you I couldn’t become the Hulk after Johannesburg. You used my trust to shove me off a cliff.” Natasha stood silently, blinking back tears but Bruce didn’t stop. “You met Tony under false pretenses too, you infiltrated his company under an assumed name. You knew he was deathly ill, that had to have been in your mission briefing, but instead of taking that into account you encouraged him to play the reckless version bucket-list and then castigated him for listening to you. You injected him with a substance without his consent. He convinced himself to trust you anyway. You stood by and watched while he took the fall for Ultron, alone. He let himself be convinced that you’d have his back, because you understood that working with the Sokovia Accords was in our best interest. Then, in the middle of a fight, your conviction ran out and so did you.... Leaving him holding the bag as usual. Now maybe I could rationalize trusting you again.” Bruce spread his hands helplessly, a polite smile appearing and disappearing. “I could tell myself you have nothing to gain by betraying me. But the other guy doesn’t function like that. Have you ever heard the fable of the Scorpion and the Fox? He thinks you’re more of a scorpion than a spider, and I’d don’t have any evidence to the contrary to try to convince him otherwise.”

“I’m- I’m sorry you think that,” Natasha said, raising her chin in a way that made her look fragile and determined.

Bruce shook his head and turned to Rhodes, “I can put up with Rogers if you need the ship and the insider knowledge of Thanos’ empire. The other guy and I know what his trigger is and you’re not bring James Barnes. Plus my issues with him are more cerebral and less visceral. I can work around my issues with him, but not with her. So your choice, her or me.”
“You’re off the team Widow,” Rhodes said. “Thor and I are heavy hitters, with flight and ranged weapons. Rogers brings transport, insider information and he’s one of the top short to mid-range fighters. With Bruce we’ve got a medic and the heaviest hitter around.”

Hank Pym stepped forward, “You’re a decent engineer Colonel but you’re not up for sci-fi, I am. I can use the ants to gather data for you and, if need be, I can put on the suit one more time. I’m old, I’ve lived my life, wasted more than I like to recall on bitterness, I don’t have a lot to lose. Stark’s daughter took it into her head to call me grandpa, I want to bring Nettie’s father home.”

“Alright,” Rhodes said. “I have my team. The rest of you, make sure the planet’s still standing when we get back?”

---

“Alleyne!” Peter called waving to the other Enhanced, part of his graduating class at the Academy along with Komodo. “I’m sorry to disrupt your leave but… What would you think about about trying to open a dialogue with the Chitauri?”

Peter immediately had David’s attention, “You know I’m a pacifist. The military’s been ethical enough to put me in a non-combat role but if you’ve got an idea about how to maybe put an end to this, you know I’m in,” he said.

“I’m going to be asking forgiveness not permission, assuming I don’t get myself killed,” Peter warned.

David thought about it for a moment, “What do you need me for?”

“Transportation and communication,” Peter said. “I need someone capable of driving a sub and learning the Chitauri language instantaneously.”

“You can’t do it without me, can you?” David asked.

“I was thinking that the Guardian’s Mantis could help with communication but her whole team is missing,” Peter admitted.

“Yes, I’m in,” David said. “I need to call Melati, I’m not standing her up. I take it you haven’t tried recruiting her?”

“Komodo has been pretty gung-ho about the whole war,” Peter hedged.

David considered, “I’ll ask her. If she’s not in I’ll make sure she doesn’t give the game away too soon. Might also ask my copilot. Kate’s a marksman, the ninety-ninth percentile.”

---

“Thor, I would speak with you,” Odin called.

“Father?” Thor asked, allowing Odin to direct them to a private room.

“I should have told your brother of his adoption, of his parentage, of my motives, my intentions for him, centuries ago,” Odin stated. “But always, there was always a reason to delay. And then the proper time came and passed and I never noticed. Even now, I should tell Loki this instead of asking you to pass on my words. But there is a feeling of foreboding on me, I fear I will not see Loki alive again. I would not have your brother die believing that I never held love in my heart for him.”

Thor frowned, “Adopted or not Loki has always been my brother, how can he not know that he is loved? Why else would you have brought him into our family?”
Odin stared at his eldest son for a moment, “You are naive, Thor. Your brother hasn’t been since he was three hundred but until recently I had not realized how deeply his cynicism ran. While I was under his spell I was forced to see myself through Loki’s perception. His beliefs about me, about his place in our family, are extremely tightly held and so the spell would permit me no influence. For these last four years, I have been able to do nothing with the knowledge I have gained.” Odin sighed deeply, “I have done your brother a great wrong by leaving him to imagine the motives behind my actions. He was always so quick to discern motive in his lessons on statesmanship. It didn’t occur to me that he could not discern the differences between political necessity and my true feelings.”

‘So much quicker than I,’ Thor supplied mentally.

“Loki was never a war trophy to me,” Odin declared vehemently. “NEVER!”

“When I was little older than Loki is now, your grandfather Bor brought your mother home from his conquest of Vanir and gave her to me as a wife,” Odin said. “It was done to tame the Vanir, they could not continue resisting Asgard’s rule without their beloved princess suffering for their actions. But in time I came to love Frigga dearly and it tamed me as well. If I were cruel or unfair in my rule over the Vanir, I saw pain in her eyes, I could not bear to be the cause of her suffering. And so I became a true king to Vanheim, not simply a conqueror.”

“Mother didn’t choose?” Thor stammered.

Odin looked Thor up and down disapprovingly. “I have no idea where you picked up the ridiculous notion that someone in your position has the option of marrying for love,” he said. “No, your mother had no choice. I had no choice. We married to end a war. The match was sealed before we ever laid eyes on one another. We learned to love one another on our own time, after our people had stopped dying in battle with one another.

“Shortly before your birth, Jotunheim attempted to expand their empire to Midgard. I repelled their advances then pressed the war back to their homeland.” Odin shrugged, “Jotunheim’s strength was such that I could not have mustered popular support for a war against them without them providing an excuse. But once the war began, as hatred of the loathsome Frost Giants reached a fevered peak, it was no great trouble to maintain momentum until our victory verged on being complete. What Loki would have done in seconds with the Bifrost, I spent decades striving towards.

“On the morning that I found Loki, I was on the verge of annihilating the Jotun. They had retreated to their last stronghold, every other city on the planet had already fallen before my armies. Their final defeat was inevitable at that point, if it proved impossible to breach their capital’s defenses I would have simply set a siege on their city and waited for starvation to set in and finish off their people.”

“Why would you do such a thing?” Thor asked, horrified.

“Tell me Thor, when you were a child, did you and Loki not play at defeating the Jotun? At killing every last one of them lest they rise up again and attempt to avenge their earlier defeat at our hands?” Odin asked dryly. “Where do you think your play came from? The Vanir were very like us, in appearance, in culture. Nidavellir possessed skills that we desired. The people of Alfheim were appealing, if exotic. All that was required to stop the wars against their realms was their submission. Svartalfheim and Muspelheim were different. They were alien, frightening, the only value Asgard saw in them was proof of our own strength in victory over them. After Svartalfheim’s armies failed to destroy us in their suicide attacks Asgard razed their cities, their planet until it was nothing but barren shale to show our superiority. There was life left on Muspel when we tired of warring against them but no civilization, they had been reduced to monsters preying on one another to survive the hell that was left of their planet. The war against Jotunheim looked to be going down that path. The Frost Giants inspired fear in Asgard and so we strove to crush them beneath our heel, grind them to
dust so that we would never had to feel afraid again.”

“But you spared Loki?” Thor said uncertainty.

“He was a healthy, well-cared for infant, only slightly younger than my own son, who had been left to die when his parents could no longer guarantee his safety from my army,” Odin said. “He was left in a sacred place so he would be near to their gods when he passed and thus more likely to come to their notice. I drove his parents to kill a child that was clearly loved, as I loved you, I gave them cause to believe it was the kindest fate they could secure for him. But Loki, little scrap of a thing that he was, wanted to live. He remade himself to appeal to mercy that his elders would have sworn I did not possess. Looking at him I found that I did not like the image of myself that I saw evidenced by the fate he’d been consigned to. I took him home and made him for Jotunheim, what Frigga was for Vanheim: A reminder to be merciful. Because there were people on the other side of the battlefield who could love and were lovable as well.”

“But you hid what Loki was, even from him,” Thor said. “Everyone knew Mother was Vanir.” He grimaced, “Even if I had imagined that the two of you fell in love and then convinced your peoples to stop warring against each other.”

“The war was bitter Thor. When it first began I was arrogant and didn’t give Jotunheim proper credit. There were times when it seemed Asgard would be overrun and the Frost Giants would win. There were few among Asgard’s warriors who had not lost a Shield-Brother to their hands. My protection would not have been enough to keep Loki safe if I’d openly adopted a Jotun babe. One of Asgard’s warriors would have decided that they valued vengeance over their life and Loki would have been murdered in his crib. You and Loki were so young, I couldn’t trust you to keep such a secret, and Loki’s life depended on it.

“Loki was my secret talisman. Never a war trophy, something to be taken and held to demonstrate my power and humiliate my enemies but a reminder to be kind, NOT to be the monster the Jotun had imagined me to be… Or that was what I told myself when I picked him up and he changed himself into an Asir babe. I thought it would be simple, when I looked down at him I thought, perhaps, we were not so different. That it was only the Jotun’s alien appearance that made them so repulsive to us. I thought Loki would blend in easily and, when he was grown, when time had softened the pain of the war, when Loki was old enough to defend himself should it be necessary, I would reveal him and our people would see that we were not truly so different from the Jotun. I thought he would bridge the gap between our two peoples.” Odin shook his head, “I thought that until Loki began to come into himself and he was nothing like us, nor was he what we thought the Jotun to be. There were days when I wondered if he’d been a changeling babe from the beginning, something utterly unique in all the cosmos.

“Loki wasn’t even my only misjudgement in the matter,” Odin sighed. “I thought time would heal the wounds left by the war but Laufey didn’t mellow with age, he grew embittered, endlessly nurturing his grudges and desire for revenge against me.” Odin glanced away, “He saw my offer of peace as a cruel mercy. Perhaps because he hadn’t expect it and I didn’t offer it until after he’d abandoned his own child to die… It would be over a hundred years before I realized that that Loki was, in fact, Laufey’s lost child. By then your mother loved Loki as much as if were her flesh and blood, I couldn’t tear him from her.”

“I never noticed it before,” Thor said staring at his father, “but you always do that: Blame all suggestion that Loki is wanted in our family on Mother.”

“I care for your brother,” Odin insisted, scowling at his eldest son.

“I don’t doubt it,” Thor replied. “But I do wonder why you are so ashamed of loving him.”
I should be writing Christmas Cards.

I set Bruce’s path Post-AoU long before watching “Ragnarok”. So a quick reminder of how this story is totally not “Ragnarok” compliant: In this world Bruce returned to his wandering the Earth practicing medicine in remote backwaters thing after AoU. He remained in hiding during the CW, in the aftermath, he contacted Thor and went to Asgard where he played side-kick while Thor went on quests. During the course of his travels with Thor, Bruce and Hulk became more attuned to the other, both becoming more willing to allow the other influence on their decisions regardless of who’s in the driver’s seat.

The original plan was to have Steve flashback to his initial reaction to hearing that Tony’s alive (and in need of rescue) but some of the comments got me thinking I needed to give Natasha’s reaction some time as well, then Pepper and Rhodey’s reactions crept in and…

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Pepper and Rhodey

“Pepper! Pepper?” Rhodes called as he landed on the platform outside of the Penthouse. He stumbled and almost fell as War Machine released him and he tried to rush inside before his leg-braces had fully engaged.

“Rhodey, what’s going on?” Pepper asked as stepped out of her office/bedroom.

“We’re bringing Tony home,” he said and Pepper’s knees went out, she sank to the concrete.

“Tell me I’m not dreaming?” Pepper murmured. Even walking into mythology and knowing that death wasn’t quite what they’d thought- “But Thor told us-”

“Thor didn’t have a fucking clue about what was going on in Asgard,” Rhodes said. “Loki- Hell, I don’t know what I want to do more: Beat the crazy asshole bloody or kiss him. He usurped the throne SEVEN-FUCKING-YEARS ago and has been impersonating Odin ever since.”

“Then-” Pepper’s eyes went wide.

Rhodes nodded. “Odin broke free and showed up on Earth a few hours ago, he confirmed that it was Loki who took Tony’s body. He says the Extremis in Tony’s blood was still active at some level, preserving- something. Loki decided it was enough to risk- What Thor said we couldn’t risk. And it was pretty much blasphemy for Loki to even try it on a mortal, but it worked. Loki brought Tony back. And then the bastard kept Tony prisoner in Asgard for the four goddamn years. He screwed with Tony’s head until Tony was willing to go along with some sort of insane suicide bomber plan to take out Thanos. But we’ve got approval to bring Tony home. Hell if I’m letting anything stand in my way.”
Ever since they’d first seen the Avalon Tech, Pepper and Rhodes had been making plans. But Thor said death wasn’t reversible even if Tony was still out there, somewhere, capable of reaching back and influencing the world. But Tony said ‘Wait. Not now. You’ve got more important things to do,’ and there was no arguing because there was a war for the fate of the world going on, and saving Tony but losing the Earth wasn’t a risk they could take. Still they’d been resolved to try. “It won’t be that simple will it?” Pepper realized as her head caught up with her heart. “What are the odds?”

“I.” Rhodes sighed. “It's going to be hairy,” he admitted. “Practically a suicide mission. Most of the people I could count on to help, I can’t take. We recovered the Vibranium from Vision’s original body and Dr. Cho’s started fabricating it into a new body while FRIDAY and Amadeus are overseeing the reintegrating of his software but it’s going to be weeks before he’s up and going again-”

“And Tony can’t wait that long,” Pepper guessed.

Rhodes nodded. “FRIDAY can’t come. Between the internet and the various SI satellites FRIDAY can command her armor anywhere on Earth but she can’t leave her servers behind. Tony would never forgive me if I brought Harley, or Peter for that matter. You’ve got Nettie to think about. Happy’ll be with me the moment he gets the news but… He commands SI’s security, that’s several hundred of New York’s trained protectors and well over a thousand people world wide. I don’t know that I can justify taking him, especially not when he’s one of the better people trying to fill the gap Misty left.”

“We’ve got Thor,” Rhodes continued. “Best guess, after hearing some of Banner’s observations about Loki, is Odin’s imploding over the realization that his second son was so starved for love that he’d rather die, literally die, than lose the one person he managed to get in his corner, even if he had to resort to inducing Stockholm Syndrome to make friends.” Rhodes shook his head, “If Banner is halfway right, I almost feel sorry for the bastard, except for the part where he’s dragging Tony down with him. Anyway, Odin’s desperate enough to risk his first son and Thor’s already seen his little brother die once. Probably doesn’t hurt that Loki was, apparently, Frigga’s favorite. Thor and Odin failed to save her, then almost immediately after they failed to save her baby… Now they’ve got a second chance.”

“Speaking of second chances,” Pepper said. “Bruce would jump at the chance to be there for Tony, this time.”

“Rogers as well,” Rhodes admitted.

Pepper’s face twisted in disgust.

“He’s got claim to a ship… Hell, I hate to say it, but he’s damn good fighter and this is a place where bullheaded, bloody single-mindedness might be an asset.” Rhodes pointed out. “We might need him… Besides Fury wants to get him off the planet before he starts getting ideas.”

Pepper blew out a huff of air, “As long as we get Tony back, I don’t care if he gets his atonement. But if he screw this up somehow, if he comes home and Tony doesn’t, I will kill him. If I have to figure out how to hire someone to do it.”

Rhodes winced but didn't disagree. “I’ve called a meeting with the Avengers world-wide this afternoon,” he continued. “I’m going to appoint Carol to take over my duties and ask for volunteers to go after Tony. We’ll see what we have to work with.”

Five hours later, Rhodes and Pepper watched in awe as their expectations, shaped by the Avengers’ Civil War and every member of Tony’s original team turning their backs on him one way or another,
were shattered in the best possible way when the entire Avengers roster stood up for Tony without hesitation.

---

**Natasha**

There wasn’t much room in the quarters the Bartons had been assigned to by the S.H.I.E.L.D., Natasha ended up laying out a bedroll in a back room between stacks of boxes that had never been unpacked after they fled their home.

One night, while laying awake wondering why Laura and the kids didn’t hate her for making it home when Clint hadn’t, Natasha spotted a plastic bag rolled up and shoved into a crevice between two boxes and realized it was from the Nevada prison, the things Clint had on his person when he was incarcerated. She slid the bag out and opened it, aware that it could be considered a violation of privacy but Clint had always known that he couldn’t invite a spy into his home without her digging a little.

The bag contained a few coins, a few bills, a keychain and a battered wallet. Natasha smiled a bit as she flipped through the wallet. The name on the credit cards was one she recognized from an old cover and one edge had been filed to sharpness, a deadly weapon when combined with Clint’s aim. There was also a folded sheet of paper, soft with age, the creases fraying.

Delicately Natasha extracted the paper and laid it flat. Despite the childish artwork, she instantly recognized the picture. During the Invasion of 2012 a bystander had captured a picture of all six of them facing off against the Chitauri. The iconic image had been reproduced thousands of times, Tony Stark had commissioned a mural of it for the lobby of the Avengers’ Tower and for years they’d given him a hard time about narcissism of having a fifteen foot picture of himself dominating the building’s entryway but the secretly Natasha was sure that all the Avengers had considered the mural something of a family portrait. Natasha stared down at that same picture rendered clumsily but lovingly by Lila Barton’s six-year-old hand and carried by her father for all the years afterwards. ‘A beautiful lie,’ Natasha thought, about what they made that picture into and how it had fallen apart when tested. She carefully refolded the picture along the original creases then tucked it into a flat compartment on the inside of her utility belt.

The day after Natasha found the picture, Agent Melinda May showed up at the door shortly after the kids had left for school and Laura to take a shift monitoring comm channels. The Cavalry gave Natasha a cool, evaluating look. “Have you ever taught self-defense to civilians?” she asked

“Out of the suit you’re a civilian,” Natasha told Tony a few days after the Avengers assembled to take down HYDRA. “I’m going to fix that.”

“Thanks but no thanks. I'll stick with Happy,” Tony replied carelessly.

Natasha allowed disdain to show clearly on her face. “I’ve seen what he calls training, a couple kids scuffling on the school grounds would impress me more.”

Tony's expression cooled. “I owe Happy my life ten times over, he knows his business.”

“Then he’s either babying you or pandering to your ego,” Natasha declared.

Natasha remembered that Tony had proved to have a solid grounding in boxing. Although he didn’t have the weight or reach to excel in the style he’d been taught he’d managed to integrate several self-defense moves that he’d picked up elsewhere. Tony also had a faith in the laws of physics that very few people possessed, he didn’t hesitate when the math told him something would work. He couldn’t
keep up with someone like her who’d dedicated the majority of her life to turning her body into a secret weapon but he hadn’t been half-bad.

During her initial assessment of Tony Stark, Natasha remembered explaining away his longstanding relationships with Harold Hogan, Virginia Potts and Colonel James Rhodes saying, “Stark has a childish need for an audience and for reassurance. He showers his inner circle with gifts and opportunities to buy their loyalty.” She’d noted it as an easily exploitable weakness. Years later, after Tony’s death, when Natasha had been asked to re-evaluate him, sticking to conclusions that she could substantiate with evidence that observation morphed into “Tony Stark provides the people he deems friends with ample opportunities to excel.”

“Train civilians? No, I don’t have much experience in that area,” Natasha said.

“Come anyway,” Agent May ordered with a dissatisfied twist of her lips. “You’re small, that will help convince them that size can be overcome with skill.”

“And you haven’t done that yourself?” Natasha asked wryly.

“My reputation precedes me,” the Cavalry said. “They don’t believe that I’m not Enhanced.” She didn’t say that Natasha’s reputation had taken a hit in recent years, she didn’t have to.

Natasha caught sight of the class waiting for them. At fourteen, Lila Barton was one of the older students. “S.H.I.E.L.D.’s training children now?” she asked frowning.

“Most of the kids here grew up S.H.I.E.L.D.,” Agent May stated. “They’ve been taught that secrecy equals safety since birth. By the time they enter school they maintain a cover like pros; Consistently, believably lying about what their parent does for a living, where they come from, what their family name is. They lie to their neighbors, their teachers, their friends, because no one can know. Their parent’s life, all their lives depend upon it. Some of them we were able to rescue them from HYDRA’s incentive program.”

“What?” Natasha asked.

“On their way out HYDRA grabbed the families of dozens of S.H.I.E.L.D. agents,” Agent May said. “Used them as a recruitment tactic: Work for us and we don’t kill your loved ones. Don’t worry,” she added before Natasha could say anything. “HYDRA knew our secrets before you aired them across the internet… You’re only responsible for the agents or families of agents who were killed by Serpent Society, the Mafia, the Yakuza, the Triad, ISIS, North Korea… You get the picture.”

Natasha bowed her head, accepting the reprimand for what it was. Once she’d been S.H.I.E.L.D.’s shooting star, her reputation poised to eclipse that of previous notaries like the Cavalry or even Peggy Carter herself. From her first day in S.H.I.E.L.D. the Black Widow had a reputation, with time and effort she’d turned fear and suspicion into respect but now that was all lost. ‘I wanted to be a hero. Not a great spy or assassin, a hero. Honesty is the best policy, right? I didn’t bother to think about the cost of dragging all of S.H.I.E.L.D.’s secrets out into the open like that. After all, I was a hero and heroes don’t compromise.’

“The ones HYDRA took had a chance at survival,” Agent May continued. “The ones we got back are living proof of the danger of being known, even within S.H.I.E.L.D. Now we bring them together here because things are so bad secrecy doesn’t matter anymore, not with the alien armada on our doorstep. So we teach them to fight, to distract them from how exposed they feel.”

Natasha didn’t say anything else about whether or not S.H.I.E.L.D. was doing the right thing by
teaching those kids, not even when she learned that Cooper was halfway through the first year material taught at S.H.I.E.L.D.’s Academy, because he wanted to do something to keep his home safe.

She went to Agent May’s classes and demonstrated moves and corrected postures and grips. She took her turn on monitor duty. Natasha waited for her next mission, for Fury to think of another way she could be useful.

Then Natasha overheard a video call between Coulson and Fury. “But why is he calling an Avenger-wide meeting?” Coulson asked.

“Rhodes is stepping down as the Avengers’ Commander,” Fury said. “So he can go after Stark.”

And Natasha’s world stopped. ‘So much of went wrong stemmed from my mistakes, my prejudices. If Tony's still alive, maybe there’s a chance to make some of it right.

‘It’s too late now but I wonder what the team would have been without my report biasing the others against him,’ Natasha thought. ‘At least I can help him get home to a family that supports him, even if I can't be a part of it. This is a chance to erase a little of the red I added to my ledger by misjudging him.’

A few minutes later Natasha was on the phone, “Steve, Rhodes is calling a meeting and we need to be there. It’s about Tony, he’s alive.”

And that was how, later that afternoon, Natasha found herself discreetly working her way across an auditorium to join Steve. It was hard to sit patiently through confirmation that Thanos’ forces had taken Tesseract from Asgard despite knowing how important that the information was.

Then: “So, this morning we learned from King Odin of Asgard that Tony Stark is alive, for the moment. He and Loki left Asgard three days ago with a plan to assassinate Thanos. Odin has informed us that Tony deviated from the original suicide bomber plan to do something that might be survivable… But to the best of our knowledge he didn’t think to include an exit plan.”

When Rhodes started downselecting the volunteers to find his team Steve leaned over and whispered, “We need to offer something or he’s not going to let us help.”

Natasha nodded, under no illusions about how reluctant Rhodes would be to team up with her. “The ship, our knowledge of Thanos’ empire,” she said.

Steve nodded and stood, Natasha got to her feet alongside him. “We’ve spent time in Thanos’ Empire and we have a smuggler’s ship available.” He turned to Rhodes, “I know you don’t like or trust me, but I swear to you that I will do everything in my power to bring Tony back.”

Thor leaned close to Rhodes, “I believe his sincerity and with the disappearance of the Guardians of the Galaxy, Lady Nebula’s ship is the best suited for this mission.” His attempt at whispering carried to the far corners of the room and Natasha signed in relief.

Then Bruce spoke up, “I hate to be a drama queen but the Other Guy can’t be on a team with the Black Widow.”

