**atonement**

by **foolondahill17**

**Summary**

"There was an idea, an idea to bring together a group of remarkable people, see if they could become something more. See if they could work together when we needed them, to fight the battles we never could."

In which Loki is apprehended by Thanos, Thor is desperate to save his brother, the Guardians are in a race against time, and the Avengers are merely a fractured imitation of their former strength. Let the Infinity War begin.

(PLEASE SEE AUTHOR NOTE AT THE END OF CH.27 FOR AN EXPLANATION AND APOLOGY CONCERNING LACK OF UPDATES)
Twelve-year-old me would be highly disappointed that twenty-year-old me has devolved to
the point of writing fic purely for the sake of angst. I am regressing in my old-age.
Contributing to unhealthy standards, disgracing the purpose of fanfiction... blah, blah, blah...

Anyway, Thor: Ragnarok was great and Loki was sexy af in that black suit. I don't know
whether there will be more chapters to this; I have plenty to write about but the end of this
semester is also devouring me... so let's wait to see who wins: term papers or fandom.

*Grandly waves hand* I hope you enjoy my thing.
Chapter 1

As soon as he saw the ship and nauseating recognition thudded to life in his stomach, Loki knew that they would never make it to earth. On the receding wake of victory, they were all going to die.

"What –" Thor began, breaking away from his stunned silence to look at Loki.

Loki did not turn to face his brother. He was transfixed by the bulky, menacing spaceship. For a moment he was certain he was going to be ill. What had he done –

Then his mind seared in unexpected, white-hot agony. He tipped forward, crashing to his knees, hands clapped to the sides of his head as he fought back a scream.

"Loki –" Thor's voice was far away, muffled behind the reawakened, high-pitched shrieking inside Loki's own head: the pain as fresh as it had been yesterday, the cruel, piercing torture of a foreign mind invading, tearing, rending his own.

"Thor –" he managed to gasp between his desperate efforts to keep his mind his own, to defend against the alien voice that was already cackling at his petty efforts. "Thor – it – it is him – we must – must flee – before it's too late –" his voice dissolved in a silent shout, mouth stretched wide. He was on the floor now, curled in on himself as if making himself smaller would somehow diminished the target.

The ship shuddered and groaned. The lights flickered. They'd been swallowed by the larger ship's tractor beam. Alarms blared, red lights whirled. It was all too much. Too much. Loki shut his eyes against the influx of information. Panic smothered him. Not again. Not again. He would not let it happen again.

Footsteps rattled through the floor. "My King –" gasped one of the newly arrived guards in confusion and fear.

Thor did not have time to answer, for just then a deep, poisonous voice crackled through the ships intercom, so grotesquely familiar that, for a moment, Loki could not tell whether it was sounding from within or without his own skull.

"Little god…trickster god…" the voice hissed through the labyrinth corridors, echoing in the high-ceilinged chamber of the bridge, eliciting cries of distress and stilling heartbeats in fear. "You cannot hide from me. I know what it is you have. Have you brought it just for me, little god? How kind of you to consider bringing me a present."

Thor had his hand on Loki's shoulder, heavy and hot, a point of contact that Loki focused all his attention on, trying to distract himself from the tentacles of poison wending through the canals in his mind.

"I speak to your king – your little king, infant king – King Thor," Thanos continued. How did he know? Had he managed to withdraw so much information from Loki's mind in only a mere second of torture? "Behold, I am Thanos, destroyer of worlds, ruler of this universe.

"You dare hide your brother within your walls, King Thor, last king of the Asguardians? You threaten the safe haven of your people, just for your treacherous god of lies? Do you not know how he has betrayed you? How he has stolen the Space Gem from the shrine of your crumbled city – how he committed such an act with the intention of bringing the Gem to me, to fulfill my orders of long ago.
"I offer you a bargain – turn over your brother to me, the silvertongue, the fork-tongued serpent – and in exchange I shall not pulverize your ship and the last remaining souls of your people into a thousand particles of dust. This I leave for you to ponder. I give you an hour to do so. If, by then, the trickster god has not been returned to me, his rightful owner, then I shall destroy you."

The voice cut off as sharply as it had begun, leaving quaking silence in its wake. Their ship remained stagnant, fixed in the electronic pull of its exponentially larger companion.

With a final gasp of pain, Loki felt the digging fingers inside his brain tear away. Did Thanos find the effort too much, or was he merely withdrawing for a brief reprieve before beginning the assault afresh? Either way, the pressure in his mind receded, reducing him into a shuddering mound on the floor. For a moment he only lay there, trying to catch his breath, cheek glued to the cool metal floor. With effort, he roused himself, and pushed his body into a sitting position. Thor kept a tight grip on his arm and Loki found he didn't mind the steadying hold of his brother.

"Loki," Thor's voice was quite plain, not a growl of accusation. "What have you done?" Still, he might as well have punched a knife through Loki's gut.

"Thor, I swear –" Loki began but he could not continue. Swore what? What did he swear? The tesseract – vanished into a pocket in the fabric of his being instead of the fabric of his physical cloak, conjurable at the merest thought – seemed to burn his flesh with guilt. It was by his doing Thanos had been summoned to them – his doing, once again, that led his people to the waiting jaws of ruin.

Rapid footsteps interrupted them and Valkyrie burst onto the bridge. Her eyes flashed dangerously, she had her sword drawn. She shouldered her way through the wide-eyed guards who had come in when Thanos' first arrived. "You –" she demanded, point of her weapon fixed on Loki's face, "what have you done to us now?"

"Valkyrie," said Thor solemnly, raising a hand in protest as he stood to his feet and took several steps toward Valkyrie in case he had to intervene physically between her blade and Loki. "Put it away. Let my brother speak."

Loki struggled to stand. He put a hand against Thor's throne to steady himself. His head ached from the attack.

"Tell me," he said, grinning, "do the people send you to tell me they wish my blood spilled? I should not be surprised. What is the worth of a one life – the life of a traitor – in the scope of all the other lives, however few they may be when weighed against the masses we lost on Asgard."

Thor looked stricken, "Loki, of course they say no such thing."

"I wouldn't be too sure," Valkyrie snapped.

"Be still," said Heimdall, coming through the door, voice deep but calm. "In the face of this unexpected enemy we have no time for petty infighting."

Valkyrie heeded him unwillingly, sheathing her sword with a roll of her eyes.

"Thor," Heimdall nodded significantly to the nervous guards and Thor snapped to attention.

"Er – leave us – go to our people, spread the message that their king deliberates the best course of action. He will not allow another drop of Asgardian blood to be spilled this day."

The guards nodded, clapped their spears to their chest in a solute, and marched out of the doors. The doors slid shut behind them with a mechanical whoosh, leaving only Thor, Valkyrie, and Heimdall –
and Loki at the center of their attention.

Loki found himself almost immediately doused in a deadly calm. This he could handle. Talking himself out of sticky situations had always been his forte.

"Loki," Heimdall warned in his deep voice, searching eyes grave but, Loki knew, unable to pierce the more carefully constructed of Loki's glamours. "It is time you reveal your secrets."

Loki swallowed. Damn, he thought he could handle this. He stepped forward and formed a sphere before his chest with his hands, unfolding the Tesseract from its hidden place within his seidr. He drew it forth into his palms, the pulsing blue gem encased within a cube of luminous glass. Valkyrie stared, mouth falling open. Thor looked away. Heimdall's golden eyes gleamed from the shadows in which he stood. He looked sad.

"You took it from Odin's vault?" Heimdall asked solemnly.

"Yes," said Loki.

Loki did not know what to do with the Gem, but found he could not bear holding it in his hands a moment longer than necessary, thrum of incessant power against his skin sending shock-waves up his arms and into his chest. He settled the Gem into the seat of Thor's throne, where it continued to glow ominously.

"On your way to resurrect Surtur from the Eternal Flame, to save our people, you thought you would make a quick detour?" Thor said darkly, fists clenched at his sides.

Loki did not reply. His head was spinning, churning in endless circles as he sought some solution to their position – a position Loki had fitted them into quite readily, lured them directly into Thanos' claws. If it had, indeed, been orchestrated that way, it could not have worked out more neatly.

For a moment Thor wrestled back his anger. He finally mastered it, and when he spoke again his voice was soft. "Oh, brother," he whispered, looking up at Loki finally – remaining eye catching hold of Loki's face. His brother's gaze was unbearable. "Will you never learn?"

"It was you who pointed out that I just want to stay the same," said Loki.

Thor merely looked at Loki. Loki fought the desire to look away.

"And all of that --" Thor waved his hand at the floor to indicate Loki's moment of agony under Thanos' invasion. Loki felt his blood run cold at the memory. "What did he do to you, brother? He was hurting you – how?"

Loki swallowed with difficulty. "He has before wielded the Mind Gem, and retains its power even now that he no longer possesses it."

"The same stone you used within your scepter to control Dr. Selvig and Clint?" said Thor.

"Yes," said Loki again.

"And – this Thanos has wielded this same power over you?"

"I – thought the connection had been broken after I lost my scepter." Each word left his lips unwillingly. "It seems it has not."

"He can get inside your head?" Valkyrie demanded, voice equal parts fury and disgust.
"I can stop him," Loki snapped, an overt lie. "He simply took me unaware."

"Brother," Thor's expression gave no hint of what thoughts were churning inside his head. "This is the answer to the mystery, then?" he said finally. His voice was taught, with anger or some other emotion Loki could not tell. "Thanos was your puppeteer, those years ago on Midgard? He controlled your mind, prompted the madness of your Chitauri attack?"

"He never controlled me!" Loki yelled, heart hammering wildly against his ribs. His lungs seemed to be deflated; they did not allow him enough air to draw breath. "It was by my own volition I attacked Midgard – he – he –" he could not speak his name. "Through him I was given the means, yes, but it was my own agency, Thor –"

The strange look did not leave Thor's unpatched eye. He clearly did not believe Loki and it was maddening – for how could Loki convince Thor the depth of his monstrosity – the true extension of his betrayal of bowing at Thanos' feet, pledging servitude – please, he would do anything – anything to make it stop –

"Can he see inside you now?" Valkyrie asked fiercely. "Are you spying for him even as we speak?"

"No!" Loki insisted. The god of lies, he could not comprehend how to now convince them of his honesty. "I swear to you, I have never given him a moment's access – he cannot enter this place through me."

But he could. He could. All of Loki's defenses were stripped away, shattered long ago, would crumble again at the merest whisper, and Loki lay naked and vulnerable before the Mad Titan, mind exposed and accessible for Thanos to play with at a mere whim. There was nothing Loki could do to stop him. Nothing.

They were all going to die and there was nothing Loki could do to stop him.

The suffocating hopelessness that descended on Loki's shoulders threatened to crush him. He fought to still the trembling of his hands at his sides.

"Well?" Valkyrie turned to Thor. "You're the king around here – what are we going to do?"

Thor looked affronted. He drew his shoulders up, "We fight. This so-called ruler of the universe will discover what happens to those who dare invoke the wrath of Asgard."

Loki nearly smiled, but the pressure in his throat was too much. He shook his head. "He cannot be fought, brother," he said. "You have no idea of his power."

For the first time, true fire glinted in Thor's eye. He'd never been able to handle being told there was something he could not do. "And you were just going to keep this to yourself, were you?" he hissed dangerously and Loki would have preferred if his brother had shouted. "You never thought to warn us that a being more powerful than we could imagine has been seeking the Infinity Gems across the universe?" He gestured to the swirling blue cube resting on the throne between them.

I'm sorry. But Loki didn't say it because he knew they would sound like empty words, even though he truly was sorry. He had never imagined – but that was his problem. He never stopped to imagine the wider reaching consequences of his actions. He always considered himself the careful planner and Thor the hot-headed fool, but in truth they were much similar in their impulsiveness than Loki was willing to admit.

"If we cannot fight him, then what?" said Valkyrie. "Can we pull away from the force of his tractor beam?"
"It is impossible," Thor shook his head. "His ship is simply too powerful."

"Then what are we going to do, Thor?" Valkyrie yelled. Her face twisted as if she was in physical pain, so great must have been her frustration and anguish.

Thor snapped. He stepped forward, dwarfing Valkyrie with his bulk and height. "If we cannot hope to win then we shall die fighting him!" he bellowed into her face.

Valkyrie faltered backwards from Thor. Her eyes wildly cast themselves to Loki:

"Why don't you turn yourself in, you coward!" she shrieked and – oh – there were tears swimming in her eyes. Loki had underestimated the amount she'd grown the care. It was odd what fighting side by side with someone could do.

A smile ghosted across Loki's lips, but he felt no mirth. "But you know all about cowardice, don't you?"

And there was solidarity among cowards, wasn't there? After all, Loki knew from penetrating her alcohol-misted memories, that she only survived Hela the first time because she ran. She hid beneath the slain bodies of her sisters, pretended to be dead, and fled the scene as soon as Hela's back was turned.

Valkyrie blanched, face going slack.

"Silence, children," it was the voice Heimdall; Loki had nearly forgotten he was there. He stepped out of the shadows he had seemingly shrunken into, hands raised to shoulder-height. "We accomplish nothing by trading insults and losing our temper."