Natasha gaped, a punch to the solar plexus would have been less stunning. Acting on reflex she tried to take control of the situation but Bruce ruthlessly stood by his ultimatum. Afterwards, still reeling from what had happened, Natasha sought Bruce out. “Why?” she asked him. “I just wanted the chance to make reparations. I deserve the chance to try don’t I?”
Bruce sighed, briefly shutting his eyes. “Natasha, it’s not about what you deserve,” he said. “I want to help Tony too and I can’t work with you. I explained why, because I needed it understood that I was entirely serious about it being either you or me, and let Rhodes chose which of us offered more to the team.”

“I was right in Sokovia,” Natasha protested. “You know I was right. If I hadn’t made you help, you would have regretted it later, you know that.”

Bruce’s mouth tightened. “I might have regretted it,” he agreed. “I certainly regret leaving afterwards. I regret that I wasn’t there to insist that Wanda Maximoff be made to stand trial for her time as a HYDRA flunky or for the aid she gave to Ultron. I regret leaving Tony to shoulder all the blame for Ultron. I regret not being there to try to mitigate the disaster that was the implementation of the Sokovia Accords, although I can’t say with any certainty that my presence would have made things better… But what would you have done to keep me from making that mistake? Locked me in a cage until I promised to make the choice you wanted me to make?”

“How can you say that?” Natasha asked. “I’d never-”

“You pushed me off a cliff!” Bruce exclaimed. “Wasn’t the whole point of resisting the Accords? To prevent anyone from telling the Avengers where they can and can’t use their abilities? I thought the Hulk would do more harm than good, you disagreed and you forced me to unleash him. If Thunderbolt Ross had ordered you to do something you disagreed with under the auspices of the Accords… Well maybe he could have thrown you in jail for refusing to obey his orders but he could NOT have forced you to do anything you didn’t want to. How is what you did to me NOT worse than what you feared Ross would do to you? …Oh wait, you weren’t against the Accords, you weren’t for them either. You were, what? For whichever way the wind blows? For the option you thought you could manipulate the most readily?”

Natasha flinched.

Bruce closed his eyes and rubbed the bridge of his nose. “I’m sorry. You didn’t deserve that,” he said.

“You didn’t say you didn’t mean it,” Natasha pointed out in a small voice.

“You didn’t deserve to have it thrown in your face, whatever I might believe,” Bruce agreed.

“But I was right!” Natasha protested. “If one of the Avengers had died that day-”

“Goddamnit Natasha! It’s not about who was right!” Bruce growled slamming a fist into the wall. Natasha’s hand jerked toward her holster and Bruce’s shoulders slumped in defeat. “It was never about who was right,” he said more quietly. “It’s about that. I categorically refuse to be in a relationship where violence towards your partner is an option. When we disagree, and we will, I don’t trust you not to hit me, shoot me, shove me off a cliff, to get your way.” Natasha started to protest, he held up a hand to silence her, “Because of the Hulk I won’t get hurt but that doesn’t matter. It doesn’t even matter that I don’t trust him -Or even myself- not to hit you back. I DO NOT WANT ANY PART OF AN ABUSIVE RELATIONSHIP! Whatever might have been between us died in Sokovia.” Bruce seemed to deflate even further. “After how we met, I never should have considered it in the first place.”

Natasha sniffled, she was surprised to realize it wasn’t calculated.

“It… It was nice, flattering, to think about. Even if it was a pipedream,” Bruce tried to gentle his voice. “I’ll tell Tony you wanted to come.”
As he started to walk away Natasha called out, “Be careful out there.” Bruce glanced back and Natasha turned her head away, stammering, “Just because the Hulk’s been invulnerable so far is no reason to assume he can’t be hurt.”

Several days later, long after Rhodes’ team had left the planet, Maria Hill called Natasha, “Your old job is still open,” she said. “Mostly you’ll be working as a ground soldier, at least as long as the war is on. But you’ve kept your head down these last four years, the added age helps remove you from the Black Widow figurines and other Avengers merchandise, it’s enough to get you out from behind a desk.”


Steve

Steve was fixing himself breakfast in the kitchen off the barracks area that had been created for New York’s Defenders on one of the upper levels of the Rand building several days after notifying Harry Osborn of his father’s death. His nose wrinkled in disgust as an the overpowering stench of stale alcohol filled the air a moment before a slight, dark haired woman brushed past him, her hip bumping him hard enough to knock him into counter.

The grade school bullying tactics were like nails on a chalkboard to Steve’s sensibilities. He cringed at the thought of what it would have looked like if the woman, Jessica Jones he thought, threw around her Enhanced strength like that with a regular person. Unable to let it pass as he had the last several times Steve grabbed her shoulder and spun her around to face him. “What is your problem with me?” he demanded.

Out of the corner of his eye Steve saw Luke Cage come half-way out of his chair. There was an air of heightened readiness to Daredevil and Danny Rand that quickly spread to Steve’s own teammates, with a small shift in their places at the counter Diamondback and Songbird were ready to cover each other or Steve if a fight broke out.

Jessica dug her thumb into the tendon between Steve’s radius and ulna making his fingers spring open and took a step back from him. “You’re seriously going to ask that?” She rolled her eyes, “It’s not like most of the world doesn’t despise you for Tony Stark’s murder, if not for the murder itself than because they think he could save us from Thanos if he were here. Or that an even bigger majority got sick of you acting like your shit doesn’t stink four years ago. But yeah fine, you want to know why I hate you? It makes me sick how everyone still thinks you’re this great friend to Barnes.”

“What?” Steve asked in shock.

“Asking to go back into cryo? Wakanda’s head cat went out of his way to make it sound all noble, like Barnes wanted to protect the world from himself. But if I’d been him it would have been worth it to get away from you,” Jessica spat. “After all the shit he went through with HYDRA you, his supposed best friend, wanted to stick him on a team with the little witch-bitch? Someone who’d volunteered for HYDRA and had a proven inclination and ability to screw with people’s minds? Fuck, with friends like you who needs enemies? Damn I need a drink.”

“It’s not even eight,” Daredevil pointed out and Jessica flipped him off.

Steve moved aside numbly as Jessica went up on her toes to reach the top shelf of the cupboard over the counter. He itched to call Wakanda and beg Bucky to assure him that Jessica was totally off base. ‘I didn’t know about Wanda’s power-leakage influencing us and we all concluded that it had been
It almost seemed prophetic when his phone rang. Steve excused himself hurriedly and walked out into the hall to answer. But it was Natasha’s voice rather than Bucky’s on the other end of the line. “Steve, Rhodes is calling a meeting and we need to be there. It’s about Tony, he’s alive.”

Steve barely noticed the phone shattering in his hand. He slumped against the wall, overcome with relief and shock. ‘Tony’s alive!’ When Thor returned with weapons and armor unmistakably designed by Tony Stark Steve had tried to replace the image of Tony slowly suffocating in Siberia, alone and afraid with an image of him in a workshop somewhere, happy, because as despite Tony’s playboy reputation he’d always seemed happiest when he was busy in his lab. But the shield, enhanced with Tony’s invention, had never seemed heavier.

Steve felt someone crouch in front of him, grab his shoulders and give him an attention demanding shake. “Come on Rogers, you can't fall apart because someone holds your past against you,” Rachel said. “You messed up, there are going to people who won't let it go. Deal with it.”

“Tony’s alive,” Steve managed.

He heard the kitchen door open and close then Daredevil warily asked, “And what are you planning to do about it?”

“Whatever needs doing,” Steve said. He thought about a little girl with curly, dark hair and a prediction for red and gold, about Pepper Potts and the pain and hate that had thickened her voice when Rhodes had asked her to house him. “Tony’s obviously being prevented from coming home.”

“Not good enough,” Daredevil said. “If Stark does need help it’s because of the last time you went on a rampage to save a friend. Do you think he’d appreciate being the excuse for you going off the rails again? Besides, what good did you do Barnes back in 2016?”

Steve gaped at him, “They were going to kill Bucky.”

“I followed the trial,” Daredevil said with a shrug. “But it was Rhodes’ intervention that result in him being brought in alive, not yours. As a result of your ‘help’ Barnes ended up back in cryogenic sleep for months until Potts offered SI technology to deal with the HYDRA triggers… Because she wanted to see him held accountable for Stark’s murder. At his trial Barnes was cleared of charges relating to his actions as the Winter Soldier, the only thing the court required of him for the Winter Soldier’s kills was to provide investigators with any information that he possessed about his missions so that there could be some form of closure for the families of the victims. To allow them to know what happened, if nothing else.” Then as an aside he added, “Precisely the information you denied Stark.”

Steve’s shoulders curled inward. During the short time he’d been bunking with the Defenders he’d come to realized that Daredevil was Foggy’s Enhanced friend and the reason the lawyer had taken his case.

“Barnes would have been a free man after his trial- Except for Bucharest, Leipzig and Siberia,” Daredevil continued. “Because of Wakanda’s extremely lenient sentencing in the eyes of the rest of the world, he’s now free to remain in Wakanda for the rest of his life. That’s where your ‘help’ landed Barnes, Stark might prefer doing without, especially when you consider his last memories of you involve being beaten, apparently to the point of death.”

Steve took a deep breath. “I need to go to the meeting and let Rhodes know I’m ready to help, if he wants me,” he pled.
“I suppose, if we didn’t take you with us, at least one of us would have to stay behind,” Daredevil allowed.

Chapter End Notes

And well, Natasha’s part turned into her send off.
“Komodo?” Peter asked in surprise when he saw her waiting along with David Alleyne and Kate Bishop.

The lizard girl shrugged, “When this blows up in your face I want to be there to tell you and David ‘I told you so’ and to kick the most Chitauri butt imaginable to get us out in one piece.”

“Have I mentioned before that I like her?” Harley said earning a glower from David.

“I always thought she was pretty great,” Harry commented and David frowned at him as well.

Melati swatted at the back of David’s head, “Stop acting like a jealous idiot, unless you mean to imply that you don’t trust me…”

David gulped then tried to school his expression into neutrality.

“And is that you in there Harry, Harry Osborn?” Melati continued frowning severely at the Green Goblin. Harry nodded. “You’re not trained or registered on that equipment.”

“I’ve been practicing,” Harry whined as Peter said quickly, “This is a special situation.”

Melati looked dubious.

“It’s not like this is an approved mission,” Peter pushed. “And Harry wanted to help.”

Harley looked between them, a bit wide eyed, “This is going to be like, like…”

‘Like the old days, before the Accords.’ Peter felt a burst of shame. Then he took a deep breath, “The people who make the rules are still just people, they can’t think of every possible situation. Sometimes you have to go against the rules… I’m just praying this is one of those times.”

“And if it goes to hell, we make sure it’s just us who go down,” Kate Bishop said. She held up a disk, “This’ll make it look like we were searching for their base but didn’t have a chance to get word back if they catch us… Just remember to break the comm system so it all checks out.”

“Good thinking,” David told his co-pilot. “Now do we know where we’re stealing a sub?”

Harry nodded, “OsCorp military contracts, we’re retrofitting a bunch of research vessels with weapons. I can’t get you past the first checkpoint or the door out but inside the shipyards I’ve got access.”

“I’ll take care of that,” Peter said, he glanced at Melati, “Wanna help?”

She grinned back showing a mouthful of too-sharp teeth, “Sounds like my kind of fun.”

“And I’m our driver,” David sighed, “I tanked up on Subs right before I came.”

“Refresher course?” Kate asked. “If this goes past your time limit…”

“Refresher,” David assured her.

“Are we set then?” Harley asked.
The guard outside of the New York shipyards saw something out of the corner of his eye. A moment later he heard a scraping sound from the same direction. “I’ve got something,” he reported into his walkie-talkie. “Send back up so I can check it out.”

Thirty minutes later the other guard shook his head and slapped the first on the shoulder, “Good job following procedure but it must have been a stray cat or something.”

The second time when the first guard start hearing and seeing things he spent fifteen minutes shining his light into the shadows, straining to peer into the dark and around corners without letting his post out of sight before he finally called it in.

“You ever been on the night shift before?” his backup asked when his search came up empty again.

The third time, with thoughts of “The Boy Who Cried Wolf” echoing in his head, the guard resolutely ignored the scratching and the inconsistent shadows for twenty-three minutes. He spent the next twelve minutes playing dumb then trying to surprise the sounds with a sudden sweep of his flashlight. Then he gave in and went to investigate himself without calling for back-up.

David Alleyne, Kate Bishop, Harley Keener and Harry Osborn slipped past the guard point using Harry’s access card. Harley stuck a strip of metal in the door to keep it from latching properly. Five minutes later, after they’d finished leading the guard on a wild goose chase, Spider-Man and Komodo joined them, letting the door close moments before the guard turned the corner and resumed his watch none the wiser.

“Sub’s this way,” Harry whispered.

“This is too easy,” Kate worried when they set eyes on the sub without challenge.

“Oh you’ve done it now,” Harley declared melodramatically.

“Sue me, I’d rather have problems here were we get a ‘seriously disappointed in you’ lecture rather than later where we get dead,” Kate sniped. “You know something’s going to happen, you should be thanking me if I induce it now.”

David climbed up to the sub’s hatch, “Superstitious nonsense.” He shook his head.

“If we’re ever sucked into a horror movie I want him around,” Harley said.

“Definitely the first to die,” Kate agreed and Harry snickered.

“I’m staying extra-vehicular,” Harley said closing his face-plate. “Ace-up-the-sleeve backup.”

Komodo nodded, “Good thought.”

It was tight to fit even fives in the sub. Harry turned his glider on end and squeezed it behind the ladder, wishing the Goblin armor was pressurized and water-tight. David and Kate plunked themselves down at the pilot and gunner’s consoles, respectively. Komodo leaned over the back of David’s chair while Spidey hung from the hull to get a good view of the radar screen without being in the way.

“Give me a second,” Harley, Iron Man said over the comms. He propelled himself over to the sea door, “Better if I override it than you blowing it.” David started up the sub and maneuvered it closer to the door. Everyone inside watched the small red and gold figure using his repulsors to maneuver through the water to mechanism sealing the gates. “How good is he?” Harry asked Spidey quietly.
Peter grimaced feeling bad on Harley’s account. Taking up Iron Man’s legacy had basically doomed Harley to a life of people asking if he was Tony Stark’s successor or just a guy in a suit of armor. “Harley can handle himself,” Peter said. And a moment later the gate shuddered and slid open, confirming Peter’s assurances. The sub slid out of the shipyards and into the cold depths of the Atlantic ocean.

Rhodes ducked to board Nebula’s ship with his armor on. Thor, Bruce and Hank followed behind him. Thor was in his standard armor. Bruce was wearing body armor modeled off of SHIELD tact-gear but with a dark purple cast and promised to stretch enough to accommodate the Hulk. Hank wore jeans and a button-down shirt, he carried his Ant-Man gear in a backpack.

Diamondback and Songbird glanced up from where they’d been consulting with Steve, making sure to pass on anything they remembered about flying the ship that he might have missed. “Looks like it’s time for you to go,” Rachel commented. “Try not to die, okay?”

“No promises,” Steve replied.

“It’s what I figured,” Rachel said. “Well, I won’t wait up. But if you happen to make it back look me up.”

Steve nodded.

“There it is,” Harley said over the comms as he pointed out the massive Chitauri mothership laying in wait beneath the Atlantic. “I’m going to peel off and try not to get spotted.”

“Thanks,” Spidey said. “We’ll take it from here.”

“Open approach?” David suggested.

“We’re here to talk,” Spidey agreed.

“And let’s all hope your power has a larger range than their weapons,” Komodo added cynically.

“I’m broadcasting ‘We come in peace’ on multiple channels and multiple languages,” David said. “Just because they haven’t tried talking yet doesn’t mean that they don’t understand.”

The five of them watched tensely as they drew nearer and nearer to the Chitauri mothership.

“Nothing yet,” David said. “Nothing… Nothing….”

A number of Chitauri Ray fighters spilled out of the mothership.

“All right!” David exclaimed. A distant expression crossed face as he digested the information he’d gained then, “Oh no. No!”

“What?” Kate demanded.

“The hive communicates within itself telepathically,” David explained quickly as the Chitauri Ray’s bore down on them. “They have a verbal language for one hive to treat with another but different hives don’t join together for battle.”

“And?” Harry prompted impatiently.

“They don’t have any sort of radio transceiver and we don’t have external speakers on this sub. I can’t exactly lean out the window and shout at them,” David finished.
“There goes the back-up plan,” Harley sighed. “I’ve got external speakers, I’m patching you through,” he ordered as he propelled himself out of the shadows and into the sub’s spotlight.

David uttered a series of clicks interspersed with guttural growls and Harley relaid them. The Rays switched from an attack run to a circling pattern. “I told them we come seeking common ground.”

After several interminable minutes, one of the Rays fell out of formation and approached Harley. It dwarfed the human-sized armor. Harley relaid the clicking, growling language back. “It-she says I sound like I’m talking through a mouth full of food,” David translated. “That’s an insult, I don’t understand the context properly to answer back.”

“It’s a hive mind,” Spidey offered, “She has lots of mouths to speak with so…”

“It means you’re a fourth rate attempt at doing business, sent as an insult not a serious negotiation,” Harry stated. “Hive minds, plenty of mouths to speak with, the only reason to send someone who’s busy eating is because talking with her doesn’t rate.”

David nodded and replied. “I told her, I’m sorry if I don’t speak well but this is my only mouth. That we sincerely want to know why our people should fight.”

“She says they’ve been sent to conquer us.”

“Tell her, she must know that Thanos is the enemy of all life,” Spidey interjected. “Tell her we want to know how she can justify serving him knowing that.”

There was a lengthy pause after Spidey’s message was relaid. Once David heard the Chitauri hive’s response he took a deep breath then turned to the others, “She invites us in, so that we might speak in person.”

“Alright!” Harry exclaimed. When he saw the others weren’t quite as enthusiastic he asked, “This is good right?”

“If you like lion’s mouths,” Komodo replied. “But hey, at least we’ll hear an honest to god villain monologue before she kills us.”

“If we have to, we’ll fight our way back out,” Spidey said with determination. “We need hear this, we need to know why the Chitauri serve Thanos. There’s no way we can ever make peace with them if we don’t know even that much.”

“Show time,” Tony reminded him. He squeezed Loki’s shoulder reassuringly with his bound hands.

Loki nodded and stood straight, looming over Tony as he escorted the smaller man to ship’s docking
port. At the last moment he fitted a gag over Tony’s mouth. “An excuse to get the lay of the land before committing yourself to anything,” Loki murmured.

The airlock irised open to reveal a hunched, emaciated man with pale blue skin and sharp, cunning eyes followed by a dozen Chitauri foot soldiers. “Ebony Maw,” Loki greeted the man with a sweeping bow. “I have returned baring tribute for Thanos: Death’s Merchant, the Midgardian who created a rival to the power of the Infinity Stones.”

“To an Infinity Stone,” Ebony Maw corrected with a show of being unimpressed.

“The Infinity Stones are relics of the time before time began,” Loki pointed out. “Among storied accomplishments of the Ancient Ascended Races was the harnessing of the power of the Infinity Stones. This child of a race barely out of the crèche has done that and more. And he did it with only his intuitive understanding of the universe to elevate him above his primitive race. For the last four years, I have educated him in the knowledge of Asgard… I am confident that he is a worthy gift to lay before Thanos.”

“What stops me from killing you and taking him for myself?” Ebony Maw asked.

Loki smiled thinly, “And this is why I spoke to you first: The others wouldn’t have asked before killing me. Of course I did talk to them. If you try to use him for your own advancement… Well, your fellow members of the Order Black won’t look kindly on it.”

Ebony Maw returned Loki’s smile with interest, “Oh yes, I see I shall have to give you proper credit when I bring your gift to Thanos. But first, I think, a test to determine this gift’s worth to us.” Hands clasped behind his back, Maw sauntered over to inspect Tony more closely. “So Gift, I wonder, have you considered that Loki turned on us. On those who so kindly rescued him from the void? As he’s turned on you?” Maw frowned, “Your little toys have caused no end of irritation during our conquest of Earth. It’s all futile you know, our final victory over your insignificant little speck was inevitable from the beginning but you’ve raised the casualty figures for the war exponentially through your actions.” He shrugged, “Thanos always appreciates a gloriously high casualty count to present to his Mistress, perhaps we should be thanking you.”

Tony tilted his head back, glaring indiscriminately. ‘Things see to be playing out according to Loki’s script,’ he thought as Maw gestured and the Chitauri grabbed Loki, forcing his arms behind his back and pushing him to his knees. ‘Can I seriously go through with this? There’s got to be another way.’

Maw removed Tony’s gag then tugged at the manacles, frowning when they wouldn’t open for him. “A present for you, Gift,” he said pressing a knife into Tony’s bound hands. “Your betrayer’s fate is yours to decide.”

‘What if Loki’s wrong? What if he doesn’t stop me?’ Tony thought. Then, ‘How many times over the centuries did Loki come up with a plan only to have Thor and his friends disregard it because it didn’t suit their sense of honor or they didn’t trust him enough to back his play?’

He tested the weight of the knife in his hands and started walking towards Loki. ‘Even if Loki’s right and they stop me there’s a better than average chance we’ll never see each other alive again. Will he really understand why I’m going through with this?’

“You know, this is sort of embarrassing, I always have something cool to say,” Tony said as he spun the knife between his hands and lunged forward. Maw caught Tony’s wrists, stopping the thrust with the point of the knife barely a centimeter from Loki’s right eye.

Loki’s expression revealed nothing and Tony refused to let relief take the tension from his body. He
twisted to glare at Maw, “Are you fucking with me?” he snarled. “Kill me, don’t kill me, throw me at
the feet of your maniacal tyrant with a goddamn bow around my neck but don’t fucking play games
with me.”

Ebony Maw looked unimpressed. “I am a direct creature Gift,” he lied. “I wished to know if Loki
was colluding with you or working on his own… It seems the so-called God of Chaos remains
amazingly consistent in his behaviors.”

“Then are we done with the silly little icebreakers now?” Tony demanded.

“Yes, we’re done,” Maw agreed. He gestured towards his ship. As they boarded he glanced back
over his shoulder. “Bring him along,” he said to the Chitauri holding Loki. Then he smiled at Loki,
“Don’t worry, you’ll be credited with securing this gift for Thanos but I’m certain dear Corvus
Glaive would appreciate a gift of his own.”

Loki started struggling against his captures.

“Glaive has mentioned how he’d like to break you more than once, a lengthy process I assure you. If
Lord Thanos is unexpected impressed with you gift, I am sure that there will be enough left of you to
reassemble.” Maw shrugged carelessly, “And if not, it was Glaive’s choice. If our Lord is unhappy it
will be with him.”

As the Chitauri dragged Loki onto the ship something shifted in the dynamic and Loki slipped free of
their hold, one of his former capture’s weapons in his hands. Close quarters fighting against a dozen
Chitauri, each of them a head and a half taller and more massively built and Tony had no doubt that
Loki would be the only one standing in a matter of minutes.

“He is a talented dancer,” Maw remarked as he lowered a blast door behind the battle and drew
Tony back. “Glaive will be by to pick you up at his leisure,” he called to Loki as he dropped a
second blast door to trap Loki and his opponents in an empty stretch of ship’s corridor. As the door
dropped Tony caught one last glimpse of Loki’s terrified eyes.
A Kiss Goodbye

Chapter Notes

Once the conversation between Peter’s team and the Chitauri is past the opening stages I stopped regularly referencing that for everything that is said David translates back and forth. After establishing “David said something in Chitauri, then repeated himself in English.”/“Peter said something in English, David repeated it in Chitauri.” It gets tiresome to read/write instead of just “So-and-So said”, IMO.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Loki shoved Chitauri bodies up against the walls of the hall where he’d been contained and out of the way. He tried several of their weapons, testing their balance, checking the blades. He picked one then propped the others that hadn’t been broken in the skirmish up so they’d be easy to grab.

He’d signed on for a suicide mission, a chance to die and take Thanos with him, not this. He couldn’t trigger the weapon implanted in his body for the Other, for Corvus Glaive, it would give away their plan and endanger Tony’s odds of getting close enough to Thanos to take his shot at the Mad Titan. Besides, Tony had warned him against using it against anyone short of Thanos, claiming dire consequences were likely. When Loki had been pulled from the Void it had been Corvus Glaive who was given the task of breaking him. ‘Failure is not looked upon kindly in Thanos’ service,’ Loki thought to himself. ‘I wonder what punishment the Other suffered for my resilience?’ A vicious snarl crossed Loki’s face, ‘Whatever it was, it was less than he deserved for what I suffered at his hands.’

One of the blast doors started to slide up, Loki saw the Other and his paramour’s feet through the crack and darted forward, sweeping his stave under the door, hoping to slice through Glaive’s Achilles Tendon before the battle properly started. Glaive jumped back and Midnight stamped on the stave, snapping it. Loki shoved the broken end of the spear at her ankle before snatching up a second stave. The door reached waist height and Midnight slipped sinuously under it, proceeded by a bolt from her spear. Loki spun out of the path of the bolt and brought his stave down, aiming for the back of her neck. Midnight leaned back and the stave whistled past her chin to strike the floor. Loki turned the lunge into a body kick, slamming her into the wall then twisted to avoid being impaled on Glaive’s weapon. Glaive spun his weapon, the blade on its butt cut Loki across the chest. As Loki leapt backwards he threw his stave, embedding the blade in Glaive’s gut.

Midnight slid up behind Loki, looping her spear over his head and drawing the haft tight against his throat. Loki dropped to one knee in and attempt to throw her over but she followed him down, keeping pressure on his airways. As Loki’s vision telescoped in he saw Glaive yank the stave from his stomach and toss it carelessly aside. The wound sealed over as Glaive sauntered across the room to crouched in front of Loki, smiling predatorially.

As the sub docked alongside a bony outcropping inside the Chitauri mothership. Iron Man pulled himself out of the water and took up a defensive stance in front of the sub, facing several dozen Chitauri across a space of just a few feet. Harley tried close down his awareness of the slight pulsing of the floor, the mothership’s pulse or respiration. “Air’s breathable guys,” he reported. “They’ve got blast-staves but they aren’t pointing them at me yet.”
“Are their weapons drawn or holstered?” Kate asked.

“Held loosely at waist level,” Harley replied.

The hatch on top of the sub creaked open. Spider-Man and Komodo were the first out, they stood on either side of the hatch while their more vulnerable teammates climbed up the ladder. For a moment the team stood on top of the sub waiting for an attack that didn’t come. Then Spidey constructed a quick web-bridge so they didn’t have to scramble between the sub and the dock.

The lead Chitauri clicked at them and stepped to one side, indicating a passway. “This way,” David translated. Spider-Man nudged Harry toward a flanking position opposite of Komodo before taking point. Iron Man fell back to rearguard, keeping David and Kate protected in the center of the formation. Kate had a quiver full of arrows equipped with the electrical pulse that had proved so effective against the Chitauri over her shoulder and her bow held to mirror how the Chitauri were holding their staves. Several of the Chitauri led the way while the majority followed behind the young Avengers, surrounding them in the narrow, flesh halls. Eventually the tunnel opened out into a chamber, an arched ceiling curved overhead, the supporting bones visible through a thin covering of membrane. At the center of the chamber was a creature, clearly Chitauri but larger than the others, the membrane covering the floor and walls had grown up over the creature’s legs, melding it with the ship.

David stepped up to stand beside Spider-Man. He bowed to the creature, then after speaking to her repeated his words in English, “Lady of @#$#@, I make myself available to translate your words to my people and our words to you. I apologize in advance for any clumsiness in my speech, human tongues are not formed to allow me to speak to you with grace.”

The Chitauri Queen replied and David translated, “I sorrow for the fate of your people. You make what must be harder by coming and asking for our reasons but you have shown yourselves worthy of the grief we incur by recognizing you as higher level beings.”

“I’m not liking the sound of this,” Harley muttered.

The Chitauri Queen continued, “You speak true: We know that Thanos is the enemy of life. But had my mother a hundred generations removed refused to bow to him our people would have long since perished in futile resistance. My daughter a hundred generations to come may see the universe come to an end because of Thanos’ machinations. However, I assure you that we work against that end.”

“How are you working against Thanos? You are his soldiers, the bulk of his army.”

“Thanos’ true believers, those strong enough to survive his inner circle, could slaughter a hive single handedly,” The Queen replied bluntly. “And Thanos is greater than all of them as one. We serve Thanos as we must to survive, we fight with only as much vigor as is required not to draw his wrath down on us.”

The expressions of the young Avengers who’s faces weren’t masked showed skepticism, whether or not the Queen could interpret it was left unknown. “I’m not patting her on the back for being self-serving,” Kate said but David didn’t repeat it.

“As his soldiers we are omnipresent and invisible in his empire,” the Queen continued. “We are the channels that carry messages between those who seek successful rebellion against Thanos. We are the scouts seeking new peoples to add to our underground.”
“You’ve never tried to open dialogue with us, with humanity,” Spidey pointed out.

“We evaluated you, this war,” the Queen replied. “Your people are not insignificant, I ask you to take comfort in this knowledge. You will kill my hive and every other hive sent against you, we accept this loss. I accept that my death will come at your hands. My live, my hive that my species might survive. But your strength added to the rebellion is not sufficient to overthrow Thanos. We will fall. The generals will take the field. I know not how many of them you might defeat but we have evaluated you: The Earth will fall, if not to them then to Thanos himself who comes after them.”

“But if you worked with us!” Harley protested.

The Queen bowed her head slightly. “We would lose together. If your people were positioned elsewhere we would have extended our hand to you, advised you to submit and join us in our waiting. But for your location you are most valuable as enemies. Thanos has committed himself to your destruction and will throw his forces at you until you are crushed. It will take generations for Thanos to recoup the strength spent in winning this war. Your sacrifice gives us hundreds of years to find a people strong enough to defeat Thanos. But we have analyzed your capabilities, calculated the odds: You are not that people. Your species sacrificed that the universe might survive.

“I should kill you now, to keep this secret secure,” the Queen finished. “But I will give in to sediment. You will remain my guests here, until your people kill us both.”

“We’ve got a small problem,” Hank announced as he studied the rocky planetoid and the large ship parked beside it on his sensors. “Two arc reactor signals. One from the ship, one from the planet.”

“Tony gave goddamned-Loki Arc Reactor based tech didn’t he,” Rhodes swore.

“Aye,” Thor said.

“We’re going to have check them both, split up,” Rhodes sighed.

Thor walked over to the screen. He let his eyes fall closed, “Norns guide me,” he murmured then opened his eyes. “I will go to the ship.”

“The planet,” Rhodes and Rogers declared in unison.

Bruce hesitated.

“I’ll coordinate from our ship and provide back-up where needed,” Hank said.

“Rogers and I have air and ground, you’ve had Thor’s back for years,” Rhodes told Bruce.

“Are we really going to wait for Tony to make his assassination attempt?” Steve asked worriedly.

Rhodes’ answering grin was tight and joyless, “How the fuck can I tell if he’s made the attempt or not from out here?” he asked.

Suddenly the ship lurched. “You were asking?” Hank said flatly. “That was a massive energy surge, most likely whatever weapon Stark built being triggered.”

“From the ship or the planetoid?” Steve demanded.

Hank gave his sensors a disgusted look, “We’re standing in the middle of a star and you ask where the energy is coming from? All the sensors say off the charts, in every direction.”
Let’s move,” Rhodes said. “No point of going in quiet now.”

Thanos’ throne room was less room than a rocky, lifeless stretch of land, small enough that the curvature of the planetoid was visible in all directions. Thanos floated above the surface like a god, seated on a mountain equipped with hovertech. For a moment Tony hesitated, certain he would be stepping out of the ship into the vacuum of space. Then he raised his chin and followed after Ebony Maw before Thanos’ flunky had an excuse to tug at the leash tied around Tony’s manacles.

They walked for nearly twenty minutes before they were standing at Thanos’ feet. Tony craned his neck back to examine Thanos more carefully, “I was expecting someone less… Disarmed,” he said, knowing it was probably stupid given the rawness of the stump that remained of Thanos’ right arm

Thanos floated above the surface like a god, seated on a mountain equipped with hovertech. For a moment Tony hesitated, certain he would be stepping out of the ship into the vacuum of space. Then he raised his chin and followed after Ebony Maw before Thanos’ flunky had an excuse to tug at the leash tied around Tony’s manacles.

They walked for nearly twenty minutes before they were standing at Thanos’ feet. Tony craned his neck back to examine Thanos more carefully, “I was expecting someone less… Disarmed,” he said, knowing it was probably stupid given the rawness of the stump that remained of Thanos’ right arm

Tony bit back his reaction to the sight of the Mind Stone, ripped from Vision’s forehead, set in central position on the gauntlet. He could only hope that his gift to Vision his hail mary pass, had been enough to save the Synthiod. The blue Space Stone and orange Soul Stone sat above it while the other three positions remained empty. “Merchant of Death, so you are what my Lady has been reduced to calling hers,” Thanos rumbled, looking down at Tony like he was less than an ant crawling across the floor of his throne room.

Tony bit back his reaction to the sight of the Mind Stone and started toward Thanos’ throne, a distinct swagger in his step despite the binders around his forearms. “For some, completely unknown, reason she thought I’d make a good relationship counselor. I mean, that’s what this is all about isn’t? For most people ‘destroy all life in the universe’ would be an end goal, but not you. For you it’s just a stepping stone isn’t it? The end game is her, everything you’ve ever done, it’s always been for her.”

Thanos lowered his head minutely, a spark of interest entered his eyes as he re-examined Tony.

“I get it,” Tony continued. “There are times when I’d have killed just for that voice in my ear, for someone telling you you’ve done well, that they’re proud of you… But sometimes that not enough is it? Sometimes you need something… Less cerebral. Sometimes you just need to be able to reach out and touch them… But she can’t, can she? Can’t directly affect this realm? This plane of existence at all. Wouldn’t need Acolytes like you and me to do her dirty work if she could, now would she?”

“I will bring all that is into My Lady Death’s domain,” Thanos declared.

“And the light only got brighter. Tony kept walking toward Thanos’ throne. When he started he barely stood as tall as Thanos’ knee but the light swallowed him, grew and stretched thin as he, it stalked toward Thanos. From within the light Tony felt himself becoming a passenger in a body that was no longer his.

He saw something in the air around Thanos and the wrongness of it grated on his senses nails on chalkboard, like the heavy scent of flowers at a funeral to cover the smell of the corpse… Although Tony knew that the being who rode him wasn’t disturbed by the smell of decay, only the self-deception implied by the effort to hide it.
He looked across the vanishing distance between himself and Thanos and realized he could look
Thanos in the eye without looking up now. “My once greatest Acolyte,” Tony felt himself say but
the voice that rang in his ears was Death’s, full of the baying of hounds and tolling bells.

“Mistress!” Thanos exclaimed, leaping to his feet only to immediately fall to his knees.

“Stand! Acolyte who would imagine himself my equal,” Death commanded stretching out a
skeletally thin hand. And Tony wanted to be disturbed by seeing the hand at the end of his arm as a
distinctly feminine one, but it didn’t even come close to making the list of disturbing things. Top on
the list was the something around Thanos, Tony’s mind rebelled at the notion of making sense of it
but he couldn’t look away.

“Never your equal My Lady,” Thanos deferred, lowering himself further. “Your most devoted
servant only. Your worshipful suppliant.” He took a deep breath, pressing his palms to the floor he
looked up at Mistress Death, “Your inamorato, if you would allow it.”

“Once, that place would have been yours for the claiming,” Death said and Tony felt her frown
down at Thanos. “But you feared. You sent billions to me instead of coming yourself.”

Something snapped in Tony’s mind and the thing he sensed around Thanos formed into an infinity
sign floating above his head.

“All for your honor my Lady,” Thanos pled.

“For your fear,” Death corrected sharply. “Stand!”

Thanos, the Mad Titan, rumored to be the most powerful being in the universe, stood before Death,
trembling.

“I mourn what your fear prevented from coming to pass,” she said as she took one last step forward
and pulled Thanos to her, bending him back as she pressed her lips to his.

Tony tried to black out the feel of Thanos’ mouth, of the breath being stolen from it. Of Thanos’
hands clinging and then scrabbling. Of his heart, pounding then nothing. Death let the empty shell
fall to the floor. For a moment the Infinity symbol remained above Thanos, broken and lusterless
then it faded, his body nothing more in Death’s eyes than the rocks he lay on.

“You were not meant to host so much of me Tony Stark, my Merchant,” Death murmured as Tony
felt her retreating, allowing him to fold back into his skin. “You will not go unchanged. Remember it
is you who chooses whether to embrace or spurn what you have become.” She glanced toward
Thanos’ body and Tony had no choice but to follow her gaze. “Remember what the fear of me made
of your predecessor. All things come to me in due time…

“Even those like your companion, who may seen nie immortal to one such as you,” Tony heard a
warning in Death’s tone. “He is very close to me now.”

“Are you warning me to prepare myself? Or giving me a chance to save him?” Tony demanded
bluntly. He felt Death smile the moment before her presence disappeared and chose to take that as
the answer he wanted.

Tony opened his eyes to see Ebony Maw smiling broadly as he slid on the Infinity Gauntlet that had
fallen from Thanos’ hand.
I might go back and add a side story covering Nebula vs Thanos. Obviously, she lost but did she or any of her teammates survive? Did the Guardians get there in time to join the battle? Right now I’ve got too much momentum on the main story to divert.
A light slap brought Loki back to consciousness. “It’s not effective if you’re not awake,” Glaive commented and Loki realized his arms were bound behind his back.

“Nor half as amusing,” Midnight added dryly. “Shall we make wagers on how long he keeps up his facade?”

“I remember last time,” Glaive replied as he manhandled Loki off the floor, lifting him upright. “He hates the sight of his true face. I say he’ll cling to the illusion of being Asgardian until Mistress Death’s cold fingers are around his heart.”

“Perhaps,” Midnight replied casually, “But for the sake of making it interesting I wager four inches of the blade before his illusion crumples.”

For a moment Loki wondered what she was talking about. Then he saw Glaive’s weapon braced at a sixty degree angle, the blade glistening with a viscous black sheen and he wished he didn’t understand. Glaive lifted Loki off his feet, as he lowered him the blade sank into Loki’s side. Loki screamed as the coating on the blade mixed with his blood, Glaive held him steady, so Loki didn’t immediately tear himself to shreds, until the initial shock of it was passed.

“Tear yourself off it and I’ll just put you back,” Glaive stated uncaringly then went and sat down. Midnight swiveled around to put her legs over Glaive’s lap as she watched Loki with rapt attention, as if seeing him struggle not to move, not to fall, not to impale himself further, was a particularly fascinating show for her enjoyment.

Loki snarled at them. He thought about triggering the device in his chest but Tony had cautioned him not to use it against anyone but Thanos. He thought about throwing himself to his knees and hoping the glaive would kill him before they could do anything but that would leave Tony alone with Thanos and Loki couldn’t do that.

A shockwave shook the ship and almost took the choice from Loki. He groaned as the blade sank deeper into his side. Then Midnight was there, steadying him, “No need to hurry,” she said. Her fingers carded through Loki’s hair in a mockery of comfort, “Just think: Maybe someone will come to save you.”

Loki shuddered, her words burrowed into his brain. He wanted Tony’s plan to work, for Tony to kill Thanos, survive and come for him. He felt tears well up in his eyes only to freeze as they trickled down his cheeks at the realization: He wanted to live, he wanted to be rescued. But the poison coated blade sliding deeper and deeper into his body made his blood burn. Instead of freezing it felt like lava soaking the leg of his armor. He could feel the poison spreading through his veins, feel his blood boiling with it. Loki wondered what would happen when it reached the ice patching the large vein directly below his heart or the ice sealing the severed arteries in his neck.
No longer concerned with stealth, Hank sent the rescue team’s ship careening towards the planetoid and still no one waited for the ship to land. Steve was the first to leap out of the door. “Fucking idiot! You don’t fly!” Rhodes shouted a half second behind him. “Doctor?” Thor asked, offering Bruce his arm and the pair of them made the leap. “Luck, all of you,” Hank muttered as he flipped the switch to close the door.

Steve hit the ground shield first. He used it to absorb his momentum, rolled to his feet and started running toward the sound of battle. Rhodes blasted after him overhead.

Thor landed just outside of the other ship and set Bruce on his feet. Then, with a roar, he brought his hammer down on the door, the metal shattered. He charged into the twisting corridors, holding himself back only just enough to let Bruce keep pace.

Ebony Maw flexed his fingers in the Gauntlet, the three Infinity Stones glowed fiercely in response. “I really must thank Loki for the gift he allowed to fall into my hands,” he murmured. “Perhaps after I’ve gotten rid of Glaive and Midnight I’ll grant him a quick death.”

Tony frowned at the number floating over Maw’s head, it fluctuated up and down with the pulsing of the Infinity Stones but while the total value changed randomly seconds were steadily being counted off. Tony wondered what would happen when the countdown reached zero; Tony knew what would happen when the last digit ticked away.

“Revel in your accomplishment Gift,” Maw told Tony as he raised the Gauntlet. “I only wish to rule the universe, not end it.”

As his armor unfolded around him Tony dove out of the path of the beam of pale, almost white, power Maw fired at him. The beam flared yellow and sputtered. Wishing for his helmet, Tony shot several repulsor blasts at Maw only to see them deflect off a shield thrown up by the Gauntlet.

Thor burst through yet another door and saw his little brother, hanging more dead than alive, only upright because of the blade entering his body just above his right hip, the point of the blade beginning to emerge from just below his left shoulder blade. There were no words, Thor’s eyes glowed as he channeled a massive lightning bolt to strike his little brother’s tormentors.

Glaive and Midnight were sent flying like bowling pins from the unexpected attack. While Thor pressed his advantage Bruce went to Loki. “Probably barbed,” Bruce muttered to himself. “I try to pull him off it and that’ll be all she wrote. Push it through, not much better. Can’t move him without…” he hit his comm. “Pym, I need something shrunk.”

“I’ll just follow the trail of destruction,” Hank replied. “Should lead me right to you.”

“Hurry,” Bruce said eyeing the discolored blood running down the haft of the glaive. Loki’s eyes were glazed, sweat beaded on his skin but when Bruce pressed fingers to his throat to check Loki’s pulse, slow and faltering, his skin was only room temperature. “Shouldn’t waste a Healing Stone now, but you’re not going to make it long enough to get that thing out first,” he said as he extracted one of the Asgardian artifacts that Odin had supplied them with for the mission.

Thor still wasn’t saying a word as he alternated between throwing lightning and Mjolnir itself at Midnight and Glaive. But despite Thor’s righteous fury Glaive and Midnight were quickly collecting themselves. Shielding himself with an arm Glaive slowly stood, pushing back the onslaught of lightning. Midnight dodged a blow from Thor’s hammer then forced him to leap backwards to evade her spear. Midnight’s style of fighting, quick and fluid, reminded Thor of Loki’s.
Bruce sprinkled some of the powered healing stone on Loki’s side where the glaive entered his body. Loki gasped as his flesh closed around the haft of the weapon. Bruce tried to hold Loki steady to keep the glaive from tearing him up as he writhed. Holding Loki tight against him, Bruce grabbed the haft of the glaive. He tried and failed to pull it free of the floor so that he could lay Loki flat to prevent to weapon from sinking even deeper into his body.

Thor switched his tactics, blasting Midnight back with his lightning then throwing Mjolnir at Glaive. Glaive sidestepped the hammer and lunged at Thor bare-handed. Midnight recovered and attacked Thor as well. He grabbed Glaive with a roar and threw him into Midnight then raised his hand. Mjolnir’s handle smacked into Thor’s palm as Loki’s torturers stood. Thor swung, Glaive swept Midnight aside and the blow crushed Glaive’s chest.

Hank, in the Ant-Man gear for the first time in decades, arrived. “Shrink this damn thing,” Bruce ordered tersely. “I can’t pull him off it without killing him in the process. If I don’t it’ll just kill him more slowly. We can't let it get stuck inside him, I think it’s poisoned.”

Thor kicked the injured Glaive aside and went after Midnight. The pair danced back and forth, Midnight blocking Thor’s hammer with her spear and dodging his lightning, never quite able to take the offensive away from the furious Thunderer. Behind Thor, Glaive’s caved-in ribs popped back into place.

Hank attached one of his disks to the glaive. “All we can do is hope it loses girth at least as fast as length,” he said.

Thor saw Glaive rise out of the corner of his eye and his surprise was all the opening Midnight needed. She threw her spear, Thor pivoted, only taking a glazing wound, but black threads spun out of the spear, ensnaring him. Thor struggled to remain on his feet as the net weighed him down.

Bruce shoved the remains of the healing stone into Hank’s hand, “Sprinkle it into the wound once the glaive’s out,” he said hurriedly. His eyes were already venomous green and his voice deepening even as he turned away. “Then get the hell out of here.”

The Hulk grabbed Glaive by the back of the neck and planted him into the floor then leapt at Midnight forcing her away from Thor and her spear. Midnight managed to evade the Hulk’s fists for several seconds, long enough for Glaive to extract himself from the deck-plating.

Loki’s mouth fell open in a soundless scream as the glaive shrunk to the size of a toothpick and pulled free of his body, releasing a gush of blood mixed with an oily black substance. Hank quickly dusted the wound with the remains of the healing stone and the wound closed over but Loki’s color remained sickly-pale, his eyes glazed. Hank pulled Loki’s arm over his shoulders, half dragging him back toward the ship.

The Hulk backhanded Glaive with an angry roar. Midnight lunged for her spear but Thor tangled his fingers in the net pinning him. With teeth gritted against the spear’s drain on his strength, Thor refused to allow her to reclaim it. Midnight gave up her weapon. She and Glaive combined their efforts, driving Hulk back with a flurry of blows.

More than once Glaive took a blow that should have incapacitated or killed him, only to be back on his feet a moment later. Thor tore helplessly at the net that held him down. Then the Hulk stepped on the shrunken glaive. “Ouch!” the behemoth exclaimed. He picked the toothpick sized weapon out of his heel. “Puny stick hurt Hulk!” he snarled and snapped the blade like a twig. Hulk swayed from the poison on the blade but Glaive dropped like an unstrung puppet as his weapon shattered between Hulk’s huge fingers.
Midnight stared at her husband in disbelief. Hulk staggered over to Thor and ripped the net away before collapsing, shrinking back into Bruce Banner. Remembering the scene he’d walked into, Loki being slowly tortured to death for the couple’s amusement, Thor threw his hammer at the grief-stricken woman, crushing her skull.

As Midnight fell across Glaive’s body Thor levered Bruce back to his feet. “Come. Despite this victory we are not yet finished,” Thor rumbled. “Friend-Tony must still be rescued.”

Thanos’ planetoid had only a thin skin of atmosphere, acting as a ceiling and forcing War Machine low to the ground. Steve raced ahead of him, dodging between boulders, following the sounds of battle. He rounded a corner and froze. Tony was there, alive and fighting, wearing a helmet-less armor suit that was less sleekly robotic and more knight of old, although still in shades of crimson and gold. His hair was longer than Steve had ever seen it and gave away were Nettie had inherited her curls from. Steve’s breath caught in wonder, for a moment all he could do was soak in the sight of Tony alive and looking healthier than Steve could ever remember seeing him.

Tony’s opponent was a thin, hunched man with stark white hair and pale, bluish-purple skin. On one hand he wore a golden gauntlet adorned with three Infinity Stones: The Tesseract, the Mind Stone and the Soul Stone. Steve felt a flash of grief for Frank Payne, Nebula, Sif and Vali, he had no doubt that the only way the Soul Stone would have left their guardianship had been over their dead bodies. To Steve’s eyes there was something unbalanced in the energy flowing around the gauntlet as it flared first one color then another but the blasts it produced were taking chunks out of the landscape. Tony returned the blasts with repulsor fire as he flung himself from one tactic to the next with no rhyme or reason that Steve could discern.

Then a blast sent up a shower of rocky debris, too close to Tony. He threw up his arms to shield his unprotected head. Steve saw Maw taking aim and time seemed to stop. He was across the battlefield in a flash, throwing himself bodily over Tony. In the weird, stretched moment, for once Steve felt like he could follow Tony’s lightning flash thoughts. He saw shock on Tony’s face at the unexpected interruption in his fight followed almost instantaneously by recognition. Tony jerk back in reflexive fear then his eyes flickered to a point just over Steve’s head for some reason. Then Tony was grabbing him, spinning them around even as he pushed his arm beneath Steve’s pushing the shield up to protect their heads. “I don’t need the guilt,” Tony hissed as the blast washed over them. Steve saw the arc reactor enhancing his shield flare blindingly bright then crack. Several smaller arc reactors set into Tony’s armor also cracked but the primary one, over his heart, held fast.

The moment the backwash cleared, Steve and Tony rolled apart, coming to their feet far enough from each other that Maw would have to pick a target. He went for Tony, Steve threw his shield as Tony spiraled away from his attack. An undirected burst of power from the gauntlet knocked the shield away. Steve caught it on the rebound. Tony fired a brace of missiles at Maw and again the gauntlet protected him.

Maw glared at them with hate in his eyes. Steve just knew that if they gave him time he’d master gauntlet but for now it was fighting him, fighting itself. Too much power, too little unity. Then Rhodes arrived, Maw pointed the gauntlet at him and a burst of golden power knocked Maw’s arm off target. Steve raised his shield and braced himself as Tony fired the unibeam.