Thor turned his back again. He was panting. He was a boy again, Loki thought, hating to lose an argument.

What was this sudden influx of nostalgia?

"My King," said Heimdall to Thor. "You must think of our people. If we die, Asgard dies."

"If you suggest I turn my brother over to that – that egotistical, insane voice from the sky –" Thor stammered.

"I merely beg of you to weigh the cost of your choices, my King."

"It is not as though we can even trust him!" Thor spun back around, teeth clenched. "Even if I did – if Loki – which I won't – but even if I did, we could not trust Thanos to holding up his side of the bargain. We are at his mercy – and I doubt very strongly he is a merciful being."

"He is not," said Loki softly. No one seemed to hear him.

"Thor," said Valkyrie, not looking at Loki and Loki wondered if it was because she thought him despicable or thought him pitiable. "We have already lost so much. Why throw it all away while we still have one gamble left – even if a fool's gamble it may be."

It hurt. Loki was not surprised, but it still hurt. How could he assume he'd be treated as anything other than a bargaining chip, he who had betrayed trust so many times? There were no more connections lasting between he and his adopted people. He could not expect mercy. How much more did he have to pay before he washed their blood from his hands?
Thor was not listening to Valkyrie, either. A feverish light was in his single eye. "Perhaps we can bribe him only with the Gem –"

"Listen to what you say, my King," Heimdall urged. "I see all, and I could not see this. Thanos has been veiled by shadow, merely an uneasy darkness in the corner of my vision. It is great folly that I could not see him until now. I cannot say what other powers he has been hiding from my sight, but it would be madness to offer him more willingly.

"Then what are you proposing?" Thor raged, voice pitching toward boiling point once again. "Give him my brother as a ruse – send him to the enemy to be – be tortured or imprisoned or killed while we slink off into the night –"

Thor's voice called forth the wave of memories Loki kept firmly shut behind a wall of metal in his mind, memories he did not revisit except unconsciously in the deepest recess of sleep, when strangled screams and the palimpsest of agony awakened again in his frayed nerves. The rush of memories was too much for Loki and he shut his eyes, feeling sick. Thor had no idea. No idea. No idea.

"Thor –" said Loki, brother's name flying from his lips without his permission.

Thor must have misinterpreted his brother's voice for he waved him away, "Do not fret, Loki. I will not let him take you."

"Thor –" Loki said again, voice quiet in order to force Thor to stop his own incessant prattling, foolish man, fighting an unwinnable war. Thor had not yet learned there was no out-maneuvering fate. Heimdall was looking at Loki: the all-seeing man, Loki felt sure he could see into Loki's head in that moment. "Brother, please."

Thor finally turned to Loki and immediately quieted – was there something on Loki's face? Some telling sign? The shadow of already encroaching doom? Thor's shoulders heaved as he struggled to calm his breathing. "Loki…" he cautioned.

Loki interrupted him, "I do not ask for your protection."

"What are you saying?" said Thor, face tortured and suddenly all Loki could remember was his brother's face above his on Svartalfheim, as Loki lay dying in Thor's arms, panting against the agony of the Kursed's wound through his chest.

"You – you do not need to protect me, brother," Loki faltered over his words. Now that he'd made the decision to say them, they didn't want to make the journey out of his throat. His body was rebelling, fighting him to stay alive for only a few moments longer. "It is not right – Heimdall speaks truth – you must think about what is best for your people."

"Our people," Thor spat, voice strangled.

A smile twisted itself onto Loki's lips, "You said it yourself, Thor, no more Asgardian blood will be spilt today." Loki wanted to step forward, wanted to lay a hand on Thor's shoulder, but he was rooted to the spot.

Thor looked like Loki had slapped him. For a moment Loki was afraid he was going to start yelling again. Loki didn't know how much more of his brother's emotion he could take. He was suddenly very tired. He could barely stand. He wanted to sink into bed and never rise again, not until he slept for the next age, and the age after that, consciousness dissolved in the cool asylum of dreamless slumber.
Valkyrie's face was stony. She crossed her arms over her chest. Loki could see her work her mouth to muster enough saliva to swallow.

Thor suddenly flung his arm into the air. "Go," he said harshly. "Leave my brother and I to speak alone."

Loki smiled at the unfamiliar edge in Thor's voice – oh, brother, playing at being their father – but he tottered against the throne again. He was tired. So tired.

Heimdall stepped away without a word. Valkyrie paused for a moment, lips parting as if she meant to say something else but the warning look on Thor's face must have stayed her voice, for she turned to follow Heimdall from the bridge.

The door slid open as Heimdall approached and now was Loki's chance –

Did he flicker? He didn't think he did, but still, something must have caught Valkyrie's eye for she cast a strange look over her shoulder at him as she left – almost as if she couldn't recognize him, but again she held her tongue and the door swished shut behind her.

Thor seemed to immediately forget Loki was still in the room. He paced forward, then turned back around, clasped his hands in front of him, then behind. He came to a stop in front of the domed viewing port, inspecting the dark shadow of Thanos' ship, mouth set into a grim line. It was as if the twisted metal spaceship had eyes – had seen all that had transpired within the room.

Loki waited for his brother to speak, but when he didn't, he cleared his throat. His mouth was suddenly parched.

"I will go to him." Loki whispered, licking his lips. He half-hoped Thor had not heard him, but Thor turned immediately at the sound of his voice. His face was purple with anger.

"You will not."

"You – cannot stop me, Thor," but Loki was screaming inside his head: stop me. Stop me, brother, I beg you. Protect me. Run from this place. Do not let me return – return to what I know to be pure agony and terror at his feet –

"I AM YOUR KING –" Thor roared, spit flying from his mouth in his rage, born from fear and hurt instead of true anger, Loki knew.

Loki could barely breathe. He gasped as he spoke, "You are king to more than just me – and he will kill them – your people – our people – if you do not let me go –"

"I will not lose you again, Loki!" Thor yelled. He took a step forward as if he meant to physically restrain Loki, pummel him to the ground or wrap him in chains, as long as he did not allow him to leave.

Loki faltered backward. His heartbeat thudded in his skull. His voice could barely creep up his throat, sharp-edged words seemingly drawing blood as they rose to his lips. He would not let his brother die. Not again would he watch anyone perish because of his ignorant, selfish mistakes:

"I am sorry, brother, but it was never your choice."

OOO

Like dust dissipating in a faint breeze, Loki let the illusion crumble. Alarms blared almost
immediately, but Loki was no longer cowering in front of Thor on the bridge, but was already secured in one of the many evacuation pods in the belly of the ship. His diversion had worked, buying him plenty of time to travel, invisible, below deck while his double and Thor argued floors above him.

He strapped himself into the seat and his fingers flew over the control panel, unlocking the ship from its birth. The pod juddered as it was released from its moorings, and Loki gripped the steering shaft with white-knuckled hands. There was no room for hesitation now. It would be only moments before Thor discovered his plan and sent guards below to drag Loki off to the brig.

Loki's stomach roiled with terror as he maneuvered the pod away from the ship, shooting into the claustrophobic gap between the two ships. Thanos' ship loomed in front of him, bathing him in shadows and dread, blocking out the light of distant suns. Heavy and wet inside Loki's chest, behind the fear that he had managed to stifle as he put his ruse into action, was a sense of undeniable inevitability.

He should have learned by now he could not run forever from his problems.

Rapidly, he felt the exhausted calm he'd discovered while on the bridge eclipsed by uncomplicated fear. His fingers were shaking so hard on the control panel that he was afraid he'd simply be unable to make his hands do as he told them to. His chest throbbed with physical pain. He was acting automatically now as his mind evaporated into a blank whine of panic. He tried to think of Thor – not of Thor frantically searching the ship for his already absent brother – but Thor escaping, Thor continuing on to earth unimpeded, ruling their people wisely, kindly, fulfilling all Odin had hoped but never achieved –

Loki held onto to this picture in his head, drawing warmth from the image, as he urged the pod forward, flying willingly toward the waiting, leering gates of hell.
Thor was already clawing his way through the pod-bay doors, metal shrieking in protest as he forced it to glide out of the way and let him through faster, dammit, even as the sirens blared, indicating an unauthenticated launch of one of the evacuation pods.

"Loki – no!" he yelled but his brother was fully out of range of Thor's voice by now, sucked into the silent vacuum of space.

"Thor!" Valkyrie was on his heels, breaking out of a sprint. "It's too late. He's gone."

Thor could only stare outside the tiny porthole in the hull, glaring into open space where there had only seconds before been his brother, preparing for his mad errand. Thor could see the pod still, pinprick lights drifting further away from Thor's reach at every moment, drawing closer to Thanos' monster ship that loomed above them.

"Loki, you fool," Thor whispered.

"Thor," said Valkyrie, "listen to me. We haven't got much time. Now's our chance –"

Thor turned on her and for a moment he couldn't speak. His thoughts whirled inside his head like a maelstrom, all forming words that vied to leave his mouth at once.

"This – this is your doing!" He bellowed, throat raw.

He expected to feel rage, wanted to be angry, but he was really just panicked. Everything was falling apart. He'd been king for barely forty-eight hours and everything was already falling completely apart. "If you hadn't put it into his head –"
"It was already in his head!" Valkyrie shouted back. She knew how to put up a fight, Thor would give her that much. "Do you think this is the sort of thing I could decide for him?" She snorted, "Please, give him more credit than that."

Her words stilled Thor's lips. He wanted to protest that Loki was not thinking clearly. His mind had evidently been addled by this – this Villain's grip – and Loki could hardly be held accountable for his actions, even if those actions were heroic for once, instead of bent on destruction.

"He – he is –" Thor fumbled for the right thing to say. How did Father do it? How did Father always look so capable?

"He is giving us a chance, Thor," said Valkyrie severely.

Thor looked away. His throat ached. His single eye burned. He struggled to get a hold on the emotions that were throttling his ability to think rationally. He watched as Loki's pod was swallowed by an entrance that opened in the belly of Thanos' ship.

Thor's sight suddenly focused on a strange pattern of smudges on the porthole that separated him from the gasping space beyond. He took a step closer, bending to get a better look. Scratched into the partition, in Loki's hasty scrawl: you dunderhead, it's still on your throne.

"Loki made his decision." Behind Thor, audible even over the renewed beating of his heart, Valkyrie's voice rang in the hollow bay. "Now it's time you honored it."

OOO

The hatch that yawned open to admit Loki into the depths of Thanos’ ship emptied into an airlock, which then released him into a cavernous hanger, cluttered with rows upon rows of compact, attack-force ships. A fleet large enough, by far, for an invasion. The Sakaarian ship could be overtaken with a mere fraction of the convoy that spread below Loki’s pod as he glided overhead, trying to find space enough to land his ship.

He was breathing easier now. There were things to do, to plan and prepare for, plenty to occupy his mind and keep him away from the panic that still hovered just within grasp – to be beckoned whenever he lost control again.

A spot opened beneath him and he deftly released the propulsion, discharging the landing braces and settling the pod with a slight shudder onto the floor of the hanger. He unlatched his fastenings, but did not immediately open the exit hatch behind him. He sat for a minute, observing the hanger through the viewscreen. It was lit by globes of light lost somewhere in the cavernous dome of the ceiling.

Across the hanger, a door slid open in the wall, emitting three figures, too far away for Loki to make out entirely: his welcoming committee.

Before he let the paralysis of dread again descend into his limbs, Loki pushed himself out of his seat and opened the back hatch of the pod, bending slightly to avoid the low, vaulted ceiling. He dismounted, swinging from the outboard rungs to the ground below. His feet hit solid ground; he'd half expected to be able to feel the hum of the engine beneath him, but the floor felt as if it belonged to a stationary planet – Thanos ship was simply too large.

Loki's escort wended through the maze of spacecraft, finally emerging from the shadows. He immediately recognized the forms of the two guards that flanked the central figure: Chitauri sentries. Revulsion rolled in Loki's stomach as he observed the knotted, reptilian bodies, the dim yellow of
their eyes, and recalled the moist clicking of their joints as they moved. At their head was another familiar figure, cloaked in deep scarlet, blue skin adopting a metallic sheen in the dim light.

Loki stepped forward, gracious smile spreading across his lips, "Ah, Nebula, how good it is to –"

Loki's voice was interrupted as, quicker than Loki was able to register she'd moved, Nebula jabbed an electroshock baton into his abdomen. He doubled over as the shock pelted through his body but was stopped from falling to his knees by the two Chitauri soldiers, who snatched ahold of his arms on either side and hauled him back to his feet.

"Silence, filth," Nebula hissed. The metal ring inlaid into her flesh around her left eye gleamed. Had she lost even more of her body since Loki had last seen her? He could not tell. Her voice was certainly still the same: deep and grating, half-human, half-mechanical from the metal voice box she'd needed to replace her vocal chords when Thanos once ripped out her larynx.

Loki grinned, hiding a wince, "Charming as ever, I see."

He thought Nebula must have been given order to drag Loki to Thanos, but Loki struggled back to stay standing. He was going to walk for as long as he still had use of his legs. He would not be thrown down on his hands and knees at Thanos's feet before putting up another fight – however brief a fight it might be.