Maw sneered as the massive blast of energy just missed him. He fired at Tony just as Steve deflected the unibeam into Maw’s back, knocking him to his knees but Maw’s shot was already fired. Tony covered his head with his arms as Rhodes dove to intercept the blast. The Mind Stone’s setting cracked, splitting the gauntlet itself and the energy from the three stones consumed Maw.

Locked together, Rhodes and Tony fell. Steve watched helplessly. Then a secondary power system
in War Machine came online and Rhodey took control of their descent. Tony hung on tightly, from the ground Steve could hear them both laughing hysterically. When they touched down safely, neither Rhodey nor Tony showed any inclination to let go of the other.

Steve went to check on the melted puddle that was all that remained of Maw and the Infinity Gauntlet, letting the two friends have their moment uninterrupted.

“I told you: No more funvees,” Rhodey said, laughing and crying.

Tony sobered, “You were still in surgery, I’d just heard-“

“Yeah,” Rhodey said. “Remember that bullshit line you fed the Senate Committee? About Iron Man being a prosthetic? You’ve got to see the legs Harley and Peter built me, you’re going to be so proud.”

The three Infinity Stones glowed brightly from the muck, unscathed by the destruction of the gauntlet. Thor and Bruce Banner arrived a few moments later, leaning heavily on one another.

“Fight’s done,” Tony announced upon seeing them, still leaning up against Rhodes’ side.

“Lucky for you,” Rhodes added taking in their battered state.

Thor nodded grimly, “We must hurry,” he said. “Loki is gravely injured. But first the Stones must be dealt with.” He glanced at the three loose Stones. “Without containment it will not be easy.”

“What part was of ‘I built you all shit to neutralize the direct effect of an Infinity Stone’ is hard to understand?” Tony demanded roughly. He stepped forward and plucked the Mind Stone out of Ebony Maw’s remains then glanced over his shoulder, “Move! Loki’s waiting and I don’t trust my gear to handle more than one Stone. I told him I was going to get us both home.”

Chapter End Notes

Happy New Year!!
“Banner, move your ass!” Hank exclaimed the moment they appeared on gangplank. “Two new bleeds just started, middle of the chest and a matching spot on the back, no apparent reason. You’re closer to a doctor than I am.”

Hank hurried to pressed himself up against the ship’s bulkhead before Tony and Thor could run him down in their rush to get inside the ship. They found Loki lying on several boxes shoved together toward the back of the ship’s command deck. He was sweating heavily, blood was pooling beneath him and soaking through his leather armor’s chest plate.

Tony stowed the Mind Stone in a compartment under his gauntlet as his armor retracted into its resting state. “Stop wasting your strength on an illusion,” he ordered sternly as he loosened Loki’s armor after running a quick hand through his hair reassuringly. “Besides Brucey-Bear’s going to need to see it to fix it.”

Thor stumbled a bit when Loki’s seeming fell, revealing Jotunn blue skin and a network of white scars. Tony pulled away the front of Loki’s armor revealing that the wound he’d taken on Svartalfheim had thawed and was bleeding again. It left the arc reactor that had been fitted into the existing wound floating in a pool of melting ice and blood, held in place only by the cables that extended into Loki’s body. “Your heart’s melting Kay,” Tony said sadly.

“Your heart’s melting Kay,” Tony said sadly.

“Your heart’s melting Kay,” Tony said sadly.

“Your heart’s melting Kay,” Tony said sadly.

“It hurts,” Loki said grabbing Tony’s hand tightly.

Recovering himself, Thor moved to Loki’s other side and knelt beside him. He frowned at Tony when he saw the arc reactor in Loki’s chest but only said, “Dr. Banner will help you, just hold on brother.”

Bruce started packing bandages around the arc reactor, trying to stem the bleeding. “Help me get him up. It goes clean through,” he ordered. Tony and Thor propped Loki up between them while Bruce finished wrapping his chest. Bruce checked Loki’s pulse, eyes and breathing. “There was poison on the blade, I don’t think the healing stone helped it,” he said. “I’ve done what I can to slow the bleeding but—” He glanced at patch of ice sealing the wounds on Loki’s throat. “If his body’s healing doesn’t kick in he won’t last the night, less if the other wounds reopen.”

“Loki, brother,” Thor pled. “Hrekja eitr. Remember the first spell Mother taught you? She even made me learn that much.”

Loki blinked at Thor in confusion.

“You must have shown me how to do it a thousand times.” Thor chafed Loki’s hand, tears welling up in his eyes. “I need you to show me it again. Hrekja eitr, please Loki.”

Loki looked around him, for a moment his eyes focused on Tony. “Why don’t you listen to your big brother Tom Sawyer. You’ve scared us enough already. We beat Thanos and destroyed the gauntlet, no one will ever even hope to assemble the Infinity Stones again. We won! It’s time to go home.”

Loki’s gaze slipped past Tony and settled on Rhodes. “Your friends came for you.” He smiled as his eyes slid closed. “I’d rather leave than be left behind again.”
Tony glanced at the spot above Loki’s head then grabbed his face and forcibly turned him, leaning down until their foreheads brushed. “Loki! You fucking listen to me!” he demanded. “Are you listening? I CAN BE FRIENDS TO MORE THAN ONE PERSON!” Forgotten in the background, Steve flinched. “Loki! Do not give up on me, you bastard!” Tony growled.

“Please brother,” Thor added. “Hrekja eitr, Mother made us practice until we could do it in our sleep, you were always her best students. Show me what she taught us, please Loki. I’m not strong enough to do it for you, you know that.”

The arc reactor and attached cables in Loki’s chest began to pulse. “Fuck,” Tony said quietly. “This might not be good.”

Thor ignored Tony. “Hrekja eitr. Hrekja eitr,” he repeated over and over again. A faint, electric blue, nimbus formed around his eyes and his hands, clasped around Loki’s. “Please brother, I need your magic.”

Tony’s eyes flickered between Thor and Loki, the falling number over Loki’s head that only he could see and the pulsating arc reactor. “Loptr! Do what your brother says,” Tony ordered, letting his voice fall into the parental cadence he’d adopted when he had believed ‘Loptr’ to be the child he appeared.

“Merchant,” Tony flinched at the sound of Death’s voice whispering into his mind. “He was given into my keeping within days of his birth. Stolen before he could be claimed but still mine. When he turned the Bifrost on his people he made himself mine again.”

“Please,” Tony whispered. “He’s barely more than a kid by his people’s lights.”

“You are my Merchant,” Death replied. “You have done me a service. If you wish it, if you are willing, if he is willing, I could place him into your keeping.”

“Yes!” Tony agreed quickly as Loki murmured, “Hrekja eitr,” in sync with Thor. The verdant green of Loki’s magic mixed with, then overwhelmed Thor’s nascent abilities. The arc reactor pulsed brightly.

“Get down!” Steve shouted. Thor and Tony hit the floor on either side of the boxes where Loki lay. Rhodes grabbed Bruce and spun him around so that War Machine shielded both of them. Steve ducked behind his shield, pulling Hank under it as well.

Loki screamed. Viscous black poison, expelled from his pores splattered the walls, etching the bulkheads as it dripped down them. Loki’s arc reactor and the attached cables were also blasted from his body.

Hesitantly, lead by Tony and Thor, the Avengers came out of their duck and cover and stared. The dying Loki had become an unconscious Jotunn child with no obvious injuries. Tony looked for the numbers over the child-Loki’s head. He breathed a sigh of relief at seeing a value high enough that it took him a moment to convert it to years. Then he frowned, he glanced towards Thor then back at to Loki. Loki’s clock was counting down at much too high of a speed, Tony recalculated a few times. “Am I off base thinking he looks healthy?” he prompted Bruce.

Dr. Banner reached out to check the boy’s vitals, then nodded, shaking out chilled fingers after he finished. “For what little I know about his species,” he said.

“In that case, I’m thinking we get out of here before we get caught in the power vacuum we just created…” Tony gestured to the poison splattered walls, “And maybe clean that up before it eats a
Rhodes raised a hand, “Am I the only one curious about why Loki just turned into a baby Avatar?”

“Platypus, Avatars were the human interfaces, you mean Na’vi,” Tony deflected.

“I stand corrected,” Rhodey said, unimpressed.

“He looks Jotunn,” Tony said giving Thor a challenging look. “What he would look like if being himself hadn’t been a major obstacle to his survival since birth. The kid thing?” Tony shrugged. “He’s spent a lot of time, um, basically pretending to be his own bastard son for the last four years, I’m pretty used to seeing him that age.”

“But why is he that age now?” Rhodey pressed.

“He’s not bleeding out, so leave it alone!” Tony snapped and Rhodes held up his hands in surrender.

Loki woke up. He looked around himself, his gaze catching on Thor and on Tony, in steadily deepening confusion. And then he looked down at himself, at his blue skin and paler clan markings. He took a panicky gasp of air then another and another.

“Loki, it’s okay,” Tony assured him moving forward to comfort the horrified child.

“Don’t! A Frost Giant’s touch burns cold!” Thor exclaimed only to be interrupted by the whir of Tony’s gauntlet activating. Loki cringed away from Thor, his eyes fixed on Mjolnir.

“Shut up,” Tony growled, stopping just short of powering up the repulsor. He glanced back at Loki, “And give me your cape. It’s a defensive reaction and he’s way too scared to control it now.”

“Brother, I didn’t- I’d never-” Thor stammered guiltily as Tony wrapped the cloak around Loki’s bare shoulders and scooped the boy up in his arms, carrying him toward the first door his saw. “I merely did not wish it see Friend-Tony harmed.”

Tony didn’t glance back and Loki only buried his face in Tony’s shoulder. Through the door Tony found what seemed to be a cargo hold converted to a conference room. He picked a corner and sat down with Loki in his lap. “You’re okay,” he said. “You’re Loki Odinson, Second Prince of Asgard. The same person you always were. Come on, slow deep breaths, like this.” Tony demonstrated moving Loki’s hand to the center of his chest to let him feel the rise and fall of his rib cage. “Just like that. You’re Loki of Asgard, Frigga’s son and her best student, am I right?” He kept repeating that and similar reassurances until Loki’s breathing calmed.

“How can you touch me? I’m a monster, a Frost Giant.” Loki buried his face against Tony’s shoulder so he didn’t have to see his own skin.

“Surprise, you’re adopted,” Tony said irrelevantly. “Okay, this is messed up but who you are hasn’t changed, I promise. Your mom and Odin knew when they took you in. They knew. And they raised you as their son’s brother. You shared a nursery with Thor didn’t you? Does that sound like they thought you were a monster? You are Loki of Asgard, that has not changed.”

“How can it not?” Loki asked. “I’m a Frost Giant.”

“Jotunn,” Tony corrected. He sighed, “You were always Jotunn but your magic changed you into an Asir. Probably because Odin found you as a baby and your survival instincts said your odds of being taken care of were better if you looked like him.”
“But Frost- Jotunn are monsters,” Loki argued.

Tony let Thor’s cape slip off Loki’s shoulders and grabbed his bare arms, firmly holding him just far enough away that Loki couldn’t not meet his eyes. “Loki, I know you’re smart enough to get this,” he stated. “There was a war between Jotunheim and Asgard. Everything you know about Jotunheim is what you’ve been told by people who faced them across a battlefield. If you’d grown up on Jotunheim you’d have grown up to stories of how monsterous the Asir were; you wouldn’t even recognize the Asir you grew up among from those stories. You are Loki, born of Jotunheim, raised of Asgard. I don’t know a fucking thing about Jotun culture, but you are the same person you always were, Loki Odinson, of Asgard.”

“You’re supposed to call me Loptr?” Loki asked in a shaky voice. “And- and Thor was old! And I- I remember an old me, but not me.”

“But we’re good on Jotun DOES NOT equal monster right?” Tony asked hopefully.

Several hours later there was a knock on the door. Tony grimaced, “If it’s Rogers, he can shove it where the sun doesn’t shine,” he muttered. “Loptr, you going to be okay if I see what this is about? I promise I’ll be right outside the door if you need me.”

Loki nodded, he pulled Thor’s cape around him like a blanket.

“It better be import-” Tony cut himself off as the door opened to reveal Rhodey. Tony shut the door behind him then leaned against it. “Sorry for biting your head off,” he said.

“It’s fine,” Rhodes said. He glanced at the door Tony trying to look casual about guarding. “It’s just… Are you okay?”

Tony gave his best friend a twisted grin, “Let’s see: Gods, as in anthropomorphic personifications of fundamental Universal forces and not goddamned Space Vikings, are real. I performed a service for one and now I’ve got a kid-Loki who just found out that he’s the Asir boogeyman, which, okay I’ve got some experience there. Been dealing with getting the almost-adult version over the same freakout for a while now. On top of that I’ve still got to figure out how to tell both him and Thor that he’s probably going to live around a hundred years instead of five thousand… Did I mention the part where now I can apparently see everyone’s life ticking away?”

Rhodes’ mouth fell open, he just shook his head.

“You’ve been averaging in your upper 80’s by the way,” Tony remarked, his gaze focusing on an empty point slightly above Rhodes’ head. “Nice and reassuring, that. But it’s not like the Fates measuring out a thread and cutting it. More an ongoing calculation of a butterfly effect. A constantly fluctuating number. Just standing here talking your number’s varying by a couple of months. Rogers went down to seconds when the moron dove in front of me back there.

Took me awhile to figure out the units but Ebony Maw’s number dropped to five years max the moment he put on the gauntlet.” Tony tapped the compartment where he’d secreted the Mind Stone. “Less every time the Mind Stone, Vision, got the upper hand against the other stones. We wouldn’t have had it that easy except one of the three Stones Thanos got his hands on was on our side.” He glared at Rhodey, “I don’t give a damn how you secure the other two Stones but the Mind Stone is going back where it belongs. It’s part Vision’s being and he’s part of it. It goes back to him. Period. No debate.”

“When you keep looking over people? You’re seriously seeing how long they’re going to live?” Rhodes choked out.
“I haven’t looked in a mirror yet. Sort of thinking about having FRIDAY project a hologram the next time I need to shave or something,” Tony admitted. Then he hesitated. “What I did with Maw? I never want to fight like that again. I was picking my tactics by based on how much they shortened his lifespan. Looking, specifically, for the means to bring it to nothing. Stane, Vanko… I’ve killed people before, fought to the death to stop them. It’s different: Them dying because I had to stop them versus me trying to figure out how to kill them so they’re stopped.” He shook his head. “I don’t want to do that again.”

“What about Killian?” Rhodey found himself asking.

“I thought he killed Pepper. Him, I wanted fucking dead,” Tony stated flatly. “I was thinking about, um, not mentioning it, my nifty new ability. We all know how well that works out, but… I think this falls into the ‘things man is not meant to know’ category, even if it doesn’t matter. Live the healthy life, step out into traffic and your number could be up. It’s not fixed, I’m not seeing your fated death, just the sum of your choices up until this moment. Only Loki’s clock is running fast. How can I not tell him, or Thor, that: Yay! Thanks to capital ‘D’ Death, he’s not going to die in the next couple of hours but he’s got a fiftieth of the lifespan he’s supposed to? I- A human lifespan doesn’t sound bad to me or you but- He’s not eight Rhodey, even though he looks it and basically acts it, he’s over four hundred.”

“Are you sure?” Rhodes asked, feeling like he was clutching at straws, searching for the conversation he’d meant to have. “You said he pretended to be a kid around you before. Could he be pretending that he only has his childhood memories now?”

Tony’s chin came up and his eyes went hard.

Rhodes mentally hit himself in the head. “Tones, please. You’ve been his prisoner for four years, you know I have to wonder about Stockholm Syndrome.”

“Yeah.”

“Yeah, you know or…” Rhodes asked.

“Yeah, I probably have it. I don’t know,” Tony slid down the door until he was sitting on the floor staring up at Rhodes. “Even factoring in the possibility of me having Stockholm Syndrome, I really believe that being Loki’s prisoner wasn’t half the mind-screw that being an Avenger was. Loki didn’t make me feel like I was scum next to him. I mean, you don’t think I’m some sort of war criminal for manufacturing weapons right?”

Rhodes shook his head, “Tony, I was the guy firing those weapons, the liaison between the military and SI, telling you what we needed and buying them. You weren’t the one selling missiles on the black market, Pepper and I were just as taken in by Stane as you were.”

“Back when we were getting ready for Thanos Loki would argue that it wasn’t immoral that I made weapons,” Tony said. “But he’s Loki Silvertongue, god of mischief and lies, not to mention that he wanted me to make more to fight someone who terrified him. The team- Wanda came along and it was like they all agreed that I was personally responsible for killing her parents. Like I needed to own every single death caused by an SI weapon, like it didn’t matter if it was Obie going behind my back or the US military. So was it Stockholm? To feel like I was safe because he liked me, needed me? I could never figure out how to get my team to like me, no matter how indispensable I tried to make myself.”

“Hell,” Rhodes said quietly, wrapping an arm around Tony’s shoulders.
“And it doesn’t matter,” Tony continued. “Loki doesn’t have the power anymore. He’s a kid. A kid I’ve been entrusted with. He’s not faking. He just got it dumped on him that his parents aren’t his parents and by the way he’s not even the species he thought he was, he’s actually one of their mortal enemies or something. He was raised to loathe the Jotunn and that’s not Loki screwing with me to make me sympathetic. Thor confirmed it when it took him about five seconds, after seeing his brother in Loki’s natural form, to use a racial slur. I know it doesn’t change the fucked up stuff Loki did but he’s got a second chance, a too short second chance but still… There is no way in hell that I’m sending him back to the same guy who did nothing but lie to him and use him the first time around.”

“We talking about Loki and Odin or you and Rogers?” Rhodey asked.

“I don’t have the time or energy to deal with Rogers,” Tony said flatly. “I have to figure out how to tell Pepper we’re adopting when I never got around to asking her to marry me and we didn’t plan our first kid. God, I haven’t even met my first not-robotic kid!”

“Shit! I need to tell you about Nettie!” Rhodes exclaimed. “How do you know about Nettie?”

Tony gave in to a bout of slightly unbalanced laughter. “Tell me about her?” he asked.

Rhodes smiled, “She’s your daughter: Extremely smart and a smart-aleck to boot. She loves building. FRIDAY’s taken to big sistering like a natural. Then there’s Harley, Peter, the girls… Even without being there you assembled a bunch of intelligent, talented kids. Nettie’s the baby but she’s not alone. None of them are isolated the way you were. They have each other, because of you…”

Chapter End Notes

Hrekja eitr - Old Norse, "Drive away poison"
Confrontations

Chapter Summary

Um... Finally, Steve and Tony talk.

Earth

Captain Danvers stood on the docks at Staten Island overlooking the largest submarine fleet ever assembled, backed up by a number of destroyers and corvette class warships. Scouring the lists of registered, enlisted Enhanced world-wide they’d pulled together a team of fifteen Enhanced suited for maritime combat to support the traditional military forces. Danvers herself would be in the air with thirty other fliers if the Chitauri tried to make a break for it. The plan was to bomb the hell out of the Chitauri underwater stronghold and kill anything that they scared out of it.

Carol stared out over the waves that had swallowed up six talented, wonderful, idealistic kids, five of them her own students. She knew if those kids were still alive then their plan to deal with the Chitauri threat would almost certainly kill them. Looking at the numbers, the odds, any risk/benefit analysis she could bring to mind the answer was always the same: Risking the safety of the planet, leaving the enemy with an army capable of decimating whole metropolis areas, thousands of square miles before they’d be able to rally a force capable of containment for six kids wasn’t a choice she could make, not as the commander of the Earth’s Enhanced forces. Personally, as those kids’ teacher it wasn’t a choice she could not make.

The smallest of the Iron Man armors touched down beside Carol with the grace of a dancer. The top of Iron Lass’ head was barely even with Carol’s nose and Captain Marvel wasn’t a particularly tall woman. The armor had a slightly narrow waist than her ‘brothers’, her proportions weren’t exaggerated but gave the distinct impression of femininity. “I was able to recover the blueprints for the Iron Legion,” FRIDAY reported. “I built a dozen of them but it turns out I can only control four plus my own armor with dexterity.”

“Can you have two more just trailing behind you?” Carol asked.

FRIDAY nodded, “Why?”

“You know Ultron’s the reason why we’ve kept it a closely guarded secret that there is no organic pilot associated with the Iron Lass callsign,” Carol said. “I can’t exactly send in the Iron Legion even if you could have built and piloted hundreds of them. I was going to have you put them in dive suits for this mission just to cover up what they were. But it occurs to me that it might be useful if you had six dive suits along for the ride if, when you find our idealistic little fools.”

The Dead Zone boarding Chitauri Space

“I’ll be right back. Your stomach’s growling and it wouldn’t hurt me to eat either,” Tony assured Loki before he ventured out of the room they’d staked out as theirs. The smell of coffee led him him to the ship’s galley.

It was the middle of the night cycle but Steve was at the sink washing dishes while Bruce poured
over a tablet. Tony blinked, for a moment it could have been 2014 any of a hundred mornings in the Tower. Him staggering out of the lab after an all night engineering binge, Bruce just starting the day while Steve saw to his enhanced metabolism after his morning run. For a moment all three of them just froze. ‘There’s no going back,’ Tony reminded himself. ‘The good old days were never really that good to start with.’

Tony walked over to the coffee pot if it was the only thing that mattered in the universe, shutting Steve’s hopeful glances out of his consciousness. Once he had his coffee Tony sank down into the seat across from Bruce and plastered on one of his old smiles, ignoring how ill-fitting it felt. “So, oh master of the squishy sciences, any clue as to why Loki’s aging too fast?”

Bruce sighed, “Tony, I’ve never seen a Jotunn from closer than a thousand yards before, the only reason I know he’s experiencing accelerated aging is that you told me, and I don’t know how you know. I’m just taking your word for it.”

Steve’s presence in the room felt like an unexploded bomb. Tony couldn’t stay seated, he abandoned his coffee and quickly threw together a couple of sandwiches while Bruce gave him the rundown on Loki’s current medical condition, which boiled down to nothing bleeding, broken or obviously non-functioning. Then, with the plate full of sandwiches and his cup of coffee balanced precariously on one hand, Tony tugged at Bruce’s shirt with the other until the biophysicist gave in and allowed himself to be harried out of the galley. “Seriously Tony, unless there’s something grossly wrong, I’m not going to find it,” Bruce continued. “I just don’t have a baseline for his species. The Bifrost is down-”

“I know, the new armor got its maiden run during the Other’s attack on Asgard.”

“But I think there might be some units from Jotunheim still on Callisto, you might be able to find a real physician that actually knows Jotunn physiology there. And if not, Odin made it to Earth without the Bifrost, I think he’d jump at the chance to do something to help Loki.”

“Odin can go screw himself,” Tony growled. “You’re right about getting a Jotunn doctor to look Loki over though. Hopefully we can pull it off without indebting Loki to that asshole again. You know he actually demanded gratitude for NOT letting Loki die as an infant? ‘You owe me your life’ from someone who was supposed to be his parent? Because after centuries of not being good enough, Loki gave up on trying.”

“Tony… Are you sure you’re not… um… Over-identifying with Loki?”

Tony gave Bruce a plastic smile, “You’re ‘not that kind of doctor’. Besides I already had this talk with Rhodey, if you want the highlights ask him.”

Bruce glanced away, shame coloring his cheeks, “I’m sorry, I was never much of a friend to you.”

Tony shrugged, “My mistake for expecting it. You were fairly clear that the only support I could expect from you was technical and that’s all I’m looking for from you now.”

Bruce nodded, “Maybe we could start again?”

Tony eyed him warily. “It’s not like I’m going to say ‘No’ to sciencing with you… Or to having the Big Guy as back up for Avengers’ stuff. We’ll see if it goes anywhere past professional acquaintances.”

“That’s all I can ask,” Bruce said.

They turned the last corner and saw Thor standing outside of Loki’s door staring at it longingly.
Tony walked past the Thunderer as if he wasn’t there, as he reached for the control panel his plate tipped. Bruce snagged the coffee cup before it could tumble from its precarious perch then waited until the door was open before handing it back to Tony. And then he let him go.

Tony glanced around the room as the door slide shut behind him, shutting out his former teammate, then shook his head and put the sandwiches down on the table. Loki-

‘Loptr, he wants to be called Loptr. What the hell does that say about the state of his memories?’ Tony thought. ‘I mean, I’m not really dealing with Loki Odinson, age 437. He’s more Loptr who’s forgotten that he’s only pretending to be a kid, which I’m guessing he actually did more often than not. Except, it’s more than forgetting he’s not a kid, not my kid. I’m pretty sure he doesn’t remember anything that didn’t happen while he was in this form. That’s gotta be confusing.’