The two Chitauri kept ahold of him, but Nebula did not strike again. She turned her back and jerked her head in a follow-me motion, fist still gripping her baton ready at her side. The Chitauri pulled Loki after them. He fought back a shudder at their touch: frigid and claw-like even through his leathers. He could smell them. Their skin was wet and scaly, holding a taint of rusted metal. Unnatural, despicable creatures.

They crossed the hanger floor, dipping beneath spaceship wings and dodging heaps of equipment, until they reached the doorway through which Nebula and the Chitauri had entered. The door glided open at a touch of Nebula's palm to a control panel and they crossed over the threshold into a narrow, low-ceilinged hallway.

The sheer immensity of the ship seemed to weigh down on Loki's shoulders. His head cleared the ceiling by only inches. Was it purposefully constructed to instill a sense of claustrophobia into its occupants? Or was the ship merely built at max capacity – every inch of vast, labyrinth space an ultimate configuration of design, no millimeter wasted on undue comfort?

Loki towered by a foot above the crouched forms of the Chitauri and the lithe figure of Nebula. He could take all three in a fight easily – in a snap of his fingers he could escape their clutches and tear back down the hallway, rip through the wall back into the hanger, acquisition a faster, better ship than his own pod and be well on his way –

A fantasy, he knew. A fantasy of a doomed man. There could be no retracing his steps. There was no way he could run from this. His only purpose now was to tarry as long as possible to give Thor and the others time enough to put into action a course of escape.

Suddenly his heart was throbbing violently again inside his chest. He swallowed deep gulps of air in an effort to steady himself.

Closer. He was getting closer.

OOO

"It's a portal through space?" said Valkyrie, examining the Tesseract but not touching it where it sat,
still radiating blue from some inner light, in the center of Thor's makeshift throne. Thor did not know if it was awe or doubt in her voice.

"Yes. It is a doorway from one end of space to the other. Supposedly, if you know how to wield its power, it can take you anywhere you desire in the vast quantity of realms."

"And you know how to wield this power?" said Valkyrie.

Thor sighed and ran his fingers through his hair. He sometimes forgot it was now shorn so short. "Although it is true I have seen its great power with my own eyes, I do not know how to exercise it for myself."

"So, what are we supposed to do with it?" said Valkyrie, voice flat with disappointment, hands on her hips.

"I do not know," Thor answered. Brother, what is the answer to the riddle you have left us with? "It was always Loki who understood these things – and besides him Erik or perhaps Tony or…"

His eyes went wide as the thought came to him like a bolt of lightning. It was a desperate hope for it would require a fool's plan, but Thor would be damned if he did not at least try it.

"Valkyrie," he said sharply and she turned to him immediately. He hesitated only a moment before wrapping his hands around the Tesseract; the vessel was cool to the touch, and pulsing with some deep, resonating energy. He did not know why he'd expected it to burn his flesh. "Follow me," he told her as he marched away from the throne. "We have a request to make of an old friend."

OOO

Loki and his escort passed silently through the maze of corridors, walking up and down ramps, through doorways and into lifts, traveling unrelentingly into the entrails of the ship, utterly out of the range of the Asgardian ship cowering in the shadow of Thanos' ship.

Loki's legs moved automatically below him. His body had gone numb, another unconscious rebellion. His physical form would not allow him to walk willingly to his death. He did not know how long they walked; it might have been an eternity.

Finally – it was almost a relief – Nebula came to a halt. They stood before a set of double doors, wider and more imposing then the hatches they had yet passed through. Loki cast a probing strand of consciousness into the room beyond – he could not see through walls with his seidr, but could get a sense of an atmosphere of a place by sweeping his magic out before him like a net.

The chamber was large – too large for Loki to get his bearings – large and remote, echoing…and at the very center of it sat a figure, a brooding, hulking figure out of which a dark, oppressive sense of evil emanated –

Loki’s seidr recoiled, snapping back into Loki’s body but not soon enough: Thanos had felt the tickle of Loki’s magic, and now Loki felt a creeping, low cackle awaken in the back of his mind.

Thanos was amused by Loki's investigation.

Now again came the fear. The horrible, petrifying fear that seized Loki's limbs like cramps. He was rooted to the spot. He could not move. Would not move forward through those doors –

Nebula turned to look at Loki, she was sneering at him, smile distorting her usually emotionless face. "Father's very angry," she warned. "I'd be on my best behavior if I were you."
"What is this?" said Loki, words managing to creep out of his taught throat. "Concern? I'm touched, Nebula. I didn't know you cared."

"I don't," she said. If her mechanically-plated face retained eyebrows she would have cocked one in cold disdain. She turned away from him and scanned her hand again on the panel beside the door. The duel hatches swept open in unison, spilling into the hollow space of what appeared to be a throne room.

A narrow, black carpet snaked from the doorway down the length of the room, ending at the foot of a hovering throne. The throne was turned away from the door, facing a wide viewing port that looked into the darkness of space. The tip of Thanos' head was visible over the back of the throne. He was not concerned with greeting his visitors head-on.

"Go," Nebula jutted out her chin. "He wants to see you alone."

Loki almost chortled. The laugh stuck in the thickness of his esophagus that barely let up breath. Was Loki really so small a threat that Thanos had no need of a guard?

Now was the moment Loki was supposed to strut forward, unconcerned, confident – but he could not. Now was the moment of waking from this nightmare, of collapsing out of his bed, tangled in sheets, onto the floor of his chamber.

Nebula huffed in annoyance and barked an order to the Chitauri guards, who pushed Loki roughly forward, forcing him through the door and into the room so that his first steps were a stumble, trying to maintain his footing.

The doors slid shut behind him, sealing off any retreat, before the thought of fleeing could even cross his mind.

He straightened carefully. Still Thanos did not turn to face him. Still, Thanos' voice remained at a distance, merely a nagging pressure in the back of his mind, not yet a full-blown assault.

Loki swallowed and stepped forward. His eyes darted from one side to the other, taking in the breadth of the room as he approached the throne. Whereas the rest of the spaceship was compact and efficient, the throne room was spacious and exhaustive. The narrow path from carpet from the door bled outward into shadow on both sides and above to the arched ceiling. Anything might have been waiting and watching from those dark corners of excess.

It was not opulent; there were no jewels or glimmering gold, simply sleek metal and trimmed, sharp edges. Thanos was not one for opulence, but he was one for spectacle, and the very design of the chamber created a feeling of diminishing emptiness, of exposure and claustrophobia. Loki was small, a miniscule figure, swallowed whole by the sheer magnitude of the cavernous room.

Loki faltered to a stop. He had approached as far as he was physically able. Thanos' throne loomed above him. He had to crane his neck to look up at it. Still Thanos did not move. Loki did not need to deliberately cast his seidr to sense the overwhelming, threatening presence of the Titan.

Loki swallowed and dropped to one knee, bowing his head. He announced his arrival with a pitiful whisper, "My Liege."

OOO

The Hulk appeared to be twice the size he normally was, so great was the contrast between his green bulk and the compressed, gray-walled quarters around him, which allowed him barely enough space for him to sit on his bed – which was collapsed beneath him because of his weight.
"Thunder man!" Hulk greeted Thor as he stepped into the room, and immediately looked more cheerful for the company. He even seemed to smile. Valkyrie hung behind Thor in the hallway, mostly because there was no room if she too entered the chamber.

"Er – ah, the sun's getting real low, big guy," said Thor awkwardly, sure it wasn't going to work but not knowing what else to try.


"Listen," said Thor urgently, "listen, you can get out if you just…just concentrate real hard, big guy, concentrate on being smaller, and then everything will get a whole lot more comfortable."

"Hulk no get smaller!" Hulk drew himself into a standing position, dwarfing Thor below him, top of his head hitting the ceiling. "Hulk stay big! Hulk bigger than puny god!"

"Hulk," said Thor. He was getting frantic now. How long did they have before Thanos discovered Loki's ruse? He thought of Loki – standing before Thanos, writhing on the floor in agony under whatever torments Thanos conjured for him, screaming for Thor to – Thor had never seen Loki so visibly afraid as he had been when Thanos' ship materialized in their viewport. Something that frightened Loki sure as hell was going to frighten Thor. "Listen to me – I need your help. I need Banner's help –"

This was the wrong thing to say. Hulk was suddenly shouting. "No Banner! Hulk good! Banner Enemy! You don't need Banner! Only need Hulk!"

"Banner is not the enemy!" Thor's words flew from his lips. He didn't know what he was saying, voice gushing out of his mouth like a flood from a burst dam. "I lied, okay? I don't like either of you better than the other. I like both of you the same! Neither of you are the enemy! Both of you are good, and useful, in your own rights. But, right now we don't need you to smash anything! We need Banner to fix something – and if he doesn't do it than all of us are going to die!"

"No! No Banner!" Hulk roared. He stomped his feet and caused the floor to ripple beneath him. "Hulk help! No Banner help!"

"Hulk!" it was Valkyrie, pushing past Thor in the doorway. Her voice was measured and persuasive. "Please listen. You can help. You can help by giving us back Banner – just for a couple of moments we need Banner and then you can go right back to being Hulk. We need him to figure something out for us – and he's the only one who can do it for us."

"Hulk do it…" Hulk's voice was almost defeated. Something like hurt crept into his large green eyes.

"No," said Thor curtly, trying to keep a hold on his temper. If he lost it than surely Hulk would to, and then he'd have the rampaging beast to worry about, tearing up the ship before Thanos even got the chance. "Hulk no do it. Banner do it. Unless you can remember what Banner knows about this," he brought the Tesseract up toward Hulk's face – a gamble that the Hulk didn't try to smash it on impulse – "then, I'm sorry, big guy, but we're going to need Banner."

Thor was done. There was nothing else he could think to say or do. He had only to wait, wait for his words to somehow pierce the Hulk's dull brain, or wait for Thanos to destroy their ship out of his gathering wrath.

Hulk's eyes focused in confusion on the shining blue cube resting on Thor's hand. Was it recognition, Thor saw there, flickering through Hulk's emerald irises, or simply perplexity and
frustration?

"Banner…help with this glow box?" Hulk asked.

"Yes," said Valkyrie, nodding her head in encouragement. "Only Banner can help."

"Banner – Banner – help?" said Hulk and his wide green face wrinkled as though in pain. "Banner – help –" Hulk curled in on himself, arms crossed over his bare chest. "Help – help – Banner – help – friends," he huffed in his deep, slurred voice and then he was on his knees, impact of his falling body making shock-waves run through the floor again.

Thor stepped back, running into Valkyrie behind him. He watched, transfixed, as Hulk shrunk inward, rolling into a ball on the floor and suddenly he was not taking up as much space as he had been before. Slowly, easily, in a way Thor had never before witnessed – with no clawing hands, yelling, or gasping for breath, Hulk's green form morphed away, fading and melting until finally all there was left was a trembling, naked, and very confused looking Banner on the floor.

Bruce blinked. "What – what happened?" he asked.

"Holy shit, did not think that was going to work," Valkyrie crowed in delight behind Thor, craning her neck to look over Thor's shoulder.

"I – I don't understand," Bruce carefully picked himself off the floor. "What's going on – Thor, where are we – did we beat your sister? Wait, what happened to my – oh, damn."

"No time for that now, Bruce –" Thor said rapidly, grabbing Bruce by the wrist and dragging him out of the chamber into the hallway. "Come – you remember the Tesseract? You remember how Erik did to harness its power in New York?"

"The…Tesseract. Yeah, I remember the – is that what you're holding? Damn, wait – Thor, I'm not wearing any clothes!" Bruce protested as he was drawn into the hallway.

"Big guy," Valkyrie shouted, running to catch up, and tossed him an oversized bathrobe, stretched to more than four-times Bruce's size for the use of the Hulk.

Thor didn't wait for Bruce to tie the fastenings of the robe around his him before yanking him back down the corridor, toward the core reactor at the heart of the ship. They had a portal to construct

O0O

Loki kept his head bent and waited for a response – a voice or simply pain, Loki could not guess. Slowly, barely resonant, Loki became aware of a noise, like a deep rumbling of earth: Thanos was laughing.

The laughter grew louder until it thudded deep and heavy in Loki's chest, filling the air, echoing off the distant walls of the room, clogging Loki's ears, cramming into the blank space until Loki thought he could drown in the incessant noise of it.

Still, he did not raise he face. Now, he did not think he could muster enough courage to do so.

"Loki, Loki, Loki," said Thanos through his laughter, as if gently scolding a child or favorite pet. "My little god. My foolish, foolish child."

Loki heard the whir of mechanics as Thanos pivoted his throne until he was facing Loki. He could feel the Titan's piercing glare on the back of his head.
"Stand, Loki." Thanos commanded and Loki’s legs responded as if on instinct. "Face me on your feet."

Loki stood there, fighting the treacherous trembling of his body.

"Look at me."

Loki’s eyes did as they were told, body losing control out of habit, even though Thanos’ talons had not yet descended into his mind.

Thanos’ face was unreadable, but his eyes were steely and indifferent. He was smiling toothlessly, a sneer that made nausea tumble in Loki’s stomach. His purple, hulking knuckles gripped the armrests of his throne. His shoulders and chest were padded in armor, and head crowned with a helmet of gleaming bronze.

Loki felt feeble and vulnerable, mind grasping desperately for something – anything – a plan, something to say or do to get him –

"Escape is futile, trickster," said Thanos, voice like a whip. Gone was his tone of condolence, replaced by cruel, silky authority. "I do not recommend letting such thoughts cross your mind again."

But he could not feel him – Loki thought in terror. He could not detect Thanos’ presence in his mind. Still – still the Titan was there – lurking unseen and unfelt. And for how long? How long had he been there watching, listening to Loki’s unhindered thoughts –

Silence, a voice hissed inside Loki’s head. Silence, little god. It is pointless to resist. As you already know so well…

"So, tell me, Loki, God of Mischief," Thanos’ voice boomed across the throne room, crashing into Loki like a powerful wave. "Does your brother, the petty God of Thunder, betray you to me so readily?"

"No –" Loki panted, searching for words. His words, his weapons that could not fail him now. "No, I leave him willingly. Surely you – surely you trust me, My Liege. Surely you recall, I promised I would return to you, Tesseract in tow. I would have returned earlier but I was – unavoidably detained –"

"Spare me your lies, wordsmith," Thanos hissed, and Loki’s mouth clamped shut, heart skidding in his chest.

"There is but one reason you stand before me. And that is because I willed it. You are my slave, little god. Have you forgotten? I ask you to recall that we have been here before. You have before fallen at my feet, defeated, and pledged your life of service to me, as I commanded, bound yourself to my authority. I do not so easily forgive my debts, child. Must I remind you –"

"No!" Loki cried. It was a grave mistake to allow his terror to be revealed so blatantly, to demonstrate this weakness. Thanos would crush him – crush him all the more willingly because he knew what Loki feared, and knew just how great that fear was. "I – I swear – I return to you because I promised I would – it is a gift! I swear to you it is a gift I bear for you, now."

Thanos was laughing again. He rolled his eyes as if he was bored by Loki’s pleas. "Very well, little god," he waved a permitting hand. "Bring forward this so-called gift."

Loki ran his tongue over his lips. He swallowed. How many moments had Loki bought them? How much longer did Thor need? It was impossible to know. It would be impossible to know if Loki
succeeded until he played all his cards.

Loki must have delayed too long for Thanos added dangerously, "Or I must I persuade you, as I have shown myself capable of doing before?"

Loki sprang into motion, bringing his hands to chest height, swirling his fingers in a circular motion, as if forming a ball mid-air, until a blue light appeared at the center of his palms, growing into the shape of the icy blue Tesseract cube. Loki held the vessel in his palms. His skin chilled at the contact.

"My Liege," he said. What now? Step forward and deposit the vessel into Thanos' waiting palm? Loki tried to move forward but he could not make his legs work. Thor, the name drummed against the walls of his skull, Thor. Thor. Thor. Please, Thor.

Thanos eyes moved from the Tesseract in Loki's hands, flash of hunger in his pupils, before moving to Loki's face – where the expression was replaced with one of amusement.

"Nebula, my daughter," Thanos called softly without taking his eyes off Loki. His voice must have carried for, far behind Loki, the doors to the throne room slid open once again and Nebula stepped forward, accompanied by her Chitauri companions.

"Father?" she said.

"Come, bring me what our little god has conjured."

Nebula's boots cracked on the hard-floor, reverberating in the bareness of the room. She approached Loki briskly. When she reached him, Loki looked from her expectant hands to her neutral face. Was her mind made of metal, too, he wondered? Was that how she managed to be so unfeeling?

He transferred the Tesseract from his hands to hers. She pulled it away from his fingers, which trailed across its surface for as long as they could reach.

Nebula stepped up to Thanos' throne and offered the Tesseract up to him. Thanos reached down to receive it. Thanos straightened in his throne, eyes only for the Tesseract. Nebula stepped to the side, hands behind her back, awaiting further orders.

Thanos cradled the Tesseract as if it was a precious infant. Slowly, carefully, he peeled away the crystalline vessel surrounding the Space Gem as easily as it had been melting ice. Blue vapors flitted and cleared around his fingers, revealing the stone settled into his palm. It blazed blue like the heart of a flame, but at its center seemed to be a pit of darkness, the blackness of expansive space.

Thanos lifted the Gem to his face. Frosted blue reflected in his eyes and off his pointed teeth as he smiled. He barked a laugh of wonder as he marveled at the small trinket that cased the entirety of the universe, contained the multitude of the stars.

His eyes turned back to Loki. Loki's heart thumped in his stomach, too quickly, and he tried to master himself.

"Well done," Thanos leered, and closed his fist around the Gem. "A passing imitation."

He crushed the stone in his hand: shards of blue crystal shattered from his fingers, scattering over the floor at the base of Thanos' throne. The illusion dissolved into wisps of fine blue dust.

Loki's breath stuttered in his throat.

"But not enough, trickster god. Not nearly enough for me." Thanos addressed himself to Nebula,
who received his orders with casual indifference. "Prepare to board the Asgardian ship. Cut down any who dare keep the Stone from me."

"NO!" the scream tore itself from Loki's throat. Immediately the spidery, grasping fingers of the Chitauri were on him, stilling him – immediately Loki was frozen once again by the glance of Thanos.

"And you," said Thanos, as Nebula swept by without a second glance, departing through the doors to raise the call to arms. "You, little god, come forward. Witness the glorious destruction of those you tried so hard to protect."

OOO

"Listen, Thor," said Bruce, doused in sweat and the pulsating orange light that came from the ship's core-reactor. "I have no idea if this is going to work, or not. And – if by some miracle it does – there's no way I'm going to be able to tell it where to go. We could end up on the other side of the universe, or in the middle of a neutron star—"

"It will go to whatever coordinates we set the ship to," said Thor, speaking with confidence he did not possess. "It is just like when my brother and I used it as transport off Midgard. We simply aligned the chamber toward Asgard. The Tesseract was only our means of traveling there. This will be just like that."

"Yeah," said Bruce, burying his head back inside the control hatch he'd opened in the top dome of the core reactor, a stream of orange light that flickered behind a glass tube, capped by metal on the top and bottom. "Except we're using a chamber of considerable size difference," he muttered as he worked. Thor was not sure if he was supposed to hear what Bruce was saying or not. "With thousands of people hitching a ride."

"How much longer?" said Thor.

"I'm working with an incredibly delicate and temperamental nuclear power device here, Thor. And I'd really appreciate a little less pressure," Bruce snapped. "I've got to find some way to calibrate the power of the Tesseract to the core reactor, plus heat the whole damn thing up to one-twenty million Kelvin if I want to break the Coulomb barrier, which is the only way I'm going to rupture the nuclei and get the reaction started."

"And that will work?" said Thor eagerly. "It will create a portal to Midgard?"

"Theoretically, yeah," said Bruce, gritting his teeth as he cut a wire – the core reactor flickered dangerously in response. "It'll essentially manufacture a wormhole from here back to earth. Theoretically. Realistically, we'll probably all be vaporized where we stand."

"Right," said Thor.

"Er – your highness," cautioned a clipped, polite voice from behind Thor.

"What? I asked that Dr. Banner and I not be disturbed –" Thor whipped around, only to find himself face to chest with the towering, rock-like Korg.

"It's only that we appear to be under attack," said Korg apologetically. "It was, I thought, something you would want to know, but I completely understand –"

His voice was cut off by a jolt that ran through the ship, threatening to toss Thor off his feet. He steadied himself, cursing under his breath.
"Thanos?" Thor asked Korg.

Another explosion wracked the ship. Not good.

"Yes, lots of ships, too many to count, all coming right toward us out of that big ship which I assume is the ship of this Thanos you speak of –"

Thor was already turning away. "Get us out of here in sixty-seconds, Bruce, or we're done for!" He yelled over his shoulder as he ran from the room.

Behind him he heard Bruce mutter, "Not the zero-stress environment I need right now."

Thor raced up to the bridge, Korg plodding away behind him, leaving a trail of pebbles under his feet. Alarms screamed. Lights flashed. Smoke already choked the corridors.

Thor broke through the doors on the bridge to find Valkyrie and Heimdall already present. Thor's eyes immediately flew to the viewport, out of which he could see numerous attack-force ships skimming across space, streaks of fire leaving their guns and traveling toward the Asgardian ship.

"They don't mean to destroy us," said Valkyrie, "only disable us. I think they plan to launch a boarding party."

Time was up. Thanos had discovered the Tesseract was fake. Thor could only pray Loki had survived the resulting fury.

Thor pelted over to the intercom controls on the armrest of his throne. He yelled into the microphone, "Warriors, all who remain who can fight, arm the battle stations. Defend Asgard at all costs!"

Another, deeper tremor of an explosion ran through the body of the ship. They would not be able to survive this for long. Already, warnings flashed on all the unmanned monitors around the room, cautioning about damage that Thor did not understand and new not how to fix.

Come on, Bruce. Thor thought, clenching his teeth as he watched another slew of enemy vessels bear down on them, guns firing rapidly. Any minute now would be nice.

OOO

Run. Run, Thor. You idiot. You fool. Flee for your life – you have the means if you were not so blind you could not see it – Loki thought frantically from his view of the battle. The Asgardian ship was not even returning fire as an array of Thanos' ships swarmed it, pummeling its hull with red laser fire.

Thanos sat above where Loki stood, sneering down at the puny Asgard ship that rocked and sputtered under the force of the attack.

"Is it not beautiful?" Thanos voice was creeping venom in Loki's ears. "The destruction. The chaos. But you know all about chaos, do you not, my little god? God of Mischief, lover of chaos and pain – tell me, do you not love this pain, the pain of your people as their last hopes are crushed, as they are once again pummeled into nonexistence, for this is the most beautiful pain of them all – a personal, intimate pain, a pain you yourself can feel as if it were your own children being torn asunder before your eyes, your own mother or father crumbling in defeat, your own brother –"

Oh brother. Brother. Loki wanted to look away. He was a fool. A fool for imagining his plan might have worked, Thanos might have a shred of mercy –
You are right, Thanos voice was an iron grip on Loki's mind and Loki toppled forward, saved from collapse only by catching himself against the viewport. I know not the meaning of mercy. A pitiful concept. I have no need of it. And after I slaughter your people, be assured, little god, that I will turn to you – I will defeat you – destory you as I did once before – and I will not release you to the sweet kiss of death, even as you beg me for it, because you are not deserving of such a fate. You are not worthy of death, little god, silly, little god –

Thanos' hand yanked away, leaving gaping, bleeding wounds in Loki's mind and Loki gulped for breath in response to the unexpected release.

"No," Thanos muttered, distracted by what was occurring outside the viewport.

The Asgardian ship had been enveloped in a strange blue glow, an electric sheen that Loki immediately recognized and felt his skin rise in gooseflesh, felt his heart leap in disbelieving hope –

The blue light flared, obscuring the Asgardian ship entirely, palpitating outward, shining brighter until it was too blinding to look at but still Loki stared. The light burnt dark stains onto his retinas, but he was unable to look away.

"No!" Thanos roared and his anger erupted like a physical force, cascading over Loki, stilling his heart.

The flame of the Tesseract grew larger still, until space was silently fractured, a split in the fabric of time ripped open to receive the Asgardian ship to safety and then –

Nothing. Empty, gaping space where the ship had once been, nothing but a dark hole which Thanos' confused force of smaller ships circled for a moment, now without a target.

Relief blossomed inside Loki's chest, so fiercely that his heart pulsed with physical pain. Loki was crying, he realized, as tears streamed unencumbered from his eyes. Loki was – but Thor had – Thor had – and Loki was crying, but his panting sobs also seemed to be wild gasps of laughter. Thor was safe. He repeated inside his head like a mantra, and it seemed in that moment that the knowledge of Thor's survival could protect Loki from any future harm.

Thanos' silence was still and deadly. He took a deep breath, gathering himself.

"Now, little god –" his voice cut through Loki's victory like a knife.

Thanos hand landed on Loki's back and he faltered under the heavy touch; the heat of Thanos' skin was repulsive. Bile rose in Loki's throat. "Now it is time for you to tell us where they have gone."

OOO

Thor's ship rumbled out of hyperspace, spat into an abrupt halt out of the swirling vortex of light the Tesseract had sucked it into. Thor tripped forward, off-put by the sudden change in momentum. He steadied himself against the back of the throne. He struggled to get a hold of his thoughts.

Every possible alarm and warning light was flashing with insistent ire.

Valkyrie was speaking to Thor, but he could not hear her. He stepped forward, until he could lay his hand on the viewport in front of him. His breath fogged the glass.

Brother, Thor thought as tears dropped from his remaining eye, looking out at a skyscape entirely foreign from the one they had just sprinted away from. A familiar green, blue, and white marbled planet, for now only the size of a grape, hovered before them. I swear – if you are still alive – I will
not leave you to die in Thanos' prisons. I will return for you. On my word, Loki. I will not let you fall from my hand again.