Loptr had fallen asleep waiting for Tony to come back. He was curled up tightly, one hand clutching a blanket and two fingers from the other had found their way into his mouth as he slept. So young, the fear and uncertainty bringing back habits of an even younger child. Tony reached out and carefully brushed Loptr’s hair out of his face. His skin, at resting temperature, was cool to the touch but not unpleasantly so. Tony remembered Rhodes’ concerns, ‘Even Rhodey isn’t familiar anymore. It’s your fault kid, but I can’t even be angry. You’re the only thing left that feels familiar and you’re more lost than I am. You wake up and your mom’s gone, your brother’s a grown man and something to be feared, you look in the mirror and see someone you were raised to hate. Shit kid, you’re no angel but you didn’t deserve this… No matter what else, you won’t be alone. I promise you that.’

“Your brother wants to talk to you,” Tony told Loki several days later.

“Do I have to?” Loki asked warily.

“He’s basically set up camp outside the door,” Tony said. Rogers was also distinctly around but Tony had to admit that he didn’t feel as likely to trip over the supersoldier. “But you absolutely do not have to talk to him. Just say the word and I’ll tell him to buzz off.” Tony tapped his powered down gauntlet significantly.

Loki thought about it for awhile. Then he sat cross-legged on the floor and closed his eyes. After a few minutes his was the pale-skinned, green-eyed Asir boy Tony had first met. “Why did you that?” Tony asked. “Did you shapeshift or cast an illusion?”

“I can shapeshift? Oh right, I can,” Loki said. He frowned, “But I don’t know how. Only I did it as a baby so how hard can it be?”

“Try thinking about the mechanics of swallowing,” Tony interjected. “Stuff that we just do instinctively isn’t always easy to learn. So that’s an illusion? Why bother?”

Loki nodded, “Thor’s an Asgardian warrior now, they kill Jotunn. I thought, he’s so much bigger, maybe it would be a bad idea to make him mad. It’s easy to make Thor mad, even when I’m not actively trying.”

“So you were always into riling up your brother,” Tony said. “Color me stunned… If you don’t feel safe around Thor I could be in the room. I mean, if you want to see him at all that is.”

Loki put a hand under his chin. “There’s stuff he won’t say around one of the lower races,” he said matter of factly. “Well, unless he forgets himself but Father doesn’t like it when we talk out of turn. Thor probably doesn’t do that anymore. Maybe you could stay at first, until I decide whether or not I
want to be alone with him to hear what he has to say. He might think I hid being a Frost Giant on purpose, that I wasn’t hiding it from me too.”

“Loki-” Tony began uncertainly.

“Loptr,” Loki corrected.

“Loptr,” Tony repeated. “Do you like being Asir better than being Jotun?”

Loki licked his lips nervously. “I- Everything would be easier if I was. I probably wouldn’t have magic or even want it. Maybe I’d be a proper warrior and Father would like me more. If I were Asir but I’m not.” Loki gestured to himself almost angrily. “This is a lie I was telling myself and Mother says the one person you must never- Mother,” Loki’s eyes widened then he was blinking back tears. “I remember crying all over you. I remember feeling guilty.” He looked up and Tony fearfully, “Why was it my fault Mother died?”

“It wasn’t,” Tony said firmly, remembering the years he’d spent thinking that his last fight with his father had been a contributing factor in the crash that killed his parents. The unnecessary years. “You were ticked off at Odin and basically wished an invader all the best. He ended up killing your mom. But you didn’t have any control over what happened, it was not your fault.”

Tony stood in front of the door waiting until it had locked behind him before stepping aside, much to Thor’s disappointment. But then, instead of pointedly ignoring Thor while going off to secure food or other supplies for himself and Loki, the Armorsmith glared fiercely at him.

“Here are the ground rules,” Tony stated. “First, obliterate ‘Frost Giant’ and any other racial slurs you might know from your vocabulary, he’s got enough shit going on without that. Second, touch him in any way I deem threatening and I’ll repulsor you through the bulkhead and worry about keeping the vacuum out after. On that note, I will be in the room until Loptr tells me he’s comfortable being alone with you.”

“I would never harm a child, much less my own brother when he is in such a vulnerable state,” Thor protested.

“You might be his brother, ‘adopted’, ” Tony sneered, mimicking Thor’s explanation of Loki from the Avengers’ first meeting. “But you’re also a warrior raised on tales of the glory to be found in slaughtering his kind and he knows that. After all he was raised on those same stories.”

“Friend-Tony, do you know anything of how my brother brought you back?” Thor asked cautiously.

Tony shook his head, “He didn’t exactly go into the technical details but I gather that it didn’t hurt that he, we were doing Death a favor. Turns out Thanos’ idea of courting gifts weren’t what his Lady desired. Why are you asking?”

Thor looked concerned, “You have been angry with us since we rescued you, suspicious of us.”

“I can’t imagine why that would be,” Tony snapped. “I mean your brother, the card carrying villain, did have to bring me back from the dead. While my recent memories of my teammates are chock-full of betrayal, abandonment and assault.” Then he sighed, “Look, your brother still loves you but he’s terrified of you. Blame your asshole of a dad for adopting a Jotunn kid and doing jack-squat to deal with the prejudices against Jotunheim in his kingdom… While we’re on the subject, Loki’s not going back to Asgard. Death gave him into my custody… Also, um, he’s aging at a human rate.”

Thor shook his head, “No, that is not fair.”
“Why?” Tony snapped, “Because you’re going to lose him? Because he’s not going to available to do your dirty work or be your scapegoat anymore? I’m going to keep him safe, give him a place he can belong.”

“I am glad,” Thor replied quietly. “It doesn’t change that he will grow old and die in the space where he was meant to reach adulthood.”

Tony’s anger crumpled into bitter ashes. “When’s life ever been fair? You’ll still have almost a century with him. But only if you’re going to be part of the solution to his internalized racism issues.”

Steve was, unsurprisingly, lurking around the galley when Tony made one of his forays out of Loki’s room to find food and coffee. Hank Pym was there as well, glaring at the coffee machine as if he was hoping to intimidate it into working faster. “That doesn’t work, I proved it scientifically with a two factorial DOE, I think I was… um six?”

“Coffee, at six?” Hank eyed Tony up and down. “No wonder you’re short.”

“Coffee stunting your growth is an old-wives tale,” Tony replied instantly. “It’s the sixth main food group and distilled creativity in a mug.” He joined Hank watching the coffee slowly drip into the pot, picking a spot that made Hank a barrier between himself and Steve.

“Why did you come on this little jot anyway?” Tony asked Hank, “Last I heard you were indoctrinating your little-big flunky in the hatred of all things Stark, particularly me.”

“And then you reached out from beyond the grave and sicced that menace Harley on me,” Hank grunted.

“You like him!” Tony crowed.

“You could have done a lot worse picking a successor,” Hank admitted. “I loathe admitting any sort of similarity with your father, but Cross and Stane were cut from the same cloth. Your brat’s sharp and he oozes common sense, wish some of it would rub off on Lang but if he didn’t catch it from his ex-wife or his daughter nothing’s going to help him.”

Tony snickered.

“I met you a couple of times when you were a kid but I don’t know you,” Hank continued. “I wasn’t done being furious with Howard but he went and got himself killed anyway, so I made you his stand-in… Two years I’d been just waiting for Howard to try to get his hands on my research. I was going to reveal him as a thief, a fraud and a talentless hack before the whole world. He never came. You probably never even heard of my particles but I was still waiting for you to try to steal them from me. You created Iron Man and a new element, you defeated an alien invasion and I was still waiting. I kept waiting, levied my expectation that you were going to steal from me into believing I was justified in stealing from you.”

Tony scowled at the mention of the Compound breakin. After Cross’ machinations became public the team had blamed Tony for being so hard to work with that another hero had felt necessary to try to steal from him rather than asking for his help.

Hank sighed, “You probably don’t realize this but Howard could be damn good at flattery… If he needed, or wanted, something from you that is. And he wanted my particles. He had me believing that he needed them, needed me, couldn’t get along without me. There I was, waiting, years, hell decades after he was dead, for him to come back and puff up my ego some more. No one ever came, I just marinated in my bitterness until I passed it on to my idiotic minion,” Hank nodded towards
Steve disparagingly, “Contributing to his decision to follow that moron and get himself branded a terrorist. I wasn’t directly involved in the unmitigated disaster that got you killed but I was a factor. Then you had to go and point that kid in my direction. Now he clutters up my lab whenever he needs engineering advice beyond Rhodes’ ability. Cassie, Lang’s daughter, she’s a bright little thing with a mind for science where Hope is all business, she’s best friends with Harley little sister and my daughter’s closest friend is your… your Pepper. Our families are entwined to the point where your daughter’s taken it into her head to call me Dr. Grandpa.”

Tony’s eyes widened in surprise but all he said was, “I always knew there was a reason not to stand on titles.”

“If not for Scott’s stupidity they would have been stopped at the airport,” Hank said. “I owed you this. Jan’s probably laughing her ass off where ever she is,” he muttered to himself. “Always said I was too stubborn for my own good.”

“Is something wrong with me?” Loptr asked after one of Bruce’s checks.

Tony grimaced, “It’s not immediately threatening or anything just something we need to look into. Might actually be a good thing if we can figure out a solution in the next ten years or so.”

“Of course,” Loptr said sceptically.

“You’re aging at a human rate,” Tony said. “You know Thor’s not really the one who suddenly got older right? In ten years, at your current rate you’ll be back to your proper age, instead of waiting 550 years.”

“I’m aging at a human rate?” Loptr asked. “Like you?”

Tony nodded.

“Oh. Okay,” Loptr said. “Is Midgard a nice place? Mortals are supposed to be hopelessly primitive but clearly that’s incorrect.”

“550 years is a very long time by mortal standards,” Tony pointed out, lightly amused. He wasn’t sure if it was by Loptr’s transparent attempt at flattery or at the way he just assumed that Earth’s evolution would progress at Asgard’s sub-glacial pace. ‘It’s good he’s considering life on Earth himself since I’ve got every intention of taking him home with me.’

They were less than a day out from the Sol system when the inevitable happened. Tony ventured into the ship’s common areas and found himself in a room with Steve Rogers and nothing, no one to serve as a buffer between them. He almost spun on his heel and walked back out but the likely conversation had been hangin over him like the Sword of Damocles ever since Steve had plowed into him on Thanos’ throne planet, determined to come to Tony’s rescue.

Tony stood there under the weight of Steve’s questioning gaze for several minutes then sighed. “Do we really have to do this?”

“Tony, I’m- I’m so glad to see you alive,” Steve said. “I just- I don’t want to be a bother but I- I can’t stand- You have to know-”

Tony rolled his eyes. “You didn’t mean to kill me? You didn’t even mean to hurt me? You didn’t mean for me to find out about my parents like that? Yeah, I know. From how you reacted to the Accords I realize that you think good intentions are all that matter, well YOUR good intentions
anyway, but they really aren’t.”

“I didn’t think it through,” Steve admitted. “I hadn’t confirmed that it was Bucky, I had no idea that a tape like that could possibly exist. If I’d ever imaged someone like Zemo doing that to you, I swear I would have told you. You are—” Steve’s gaze fell to the floor at Tony’s feet. “I did think of you as a friend, even if I didn’t act like much of one.”

“You didn’t mean for me to find out about my parents at all, because it was easier for you if I stayed ignorant,” Tony disagreed flatly. “And whether you meant to or not, you did hurt me. And I don’t just mean the flail chest, cracked skull type of hurt. I know I gave as good as I got in that fight.”

Tony smiled, sharp edged and bitter, “If I’d had your healing factor back then I wouldn’t have even died or anything so eye for an eye and we’re good right?”

“But you betrayed me. More than that, you crippled my best friend, nearly killed him. And don’t give me any shit about how it was friendly fire or it takes two to fight. You, Barnes and Wilson were international fugitives, we gave you a chance to surrender. Rhodey was a duly appointed officer of the law who was there because we put ourselves in the line of fire to try to bring you in alive. If it hadn’t been us, Ross would have sent someone with orders to kill you. Judging from Romania it was their lives not yours we spared by coming in their place but either way we were trying to deal with that fuck-up without casualties.”

Steve started to open his mouth but Tony cut him off, “And don’t tell me you tried to talk me at the airport. If you’d wanted to talk you would have called ME instead of calling in Barton, Maximoff and Pym’s guy to FIGHT me. If you’d wanted to talk you would have called me instead of having Clint attack Vision in his own home before saying one word to him. You brought up your justification for keeping your bestie at your side to DISTRACT me from the fact that the rest of your team was still trying to steal a goddamn jet. Leipzig happened because of you, you and your paranoid, egotistical delusion that you and you alone could deal with Zemo. That you were the only good guys out there. You are why that useless battle happened, you are why my best friend lost the use of his legs. That is on you. That is on you. Just ask Natasha: You weren’t going to stop. No matter what I said, you weren’t going to stop. Well, fuck you if I don’t think that’s a reason to back down. The Ten Rings weren’t going to stop torturing me, by Romanoff’s logic I should have just given them the damn Jericho.”

“Natasha wanted to come after you,” Steve said quietly.

“Clint talked her out of doing anything so stupid I’m guessing,” Tony said bitterly.


“Damn,” Tony breathed. “His kids?”

“Okay,” Steve said. He looked down, “They lost him when I called him out of retirement. They’d adapted to living without him long before he died.”

Silence closed around them for several minutes.

“I didn’t want to fight,” Steve said finally. “I wanted to say I’m sorry.”

“It doesn’t matter, I wish it did but—” Tony replied, his voice low and exhausted. “I didn’t handle Siberia well but you sure as hell weren’t just defending yourselves and even after all these years I don’t know how I was supposed to have handle it. Was I supposed to not be gutted watching my parents’ murder? Was I supposed to not be hurt- furious to realize that you lied to me, that you set me up for a bastard like Zemo to ambush me with that fucking video? Maybe I was. You lied to me
Rogers, lied to my face and berated me about keeping secrets while you did it and when I try to figure out why, all I can think is that my having feelings was too much of an inconvenience for you to be bothered with.”

“No,” Steve protested. “It wasn’t like that. I didn’t know how to tell you…” He hesitated then added, “Bucky said I didn’t want to put faces to his victims.”

“Your comfort was more important than me being learning the truth about my parents’ murders in a safe environment, from a friend,” Tony summed up. “You could have told Rhodey, let him deal with my messy, inconvenient feelings.”

Steve shook his head vehemently, “How could I? I couldn’t tell anyone, couldn’t ask advice from anyone without betraying you. You had to be the first person I told.”

Tony snorted, “You didn’t want anyone to know what your best friend had done. If you couldn’t have come to me as my friend and told me what you’d learned, you should have let Rhodey do it. But when it comes to Barnes I’m not your friend, I’m not even a blip on your radar. That was the recurring theme of the whole clusterfuck wasn’t it? Barnes comes first for you, above civilians, above law enforcement personnel, above the Avengers. When it comes to Barnes the only time you even tried to balance what was good for him against what was good for anyone else was when he was getting ready to help kill 700,000 people and even then you didn’t know you could bring him back from the Winter Soldier yet. I dread to think what would have happened if he’d pulled you out of that river before Project Insight was kaput.”

Steve bowed his head and let Tony rant without interruption.

“You couldn’t come to me and tell me what happened, you couldn’t tell me Barnes wasn’t an ongoing threat. I offered to get him help but that wasn’t good enough for you! The whole goddamn time we were fighting in Siberia you kept going on about how it wasn’t his fault but you weren’t going to do anything to keep it from happening again. He wasn’t in control when he strangled my mom… Or when he killed those guys in Berlin and nearly put a bullet in my head, so according to you we just have to let him go? Let it happen again? Yeah, I tried to kill him when the asshole pointed a gun at me in Siberia. Why the hell should I trust that he wouldn’t pull the trigger when he did pull it not even twenty-four hours earlier? When I’d just finished watching him murder my mom? Why should I trust you when you say he’s on our side now?” Tony took a moment to glare at Steve, “I’m not going to apologize for sucker punching you, Rogers. You’re a lousy excuse for a friend… To me anyway. And you’re the last person who’s got any business saying how it’s wrong to solve problems through violence.

“So thanks for coming after me and all but I doubt I’ll ever forget where I stand with you. You didn’t mean to kill me. That I died from injuries you inflicted, you desperately want to do something, anything to get the weight of it off your conscience, I get that.” Tony shrugged, “But as for where we go from here? I didn’t die in Siberia because of damage you dished out. I died because you left me to get home with those injuries, with a dead suit, cut off from any help. I died because you didn’t care enough to make sure I got home. We fought because you didn’t care enough to make sure I learned about my parents in a- a kind way, from a friend… You ever heard the one about the opposite of love isn’t hate, it’s indifference?” Tony asked. “That’s why I died: Of your indifference. And that what I want to feel for you. I don’t want to feel hurt or anger when I think about you, I don’t want to think about you at all.

“You want absolution? Fine, thanks to Loki I’m not dead anymore and you brought me home… Four years late. I absolve you for leaving me to die last time. Go on with your life, get over it. You’ve got my permission, just do it somewhere away from me. I think I might be able to forgive but
I can’t and won’t forget. Taking another chance on friendship with you isn’t worth the risk to me.”

Steve nodded stiffly. “I am sorry… Um, I guess, goodbye Tony. I’ll try to stay out of your way after we get back to Earth.”

Tony sighed. “Good luck Steve,” he said. “And goodbye.” Tony turned and walked away and he didn’t look back.

---

**Earth - The Chitauri Stronghold**

Peter’s head jerked up as the hairs on his arm stood on end. “It’s time,” he told the others. “The attack’s coming, our best chance to get out is going to be while the Chitauri are distracted.”

Harley, a bandage around his arm from where they’d dug out one of Iron Man’s implanted controls, pressed the ‘skeleton key’ he and Peter had created from scavenged components against the cell door’s locking mechanism. “Open Sesame,” he said and then activated it.

The door slid open as the Chitauri base was rocked by the first depth charges. “Have I said ‘I told you so’ lately?” Komodo asked. She and Peter took the lead, their Enhancements still intact despite the Chitauri relieving them of all their equipment.

“Consider it said,” Peter sighed, “Everyone protect David, he’s our ticket out of here if we can manage to find a Chitauri sub that doesn’t have a mind of its own.”

---

Loptr stared out of the portal at the spinning blue globe growing large before them.

“We’ll have to start over, when we get back.” Tony said. “It’s been a lifetime, my daughter’s lifetime, since I was on the Earth. They’ve moved on. Time didn’t stop for them while I was gone. But maybe that’s what Pepper and I needed, a fresh start. Won’t know until I try. No way out but forward Elsa, never any way out but forward.”

“Easier without me tagging along,” Loptr said in a small voice.

Tony shook his head, “I’ve been figuring out this whole parenting with you these last four years, no way I leave you behind. Four years and blood’s never defined family for me. You’re mine Loptr. Let me take you home with me. It’s time to go home.”
FRIDAY dove through the murky waters of the North Atlantic as depth charges exploded around her. The shadows of the surface ships were lost in seconds. She outraced the massive submarines and the small squad of maritime Enhanced. Torpedoes cut through the waters but in a corner of her matrix Amadeus Cho sent FRIDAY a steady stream of data on the Navy’s firing patterns making it child’s play to dodge between them along with the six Iron Legionaries she was commanding.

FRIDAY felt an unexpected warmth at the thought that her partnership with Amadeus was very nearly an inverse of the assistance she’d provided for Tony. Now she was the one in the driver’s seat while Amadeus was the voice in her ear, feeding her data and keeping an eye on the battle as a whole while she focused on her part in it. She didn’t believe it was possible for an AI like her to possess intuition but still she felt a certainty that she’d come home with her little brother and the others that far exceeded the calculated odds.

Ahead of her FRIDAY saw flashes of light moments before the shockwaves from the exploding torpedoes started to buffet her. A cloud of Chitauri ships erupted up from the depths in response to the torpedoes. FRIDAY tucked her arms in close and flew straight, trying to mimic the profiles of the torpedoes. She shot past the first wave a Chitauri without slowing, angling for their base.

Above and behind her the waters churned as the Chitauri and Earth forces engaged.

Komodo and Spider-Man burst out of the cell as explosions shook the whole base. They sprinted down the hall and tackled the Chitauri guards without hesitation.

For Harry Osborn the whole situation had taken on an air of unreality several days ago and since it was keeping panic at bay he decided to roll with it. It was an understatement to say that their parlay with the Chitauri Queen had not gone as planned. After she’d declared that they were to be held prisoner until they, along with the Chitauri base, were destroyed in Earth’s anticipated offensive they’d been gassed.

Harry woke up feeling distinctly hungover and underdressed. For a few blissful seconds he didn’t remember how he’d come to be in this state. “Okay, everyone’s up,” Melati announced. “So let me make this official: I told you so.”

“Thank you, that was utterly necessary, I’m certain,” Peter groused.

Harry gave up on hoping he was having a nightmare, opened his eyes and sat up. While they’d been unconscious the Chitauri had disarmed them by the expedient of stripping them down to their underclothes. He spent a moment being creeped out by the thought of the Chitauri undressing him before deciding they were probably too alien to care and he should be more worried about the loss of his armor, his glider and his weapons.

Then it occurred to Harry to wonder if Peter’s identity had been a secret from his teammates. Superstitiously he watched the others and decided that Kate Bishop probably didn’t know from the too frequent glances she was stealing at Peter, easily recognizable from the SI product releases he’d been involved in. It was harder to tell with the others.

Harley, David and Melati were clustered around the door along with Peter, peering at the locking
mechanism. The four of them seemed to be holding an animated debate conducted entirely in gestures and glances.

Peter caught Harry trying to figure out the others. “I’ve gotta talk to their PTB. Taking a guy’s mask? It’s just bad villain etiquette,” he said.


“Well let’s not broadcast it over the comm channels,” Peter sighed. “Stick with call signs.”

Harley jerked his chin toward the door, “I can do it,” he said firmly, apparently ending the debate.

“You’re sure?” Peter asked.

Harley nodded. Peter glanced pointedly at a point on the ceiling then at Kate and David. Harry wasn’t quite sure how it was coordinated but after a few moment of randomly shuffling around he, Kate and David were standing near the middle of the room while the other three were crouched on the floor on the far side of the room.

Peter sat behind Harley and stretched out his left arm, holding firmly. Melati flexed her hand and claws emerged from her fingertips. Harry’s eyes widened as Melati started digging into Harley’s arm with her claw. “So what’s the new guy’s call sign anyway,” Harley said in a wavering, please distract me voice.

“So what’s the new guy’s call sign anyway,” Harley said in a wavering, please distract me voice.

“’Rookie’ works for me,” Melati replied obligingly.

Harry swallowed back bile and looked away from the impromptu operation. “Don’t I get a say?” he asked. “Shouldn’t it be something Goblin since I’m using the same gear as my dad?”

Harley made a muffled grunt and Harry made the mistake of looking. Melati had a blood covered bit of circuitry half-exposed, Harley was biting down on the heel of his free hand.

“So you guys have code names?” he rambled fixing his attention on David and Kate. “I never heard them.”

“Hawkeye,” Kate said firmly. “You’re not the only one who was inspired by someone that the media only remembers for what they did wrong,” she told Harry.

“Or the first person to be saddled with a call sign they protested,” David added. “Prodigy, it turned out Copycat was taken.”

Harry looked nonplussed.

“I hate my powers,” David explained. “They’re a cheat, a shortcut.”

“There!” Melati exclaimed. Harley claimed the small transponder while Melati ripped up Peter’s tee-shirt to make bandages.

Spider-Man tossed a liberated Chitauri stave to Hawkeye while Iron Man dove into the guard’s control panel with a gleeful exclamation. Komodo handed a second stave to Prodigy who took it absently.

“IM, we need to keep moving,” Spidey prompted.

“Yeah, yeah,” Iron Man said distractedly as he emerged from the console, hands full of components.

“I’ve got an escape route,” Prodigy declared as his gaze returned to the here and now.
“Keep him moving,” Spidey told Harry.

Harry frowned in confusion until he saw Iron Man jogging towards the door eyes fixed on tech he was repurposing on the fly.

The six of them broke out of the cell block and started toward the Chitauri docks.