Chapter End Notes

Before anyone freaks out…I know. I know Nebula wants to kill Thanos and left the Guardians with the purpose of hunting him down. Just, trust me 'kay? She's a smart cookie. Maybe she's got a plan too, eh?
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

Where are my freaking manners? Already the third chapter and I haven't THANKED my lovely commenters, bookmarks, and kudo-ers yet? Y'all da best. You make the Marvel fandom a super (see what I did there?) place to hang and I'm so grateful for the reception this story has so far received.

- Also -

Warning for a moderately disturbing torture sequence, found in the last section of the chapter.

"Uh, I hate to state the obvious," said Bruce, thin frame still draped in the baggy bathrobe, eyes glued to the viewport through which the earth rapidly swelled as the ship plummeted toward the outer layers of atmosphere, "but I think we're going to crash."

The tips of Bruce's hair were standing on end from the electric force of the Tesseract's surge in the engine room. His eyebrows weren't the only things singed; everything inside the ship's guidance and propulsion systems had also been fried. They were essentially freefalling through the earth's atmosphere, being torn apart by nearly 2,500 Newtons of gravitational drag through 3,000 degrees Fahrenheit of resulting friction based entropy, with not so much as a backup thruster still thrusting.

"Not now, Bruce," Thor snapped. He didn't pause in racing across the bridge, barking order to the assembled Asgardians at the various beeping consuls as warning lights flashed and sparks flew from overexerted instruments.

Valkyrie was shrieking at some poor incompetent, "Fire the ion thruster, idiot! No not that one! That one! Oh, for the love of – let me!"

Bruce really should have been doing something, finding some way to put one of his seven PhD's to good use, but to be perfectly honest he didn't know a damn thing about space travel. For God's sake, he had still been contentedly naïve about the everyday life on another planet before he'd woken up to find he'd been living it for two years. He figured he was entitled to some kind of goddammed reprieve for one goddammed minute, dammit.

The ship squealed and shuddered as it shoved through the exosphere. The viewport glowed fiery red as they picked up speed. The ship was vibrating. Bruce prepared himself to be incinerated.

The ship-to-ship intercom crackled on the throne's armrest, barely audible among the cacophony of alarms and panicked shouts that filled the bridge. "Attention. Attention…This is the United States Military… Be aware that you are in violation of restricted airspace…"

Bruce dived for the intercom and punched a button that looked like it wouldn't result in blowing up the ship on the spot: "Yeah, hello? Thor, how do you work this? – Hello? Hello?"

"Be aware that we will respond with force if you do not acknowledge…"

"Hello! Listen, this is Dr. Bruce Banner. I am a citizen of the United States. We are in distress."
Declaring emergency. Women and children are on board. Do not respond with force. I repeat, do not respond with force. We mean no harm."

Bruce highly doubted his voice was even making it through the intercom, and, even if it was, there was very little good it could do. It wasn't as if the US military was likely to even get a fix on their position, let alone manage to launch a rocket before the Asgardian ship collided into the surface of the earth at 2,000 miles an hour. Houston, we have a problem.

Bruce had always imagined he'd leave some kind of crater when he got taken out, but he had never thought it would be something quite like this. He felt a distant, anxious rumbling in his body as the Other Guy stirred with unease, but Bruce was easily able to ignore it.

"Dr. – Dr. Banner…" the intercom rustled in and out of reception. "Do…require assistance?"

"Yes!" Bruce yelled into the intercom as the ship continued to plunge. The red glare disappeared from the viewport as they emerged from the thermosphere, replaced by the frighteningly distinct landscape below: smudges of green and brown terrain veined with blue rivers. "Be aware that we are about to crash dead center into your goddamn country!"

People were shouting. Lights were flashing, sirens blaring. The viewport was swallowed whole by the surface that rushed upward to meet the ship. At the last minute, Bruce flung himself onto the ground, curling into a tight ball and squeezing his eyes shut.

When the impact came it was as if everything went into slow-motion. Sound stopped. Bruce's body filled with a strange feeling of weightlessness as he lifted off the floor, lazily spiraling through midair. He was aware of little things: the tingling in his scalp as his hair lifted away from his head, the tautness of his forearms as he gripped his knees to his chest, the nauseating dip in his stomach as he went airborne –

And then the moment was unpaused and Bruce was flung back to the floor with a bone-shuddering thud. His limbs unrolled around his body as he skidded on his back across the floor, tumbling rag-doll like across the metal until he finally came to a stop with a sharp crack of his head against the opposite wall.

He slumped, for a minute too dazed even to fill pain, or register he had stopped moving.

Then his lungs screamed for oxygen and his mouth flew open in a desperate gulp of air, and that's when the pain hit him like a four-wheeler had just smashed into his chest. His eyes flew open and every particle in his body was screaming with pain – but pain was good. Pain meant he was still alive. At least he thought so. And he wasn't even green.

*You've mellowed in your old age, buddy,* he thought.

Bruce hadn't had time, yet, to consider what had happened in his quarters: The Hulk had simply… seceded. Willingly surrendered his superior form for Banner's mind. It was a depiction of symbiosis Bruce had yet encountered, something that was puzzling and disturbing at the same time. What was happening to him? First two lost years as the Hulk on Sakaar, now a willing transformation.

He didn't know himself anymore. There now seemed to exist within him two entirely separate beings, not a shared consciousness and subconsciousness as he for so long defined it, but two multi-faceted minds, two bodies, two different sets of desires, thoughts, reactions….

Sounds wafted through his ears sluggishly, so it took a moment for him to realize alarms were still screaming, and the bridge was littered with other bodies, most stirring and groaning as they tried to
get back to their feet.

Right. Maybe not quite the time for self-reflection.

A bulky mound shifted next to Bruce and Bruce realized both he and Thor had ended up crunched up against the same wall. Thor moaned and rolled onto his hands and knees. For a moment he stayed like that, breathing heavily.

Finally, he pushed himself back to his feet. He was disheveled, face and arms scraped, and was missing his eyepatch. He looked around the ruined, smoking bridge. "Is anyone hurt?" he growled, wincing as he moved a shoulder too quickly. "Are you injured, Bruce?"

"I'm – okay," Bruce breathed through aching ribs. He caught sight of Thor's eyepatch among the debris and snatched it up. Thor offered him his hand and pulled Bruce back to his feet. Bruce's head spun when he stood. The floor was tilted at a slight downward slope. "Thanks," he wheezed, handing Thor the patch.

Thor acknowledged Bruce with a nod and fitted the patch back into his empty socket.

All around them, Asgardians were picking themselves off the floor. Valkyrie dislodged herself from underneath an overturned consul, cursing fiercely.

There was a cobweb pattern of cracks across the viewport, which was clogged with nothing but brown dirt. The ship had burrowed itself headfirst into the ground.

"Examine the ship," Thor ordered some of his least-shaken attendants. "Check for damage and severe injuries. Report back to me."

"Yes, My King," the attendants responded crisply, saluting with an arm across their chests before leaving the bridge. They had to open the ruined, sizzling door by force.

The bridge was strewn with crumbled equipment. Exposed wires sparked and smashed instruments wisped smoke into the air. Thor's throne had tumbled off its pivoting base.

Valkyrie approached them, trying to walk off a limp and rolling her head to work out a kink in her neck. "Damn," she said on an exhale. "Quite a ride."

Bruce didn't know if she was referring to merely the crash landing or the entire bullet-speed Tesseract jump through space that had occurred moments before. Either way, he was inclined to agree with her.

"Attention. Attention, survivors."

The muffled voice barely seeped through the hull of the ship. Thor and Bruce exchanged a confused glance.

"Attention. You are surrounded." This pronouncement was followed by the unmistakable squeal of interference from a bullhorn. "I repeat, you are surrounded. Be aware, if you pose a threat, we will fire. By order of the US Military, remove yourselves now."

"Er – that will be the welcoming committee," said Bruce.

The climb out of the bridge and through the corridors to the exit hatch was a difficult one. Entire chunks of walls had collapsed, barring their progress until Thor lifted the twisted metal and crushed rubble out of the way. The exit hatch was also not working. Valkyrie joined Thor's efforts in
physically ripping it open.

A crack of light appeared through the door as the seal was broken, just as the bullhorn voice demanded again, "Remove yourselves now with your arms raised to shoulder-height."

Thor yanked the hatch further open and squeezed through the opening, Valkyrie on his heels, and Bruce following right after. The sudden glaring sunlight and chill air slapped Bruce in the face as soon as he stepped outside. He had grown used to the dim artificial light of intergalactic travel over the past few days.

He squinted into the sunlight, raising a hand to shield his eyes. That was when he realized that the man with the bullhorn had not been kidding: the ship was indeed surrounded. They had crashed in the middle of a farmer's field, and broken stalks of corn were littered around the upturned ground around them. More than a hundred US infantrymen, bearing locked and loaded rifles, and perhaps twenty aimed gun turrets atop tanks circled the ship, currently all trained on Bruce, Thor, and Valkyrie standing outside the wrenched open exit hatch.

The Other Guy growled from within Bruce's center. He was not a fan of being faced with loaded artillery. For once, Bruce had to agree with him. Valkyrie looked like she was fighting the impulse to draw her sword and plunge headlong into the wall of troops. Bruce caught her eye and frantically shook his head. Not a good idea.

"I am Thor Odinson," Thor declared, drawing up his shoulders so he stood at full imposing height, unperturbed by the fire-power. "God of Thunder. King of Asgard. And protector of your realm."

"We – uh – know who you are," the man announced through the bullhorn. He stood on the seat of a jeep, in the thick of the soldiers. The insignia on his uniform revealed that he was a first lieutenant. He was clearly out of his element, not entirely sure how to respond to the unexpected sight of an alien ship crashed in the middle of a cornfield. Bruce almost felt bad for the guy; he was practically quaking in his military-issued combat boots.

"I recommend you lower your weapons," said Thor. His voice was dark.

Disquiet stirred again in Bruce's core. Not good, not good, a quiet voice of panic wakened in the corner of Bruce's mind. "Ah, Thor…" he said but he didn't know what to suggest.

"Stand down," said the lieutenant, "You are trespassing on United States territory. Surrender now and you will come to no harm."

"I demand to hold conference with someone in authority," Thor said, and it truly was a demand. Bruce didn't think he had ever seen the god appear so kingly. He was clearly a man brought to the very end of his rope; he was sick of this shit. "I am an Avenger of this petty planet. Do not imagine you can threaten me. Where is Director Fury?"

"Listen – er –" Bruce stepped forward, raising his hands over his shoulders to make sure they knew he was not a threat. "I'm Dr. Banner – the guy you got on the intercom a minute ago. Listen, there are women and children on board…probably people injured. We're not here to cause problems."

The lieutenant remained unmoved. "Remove yourselves from the wreck. You are all being taken into custody, by the order of the United States Military –"

"Certainly know how to make an entrance, don't you, Point Break?" called a voice and Bruce, Thor, and Valkyrie snapped their attention to the air. A familiar red and gold suit flew into view, soaring above the heads of the assembled armed troops. He was swiftly joined by two more inflight figures,
one in a bulky body armor very similar to Iron Man's, the other in a sleek red and emerald body-suit and flowing cape.

"Tony!" Bruce cried.

"Bruce – happy to see you're not dead," Tony's voice replied from within the suit, swooping down lower to the ground. Bruce realized, with a disconcerted tug in his stomach, that Tony's suit was up to full-power, ready to attack if necessary.

"Yeah," Bruce fought to keep his voice casual. "So am I."

"Interrupted mid-shower?" Tony asked.

"What –" it took Bruce a moment to realize he was still only wearing a bathrobe.

"Stark," Thor growled. "What is the meaning of this?"

"Don't worry, man," Tony answered. "Just being cautious." The dangerous blue glare in his suit suddenly died as he apparently assessed enough of the situation to realize the wrecked Asgardian ship did not pose an immediate threat.

"Alright," Tony said to the waiting troops, "stand down. The Avengers can take it from here."

"Mr. Stark –" the lieutenant cautioned through his bullhorn.

"Oh, can it, Greg," said Tony, roll of his eyes apparent in his voice even if Bruce couldn't see his face. The lieutenant's cheeks burned red but he put aside his bullhorn and motioned his troops to lower their rifles.

The Other Guy breathed a sigh of relief that Bruce echoed. The propulsion jets died on the bottom of Tony's boots, and he lowered gently to the ground. Vision remained hovering effortlessly in the air, cape flapping in the slight breeze. Rhodes also landed and marched with a slightly stilted gate to join Tony in the center of the ring formed by the soldiers.

"These are the Avengers?" said Thor, voicing Bruce's own confusion. "Where are the others?"

Tony lifted a gloved hand to the base of his neck to release the mask of his suit. The face beneath was almost sheepish – not an encouraging expression when worn by Tony Stark.

"Boy," he said, "have you two missed out on one wild time."

"Er – Vision, Colonel," Bruce nodded to each in turn. "Good to see you."

"You, too, Doc," Rhodes replied.

Vision descended from the air, but continued to float inches off the ground, "Dr. Banner, Thor, my friends. I am also pleased to see you."

"Is anyone going to tell us what the hell is going on?" Thor's voice was electric. Bruce thought he caught a whiff of ozone coming off his skin.

"I might ask you the same question," Tony stepped forward. "You did just crash an alien spaceship into our planet – the last time that happened, if you recall, didn't turn out too hot. You can understand if we're a little tetchy."

"Where exactly are we?" said Bruce, taking in the flat landscape: the golden fields of corn spread
below what was clearly the early winter cold of November, and the dome of blue sky that stretched above them, trail of smoke that lifted into it from the wreckage of the Asgardian ship.

"Welcome to your old home on the range," said Tony. "Broxton, Oklahoma. Yee-haw."

"Tony," Rhodes nudged Tony in the side and tossed his head over his shoulder. Far across the field, beyond the tracks the tanks had made in the rows of corn, swirling dust indicated the approach of more vehicles. "We've got company."

"Right, well, that'll be the boss," said Tony, and pressed a reception devise on his wrist, speaking into it, "Chill, General. Yeah, I know you've trying to contact me. I can hear the signal in my suit, you know…what do you mean, ignoring you?"

It didn't matter what the person on the other end of Tony's conversation meant, for the approaching vehicles drew close enough for Bruce too see inside them: there were three more jeeps, each containing uniformed drivers and important looking people sitting in the backseats.

The jeep at the head pulled to a stop behind the circle of tanks and soldiers and someone Bruce had very much hoped never to see again in his life – General Thaddeus E. "Thunderbolt" Ross, himself – stood up in the back. He angrily chucked his communication devise into his seat and launched himself out of the vehicle, stalking over to Tony.

The boss? Bruce thought in alarm. Since when did Tony Stark have a boss, and since when had it been General Ross?

"What in the hell do you think you're doing, Stark!" Ross bellowed, veins standing out in his throat. "Engaging yourselves in the situation before it could be properly assessed by my team –"

"Your team," Tony retorted, "was about to open fire on a possibly harmless unidentified alien vessel before I intervened."

"It's a goddammed alien vessel, Stark! In our experience when have they ever been harmless?"

"Er – now, for once," said Thor, clearly disconcerted at being ignored. He climbed down from the ship, scrambling over the mounds of dislodged earth. Bruce hesitated, exchanging a glance with Valkyrie, before following suit.

Thor stared down his nose at Ross when he reached him, towering over the man by a head. "I am Thor, God of Thunder. King of Asgard. And –"

"Yes, I know who you are," the General interrupted testily. "Now tell me what you're doing on my damn planet."

"We have come for aide," Thor said stonily. "In the past, I have received a glad reception in this realm. But, I sense now that things have evidently changed –"

"I'll tell you what's changed –" Ross's face was red. "We've gotten sick up to here with your intergalactic bullshit –"

"Um," Tony interrupted, eyebrows arched, "not to interrupt this little powwow, but I'd say we have about…" he checked his watch, "thirty seconds before this place is swarming with media. You weren't exactly subtle, you know."

Ross turned his stormy eyes on Tony, but acknowledged his point with a tightening of his lips. He was suddenly barking orders to the waiting troops: "Assess the area. I want reports every ten
minutes. And you all are coming with me. I've got a shitload of questions that you'd better be prepared to answer if you ever hope to see light of day beyond the bars of a prison. And you –" Ross suddenly wheeled on Bruce and Bruce blinked in surprised. Until then, Bruce had half-heartedly hoped the General hadn't recognized him. "Don't even think about transforming into that damned green monster or you'll get fifty pounds of lead pumped directly into your brain. Understand?"

Taken aback, Bruce snapped to attention, "Yes, sir."

OOO

Thor left Heimdall in charge, ordering him to assess the ship's damage and any injuries of his people, warning that Korg and the other gladiators had better stay out of sight; there was no use in further alarming the humans. The soldiers had been ordered to provide any medical assistance the Asgardians required, but Thor was uneasy about the fact that the soldiers still kept their weapons near at hand; the Asgardians were not entirely unwelcome, but they were also clearly not untrusted.

Rhodes and Vision stayed behind at the spaceship to oversee the proceedings; Tony led Thor, Bruce, and Valkyrie over to one of the jeeps that had driven up with Ross.

"Who's the princess?" Tony nodded to Valkyrie.

"Call me that again and I'll shove my blade through your eye," Valkyrie hissed as she clambered over the side of the jeep.

Tony jutted his thumb over his shoulder at Valkyrie and told Thor, "I like her."

Thor rolled his eyes. Some things never changed, Stark's humor among them. Thor got into the front seat of the jeep next to the driver, who was looking noticeably anxious to be in such intimidating company. Bruce joined Valkyrie in the back.

"Move it, kid," Tony told the driver, "I'll take it from here."

"But, sir –" the driver protested.

"Nope. I'm going to make sure my friends here get treated with the utmost hospitality, and the only way that's going to happen is if I see to it, myself," said Tony. He was already disrobing himself of his armor, tossing it into the back cavity of the jeep before replacing the driver behind the wheel.

General Ross's jeep pulled away first and Tony followed suit, sweeping the vehicle in a wide, somewhat erratic turn, juddering over downed stalks of corn.

"So, is anyone going to tell me what the hell is happening?" Valkyrie demanded over the wind that blew passed the open top of the jeep.

"I apologize," Thor said. He'd forgotten that Midgard was a realm unknown to Valkyrie, and she had before now been patiently waiting for some kind of explanation. "This is my friend, Man of Iron –"

"Allow me to introduce myself," Tony interrupted, throwing a wolfish grin over his shoulder that threatened to send the jeep off the road, "I'm Tony Stark, counted among Earth's mightiest heroes, certifiable genius –"

"You're certifiable, alright," said Bruce from the backseat.

Valkyrie snorted, "You are one of Midgard's mightiest heroes? Beyond your suit of armor, I doubt very much you would come out on top of any fight."
"For your information," Tony retorted. "I was middleweight sectionals champion in –"

"No you weren't, Tony," Bruce cut him off. "Why do you tell people that? You need to stop telling people that."

"But what is the meaning of this, Stark?" said Thor, wanting to pull them back to the matter at hand. So much had happened in only a matter of two hours. He needed the facts, and after that he needed a moment of silence, so he could compose himself and set a plan into motion. All that mattered now was leaving his people in safe hands so that he could again think of reaching Loki. "Why are you taking orders from this General? What has happened to the rest of us, Captain Rogers, Natasha, Clint –"

Bruce sat forward in his seat, wanting to hear the explanation, as well. Tony's face looked pained. "Listen, it's a long, complicated story. And one that I really can't go into now. We – this is all we have left, alright? Rhodes, Vision, and I are the last of the Avengers – they're not dead!" Tony added quickly as a stricken looked crossed Bruce's face. "It's just – we've…erm, disbanded."

"How?" said Thor, just as Bruce said, "Why?" and Valkyrie, in a huff of frustration, "Who?"

Tony shook his head. "Just…trust me for now, okay?" It was not a reassuring thought, having to rely solely on the word of Tony Stark. "And ixnay on the eamtay when we're with the General. It's a sore spot for him."

Valkyrie rolled her eyes and threw herself back in her seat. "He can't even speak properly!"

OOO

Loki was on his hands and knees, gulping air and trying not to vomit. His head was splintered with pain, which clouded his vision and made him forget where he was: on the floor of Thanos' throne room, lightyears away from any hope of assistance.

It is useless to resist, Thanos voice crept through Loki's mind. I will gain access to the information I seek whether by your own admission or through force. His pronouncement came with a ripping pain in Loki's head and a shout flew from his mouth.

He collapsed on the ground, quaking, face hidden on the cool floor, hands clapped over his ears.

I will destroy you, little god. I will destroy the very foundations of your sanity, as I have easily done before. For whose sake do you keep your silence? Why protect those who would willingly leave you to this torment?

"I have – already told you," Loki panted. "I know nothing of – the Asgardians destination –"

Silence, deceiver, Thanos hissed and the resulting pain snatched a scream from Loki's throat. There were talons in his head, digging wide divots out of his brain, lacerations that oozed thought and tendrils of memory, uprooting Loki's consciousness from the hasty shelters his seidr had attempted to construct around it.

Thanos sighed as though he was deeply disappointed in Loki's lack of cooperation. He spoke aloud, "I grow weary of your screams. Come," he said to one of the watching Chitauri guards, "muzzle the beast. I have no further use of his voice. What I want is inside his head. I can retrieve it quicker if he is prevented from speaking the power of his petty magic."

Skeletal hands grappled against Loki's body. He could not see them – he could barely see anything, blinded as he was by the churning visions dislodged inside his skull, but he lashed out against the
animals as something made a grab for his face.

The back of his hand collided with the disgusting, scaly maw of a Chitauri – "Bind him," Thanos hissed, and then claws were closing around Loki's wrists. He struggled but his arms were roughly forced behind his back. He groaned in pain as his joints protested the force but physical pain was nothing – nothing compared to the agony that pulsed through his wounded mind.

Cold rings of metal bound his hands behind his back. There was nothing he could do now; he was utterly powerless, lying in an immobile heap on the floor. He twisted his head out of the reach of their fingers, but they closed on the back of his neck and dug into his cheeks, fixing a metal brace around his face. Fingers plied open his jaw and stuffed a firm, rubber-like object into his mouth, pressing so deep that Loki gagged, an interior piece of the muzzle that ensured he would not be able to lift his tongue off the bottom of his mouth.

The muzzle was in place, biting into his jaw, rubbing his lips raw, and they released him, discarding him on the ground. He tried to breathe deeply through his nose, desperate to alleviate the panic crashing through him at the fact that he could no longer breathe through or even open his mouth. The chunk of rubber inside his mouth made him gag again and he urged himself not to be ill.

You dare, even now, hope to hide the whereabouts of the Gem from me? Foolish child. You cannot stop me. I will make your loved ones scream; they shall be torn limb from limb, their worlds demolished before I get my hands on the Stone. You cannot hope to stop me.

Loki writhed on the floor under the renewed assault of Thanos' voice. His head hit the corner of a wall and blood trickled into his eye from the resulting cut. Thor. Thor. Help me. Think of Thor. Thor safe. Thor alive. Asgard protected –

Protected? Thanos' wild laugh ricocheted through Loki's skull. You have protected no one, useless creature. You have only guaranteed their deaths. You are the architect of their destruction.

It is not true. It is not true. You will not reach them. I will not let you touch them – an unexpected surge of strength ripped from Loki's chest, and a cloud of sparking seidr rushed out of him, bent on rendering some kind of destruction, of attacking the voice inside his head that no longer seemed to have any physical origin.

Thanos growled and grasped hold of Loki's magic, stifling it, stuffing it back through Loki's pores, clogging his limbs, so it turned on itself, eating away at his flesh – Loki's scream was muffled by the gag in his mouth.

And suddenly Loki was not there. He was spiraling through a vortex between dimensions, lost in an impenetrable darkness entirely like the Void.

His feet his solid ground. He was standing at Thanos' viewport, as he had been only moments before, looking down on the Asgardian ship, wild hope thrumming through his stomach.

But instead of the frosted blue of the Tesseract's transporting light, the ship was immersed in a blanket of yellow flame. Great, billowing clouds of smoke were dissolved the hull, cutting through the screaming voices who begged for help – Loki could hear their cries for mercy ringing in his ears – and then the ship was gone, incinerated, nothing but a emaciated frame that collapsed through open space, drifting away as if a funeral pyre on torpid water, no living being left on board –

You killed them, Thanos told him. You have already watched them die, God of Lies. You delude even yourself, preserving a hope that no longer exists.
No. No. This was not what happened. Loki’s mind struggled for the truth but it was out of reach, completely indiscernible from one lie to the next. Loki had seen for himself the Asgardian ship jump through the fabric of dimensions, fleeing to the distant haven of Midgard –

_Ah Midgard_, Thanos voice punted Loki back to the present moment, curled into the fetal position on the floor, surroundings shattering into illusion. _So your fractured hoard of people has fled to Midgard?_

_No, _Loki thought, horrified. _What have I done?_

_The land of petty mortals_, Thanos cried, triumphant, _there will be nothing there to protect them from my wrath._
Thor scowled under the harsh light of the naked bulb set in the ceiling. He crossed his arms over his chest. This General Ross had no cause to treat Thor like some common criminal. Thor would not let himself undergo an interrogation.

He, Valkyrie, and Bruce – given a set of simple black clothes in exchange for his robe – sat across a metal table from the General and Tony. They'd borrowed the back room of the local police department for the interview. Two uniformed men stood just outside the closed door. Thor was liking this situation less and less with every passing moment.

"We are in grave danger," said Thor, speaking to Tony instead General Ross because he knew his voice would not penetrate the stony expression on the General's face. "An unforeseen threat approaches closer to your planet with every passing moment."

"And you've led it here, I suppose you're going to tell us," said the General.

"Not voluntarily, I assure you," Thor answered uncertainly. "Fleeing to your planet was a last resort. We had been put into a situation of life or death."

"What's coming?" Tony asked, voice soft in an effort to interject a bit of civility back into the conversation.

"His name is Thanos," said Thor. "I know very little of him, only that he is insane. And he seeks unfettered power so he may rule all the universe."

Ross threw up his hands. "What is this bullshit? Spinning some kind of fairytale – I'm warning you, Thor, so-called god or not, if you're feeding us a pile of lies –"

"It is no lie. We have seen his vessel with our own eyes. We were almost destroyed by his might half-way across the galaxy before we escaped to your solar system," said Thor.