Harry watched in awe as Spider-Man and Komodo fearlessly went after the Chitauri with only their enhanced strength and their combat training as a weapons. They backed up each other with the smoothness of an choreographed dance while Hawkeye fired shot after shot into the fray, so close that Harry didn’t know how she was avoiding friendly-fire incidents. Prodigy unhesitantly guided them through the labyrinth halls of the Chitauri base. Only fifteen minutes in, Iron Man tossed Spidey a cobbled together taser then set to work on making another. It was all Harry could do to keep the pace and guide Iron Man since he was too busy to watch his feet. ‘I’m basically dead weight without my gear,’ Harry realized. ‘And even if I had it I’d miss half their signals and constantly be needing additional instructions. As soon as we get out of here I’m applying for the Academy... Assuming we survive.’

“What the hell is going on in the Atlantic?” Tony demanded as Nebula’s ship entered Earth’s atmosphere.

Rhodey hurried over to join Tony and Loptr at the view port. He stared down that the boiling seas. Dozens of ship were clustered in a five hundred square mile patch of ocean, the water beneath them sparkled with the light of hundreds of explosions flashing below the surface. He took a deep breath, “There’s a Chitauri base in the North Atlantic. We were gearing up to attack it when I got word about your and Loki’s plan to go after Thanos… With no notion of how you were going to get home!” Rhodey scowled disapprovingly at Tony. “This must be the attack.”

Tony stared at him in shock, “But I killed Thanos, the war’s over.”

Rhodes shook his head sadly. “No, there are three more Chitauri convoys already enroute. Two of them are past the point of no routine. We don’t have the means to get word to the third and warn them to turn back, that there’s nothing for them here. Plus there’s still a city sized Chitauri stronghold beneath the North Atlantic and, after nearly a year of bombardment, humanity is not going to trust them as our new neighbors. We have to root them out.”

“No,” Tony said. His armor began unfolding around him. “I didn’t let Death take my body for a joyride and NOT put a stop to this war. They’ve got nothing left to fight for. We can let them refresh their ship’s atmosphere on Earth so that they can turn around and GO HOME.”

“How?” Rhodes demanded. “They’ve never been open to talking. They come, they kill... Until we kill them.”

“I’ve going have something to say about that,” Tony declared. “Loptr, stay put ‘til I get back.” He pressed the palm of his armor against the door panel and took control. A moment later the door slid open, wind whipped by the force field keeping the atmosphere in at hurricane speeds.

“Tony, wait! What are you going to do?” Rhodey asked.

Tony grinned, his face plate slammed shut. “Don’t worry, it’s only a little crazier than that time in Moscow.” He jumped.

Rhodes ran to the door, “Idaho or Russia?” he shouted after Tony’s rapidly vanishing figure. Then he sighed. “Like it matters.” He shouted toward the cockpit, “Hank! Get the UN on the line, let them
know that Tony’s got a hairbrained stunt to try to stop the war and they need to back his plan. Whatever it might be… Cross your fingers and pray that it wasn’t Moscow, Idaho he was talking about.”

A hundred yards down and falling rapidly, Tony activated his HUD, “FRIDAY, you out there?”


“Good to hear your voice too, baby girl,” Tony replied warmly. “Now, could you do me a favor and help me put a stop to this stupidity?”

“Anything you want Boss,” FRIDAY thought if she had tear duct they’d be overflowing.

“I want you to hack everything. Every satellite, every radio or television station. Every frequency. If it can broadcast a message I want access.”

“Sure Boss, whatever you need,” FRIDAY said. On a secondary line she gave Amadeus the order to start helping. To her surprise, as she reached out, Tony’s armor was already in control of a number of systems. “Um Boss, you get started without me?”

“What?” Tony asked, then he noticed that the gauntlet where he’d secreted the Mind Stone was glowing gold. “Oh. Okay. I think your nephew’s helping out.”

Several minutes passed, the gold glow from the Mind Stone stone spread until only the Arc Reactor held its own color. “Ready,” FRIDAY said.

Tony took a deep breath, “How about some intro music?” He grinned as the first few cords of Black Sabbath’s Iron Man screamed across the airwaves. “Got your attention? Good. Thanos is dead. His generals, the Black Order is dead. The war is over. All that’s left is to determine the final casualty count. You want to make it higher, keep going. Or we can all step back.

“These deaths mean NOTHING. Thanos was all about laying bodies on the altar of Lady Death. She didn’t want them. Thanos is dead, there is no god-king whipping you onward. Who here is in favor of more meaningless death? Just step forward. Those of you in favor of NOT giving your lives for nothing… Step back. Stop the fighting. Let’s find another way. The war’s over, all except the shouting.”

The whole battle jerked to a shocked stop as a mechanical scream, “I am Iron Man” echoed by a pulsating guitar rift, reverberated off the interior of their skulls.

Peter and Harley stared at each other, disbelief and amazement warring in their eyes.

“Got your attention? Good.”

“Mechanic - Tony,” Harley breathed.

“Thanos is dead.” The Chitauri lowered their weapons.

“Those of you in favor of NOT giving your lives for nothing… Step back.”

The Chitauri facing off against Peter’s small, desperately hopeful team knelt, laying their weapons on the floor. “Our calculations were wrong,” the Queen spoke through her drones. “Would you, please, help us surrender?”
“He’s back!” FRIDAY exclaimed, her excited voice echoing from every speaker in the Tower. “Boss is back!!!”

Pepper dropped what she was doing.

Then Tony was broadcasting. Pepper couldn’t hear what he was saying, just the sound of his voice, in her head, from every speaker. And she was walking towards the stairs in a daze.

There was someone saying something about the Chitauri forces pulling back, about a ceasefire but the words had no meaning in Pepper’s ears. By the time she reached the penthouse she was running.

She kicked off her heels as her anklets and bracelets transformed into hand and boot repulsors. She reached the edge of the balcony at a dead sprint and leapt into flight. The only thing that mattered or made sense was the glowing point on her HUD that represented Tony.

She saw him turn towards her. For a moment she was afraid the armor was going to be empty again. But then the face plate retract and it was Tony. Pepper crashed into him, laughing and crying. Her momentum sent them spinning through the air and she didn’t care. She wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him.

The kiss tasted of metal and salty tears and it was perfect. Hundreds of feet over the ocean, spinning and laughing and clinging to each other.

Eventually Tony gained control of their momentum and Pepper fitted her body close enough to his that her boot repulsors were supporting her weight without destabilizing their flight. “You’ve been practicing,” Tony said huskily.

Pepper hiccuped wetly, “Four years and that’s the first thing you have to say?” she laughed leaning her forehead against his cheek.

“I wasn’t even sure you’d take them out of the box,” Tony said.

Pepper clung tighter. “You gave me something to protect myself and I left. I’m sorry Tony. I should have figured it out after Killian. I kept telling you that I couldn’t handle you being Iron Man but it was me being helpless that I couldn’t handle. I can’t take being used against you Tony, I can’t. But it wasn’t you that needed to change, it was me.”

“Never really could see you as the Damsel in Distress type, Pep,” Tony whispered grinning fit to split his face as pieces just slightly out of alignment since 2008 finally, finally slid into place. “Not when I remember how you’ve always had my back.”

“I missed you, Tony. Four years, Tony, I haven’t been whole without you.”

Chapter End Notes

For all that IM3 ends with blowing up the suits, I still contrast “I can’t do this, I physically can’t do this!”- Pepper on the roof at the end of IM2, with “Who’s the hot mess now,”-Pepper after she takes out Killian. Despite being in more danger, being more personally attacked and affected in IM3 Pepper is in much better shape emotionally when she saves herself than when she gets rescued… So what the hell were they thinking when they reset her to powerless?

I’ll probably come back to this more when I finally finish up “5+1 Valentines”, but
that’s where I’ve been trying to get with Pepperony: Pepper doesn’t have the same need to save the world/be a superhero that Tony does but her issues with Iron Man are about feeling helpless. It’s the one part of Tony’s life where she’s on the sidelines when he gets in trouble, at best, and at worst the villain is using her as leverage against him. Pepper needed to fix that: Her ability to cope with Iron Man rather than Tony being Iron Man.

Remaining Plans for the series

Short Term:
- Tony and Loptr reunion meeting Tony’s family on Earth.
- Vision resolution
- Peter and Co return to the surface

Mid Term
- Tony’s family dynamic (final chapter of “5+1 Valentines”, maybe a 1-shot on Hank and Tony’s irresponsible lab day, possibly as part of a post-Tony returns series of 1-shots similar to the Nettie series)
- Tony’s new ability
- Earth considering its place in the galactic society going forward.

Long Term
- Effect of the knowledge Tony brings back from Asgard
- Revisit Tony’s ability
- Loki end game

Steve and his team’s resolution (both short and long term)

Other stuff that’s outstanding in this series:
- Resolution for “Classified Lives”
- One more entry in the Ultron related stories
- Possibly: Peter revealing his identity to others with a Peter/Gwen subplot
- Possibly: Nebula & team’s fate/GoG side-story
- Possibly: Rewrite “Forced Reflections” (it currently includes more irritation due to conversations with Team!Cap fans than is really good for the story.)
Chapter Summary

The beginning of the end (of the story)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The rest of the flight back to Stark Towers was... just great, as far as Tony was concerned. Sure there was a layer of armor between himself and Pepper, two counting her force fields, but the two of them together, sky above ocean below, with nothing else pulling at them, that was a moment Tony would have happily stayed in forever.

But as soon as they were over land the evidence of the war became impossible to ignore. The changed skyline, the damage to the city, the arc shield and the fortress-like additions to the buildings on the shield’s perimeter. They talked a little, not much. Pepper mentioned rebuilding. Tony brought up some techniques he’d learned of in Asgard, wanting to try them.

As the Tower began to loom large Tony felt increasingly nervous. What would Nettie think of him? Would she be mad he hadn’t come back sooner or not like having a new person intruding on the family she’d always known? What would Pepper think when he told her that Loptr, Loki would be coming home with him? Was there really still a place for him on Earth after being dead for years? What would he see when he looked at his daughter? Extremis was showing in Pepper, she was likely to see two hundred. That started Tony thinking about how mankind might react if he offered them the first stage of Vanahiem’s enhancements to extend the species’ lifespan... Not so far as to become offensive to Death, or worse yet, in Tony’s view, so much as to induce the stagnation of Asgard.

But... It was a good reason to renew his professional acquaintance with Bruce as well. The man was brilliant and more biologically oriented than Tony.

Once they were over the balcony Pepper let go of Tony to land. Tony hovered over the ground frozen as he spotted the curly haired little girl waiting for them. Then Tony saw Roberta and David Rhodes waiting along with Nettie and somehow, seeing the daughter he’d never met with the family that had all-but adopted him after his family had been lost made it possible for Tony to breathe again as he took that last step and landed on the balcony. He looked at Nettie and his whole body sagged with relief, 'Extremis from both parents.'

Pepper and Tony deactivated their armor. Pepper’s force fields vanished and the repulsors on her palms and the soles of her feet slid back to look like gems on her bracelets and anklets. Tony pulled off his helmet and retracted the full armor back to something that looked ‘casual wear’ or maybe casual armor on Asgard. Then Pepper fitted herself back against Tony’s side.

The elder Rhodes’ stood back while Nettie scrambled up her mother to peer more closely at Tony. She examined him carefully. “You see me,” Nettie concluded. She glanced back at the adults. “They’re looking at you.” She leaned around Pepper and poked Tony’s cheek. “You’re here, really here.”

Tony nodded unable to think of a single thing to say. Nettie threw herself at Tony. Startled, he barely had time to catch her. “Hi,” he managed as he rearranged himself from desperately clutching, to
securely supporting the child he unexpectedly found in his arms.

“Hello, I’m Antoinette Evelyn Stark, but only people who don’t know me call me that. You should call me Nettie. You’re Daddy.”

“Okay,” Tony agreed, smiling fit to split his face.

Then Roberta was hugging all three of them while David gripped Tony’s shoulder tightly. “We recognized your work coming out Asgard this last year,” David said. “Still, I hardly dared hope.”

Roberta laughed, “You’re home Tony! That crazy Norse god truly brought you back. And even if one thing has nothing to do with the other, suddenly I’m feeling a lot more like believing his story about how that invasion wasn’t his choice.”

“Funny you should mention him,” Tony said with a nervous glance at Pepper. “I met the ones wielding the whip. The Ten Rings had nothing on them.”

“Past tense?” Pepper asked glancing toward the skies.

“With extreme prejudice.”

Happy was waiting just inside the penthouse, the moment Tony saw him he started scheming as to how to get him in a doctor’s office.

Tony glanced around, the living room seemed about half the size he remembered it. It held a big dining table and a TV and there were textbooks on the couch and a box of toys in one corner. It looked lived in and reminded Tony of visits to Harley’s home in Tennessee or holidays with the Rhodes’. Family rooms that never expected to host a television crew and Tony wondered how Pepper managed that without the paparazzi going into overdrive. Then he remembered the war, history and austerity measures.

Happy hugged Tony tightly but didn’t say anything. Tony pulled back a little and gave him a long look. For a moment Tony was afraid he’d already seen a doctor. Then Happy took a deep breath, “Harley, Peter and several of their friends got naive, idealistic a couple weeks back. No one’s seen them since. Marlena, Mercedes and May… they’re doing their best not to lose hope but—”

Tony felt as if the air had been knocked out of him. “Just a couple weeks?” he asked knowing he’d never forgive himself if he’d failed to save his potato-gun wielding protege by such a thin margin. Tony had only spoken to the Spiderling a handful of times but the kid had so much potential. And Happy wasn’t going to see sixty. David and Roberta were both well into their seventies so it hadn’t been unexpected that neither of them would survive the decade but- And there were more people coming into the room every minute, most of them Tony didn’t even know but all of them were going to die. Even Pepper and Nettie despite lifespans that were frankly inhuman.

‘So many people.’ Tony felt a spinning sensation. He wanted to close up the armor around him but Nettie was still in his arms and if he had to guess from the way her arms where locked around his neck she wasn’t going anywhere soon.

“Tony? Tony!” Pepper sounded a thousand miles away. *I’m barely back and I’m worrying her already.*

The tower shivered as Nebula’s ship landed on the apron. The hatch slid open, the moment Loptr saw Tony he slipped past Thor and out of the ship. He didn’t exactly run, Loptr had been raised to be too conscious of carriage in public for that, but he moved with alacrity. Loptr was giving everyone around him looks of mixed anger and fear. *Kid doesn’t need me falling apart on top of*
"everything else,’ Tony thought.

Loptr’s familiarity was grounding. The way he moved through the crowd around Tony was a reminder that, kid or not, he’d been undergoing combat training for more years than Tony had been alive and he was on edge. Tony dragged himself away from the incipient panic attack, gesturing Loptr to his side. Princely dignity didn’t keep the boy from twisting one hand into the back of Tony’s shirt as he glared at anyone and everyone.

“Cut that out,” Tony muttered ruffling Loptr’s hair with the hand that wasn’t supporting Nettie. “You’re going to have everyone thinking that you’re not a sweet little snowflake.” Tony snickered, pouting was definitely a better look on the kid. Irritated or not, Loptr didn’t make any move to leave Tony’s side.

“Okay,” Tony took a deep breath. “The Chitauri pulling back is a great sign, they’re intelligent enough to know that the war’s done. I’d say lost but the guy that wanted to end all life is dead himself and that’s a win for everyone else. Odds are they want passage home, which is shouldn’t be a problem for us, we don’t want them here anyway. But we can give that to them as a concession if they give us what they know about our misplaced kids.”

“What misplaced kids?” Rhodes asked as he joined them. Hank, Thor and Bruce were right behind him. Steve stayed in the doorway of the ship, remembering that he was distinctly not welcome in Pepper’s home.

“Harley, Spider-Man, Komodo, David Alleyne, Kate Bishop and Harry Osborn,” Happy reported grimly. “They decided they needed to talk to the Chitauri.”

At Harry’s name, Steve edged closer.

“FRIDAY was going to try to break into the North Atlantic stronghold and retrieve them during the attack but—”

“They’re calling us,” FRIDAY broke in, “It just hit the radio waves. The Chitauri want to surrender and Prodigy is acting as their translator. They’re all okay, the six of them and a representative of the Chitauri will be in New York in an hour to discuss the terms of their surrender.”

The joyful shriek from the next room over had Loptr jumping. “I’m going to hug him half to death then I’m grounding him until he’s got as many gray hairs as he just gave me,” May Parker declared marching out of her room, Gwen Stacy right beside her. Harley’s mother and sister weren’t far behind and Marlena was nodding in agreement. Then Marlena noticed Tony and blinked. “Tony? How? Never mind, welcome back. I’m going to strangle you for giving my son that armor, just as soon as I finish making sure he’s alive and figuring out if it’s actually possible to ground an eighteen year old… I should talk to Carol, she’s his commanding officer and the lot of them are technically AWOL… How much trouble are they going to be in?” Marlena asked suddenly sounding worried again.

Then she hugged Tony, “You’re a terrible role model Tony Stark, leaving us all thinking you were dead for so long.” And she was crying and hugging him. And Nettie was crying too, hiccuping, overwhelmed sobs. And somehow, Loptr had wedged himself between Tony and Harley’s mom. He wasn’t tall enough to actually get in the way of her hugging, so he just ended up as a highly disgruntled participant in a group hug. “Ignore everything I say, the last two weeks…” Marlena shuddered. And Tony thought about how he’d felt hearing about Harley stretching out into weeks of uncertainty and felt his stomach clench painfully. He patted Marlena on the shoulder awkwardly. Harley’s mom was going to die in her late seventies. ‘So many people.’
Then Rhodey was dragging him out of the family room. There was a narrow hall and a row of doors, probably bedrooms, it was quiet. Rhodey and Pepper were a cautious several feet down the hall, between him and the door to the room where everyone was congregated. Nettie was clinging tightly enough to leave bruises and Tony was pretty sure the pulsing necklace she wore wasn’t just for decoration. Loptr’s skin temperature had dropped enough that he was going to have a couple patches of first degree frostbite from where the kid was pressed up against him. ‘Be a good idea to get him something like that necklace.’ Tony thought. ‘I’ve gotta calm down to get the kids calmed down. Thank God Harley’s okay.’

Tony took a number of deep, measured breathes while FRIDAY prattled on about the weather in Malibu. “How long do I have before someone official descends on me?” he asked Rhodey without glancing up from the floor.

“We can stall them at the lobby maybe half an hour,” Rhodes said. “And not to rush you, but it might be good if a certain something was back in Viz’s head before anyone has a chance to object,” he nodded toward the gauntlet were Tony was holding the Mind Stone.

“Yeah, good thought,” Tony said. “Pep, set up a conference room. Make it small enough to justify keeping the numbers I have to deal with at once to a bare minimum… Can I get away with doing this in armor?”

Pepper smiled wryly, “Between Avalon Tech and the Asgardian-inspired style of your current armor… You’ll be encouraging the King Arthur comparisons but I’m not saying that’s a bad thing. Keep the helmet off, if you can.” She urged Nettie into her arms and Loptr stepped back far enough to let Tony armor up without needing to be told.

“Get Thor,” Tony said, automatically his hand found Loptr’s shoulder. “I caught a glimpse of Dr. Cho’s efforts from Hlidskjalf, I think the problem is Vision needs a jump-start, like the first time.”

Rhodey nodded and ducked back into the family room while Pepper led Tony to the elevator, Loptr trailing closely behind.

FRIDAY didn’t bother to wait for anyone to tell her to send them to the medical level. “I’ve warned Dr. Cho you’re on your way,” she reported. “She says she’ll be about five minutes finishing up with her current patient.”

Tony tried not to cringe when the doors slid open on a busy hospital level. Everywhere he looked people were dying, maybe not right now but the setting was making it hard to turn the numbers into years, decades even, and not just to see the moments ticking away. Pepper took Tony’s elbow and quickly steered him past the rows of beds to a curtained alcove where Vision lay.

Tony swallowed, there was no countdown on Vision, no infinity sign like Thanos had. There was a fuzzy something, frozen between one moment and the next, neither alive nor dead. He wondered what he’d see when he saw DUM-E, Butterfingers, U or FRIDAY’s severs, if it was Vision’s nature or his current state that Tony was seeing.

A young man, barely out of his teens was waiting for them, looking like he was one harsh word from jumping out of his skin. “I’ve been trying to download Vision’s code ever since Mom finished rebuilding his body,” he said holding up the amulet Tony had sent as an eleventh hour save for the sythoid. “I’ve been trying to download Vision’s code ever since Mom finished rebuilding his body,” he said holding up the amulet Tony had sent as an eleventh hour save for the sythoid. “I don’t know what I’m doing wrong, he just won’t wake up.”

“Hmm, yeah,” Tony agreed. “That happened when I first tried it too. Sometimes you just need a jump start. And here comes my favorite walking lighting rod,” he said as Thor, Rhodey and Dr. Cho joined them.

Loptr slipped closer to Tony at the sight of his older brother and Tony absently put a reassuring hand
on his shoulder.

“Dr. Stark, it hasn’t been the same without you,” Dr. Cho said with a small smile.

“Is that a good thing?” Tony asked with a wry grin as he remembered Cho’s decided lack of interest in socializing with him back before Ultron.

Dr. Cho’s expression softened, “Sometimes we don’t appreciate people until they’re gone. We’re lucky to have you back.”

“So, um, can we move this up to the roof or something?” Tony asked. “This isn’t exactly the spot for a lighting strike… Thor, ready for a greatest hits episode?”

“Aye,” Thor agreed. “Have you a plan to restore the Mind Stone?”

“Ultron added the Mind Stone to the matrix while the cradle was still in the process of creating Vision’s body,” Dr. Cho said thoughtfully. “I can put him back in a state of flux.”

“Then let’s do it,” Tony replied. “Move everything to the roof. Fire up the cradle. I’ll put the Mind Stone back where it belongs… Before anyone gets ideas.”

A few minutes later Vision had been relocated to the roof and placed in the cradle. Dr. Cho checked over the connections then started it up while Tony removed the Mind Gem from the compartment in his armor and Amadeus plugged the amulet into a computer attached to the cradle and started bringing up the program. “Dr. Stark? Do you want to check this over?” he asked fingers twitching nervously.

Tony glanced at Pepper. “He knows his way around a computer system,” she said easily.

Amadeus sputtered and blushed.

Tony raised an eyebrow at his reaction, “Good enough for me. Okay, Kid. The amulet was a last ditch, previously only in theory effort at saving Vision if Thanos got to the Mind Stone. It wasn’t designed to be pretty, just grab everything and go. To duplicate what Banner and I did last time we’re going to have to restore Vision’s schematic in a limited window.” He gestured to the amulet, “Think of that as a box of christmas lights, you know no one bothered to be neat about it when they were putting them away. We’ve got to untangle them and feed them to Vision while we’re downloading, we’ve got three minutes. Do or die. You up to helping me?”

“Yes! Definitely!” Amadeus said, his eyes were wide and a little wild.

Dr. Cho pulled her son aside for a moment, “He’s FRIDAY’s family. How compromised are you?” she asked him quietly.

Amadeus squared his shoulders, “Who else is more qualified to assist? I’ve been looking studying the amulet code for weeks.” He nodded toward Tony, “He’s the only Avenger or ally where I don’t know that I’m the better programer.”

Dr. Cho opened the cradle and Tony dropped the Mind Stone into place. The matrix went mad. “It’s changing his parameters,” Cho said pulling up one display after another.

“Keep downloading,” Tony ordered as he joined Amadeus. Their hands flew over the keyboards feeding Vision back into his body. “No turning back. Thor, you’re up. Wait for it...

Thor raised his hammer and a storm began brewing.
“NOW!”

When the smoke cleared Dr. Cho unsealed the cradle and Tony hurried over to help Vision out. A bemused expression crossed Tony’s face as he leaned down helped a too slight form out of the chamber. The being who emerged had Vision’s red and green coloration but his features were softer, less defined. Anyone guessing his age would have picked around twelve or thirteen.

“More younger siblings?” FRIDAY asked. “But I thought…”

The youthful Vision turned to stare up at Tony, “Hello? I feel I should know you.” He tried a tentative looking smile.

“Yeah, we’re family, um, Vision?” Tony finished uncertainty. “You’re still Vision right? Not, um, his kid? I’m really not old enough to be a grandfather, um, great grandfather. This keeps getting worse. Okay? You’re my kid, let’s leave it at that before I start looking for a nursing home.”

Loptr glanced between Nettie and Vision then settled on scowling at Vision.

“Did you ever tell me you wanted a large family?” Tony rambled at Pepper, “Because I’m sort of hoping that’s the case.”

“I’m just going to say it’s good that we have a pretty big support system,” Pepper replied.

“We do?” Tony asked, completely bewildered.

Pepper smiled and nodded, “We do.”