Tony cut across General Ross, leaning across the table, eyes gleaming with interest. "How did you escape him? How'd you get from the other side of the galaxy to earth?"

"With –" Thor sensed suddenly that the Tesseract's presence on Midgard was a fact better not revealed, at least not yet to General Ross. "With the hyperjump capabilities of our vessel. I am afraid it was ruined in transit, as were most of the other systems."

Thor met Tony's gaze unabashedly. Bruce and Valkyrie remained mercifully silent at his sides. He had always been a terrible liar, but he could not tell whether or not Ross had swallowed his words. Tony's eyebrows rose. He was familiar with the power of the Tesseract; Thor had no doubt that the
Man of Iron suspected Thor of bending the truth, but he too was silent.

"And why is this Thanos chasing you?" said General Ross. "What do you have that he wants?"

"He – seeks to destroy Asgard," Thor answered. "Already he has risen our kingdom to the ground. He hopes to entirely eradicate our race from the cosmos."

More lies now. They tasted bitter on Thor's tongue. He did not understand how Loki did it so effortlessly. At the thought of his brother, a heavy weight dropped into Thor's stomach. He dreaded to consider what torments Loki was at this moment enduring under the hand of Thanos, nor consider how long he could withstand them until he broke. He had survived once, Thor reminded himself. He could only hope his brother was strong enough to survive again.

"So you brought your survivors here?" Ross shook his head. "Without stopping to consider that Thanos might not care whether he eradicates two races for the price of one –"

"Our people are refugees," Valkyrie spat, breaking her silence. "We have been ravished by war. Our homeland has been destroyed. Surely you mortals are not strangers to the concept of mercy?"

"We're not going to willingly invite a group of a thousand people into our country whose presence might result in its ruin," said General Ross.

"They are injured and starving! They are orphaned children!" Valkyrie's eyes flashed dangerously. She gripped the armrests of her chair. She looked ready to launch herself bodily at the General across the table.

"Valkyrie, be still –" Thor cautioned.

"Your people won't be hurt," Tony interjected. "And they will be taken care of. I've got aid packages en route right now. You've got my word on that." General Ross looked at Tony as if he couldn't believe his ears.

"Don't pretend like I trust you, Tony Stark," Valkyrie said darkly but fell into an unwilling silence.

"Please, General, I assure you," Thor braced his elbows on the table, "I mean Earth no harm. I swore to protect this realm. I am king of Asgard now – and have sworn fealty to the nine realms under my watch. I have fought to protect Midgard in the past, side-by-side with Tony Stark, Captain Rogers, and the rest –"

"Mr. Rogers," General Ross intercut, "is currently a fugitive of United States justice. He's got a long stint in a penitentiary ahead of him if he ever dares show his face in this country again. And that goes double for the freaks he calls his friends."

Thor sat back, stunned for a moment into silence. He clenched his jaw. "Be cautioned, General," he said at last, "At one time I counted these so-called freaks as my own friends."

"You'll do well to rethink that, your majesty," said Ross, voice curled in disdain around the words your majesty.

"Uh – listen," said Bruce, ever the voice of reason. He lifted both hands in the air in a sign of submission, "I don't know what's happened here since I've been away. But I know that, whatever it was, it can't have been good. And I also know that Thor, or his people, don't mean to cause any more harm –"

"Yes," said Ross viciously, "but you know as well as any that harm need not be intentional, does it,
Banner?

Bruce's mouth snapped shut. He sat back in his chair, face unreadable.

"Okay," Tony let out a breath. "I don't think this is accomplishing anything. I think – if I may be so bold –"

"Since when do you have to ask, Stark?" the General snapped.

"I think," Tony pressed on, "that the General needs to confer with others in authority about this situation. In the meantime, I've set up reservations for you three in the local motel. That's the singular local motel. It's a small town, and not exactly the Hilton –"

"Thank you, Tony," said Thor, trying to keep his voice civil, but it left his lips stiffly. "But my place is with my people."

"Your place," General Ross said, pushing his chair back and standing so he could look down on Thor, "is right where we tell you it is. You're trespassing on US soil, your highness. That's my jurisdiction, and you'll do well to remember it."

OOO

"A peace offering?" said Tony, looking apologetic in the doorway of the hotel room, hoisting two clanking bottles into the air by their necks.

Thor let him cross the threshold with a roll of his eyes and assenting nod. "But I warn you," he said, "I expect explanations along with your drink."

Tony shut the door firmly behind him, blocking the view of Ross's men mulling outside in the hallway.

Bruce came out of the bathroom doorway, toweling off his hair, having just finished his shower. "I've got a feeling they're for me," he said, nodding through the doorway to the guards outside.

Tony grinned, but it looked like it caused him physical pain, "I'm afraid to say they're for all of you. Ross isn't taking any chances – superhuman beings are…a touchy subject in US bureaucracy right now."

"Because of these Accords?" Bruce said shrewdly. He answered Tony's look of surprise with a shrug, "Free Wi-Fi. Caused quite the media disturbance. Leipzig, Tony, really?"

"You don't know the half of it, Bruce," Tony objected. "I did what I thought was right – what I still think is right. Someone had to try and stop them."

"Them?" Thor demanded. "Those who were once your allies and friends, Tony?"

"Listen," Tony said testily, "I didn't come here to talk about my morality, or lack thereof. I came here to offer you booze and attempt to smooth the feathers Ross ruffled earlier."

"So you're Ross's public relations man now, huh?" said Bruce flatly.

Tony balked, clearly about to retort angrily when Valkyrie pushed open the door from the adjoining room.

"Did someone say booze?" She snatched the bottles out of Tony's hand. "Shit, yes. I was afraid you mortals didn't believe in the stuff." She ripped off the stopper of the bottle and placed the rim directly
to her lips, taking a large gulp. She swallowed and pulled the bottle away from her mouth with a grimaced. "What is this – water?"

Tony looked a mixture of horrified and impressed, "That's Napoleon Brandy."

"Well," Valkyrie retorted, "you can tell your chum Napoleon that his alcohol is shit."

"Tony," Thor pulled the conversation back to center. He had no desire to argue, but he needed answers. "Where are they now, the others? Bruce told me they escaped from their island prison – do you know where they have gone?"

Tony looked over his shoulder as though he was afraid they were being watched. Bruce caught on quicker than Thor did. "Are we being monitored?" he asked, forehead wrinkling.

"The room's bugged, but I think I've taken care of all the necessary precautions." He paused to wave a cheerful hello at the nub of a sprinkler poking out of the ceiling. "We should be okay to talk freely."

Bruce's eyes remained narrowed in suspicion but he lowered himself onto one of the two beds in the room. He folded his towel next to him. Tony hooked a chair from the desk with his ankle and fell into it. Thor stayed on his feet, arms over his chest. Valkyrie leaned against the wall, taking another swig from the bottle which she showed no sign of wanting to share.

"Did I mention the hair looks great?" said Tony to Thor, but the ruse was evident. His voice was defeated even if the smile on his face was not. "And – er – not to be rude, but you seem to be missing an eye. Sure there's one hell of a story behind that, eh?"

Thor didn't answer.

The silence pressed Tony's voice into action. "Right. Well. Officially I have no clue where anyone is. Clint is back in safe retirement. Ross has his farm under constant surveillance – with equipment provided, and modified, by Stark Enterprises. For all Ross knows, the place has been abandoned for seven months, but that's just a loop of stock footage. As Clint is fond of reminded me, it was the least I could do." He added, "I think Wanda is with him. She was in…pretty rough shape after what they did to her."

Bruce shook his head. "She was just a kid, Tony."

Tony pretended not to hear Bruce, and kept talking. "Natasha is off somewhere being the frustrating secret spy with no identity we all know and love. Wilson is…I think still in Wakanda, but I don't know, he could be long gone by now." His voice was bitter when he finished, "I have no idea where Rogers is. Or his friend."

"The Winter Soldier?" said Bruce.

"The one and only," Tony's voice was tight. "You going to pass around that bottle, missy?" he snapped at Valkyrie.

"Sorry," she said lightly, and handed him the drained bottle. "Already empty."

"Steve's not crazy, Tony," Bruce insisted. "He wouldn't have done what he did if he wasn't absolutely convinced he was doing the right thing."

"And you don't think the same of me?" Tony asked, eyebrows drawn, expression almost pleading. Thor recognized his voice as that of a man who had asked himself the same question many times.
"Of course I do," Bruce said quietly, eyes dropping to the floor. He was not exactly emboldening.

"Alright, Thor," said Tony, turning away from Bruce, voice growing firm. Perhaps he was hiding hurt from the other man's words. "I've been truthful with you. Now it's your turn. What exactly is all this about?"

"It is as I say, Tony," Thor answered, unsure why he still felt so tentative about displaying the truth to his friend. He found lying difficult to stop once he'd started. "Thanos pursues us. I am afraid I have threatened the earth unduly. I must depart this planet as quickly as possible."

"Hate to break it to you," said Tony, "but earth hasn't quite mastered the art of intergalactic travel quite yet."

"I have…" Thor breathed, "a means. But I must be assured of your help, first, Tony, before I tell you. I must be honest. This situation I find on Midgard is gravely disturbing. The Avengers disbanded, those who once fought side by side now facing each other in battle."

"Please, I've heard enough of Miss American's self-righteous claptrap," Tony snapped. "Let's try to keep focused on the matter at hand, okay? For instance, the fact that your ship didn't take a leap through space without some kind of help, and your pal Thanos isn't chasing you just because you're a race of some super-beings with some half-assed god complex."

Thor chose to ignore Tony's comments. The man was obviously upset. "You are right," he said at last.

"It's the Tesseract, isn't it?" Tony guessed. "Thanos is chasing Infinity Stones, dammit."

"Yes," Thor couldn't help but hide his surprise and Tony rolled his eyes.

"In case it's slipped your mind, I am a smart man," he quipped.

"Then you understand now why it is imperative I depart from Midgard," said Thor urgently. "And the Tesseract must go with me. Its presence here is a great threat. And I have yet unspoken business with Thanos – for he holds hostage my brother. I fear for Loki's life if I do not act with due haste –"

"Loki!" Tony's eyes grew to the size of saucers. "Are you insane, Thor? You're worried about frikkin Loki? The same guy who trashed uptown Manhattan?"

"My brother is not the man you once knew, Tony," Thor insisted. It was imperative Tony understand. Loki was Thor's brother, all the family of Thor's that remained now that Odin had dissolved into the cold Norwegian air, and even Hela, unknown sister, perished in the hellfire of Surtur's destruction. "He willingly sacrificed his life for Asgard's survival. And I have reason to believe his assault on Midgard was prodded by Thanos. I cannot leave him now to face alone the untold horrors of Thanos' prison."

"Erm – Thor," said Tony, rubbing the back of his neck with his hand. "No offense – I mean, I get that he's your brother – but he is a war criminal here on earth. He killed over four hundred people during the stunt he pulled in New York. I mean – it's great that he saved you, and all – but do you really think you can trust him? I mean, this is Loki. The kid who's, what, stabbed you in the back about four thousand times? How are you so certain he didn't plan this all out so Thanos could have easy access to the Infinity Stones?"

"But Loki left the Tesseract with us –" Bruce protested.

"Yeah, and let you flee to one of the few other known locations of another Stone," said Tony flatly.
Bruce turned to look at Thor, clearly expecting him to be angry at Tony's words, but Thor was silent. He was thinking about too much to speak immediately. Tony's words had lit a fuse of doubt inside him, something he feared that, if left alone to burn, would lead to a stack of flammable uncertainty.

Tony was right – how could Thor trust Loki? Oh brother, Thor thought fiercely, why did you have to make it so difficult?

And yet –

The terror in Loki's eyes had been unprecedented. Thor had never, in all his life, seen his brother shake in fear. Thor thought he could at least trust Loki's horror, if not his words. Tony had to comprehend the overwhelming weight of Thanos' threat in comparison to Loki's past transgressions.

"I – understand your misgiving, Tony," Thor spoke slowly. He was unaccustomed to examining his words before he spoke. Already he had learned much of the responsibility that came from being the voice of an entire people. "But I choose to trust my brother. I am tired of suspicion. If it is true that this exhaustion will lead to folly, then so be it – I would willingly suffer the consequences if only for the hope of someday having my brother returned to me."

"You may willingly suffer them," Tony's voice was uncharacteristically hard – what has happened to you, my friend? "But that doesn't mean you have the right to force it on the people of earth. I'm sorry, Thor. I'll do what I can to help your people, but I can't let you leave – not yet. Not until we get a fuller picture of what the hell this is all about. Earth can't afford any gambles, right now. And I won't be responsible for taking them – not again, I won't."

"Than you're a fool," said Valkyrie.

"What?" Tony snapped.

"Valkyrie –"

"No, Thor," said Valkyrie, pealing herself away from the wall that she had stood against, silent until now. Her eyes were lit with a ferocious gleam; in moments like this Thor remembered that she was a warrior. "You will cease stifling my voice. And you – Stark – you are a fool to not realize what must be done. Loki was brave enough to accept his fate. It is time you did as well."