“Well, okay then,” Tony decided. He glanced from Vision to Loptr, “Guess you guys aren’t the only ones needing introductions.”

Harley found himself flying overhead along with Harry Osborn as their team made their triumphant return with the Chitauri representative who would be formally negotiating the terms of the Chitauri surrender. Harley wished he could fly straight to the Tower and see that Tony was back - Was alive! - with his own eyes. But he couldn’t just abandon his team, not even for Tony’s return from the dead.

“So how much trouble are we going to be in once we’re behind closed doors and they don’t have to pretend that we had any sort of authority to open talks with the Chitauri?” Harry asked.

Harley grimaced, “Well, at the least, you’ll be seeing some familiar faces in your remedial Avengers classes when you get to the Academy. And you won’t have a choice about classes. Going vigilante with Tech-based Enhancements is basically the next level below coming in because of an accident with biological powers you tried to hide.” Then, with a wry smile audible in his voice, Harley added, “But hey, you won’t be the one deepest in the shithouse! There’s the rest of us who studied the rules, and why they exist, and still broke them…

“We have a good case for why we did what we did and everything worked out but I’m anticipating months of exploring scenarios where this blows up in our face instead of working out. And, since the war’s over, I’m betting that I’ll be old enough to drink long before I’m cleared to be in the field again. Great reward for helping to shorten the war by three months easy, huh?” Harley sighed.

“Well, it was worth it,” Harry decided. “I really don’t think the Queen would have been so ready to stand down if we hadn’t come to her.”

“Yeah,” Harley said with a small smile. “It was worth it but propriety has to be maintained or the
next thing you know you’ve got Captain America invading other countries and attacking anyone who dares to stand up to him again. So I guess I’ll take my lumps and be gracious about it so they feel guilty about having to punish me.”

The necessary meetings went as well as could be expected.

The Accords committee was, predictably, not happy about the Mind Stone but they’d been firmly supportive of it being a part of Vision and Vision being an individual with the right to stay and defend the Earth if he so chose when the Nova Corps had been adamant about dragging him off to a vault somewhere in the depths of their empire. Tony had only returned the Mind Stone to the individual whom they had previously insisted it belonged to as much as his hands belonged to him. So they could take their lemon sucking expressions somewhere else as far as Tony was concerned. They also wanted to know why the Mind Stone’s protector was suddenly a pre-teen and yeah, Tony sort of wondered about that himself but wondering wasn’t going to change anything.

There were debriefs. About Thanos, about his generals, about just how certain was Tony that they were dead? Tony tried not to laugh hysterically when he told them he knew Death when he saw it. They wanted to know about Asgard, about its technology. Tony told them he had every intention of sharing what he’d learned but they’d have to wait until he figured out what of the information he’d gained was good for the Earth and how to modify it to be compatible with their existing technology. There were complaints, of course there were, complaints and wasn’t he being egotistical? Wouldn’t Earth be better off if he simply shared everything he’d learned with the planet’s other top scientists? Tony pointed out that the information had been gained at the cost of four years of his life, it existed only in his head and he’d share, or not share it, with whomever he damn well pleased. He told them he didn’t want another Ultron anymore than they did, he was happy to have their input in creating a peer review board for him to go through before implementing anything. The board would have the final word what was safe to bring to Earth but Tony was under no obligation to share everything he knew. And SI did have every right to profit from Tony’s knowledge. If he decided to share some things freely that was his choice, not an obligation. They could have what he chose to give them or they could have nothing at all because that’s what they’d get if they tried to force him to give up anything against his will.

Tony wished Loptr hadn’t been glued to his side when they asked him about the four years, about why he hadn’t come back sooner, but Loptr was deaf to suggestions about food, sleep, exploring his new home or getting to know his new family.

They wanted to know how he’d come back. Tony’s death had been a factor in the trial of the century. While Steve Roger’s accountability in his death had been a non-issue in the trial due to Roger’s plea, most of the world had speculated and come the conclusion that the murder was the only reason Rogers had turned himself in after fleeing with Barnes in Berlin, then again in Siberia and breaking the other Rogue Avengers out of the Raft. Anyone not living under a rock for the past four years knew Tony had died. Most members of the Accords committee had read his autopsy report. Of course they wanted to know how. Tony told them Asgardian science/magic and if they wanted the technical details they’d have to talk to Odin… And good luck with that. He didn’t tell them anything about Death, about being her Acolyte or that she’d allowed his soul to return to the living world because she’d had a mission for her Merchant. He didn’t mention that every time guy on the left got frustrated with him the man’s life expectancy dipped for a couple minutes or so, Tony figured it was high blood pressure or something else exacerbated by stress.

In the middle of the debriefing Odin decided he’d put up with enough human nonsense. “Loki, it is time to go home,” Odin announced as he pushed past Pepper.
At the sight of his father, scowling and in full battle regalia, Loptr froze, Tony didn’t even think he was breathing. After a moment Jotun-blue skin and fiery eyes had been covered with the illusion of pale Asir skin tones and green eyes.

“My apologies,” Pepper said, her voice acid, “Apparently meetings in progress mean little to kings.”

Loki stood slowly and took an unsteady step toward Odin. From his expression a person would have judged that Odin was summoning him to his own execution rather than taking him home. Tony put a hand on Loki’s shoulder. “Loptr, why don’t you stay here while I have a quick talk with Odin, Father of Thor here?”

Tony gestured for Odin to proceed him into the hall, the faint whine of repulsors powering up dancing on edge being a threat. Odin frowned but allowed Tony to move the confrontation into another conference room across the hall.

“What is the purpose of this?” Odin demanded as Tony shut the door behind him.

“When Loptr was de-aged it changed him,” Tony said. “He’s only going to live a mortal lifespan. Let him stay here, where he won’t grow old and die while everyone around him stays the same.”

“He is still my son.”

“Adopted,” Tony said. “And now he knows it. You raised him on stories of how you gloriously subjugated the Frost Giants, now he knows he is one. Did you look at him? Loptr’s terrified of you. He’s not going anywhere.”

“Mortal, you have done the Universe a service but do not presume,” Odin thundered.

Tony matched the All-Father glare for glare. “‘Death is his birthright,’ that’s what you said in your little kangaroo court wasn’t it?” he snarled. “You got it a little backwards, he was given to Death as a tribute. Did you know what She calls him? Death? Her stolen sacrifice. So fucking count yourself lucky that She decided to put him in my keeping instead of taking him.” He glanced over Odin’s head then gave him a cold and calculated smile, “You should know that you’re putting yourself in Her hands by demanding Loptr’s return.”

“You are Death-touched,” Odin said taking a step away from Tony.

“Loptr is mine, by Death’s degree,” Tony said. “You want to argue, take it up with her.”

Odin bowed his head in acquiescence. Then he waited for Tony leave rather than closing the distance between them an inch.

The excitement of Odin’s interruption was followed up with a brief press conference to announce to the world that Tony was alive and back. Tony was bemused by how nice the press was being. They didn’t even ask any awkward questions about Loptr. Although the child, in his Jotun form really didn’t do much to remind people of the mad Asgardian who’d tried to conquer the Earth in 2012. Still, they didn’t ask if he was Tony’s alien love child either, which they certainly would have before Tony’s death... There was always at least one person in the crowd who sucked at math.

“When are they going to remember that I’m the guy they love to hate?” Tony whispered to Pepper.

“Tony, you’ve been the martyr of the Sokovia Accords, the one who died trying to get the Avengers to listen to the world and stop putting themselves above the law for years now… I told you, you’re King Arthur returned from the dead right now, you’ve got nearly as much leeway with the media as Steve Rogers had in 2012.”
“And hopefully enough good sense not to squander it?” Tony asked.

“I think you’ve long since matured past that stage.” Pepper smiled a bit, “You have my vote of confidence.”

When everyone finally gave in and declared the day done Pepper shooed Tony off to bed.

After they’d gotten reacquainted Tony still found himself full of nervous energy even with Pepper soft and sleepy in his arms. He played with her hair and let his thoughts wander as her breathing began to slow.

“Pep?” Tony asked randomly.

“Mmm?”

“That kid to today, Cho’s kid, is he always that nervous?”

Pepper snorted, “Hardly, but he was meeting his girlfriend’s father for the first time.”

“What?”

“He and FRIDAY have been dating for a couple years now,” Pepper said.

Tony thought about that for a moment, “Think it’ll help if I tell him it’s all fine as long as he and FRIDAY are on the same page but if he’s trying to take advantage of her I’ll kill him?”

“Probably, then he can stop waiting for it,” Pepper replied. She tangled her fingers with Tony and curled up with her head pillowed on his shoulder being careful not to put any pressure on the reinstalled Arc Reactor.

“It doesn’t go very deep this time,” Tony said after a few minutes. “They just shaved a divet in my sternum to hold it. It got a little fused with me during, um, everything. I don’t think it’ll come back out.”

“But it doesn’t hurt you this time?” Pepper asked.

“Nope, not this time. Not much worse than some of the more outrageous piercings.”

“Good,” Pepper declared, then cuddled back into Tony’s arm. “Now sleepy time.”

Tony curled his free hand around her waist and tried to relax into the deepening rhythm of her breathing. He tried to remember how it had felt to imagine coming home. But he’d given up that dream so long ago and it had never been like this. ‘I have nine kids, three of them fully organic.’

Well Harley wasn’t actually his but apparently the public thought he was. Plus Harley came with a mother, a sister and now Happy was his stepdad. Which was nice, surprising but nice. Even if Happy stopped working for him they’d still be connected through Harley. Harley was an adult for all intents and purposes, that was going to take some getting used to. They’d been talking about where Harley wanted to go to college the last time Tony saw him.

Vision wasn’t fully organic but he wasn’t fully an AI either. Tony wondered if they’d have been more mindful about Vision’s emotional maturity the first time around, about him dating before he was technically a year old if he’d looked like a kid last time. Once Vision finished reviewing his backed-up memory files he technically had all the knowledge he’d had before but this time Tony was seeing how new he was. He wondered if he’d ever really seen Vision the first time around because
he didn’t remember that newness, all Tony really remembered was feeling like he’d been punched in the gut every time Vision opened his mouth.

He still missed J.A.R.V.I.S. Tony didn’t think he’d ever really get over losing him. He wished he had the presence of mind and the time to ask Death about him but Tony found that didn’t see Vision as a reminder of J.A.R.V.I.S.’ loss anymore.

DUM-E, U and Butterfingers were confused about why J.A.R.V.I.S. hadn’t come back with Tony. They were limited in ways that FRIDAY and J.A.R.V.I.S. weren’t, hadn’t been, they didn’t really have the complexity to understand rules that weren’t absolute. They’d been sad but accepted it when they’d been told J.A.R.V.I.S., and then Tony, had been broken too badly to be repaired. But now that Tony was back they wanted to know when J.A.R.V.I.S. was coming home and telling them he wouldn’t break Tony’s heart.

FRIDAY was Pepper’s spiritual daughter and Tony wouldn’t have her any other way.

And Nettie, Nettie was precocious and perfect. Tony saw his mother’s smile in her and Pepper’s beautiful, sharp eyes. He was terrified of messing up with her. Even in the wildest of his playboy days Tony had always been careful not to get anyone pregnant because, despite all the tension between them, Tony was aware that he was very much his father’s son and he never wanted to become Howard to some kid who had misfortune to share his genes. But Nettie wasn’t some theoretical child, she was his and she was Pepper’s. She might have been an accident but she certainly was not a mistake. Tony had fallen in love with her when he’d thought she was a dream and actually holding her only cemented the feeling.

Then there was...

“You’re thinking too loudly,” Pepper murmured.

“Are you really okay with… With everything?” Tony asked. “With all this? I actually do remember that you didn’t want kids. And it’ll make getting a break from me messier.”

“I’ve had four years of thinking I was never going to see you again,” Pepper said. “I can say with a considerable amount of certainty, that I’m done with us taking breaks. The last one wasn’t supposed to last long anyway. I- I was just scared. I wasn’t ready to be pregnant and then you were gearing up for a potential attack. Neither one was the sort crisis I was comfortable with. It wasn’t supposed to be forever Tony, just a little time to get my head back together.”

Tony smiled a little and nodded. Then he took a deep breath, “Um Pep, did um anyone mention how Loptr is a Loki de-aged? I mean while I wasn’t getting around to it.”

“The kicked puppy looks Thor was giving off every time Loptr cringed away from him was a clue… Not to mention the -discussion- you had with Odin,” Pepper said drily.

“I didn’t want to assume,” Tony said. “I think there was a big chunk of the behind the scenes of our little Avengers Civil War was me assuming that everyone knew what was obvious to me; that the Accords were going to happen for one.”

Pepper’s mouth tightened, “Nothing you did comes even close to excusing what they did. Don’t try to take the blame for their fuck-ups.”

“Yeah, old news,” Tony agreed. “About Loptr, are you really okay with adopting him?”

“The part of me that wants to be angry at Loki for keeping you from me for so long has been thoroughly out voted by the part of me that knows you would be dead if not for him and the part me
that saw the absolute terror in his eyes when his father walked into the room,” Pepper sighed.

“Odin’s claim to fame is the subjugation of Jotunheim,” Tony said grimly. “Loptr spent the last couple hundred years listening to tales of how his father gloriously slaughter the Jotun in battle. Now he finds out he’s one of those people his father spent decades killing.”

“That’s...” Pepper shook her head. “A fucked up way to raise a kid. Tony, I can see you’re the only source security that kid has right now, I don’t have the heart to deny him that. But we’re talking to Doc Samson about him first thing in the morning.”

“What?”

“Leonard Samson has spent the last few years becoming THE specialist in Enhanced psychotherapy,” Pepper explained. “If he’s not the right person to talk to Loptr he’s the one I want making the recommendation. Because I can already see potential problems in the way he glares at anyone else who has a claim on you.”

Tony grimaced and nodded, “Probably wouldn’t do any harm if I talked to this Samson guy a little myself. Four years is a long time,” he admitted.

Chapter End Notes

So in the comics Kid Vision/Jonas is a separate character from Vision. More like the distinction between J.A.R.V.I.S. and Vision than the distinction between Kid-Loki and Loki. With the Mind Stone involved it's less clear cut here but this chapter didn't really have a spot to explore it more.

The end of 5+1 Valentines is next chronologically and should be next week's chapter.

Then the the midterm epilogue which is also the Steve-centric chapter and also back to Vision.
About a week after the Chitauri surrender Steve found himself summoned to SHIELD’s New York office along with the surviving members of his team. They were escorted into a large conference room along with a dozen other Enhanced.

Rachel and Melissa glanced at each other then split up to work the room. In a few minutes Melissa was chatting up a guy in a winged suit of armor. Steve was embarrassed to admit that he was a little relieved to see Rachel had picked a woman in a snake-themed costume to pump for information, probably an old friend from her Serpent Society days judging from their body language.

Since Tony’s rescue Steve had found himself doing a lot of reassessing of his expectations. He hadn’t meant to do it, he’d wanted to be part of the rescue effort because he wanted to do something to make amends for what he’d done to Tony, but somehow, some part of him had started thinking that if he helped to bring Tony home, alive he could erase the horrible mistake he’d made at Siberia, that things could go back to the way they’d been. On the way out getting Tony back alive had been everything, the only thing. That had made it easy to believe that everything could, would change if they succeeded.

The trip home, after Tony’s recovery and the Order Black’s defeat, had made it clear that wouldn’t be the case. There had been no point in talking to Thor unless you wanted to talk about Loki, first Loki had been dying from poison and impalement then from humanity and while it didn’t sound too bad from Steve’s perspective he did get, at least intellectually, that a human lifespan was horrifically short to someone like Thor, especially when applied to his little brother. And Tony had been about as eager to talk about something not related to Loki’s health as Thor.

Steve eavesdropped on enough conversations to know that Rhodes, Dr. Banner and Dr. Pym were all concerned about Tony’s attachment to his captor of the last four years as well. However, eavesdropping was as close to sharing concern with them as Steve could get. “Looking at you doesn’t make my blood boil,” Bruce had said. “There’s a huge part of me that just can’t believe you could be so short-sighted, willfully ignorant, self-centered and negligent. That you could care so little about Tony…” Bruce shook his head, “Intellectually, I know that you were but I just can’t believe it. And for that reason I’m capable of working with you… Since I have to, it doesn’t mean I want to.” Dr. Pym regarded him with open contempt and Rhodes—Colonel Rhodes was civil and professional but Steve didn’t fool himself, Rhodes hated him.

As for Tony... “I can be friends to more than one person,” Tony had said and Steve knew that HE hadn’t been. He’d only been Bucky’s friend for a long time and the number of people willing to let Steve try to do better in the future had become vanishingly small. Tony certainly wasn’t on the list, sometimes Steve wondered if even Bucky was.

Nick Fury walked into the room along with the nasty little man Steve remembered from Berlin, the Deputy Commander of the unit that had gone after Bucky or something. Fury stood in the doorway and glared at the room, prompting everyone to quickly get their ass in a chair. He held up a sheaf of documents. “Congratulations, you earned your pardons. Now that we’re demobilizing we don’t need
you anymore.

“However, in the interest of giving you a little help in staying straight and maintaining whatever civic-mindedness you’ve managed to cultivate you’re being offered the option of going into the Reserves. You show up once a month for training, you get a retainer. If there’s another global threat of sufficient severity that we run out of fully trained volunteers who don’t have a criminal record we’ll call you. In other words you don’t need to be worried about the Accords Committee wanting you for less than the end of the world. So, thanks for your service. Good luck. Try not to get arrested again.”

Steve hung back as the others picked up their pardons and meandered out of the conference room. Melissa and Rachel hesitated at the door, waiting for him along with Melissa’s new friend. “What if you want to become an active Avenger?” Steve asked Fury as he accepted the pardon. “What do I need to do to re-enlist?”

“You don’t,” Everett Ross stated bluntly. “Do you know how much of a headache it was to find a team willing to take Sam Wilson? That was during the war. And he was the polite, hard to hate, member of your little cliche.”

“The discharged me,” Steve told Bucky, clutching the phone like a lifeline.

“Weren’t you trying to figure out a way to get into art school back before the war, er- WWII, broke out?” Bucky suggested… Or possibly asked, Steve sadly noted that Bucky didn’t sound entirely sure of his memory.

“Yeah, drawing was about all I was good for back then,” Steve said. Drawing had been his comfort when he was laid up, too sick for school or work. He’d returned to it in prison to try to make sense of his thoughts by turning them into something concrete. He flexed his hands, larger and so much stronger than they’d been back then but still, apparently, not good for much.

“Or do construction if you’re still trying to prove something,” Bucky said a bit impatiently. “That was the better part of why you were always so hot to enlist wasn’t it? It’s why collecting scraps or selling bonds wasn’t good enough for you. It wasn’t enough to fill a need, you had show that you could fight.”

Steve bowed his head remembering the Expo, trying to enlist for the fifth time, Bucky telling him “They’ll catch you. Or worse, they’ll actually take you.” Back then he’d had answer, back then he’d believed it when he insisted “There are men laying down their lives. I got no right to do any less than them. That's what you don't understand. This isn't about me.”

He’d believed it then even when Bucky argued there were other things he could do. “There are so many important jobs.”

“I'm not gonna sit in a factory, Bucky.”

Now he heard how, in insisting on being one of the people he’d so admired, even when he was manifestly not fit, he’d refused to support them and had spit on everyone who had been willing to do whatever they could, whatever they were capable of to help. Now he realized that Bucky had been right back then: It had been about him.

“So you got any thoughts on when you’re coming back to the States?” Steve changed the subject.

“I guess I could ask T’Challa about a getting a passport.” Bucky said without enthusiasm. “Suppose it’d be nice to see how Brooklyn rebuilds from the war. I’m probably old news by now.”
“A passport?” Steve asked.

“Lost US citizenship when Wakanda decided I’d made reparations for Bucharest, Berlin, Leipzig and Siberia after just a couple years,” Bucky said flatly. “Revoking my citizenship settled the protests in the US, I know you know about this.”

“I always figured it was just for show,” Steve protested.

Bucky sighed, “Maybe it was but it wasn’t less real for that. ‘Sides, I got a life here, maybe a girl. That part’s a little hard to work out. I mean Wakanda’s way too forward minded for any sort of crap like their king having a harem. The Dora Milaje are the king’s bodyguards and personal attendants, it just happens that Dora Milaje translates into something like wives-in-training. I’m not quite clear on what happens if one of them totally cerimonial wives-in-training sets her eye on a guy who ain’t her king… But we’ll work it out. Well, work out something where I’m not climbing out her window predawn while her shield-sisters snicker and pretend they don’t see me… or get all flustered if I actually manage to make it past ‘em on the sly.”

Steve felt blush climbing up his neck. “You and the dames. You were always—” he sputtered.

“Why don’t you come visit me sometime,” Bucky said. “Bring that girl you kept mentioning in your letters. This Rachel sounds like she’s got some promise in keeping you in line. It’s time you went home from the war Stevie.”

Steve was out walking, trying to figure out what to do with himself, when he saw Colonel Rhodes speaking on a display model television. He turned into the nearest open sports bar and wasn’t surprised to see a good crowd gathered around screen tuned to the Colonel’s speech.

“The Avengers, Enhanced in general, were never meant to become a standing army under the Sokovia Accords,” Rhodes was saying. ‘The Avengers’ remit as defined in the Accords was to defend against threats to the planet as a whole. Before the threat of Thanos came to light we were moving toward a model where a core group of Avengers were employed to train newly discovered Enhanced in the responsible use of their abilities. We served as liaisons pairing Enhanced who wanted to be in law enforcement, military or anti-terrorist forces with the traditional forces working in those areas. And we were available as a first response if a global threat did appear.

“With the War for the World’s end we are in the process of moving back to that model, demobilizing the army assembled to face Thanos. This will be a gradual process. The Chitauri’s terms of surrender mean we’ll be hosting them on the planet for the next year while the forces dispatched to attack our planet refuel so that they’re capable of making it back to their own space. We’re giving them the ability to retreat but we will maintain a global force capable of dealing with any violations of their terms of surrender until they’re gone.”

The screen switched from Rhodes to a newscaster. “Coming up in the News: The United Nations continue negotiations with the Nova Empire to transfer control of the Defense Platforms they built in our solar system over to Earth’s forces. In the face of a united front, the Nova Empire has agreed to decommission of the weapons in those platforms which were designed to destroy the Earth in the event that we were defeated by Thanos, however, there is still no sign of agreement on how much of a military presence the Nova Corps will maintain in the Sol System going forward.

“Meanwhile, Jotunheim has entered into talks with Earth to turn their military outpost on the Jovian moon, Callisto into a permanent settlement. It is anticipated that other members of the Nine Realms will make similar requests shortly...”
Steve and Rachel along with Melissa and her new friend Abner Jenkins ended up pooling their Reservist Retainers and to cover the monthly rent a small place while they looked for work. Steve supplemented his share of the living expenses with his saved backpay so that the demands of his enhanced metabolism weren’t a drain on the other’s resources but it wasn’t an indefinite solution, he needed to get work. Steve considered Bucky’s suggestion of construction but almost all of the clean up efforts were subcontracted through Damage Control, after realizing that he didn’t even bother applying to them. He knew how to draw but had no idea of what the business side of being an artist entailed. Ross had made it clear that Avengers-type work was off the table.

A week after Rachel dragged him down to the unemployment office invitations to OsCorp showed up at their door. Given the scathing letter to the editor about Captain America’s current employment status, which had been met with overwhelming mockery- Steve had no idea who thought it was a good idea to write it, the last thing he wanted to do was draw attention to the situation. -Steve had a fairly good, if embarrassing guess as to what Harry Osborn was going to say and Harry didn’t surprise him.

“You’re my dad’s team and…” Harry paused awkwardly. “I kinda hate that everything you did for the planet is being overshadowed by the mistakes you made, that you’re not being given much of a chance to move on from them. I wanted to offer, um you’re all totally overqualified for OsCorp security but positions there or OsCorp is continuing work on the Goblin-line and other projects designed to enable regular police or military forces to successfully perform their jobs even against Enhanced. Er…” Harry stole a nervous look at Steve, “Um, I guess that’s something you’re against.” Then he automatically slid into the manner of a salesman making his pitch. “But should we really be trusting random chance to ensure the good people who become Enhancement outweigh the bad ones? For every one Enhanced individual who decides to turn hero another three turn villain. In this modern age police need to be able respond effectively to crimes committed using enhancements, our militaries need to be able to respond to alien invasions. I need people to evaluate the effectiveness of our offerings before they get into the field. I don’t want people depending on shoddy equipment.”

Steve’s pride told him to refuse the offer and Harry was right about him not liking the company’s direction but… But Otto Octavius was hovering in the background and Steve didn’t like his look now anymore than he had before. His gut told him that Harry’s XO did not have the earnest young businessman’s best interests at heart.

“Could I extend the offer to a friend in the same fix?” Melissa asked before Steve had a chance to respond. “He’s a tech-based Enhanced, used to work as a techie for S.H.I.E.L.D. but he didn’t get any respect from the field agents so he cobbled together an winged suit of armor and taught them some respect.

Harry grinned, “Sure, love to have him.”

“You didn’t have to do this,” Rachel said. Then she grinned, “But no take-backs!” And Harry laughed.

Steve saw Octavius glowering and felt better about saying, “Thank you.”

“Should the Avengers really be tying themselves up with disaster relief efforts?” The word ‘Avengers’ drew Steve into the breakroom like a magnet. Not really agreeing with what Harry was doing with his company, Steve had chosen the security option along with Melissa rather than helping with product testing like Rachel and Abner had. Abner turned out to have enough tech know-how that he’d moved away from being a test subject to challenge the Goblin Gear to being a full part of the R&D team. Rachel liked the excitement of the
mock battles and Melissa liked working nights in security as it didn’t interfere in the classes she was taking.

Making equipment that qualified the pilot as tech-Enhanced and selling it to the police made OsCorp a target twice over, both for people trying to steal the gear and for those angry that OsCorp enabled the police to be a threat to their activities. Steve was glad to be useful even if the police and their Enhanced allies took over with any situation that went past OsCorp’s walls.

Captain Danvers was on the TV in her Avengers gear, smiling at the Sixty Minutes journalist, “The Avengers’ remit is global threats. In the two years since the War ended there have been no events meeting the criteria laid out in the Accords for the Avengers to assemble. Local Enhanced working along side law enforcement deal with the bank robbers and lunatics going on rampages. The JCTC also has a healthy contingent of Enhanced trained to work with them in dealing with Enhanced Terrorist threats. The Avengers can call on those individuals as well as their Reservists in the event of a global threat that requires a larger response than the seven active Avengers teams scattered across the globe and the two teams stationed in space. But until such threat emerges, earthquakes and tsunamis are a much better fit for the classification of a ‘global threat’ than most terrorists, given the magnitude of lives that can be endangered by the larger natural disasters.

“The Avenger don’t and shouldn’t be dealing with every two-bit hood who happens into some power and we shouldn’t be dealing with organizations like HYDRA. We don’t have an open invitation to go anywhere in the world and do anything we like. During the War the number of Enhanced coming forward exploded, technology leapt forward. In the aftermath of the War there are local people who can deal with local issues without the political controversy and misunderstandings that accompanies a foreign team coming in.”

Steve quietly backed out of the breakroom and went back to his rounds, glad no one had noticed him come in or had the chance to ask what he’d been thinking when he led his Avengers into situations like Lagos.

Harry graduated from the Avengers Academy four years after the war ended. It was an unusually long training period for someone who started training as an adult but with his initial adventure as a black mark on his record and the Avengers and Earth’s other militaries going through a demobilization period there’d been more push to hold him in training than to move him to active status.

Steve smiled and congratulated Harry on his graduation and Rachel patted him sympathetically on the shoulder when Harry wasn’t looking.

“Why do you stay with me?” Steve asked later that night.

Rachel smiled wryly, “I know myself, without you as a reason not to I would have fallen back into mercenary work before Kid-Goblin ever made us his offer.”

Tony came took the podium in front of Stark Towers, at home in front of the TV Steve turned up the volume. As had become his custom Tony was wearing the breastplate and bracers that were his armor in resting state. His habit was, of course, the genesis of the latest fashion trend that made the streets of New York look like Ren-Faire. Steve wondered if it was a sign that Tony was doing better that he was making appearances with the armor in its resting state now rather than just taking the helmet off for interviews like he had for the first few months after his triumphant return.

Tony grinned at the reporters, “So you guys want to know what I’m up to? About SI’s direction now
that I’m back? A lot of you have asked if the armaments I sent Earth’s way from Asgard means SI is going back to manufacturing weapons. I suppose I could just tell you that I’m highly supportive of Harley and Peter’s decision to take the company in a biomedical direction, retroactively making my B.S. about Iron Man being a high-tech prosthesis, well, somewhat less B.S.-y. But I’m trying to hang on to the non-asshole image I’ve got going at the moment so…

Tony took a deep breath, “No one has ever won an arms race. There’s no finish line and the other guy never drops out. The whole point of the game is to accumulate such a huge power-differential that you can feel safe because your enemies would never dare attack you. But while you might feel safe if you’re the one with the lead, the other guy’s safety now depends on your… benevolence. And they don’t trust it, any more than you’d trust their benevolence if the situation were reversed. So they’re just going to keep searching for ways to whittle away your power differential until it’s gone. Until we’re both sitting on a pile of nukes saying we’re safe because we can destroy the world twenty times over if anyone starts anything and they’re saying that they’re safe because they can destroy the world twenty times over if anyone starts anything. And no one’s won and no one really feels safe. Until everyone agrees that maybe tying isn’t so bad and eventually someone has the guts to ask wouldn’t we maybe be just as safe if everyone was sitting on the power to destroy the world five times over instead of twenty times over? And in the background we’re all trying to come up with the new big thing that’ll make nukes obsolete before the other guy finds that same chalice.

“When I decided to walk away from the military arms race, it wasn’t my intention to jump headlong into another arms race but old habits die hard and I was a second generation Defense Contractor. I was comfortable with the paradigm of the new world of Enhanced powers that I found myself in. The rules of the game were like an old familiar friend: Jealously guarded power. Secrets hoarded for the edge they represent. The safest hands are our own. An arms race on an individual level and we were all so very proud of ourselves for cutting the government out of the process.

“The myth of the Old West is great but there’s a reason why it’s not the rule of the land. Much better to have a system of checks and balances rather than counting on power of righteousness to ensure that the ‘good guy’ has the faster draw. We could tell ourselves that we were the hero of the story, the ones setting right the wrongs of the world but at the end of the day we were just players in a might-makes-right game. And our good intentions didn’t come out on top when they came in conflict with our personal interests.

“SI will not be going back into the weapons business. That’s still my choice. The war against Thanos served to push our militaries to new heights, as most wars do. The gap between Enhanced and Traditional peacekeeping forces has narrowed substantially. I intend to continue working to further reduce that gap by providing defensive equipment. But if you want bigger guns? Well, I’m sure we’ll have plenty of alien ‘guests’ willing to fill the demand, I’ll stick with working on making them ineffectual. This time I will not be switching from one arms race to another, I won’t be looking for ways to give one group a positive power differential but I’ll be working towards creating the tie, leveling the playing field since that seems to be the only way we’ve found to de-escalate.”

Steve tried to volunteer to help lobby for several of the never ending list amendments proposed for the Sokovia Accords and the US’s SHRA. Most of the time he was politely turned down but more than once he was told, “If you really want to help, go publicly proclaim your support for the other side.”

The influence he’d once had was long gone. His reputation tarnished beyond repair.

Tony Stark was everywhere on the news.
The World Health Organization started distributing a new, general vaccine developed by Stark Industries based on some of the information Tony brought back from Asgard. To Steve it sounded like a watered down version of the Super Soldier Serum. Bruce Banner made some of the presentations about how the vaccine worked and what its effects would be.

Tony was consulting with Reed Richards and the Storm Consortium on building intergalactic ships so Earth and New Earth wouldn’t need the Nova Empire to stay in contact. The Consortium was also working with representatives from Nidavellir to learn more about terraforming other bodies in the Sol system for human habitation.

Tony provided the final key to fully integrating Helen Cho’s synthetic tissue with Peter Parker and Harley Keener’s prosthetics to make artificial limbs that did everything a natural limb did except grow. His contribution, enabling Helen to finally discover how to rebuild nerve tissue, finally enabling her to fully heal Rhodes’ injuries from Leipzig.

The media could barely go a week without putting out a suggestion, opinion or questions about why Tony Stark didn’t have a more prominent, official position on the Accords Committee. It didn’t seem to matter how many times Tony pointed out that Colonel Rhodes and Captain Danvers had everything well in hand from the Enhanced side and he’d much rather spend his time on tech than on politics.

Pictures of Tony and his family dominated the supermarket checkout stands. Steve heard that Pepper had requested and received a restraining order but it didn’t seem to make a dent in the pictures of Tony, Pepper, Nettie, Vision and Loki- Well Loptr according to the press but Steve would never see him as anything but Loki. - Harley Keener and FRIDAY also showed up with the family but more frequently the photos of FRIDAY showed her with her boyfriend or with the European Avengers as Iron Lass when it was decided that, AI or not, she shouldn’t be on the same team as her father. Harley was on an extended leave from the Avengers to complete his doctorate, a somewhat controversial choice in the media’s eyes.

The closest Steve came to seeing Tony or any of his extended family in person was when Peter swung OsCorp to see Harry Osborn.

On the fifth anniversary of the Chitauri surrender ending the War for the World, Steve took the day off work to attend the anniversary celebration, mostly because Tony was the keynote speaker. He passed through the security around the event without challenge but the weight of wary eyes told him that he hadn’t gone unrecognized and that was still remembered largely without fondness. Steve blended into the crowd and waited for Tony to make his speech.

“For a long time the super heroics game was been defined by people willing to go outside the system to get done what needs doing,” Tony said. “And there’s time and a place for that- It’s tying a couple of branches to your broken leg so you can hobble out of the wilderness. But the time for those sort of measure is passed. What we need now is something bigger: People willing to do more than be an emergency prop to keep a broken system from collapsing altogether. People willing to do more than tear down what’s not working. It’s easy to point out the problems in a system, it’s much harder to take responsibility for building a new system that works. But since I’ve been back that’s what I’ve seen: At the Avengers Academy. At the Accords Committee… We might rub each other the wrong way more often than not but we’re all here to build, to create, something new, something that will sustain. The Declaration of Independence from the previous, no longer workable system has been given. Now we’re hashing out our new Constitution. One that encompasses Enhanced as part of our society. One that recognizes extraterrestrial empires as diplomatic relations and trade partners.

“Reality expanded. For a long time we tried to hide from that. People in power chose to keep the
public ignorant out of the fear that what was out there was too much for their citizens to handle. Your heroes declared that the safest hands were their own, relegating those they professed to protect to the role of helpless children. It didn’t work. A society built on a foundation of lies was doomed to crumble.

“Since I’ve been back, I’ve seen something new. I’ve seen people building a strong foundation. Searching, fighting for answers that will work given what we now know of the Universe that we are a part of.

“Once I considered myself the first of a new generation of Marvels. I’ve come to realize that I’m more accurately one of the last of the old. I look at the Academy and see we’re raising kids more idealistic than ourselves. I look at our governments and see people striving to be inclusive of all the myriad forms of humanity that we now recognize as sharing this world. I look at our cities, our planet and see a determination to rise from the ashes of this war stronger and better than we were. This is a new world coming into being and I can’t wait to see it realized.”
“Tony, why don’t you and I go for a flight. Do you remember that little restaurant on the Maine Coast?” Pepper asked.

“The one we found after talking to the kids with the new idea for capturing tidal energy? They did have a great clam chowder.” Tony said. Then he grinned mischievously. “Actually, I’m more in the mood for staying in. Just hanging around the tower. It is my eightieth birthday… Or would that get in the way of planning the party?”

“Terribly,” Pepper replied blandly. “The kids are in charge, I’ve been delegated the task of keeping you out of the loop.”

Tony rubbed his hands together, “How many close misses do you think I can engineer?”

“And make me look inefficient?” Pepper asked.

“Oh right, can’t have that,” Tony agreed. “Let’s go for a walk, then you can spirit me off to somewhere romantic and not in the way. Is Brucey being in town for my birthday or a happy coincidence?” Since they’d completed their universal vaccine Bruce spent most his time distributing it to disadvantaged areas.

“He said something about numbers divisible by ten and that he wouldn’t want to miss it,” Pepper replied.

Tony chuckled, ‘Eighty years. When I threw my fortieth birthday party I didn’t expect to see forty-one.’ There was grey in his hair but he was healthier than he’d been… ‘Well, alcohol and substance abuse starting practically before I was a teenager and going on much too long. The original arc reactor and accompanying Palladium poisoning. Even the not-poisonous version wasn’t exactly good for me. Maybe a brief window after Extremis but...’ But the Avengers had worn him down, consumed his energy and left him depressed, uncertain and desperate to do more, to do enough to be forgiven.

He glanced around at the crowds on the sidewalk as he and Pepper left the new Stark Tower and smirked. He didn’t see anyone who hadn’t received the universal vaccine. The life expectancy of people who’d received it before turning fifty averaged around hundred and sixty, people who’d received it in their twenties saw a similar life-expectancy but also a moderate but notable increase in reflexes and strength. Children who first received the vaccine while they were still growing were likely to live well into their second century and as they reached adulthood the definition of an Enhanced Human was changing. ‘Jessica won’t qualify as Enhanced in another generation or two,’ Tony thought.

Tony checked his reflection in a passing window and saw a gently fluctuating hundred and forty years left in his life from the combination of Extremis and whatever Loki had used to bring him back after Siberia. It had taken him years to get rid of the jagged swings that he’d come to understand marked someone bound and determined to die by violence. Any S.W.O.R.D. mission, every mission would throw the possibility of dying on that mission into every member of the team’s future, even Vision who was functionally immortal could die when he went into battle. But even among S.W.O.R.D.’s ranks most people’s numbers smoothed out between missions. Even in S.W.O.R.D.
most people lived their lives between missions. But for some people there was no in between, there
was only the next mission, the next chance to risk, to give, their life. Tony learned quickly to nudge
Rhodey and Carol toward getting help for the kids who came to them with that sort of life
expectancy. It had been harder for Tony to accept that it was okay for him not to want to give his life
but there were the kids and Pepper and his extended family. They were a reason to live that Tony
realized he didn’t feel guilty about embracing. And the little voice in his head that always insisted
that he wasn’t doing enough, that he needed to do more to atone, to be worthy, eventually, with a lot
of work, went silent.

The buildings in the rebuilt section of New York outside of the Arc Shield soared high above them,
taller and more graceful than would have been possible before integrating some of the knowledge
gained from Asgard and the Nova Empire. They featured dozens of aerial walkways arching
between the buildings to form a network of delicate looking paths across the sky. The city,
conversely, had shrunk in area as it shot upward.

“I’m feeling oddly nostalgic,” Tony told Pepper as he steered them toward the center of the city.

“Tony, are you sick?” Pepper asked and Tony laughed.

Several minutes later towering building opened up on a large green space. Memorial Ring Parks
were common in cities that had survived the war under the protective umbrella of an Arc Shield. The
New York Ring Park had a meandering path running through its heart, past statues commemorating
the attacks the city had withstood and the heroes who had lost their lives defending it. Tony knew
where the names of Jim Paxton, Misty Knight and a half dozen other heroes he’d never had the
chance to get to know but who had been close to his family were carved.

As Tony and Pepper wandered down the shaded path, past the monuments, Tony noticed a woman
carrying an arrow. Tony recognized Natasha Romanov immediately, she was older but still
prenaturnally graceful, still red-haired although he suspected dye. He thought about saying hello, he
thought about pretending he hadn’t recognized her. Then Natasha felt the weight of his gaze and
turned around. “Clint’s name is here,” she said a bit defensively.

“You’re probably right about him appreciating that more than he would flowers,” Tony said nodding
toward the arrow in her hand.

“After he talked me into letting him bring me in he always had my back. Always, except for
Leipzig.” Natasha didn’t say that finding herself fighting against Clint was why she turned, she
didn’t say she was sorry but Tony heard both statements anyway.

“You still in contact with his family? How are they?” Tony asked.

“Cooper’s a pilot, he flies escort for the transports going between Earth and New Earth. You’ve
probably seen Lila, she’s an attache to the current US representative on the Accords Committee. You
might not have realized, she uses her husband’s name. Nate’s an architect, he’s in love with some
hardening technique you brought back from Asgard, I don’t understand him when he raposidizes
about material properties,” Natasha said with a small grin. Then she glanced away, “Laura declined
the vaccine, she died a few years ago.”

“Oh,” Tony said uncertain as to how to react.

“Are you still with Agent Hill’s organization?” Pepper asked politely.

Natasha nodded. “For a while, right after the war, I thought Coulson’s group was a better fit but…”
She shrugged.
Tony decided against saying anything about Natasha never being one to go down with a sinking ship. Then on impulse he heard himself asking, “It’s my birthday tonight, you want-”

Natasha smiled, her eyes warming a bit as she shook her head. “I’ve seen the sheer chaos that your grandkids call good fun.”

“Who hasn’t?” Tony replied glad he’d asked and even more glad she’d declined. “And none of them are Loptr’s.”

“Yet anyway,” Pepper added with a small grin.

Tony gave her a slightly wide-eyed look, “What do you know that I don’t?” he demanded. He nodded an absent farewell to Natasha as he continued to grill Pepper about whether or not Loptr was serious about anyone.

After dating several fellow heroes Harley had married an engineer from SI’s R&D department, they had two kids while Mercedes had three with a young man who fought with sonic-tech he’d developed himself. Tony cheerfully shared grandfather duties, like presenting the five kids with loud, obnoxious toys to annoy their parents, with Happy. FRIDAY and Amadeus were working on a new AI together and Tony teased them about which of them should be considered pregnant with their ‘brain-child’. Vision and Cassie had adopted a baby boy under tragic circumstances when one of their teammates was attacked in his home, of the family of five only the baby survived. The attack sparked a renewed interest in secret identities among the Enhanced. Victor had been in a long-distance relationship with another member of S.W.O.R.D. for years but neither of them felt ready for kids. Nettie and Loptr took after Tony more than he’d like, by the time they were in their twenties they both had a steady stream of dates coming by who rarely lasted long enough for Tony meet any of them twice.

After years of prevaricating Rhodey and May admitted they were together, which Tony decided, retroactively made Peter his nephew. Peter and Gwen had married right after the war and their two kids had been part of the new post-war boom generation. Ben Parker was only a few years younger than Nettie, one of the bright stars of the space program working under Reed Richards, he had inherited his father’s powers but had little interest in using them for more than crawling around the exterior of his space ships. Ben’s younger sister May, Mayday, was training under Carol Danvers to assume co-leadership of the East Coast Avengers with her best friend Maggie Leighton. Tony didn’t know Maggie well enough to be more than mildly bemused at the choice to use her mother’s maiden name and the codename American Dream but she was a good team leader and a good friend to May. Tony took it to mean that Rogers had come through okay, since he’d also managed to raise a kid who had his best qualities and steered clear of the pitfalls that had derailed him. Somewhere along the line, that had become Tony’s definition of success: Raising kids better than they’d been.

As Pepper and Tony approached the inner edge of the Ring Park a curving transpasteel wall rose up forty feet in the air, simulating the activated Arc Shield. Ten years ago a restoration and commemoration group had erected the wall and returned most of the portal buildings to their wartime state. Closer still they saw tour-guides dressed in the motley mix of uniforms that had been common among New York’s defenders collecting their groups. Tourists from all over the Universe came to see the planet Thanos couldn’t conquer and the home of the man who defeated him. Tony tugged his ballcap down, he was a hero to the people of Earth but the people who had actually lived under Thanos’ heel practically deified him. Tony found it all beyond embarrassing.

He and Pepper crossed through one of the Portal Buildings. It was like stepping back in time. Outside of the Arc Shield New York had been rebuilt practically from the ground up. It had been rebuilt eagerly incorporating new technologies and techniques from the Nova Empire and the other
Realms, rebuilt to be a modern, space port city. Inside the area that had been protected by the Shield the need to rebuild had been minimal and by the time renovation of Manhattan or the other areas that had survived became a priority for anyone the area had become a historical district. Tony and Pepper caught a ride with one of the self-driving cabs that populated the streets of the city. The cabs and their bigger cousins the self-driving buses were the only vehicles allowed in the Historic District.

Because of the Arc Shield and Arc Reactor, Stark Tower had become the physical and emotional center of the city during the war, it was the heart of the historic district. A fact that caused Tony pain if he thought to much about it. That anything of his could belong in a museum was vaguely insulting in Tony’s opinion, let alone the monument to progress that he’d built Stark Towers to be. Pepper and Rhodey persuaded him to turn over the Stark Tower over to the city to become a museum dedicated to the War for the World anyway.

“Did Strange really wear the cape while he did triage?” Tony asked Pepper as they walked into the lobby. Wax models, including Doctor Strange, showed what the lobby would have looked like in the aftermath of an attack.

“It’s a cloak and it was hardly going to let him leave it behind,” Pepper said.

Tony grinned, “I’m going to have to say something you know.”

“You always do,” Pepper replied, shaking her head. “And I’m sure he’s found something new to tease you about since the last time you two saw each other too.”

Tony shrugged, knowing it was true.

There were areas of tower where tourists could tour through the efficiencies Pepper had converted most of the living space in the Tower to in preparation for the need to shelter people from the extended New York metropolis area. He saw a wax figure of Peter in one of the labs developing the tasers that had been one of the most effective weapons against the Chitauri, along with a display of some of the Avalon Tech Tony himself had sent back to Earth. There were transparisteel walls around the Arc Shield generator on the roof and the Arc Reactor in the basement to allow tourists to see them, although Tony noted, everything critical was hidden behind panels. Both pieces of equipment were still fully operational.

There were also displays, showing how other cities in the US and around the world had survived the war. There was a level dedicated to the migration to New Earth and an attendant who helped kids and adults pair up as penpals with the citizens of New Earth in an effort to keep the two planets close. On Tony’s request there was very little information or speculation on his four years in Asgard displayed in the museum. But there was a display dedicated to Tony’s personal history and another nearby on the rise and fall of the original Avengers Initiative. Judging from the display, history wasn’t remembering the Avengers kindly.

Between the day and seeing Natasha earlier there was part of Tony that wanted to argue, wanted to defend his old team. Hell, even his decisions regarding the Avengers were getting a thorough raking over the coals: That he created the ivory tower atmosphere among the Avengers that blew-up in his face during the Civil War when he stepped in and picked up the pieces after S.H.I.E.L.D.’s fall. That Natasha’s taunting of Congress and Steve’s failure to show when summoned would have gone very differently without SI Legal working like mad in the background. That without his funding the hunt for HYDRA would have fallen under the purview of trained professionals. That the Avengers’ raids and their hunt for the Scepter, their habit of fixating on a single HYDRA head, dating all the way back to WWII, had been what enabled HYDRA’s ‘cut off one head and two will replace it’ mantra to be so successful. That, despite the general disapproval of S.H.I.E.L.D.’s refusal to stay disbanded or accept any sort of oversight, their approach of attacking HYDRA as an organization and
capitalizing on HYDRA’s internal conflicts, with support from actual official military personnel like General Glenn Talbot was what finally ended the threat.

Tony wanted to protest, to defend the choice they’d all made back then, but in the end the only protest he could think of was that they’d had so much potential. The Avengers could have been something, something magnificent beyond belief. But that potential had never been realized beyond fleeting moments in the middle of battlefields when the stakes were so high that uncertainty vanished. As the Avengers they’d fought battles they shouldn’t have fought to assuage Steve’s fear of not being needed, because of Tony’s fear of not doing enough, because Natasha needed the means to wipe the red from her ledger, because Thor needed closure after he’d believed his brother to be dead, because Bruce and Clint had both needed a place to belong. The world had needed the Avengers in times of extreme crisis, brief, fleeting and desperate moments. But they, the people who were the Avengers, had needed to be the Avengers on an ongoing basis, they’d needed to be needed. So much potential but their insecurities undermined it all.

What Rhodey and the others had built in from the ashes was stronger and steadier, and Tony had embraced it wholeheartedly ever since his return. The New Avengers, now S.W.O.R.D. had been built around professionalism, around doing a job that needed to be done. ‘For all of us the Avengers were as much about pandering to our egos as they were saving anyone. The dark side of a hero complex: Our need to be the hero placed over the needs of the people we claimed we were there to save.’ Tony sighed and turned away from the display, turned his back on the past.

“Think we gave the kids enough time?” he asked Pepper. “I feel like being home.”

“Nostalgia never did suit you,” Pepper agreed. “If they aren’t ready I’ll scold them for being inefficient.”

Sometimes the world still needed saving and Tony was more than happy to help if he could. But he didn’t need to save the world anymore. When he called the Iron Man armor it wasn’t about atonement or redemption, it wasn’t a way to white out his past. It was about the future and making it something unimaginably great, for everyone.

Chapter End Notes

Kept trying to fit in more about Loptr and it kept not fitting. It'll probably pop up in "Moments".

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!