"Listen, princess," Tony was on his feet, baring down on Valkyrie and Thor knew Tony lacked wisdom, but had not realized he how much he lacked if he would approach Valkyrie so brashly. "I don't know who you are – and, frankly, I don't give a damn – but don't you dare come onto my planet and start telling me what to do –"

"Someone must!" Valkyrie did not back down, although Thor was grateful to see she also did not yet draw the knives hidden in the tops of her boots. "This has passed beyond the interest of merely Asgard or Midgard. Thanos threatens the entire universe. You must pull yourself away from the self-preservation of your own planet and consider the survival of others – clearly difficult if you cannot even contain the infighting of your own defenders."

"Would you stop harping on that!" Tony exclaimed, wheeling on Thor. "It's been a shitstorm around here, Thor! And you have no right to blame me for the way things went down."

"I do not aim to cast judgement, my friend," said Thor. "I have learned that a man's actions cannot be weighed until all the cards are revealed. But, be warned, I will hold you accountable for the choices you make in this moment, Tony, placed in the middle, as you are, between the word of a friend and the motives of this General you so willingly follow."
"Alright," said Tony flatly and turned to leave, "That about does it. You three aren't going anywhere anytime soon, so I'm sure I'll bump into you again – but before then, go to hell. I'm not interested in listening to criticism from people who I once thought were my friends. Barring you, princess, because I still have no idea who the fuck you are."

Valkyrie crossed her arms over her chest, face hard. Thor did not make a move to protested as, with a self-aggrieved air, Tony swept from the room.

With a groan, Bruce was on his feet in a instant. "Tony, wait –" He tried to follow Tony into the hall but he was intercepted by one of Ross's guards, who stepped into his way. Bruce turned back and shut the door to their room behind him.

"Uh," he said. "I think we might be under house arrest."

OOO

Darkness fell swiftly across Midgard, the sun already exhausted by early winter's toll. General Ross did not forget about his prisoners, and sent several cartons of food to their room. Valkyrie remarked that they were probably poisoned before she snatched one full of rice and chicken for herself, and – along with the second bottle of alcohol Tony had left behind – retreated into her room, shutting the door behind her.

Bruce sat cross-legged atop one of the double beds, flicking through channels on the television as he ate. Thor observed several expressions wash across Bruce's face, ranging from pleasure, to shock, to revulsion as he tried to catch up on all the news he had missed over the past two years.

"I cannot believe he's our president," Bruce muttered finally, turning off the television and tossing the remote away in frustrated disgust. He leaned back in the bed, stretching his legs out in front of him and glanced to where Thor sat, crunched at the small desk against the wall, shoveling noodles into his mouth.

"You going to deal with that?" he nodded to Valkyrie's closed door. His voice was not exactly sharp, but it was certainly not his customary gentle tone. The circumstances had left all three of them rather irritable.

"What?" Thor said around his mouthful of food. There were so many things he was supposed to deal with; he was not aware that Valkyrie was another.

"I mean," Bruce propped himself up on his elbow, "I don't pretend to be an expert on women, but I think she might be upset."

"Are not you her friend, as well?" Thor demanded. "I could argue that you have certainly known her longer than I –"

"Yeah, well, considering I can't really remember knowing her…Besides, you two are both Asgardian, right? I mean, I don't want to impose, but – it's been a rough few days. Maybe it would be good for both of you to, well, you know…." Bruce's voice dissolved into a shrug of his shoulders.

Thor sighed and pushed himself out of his chair. "If I am gone for more than an hour, come to my aide," he warned.

"You're on your own," said Bruce behind him as Thor wrapped his knuckles thrice upon Valkyrie's door.

"Er – can I come in?" he mumbled through the door.
"You're the king," she answered from the other side. "You make the rules."

Thor opened the door, conscious of Bruce's eyes on his back, and stepped into Valkyrie's room. It was a mirror image of his and Bruce's – two beds, a dresser with a television, and a desk that nearly blocked the avenue to the door.

Valkyrie did not look up when Thor came in. She was perched on the edge of the bed nearest the window. Tony's bottle of alcohol dangled from her hands between her knees.

"Did you find dinner satisfactory?" Thor asked. He shut the door behind him. If Bruce was too afraid to get involved than he wasn't going to have the privilege of hearing their conversation.

"No less disgusting than what I've rummaged on Sakaar," said Valkyrie.

Thor uneasily recalled the scavengers' talk of eating him back among the trash heaps, but pushed the thought from his mind. He began carefully, "I – er – Bruce was under the impression that you were distressed."

Valkyrie cast Thor a withering look but thankfully did not chuck the bottle at his head. Thor would never willingly admit it, but he was a clumsy fool when it came to women – Jane could certainly attest to that.

Jane.

Thor had not meant to think of Jane, but now that he had, everything about her filled his head. She was probably not even aware that Thor had returned to earth, nor was she likely to become so. Her last words rebounded in his skull: for the best, Thor. Can't keep doing this. More important things on your mind now, and so do I. Let's stop kidding ourselves. It was never going to work.

For the best. Thor maintained that their separation had been mutual, and it had been, although only because Jane had voiced first the same thoughts Thor had only been too reluctant to speak aloud.

Valkyrie huffed and brought Thor stumbling back to the present moment: "You gonna just stand there and gawk?"

She shifted over on the bed, indicating Thor had permission to sit beside her. He did so, being careful to give them each plenty of girth.

The liquid sloshed within the bottle as Valkyrie lifted it to her mouth. Thor intercepted her, snatching the bottle out of her hand. Her mouth opened to protest but her lips clamped shut again when Thor, instead of throwing the bottle away as she evidently suspected, placed the rim to his lips and took a long draught.

He sighed when he was done, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, and gave her back the bottle. It was nearly empty.

She chuckled softly in appreciation. Quickly her face darkened again. "Your friend is a real asshole, you know."

"Tony is…not the man I left two years ago," Thor admitted. "I am more disturbed by this turn of events than I can say. I had hoped for a different reception, that our people might be willingly embraced by earth’s, that I could see my friends again band together in the face of a common enemy. I did not expect to find them more badly fractured than ever before."

"Yeah, well, we don't always get what we want," Valkyrie interrupted Thor. Her voice was bitter,
and it struck Thor like a slap across his face that perhaps this moment need not be all about his own problems.

He clamped shut his mouth, hoping his silence might prod Valkyrie into an elaboration, but she remained stonily silent. Perhaps she was thinking of the crushing disappointment of watching their homeland be consumed by flames, despite their efforts. Perhaps of all the thousands they could not save. Perhaps she was thinking of the fallen sisters of millennia ago, their defeat at the hands of Hela a reflection of defeats past.

There had been no time, before, to assess the pain. Now Thor felt himself almost overwhelmed with it, a deep aching in his heart as he remembered all that had been lost: So many. So much. A civilization wiped out in furious obliteration, the cries of mothers, fathers, and children muffled in a violent death through flame – what else could Thor have done? What could he possibly have done to stop it?

If this was what it truly meant to be king – to be crushed by the responsibility of all their despairing voices, then it was a throne he did not want.

Fandral, Hogun, Volstagg. Their names clunked heavily into his stomach. And Sif. Her body had been counted neither among the dead, nor the living. He did not know where she was, but could hardly dare hope she had survived Hela's rage. And then there had been so many countless others with faces and names Thor did not know.

"I am sorry," said Thor softly to Valkyrie, thought sinking with regret into his chest and drawing him out of his reverie. "I do not think I ever asked you your name."

Valkyrie blinked. Her face went blank with shock; Thor might as well have said something obscene instead of to merely inquire her name.

Valkyrie recovered herself rapidly. She turned away, as if she was embarrassed, and finally answered, voice a murmur, "It's – erm – Brunnhilde." She took a deep breath and met his eye, gaze fierce. "My name is Brunnhilde."

"Brunnhilde," he fitted the name around his tongue. "Yes, a worthy name for a warrior such as yourself."

She accepted the compliment with a crisp nod. She turned away again, "I am sorry, Thor, about Loki. I truly am. I – the things I said on the ship – I did not mean them."

Thor sighed. "I understand. It was a…hasty moment."

Brunnhilde nearly smiled, cocking an eyebrow at his choice words. She was evidently anxious to move the conversation away from the somber topic and prompted him, "I'm guessing you're not content to sit around and wait until the metal man decides what to do with us?"

"No," said Thor, "you are right. We must act. The situation grows desperate."

"You intend to leave them?" Brunnhilde asked, speaking of the people of Asgard, Thor knew. Her voice did not sound accusing.

"I have to trust that our people will be safe on Midgard," Thor's voice was heavy coming up his throat. "As you said, Brunnhilde, this is beyond the scope of merely one planet."

"And this isn't actually more about saving your brother, is it?" Brunnhilde's gaze, despite the frost of alcohol across her eyes, was unnervingly direct.
Thor shook his head, "Do not ask me to answer that question. For now, all we can do is move forward if we are to retain hope of either the Universe's or Loki's salvation."

"Alright then," Brunnhilde stood abruptly; she tossed the rest of the alcohol from the bottle into the back of her throat. "I won't ask for an answer, then. First things first, what's the plan?"

"I am afraid we must be tactful if we are to ever consider the possibility of the Midgardians future assistance."

"Diplomacy be damned," Brunnhilde said briskly, "Let's get out of this fucking motel."

Thor joined her on his feet, smiling at her eagerness. In this, he thought, perhaps she was right. "I think I know yet of one who might be willing to help us."

It was time again to pay a visit to the strange sorcerer of Bleeker Street.

OOO

Loki was prostrate on his back, arms pinned painfully beneath him. He labored for air, lungs deflated in his chest. His breath stuttered in his throat as his shin unexpectedly snapped back into place, his seidr thrumming erratically through his body, strained and exhausted, desperately attempting to heal the flurry of injuries the Chitauri had left in the wake of Thanos' hiss: you have leave now to pick the little god apart.

But Thanos had once again called off the assault. Loki did not understand why, but he was beyond the point of asking questions. Thoughts chugged sloppily through his mind – Thor, dead, not dead, Loki walking over the bodies of Asgardians, stepping in their blood, Midgard, Thor was at Midgard, waiting for death at Midgard, Thor dead –

"Not to worry, little god," Thanos laughed. "I shall not go personally to enact vengeance upon your precious people. No, that job I entrust to someone else, for I cannot yet be interrupted in my quest. For, you see, I was on another errand when I was intercepted by your vessel. And I think it now high-time to return to it. But, have no fear, you and your people shall be punished for your part in keeping the Stone from me."

Thanos prodded again at the unraveling coils of Loki's mind and a groan piled into the base of Loki's throat, colliding into the gag stuffed in his mouth. And be wary, little god, do not attempt to hide anything more from my gaze. There is nothing I cannot pluck from your fragile mind.

With unprecedented savagery, Thanos buried his talons knuckle-deep into Loki's brain. Loki's back arched beneath him – he was afraid his spine would splinter from the force – and his cry dissolved into the impenetrable muzzle. Why why why his thoughts spun jaggedly through his mind. He had nothing else to give – nothing else to give – nothing nothing – no more answers no more answers – no more –

Thanos tore free. Loki collapsed on the ground. He tasted acid and blood in his mouth. Tears pooled behind his shut eyelids.

"Take it away," rumbled Thanos' voice somewhere above him.

The scaly claws of the Chitauri descended once more upon Loki's body, grasping him under his arms and tugging him onto his knees. He tried to stand, but his body would not respond to the commands of his mind.

"And you may tell my son," Thanos added as the Chitauri dragged Loki like a limp puppet from the
throne room, "that he may now have his fun with the prisoner."

Chapter End Notes

I apologize for this egregious shift in tone – but – I started cackling in the middle of the night when I reread "Mr. Rogers is currently a fugitive of United States justice." What did you do in the neighborhood, Fred?
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

Sorry I missed last weekend. Finals were awful. But they're over now, and I'm home for the Holidays – for which I am very grateful. It was a hectic semester. I'm happy to see it behind me.

Graphic depiction of torture right at the start of this chapter. PM me if you have any concerns (including about ratings). I will be sure to include more warnings if there is similar violence in later chapters.

They dragged Loki into the bowels of the ship, where the crushing mass of the vessel seemed to cave inward, creating a vacuum of claustrophobic pressure above his head. His body was dead weight, aching and strained, too exhausted even to raise his head as he heard the grating metal doors of a cell open to greet him.

He was thrown into the cell. His collision with the wet, stone floor rattled his teeth. Shut his eyes, he warned himself. Shut his eyes and pretend it wasn't happening. It was just a nightmare. Just another nightmare, a repeated regress into times of old when the harrowing darkness of the Void was replaced with fresh, unimaginable terrors – and it was simply a nightmare. Just another nightmare.

He had survived before. He had survived before because he had let his sanity fly free, cast it from his mind like it was a blanket. Do so again, he urged himself, let go – But why? Why was it so difficult? Why did his rationality cling so desperately to the shredded holds of his mind, refusing to allow him to flee this place, to fall into the comforting folds of madness?

Claws pulled at him, fingers ripped his shirt off his torso until he was naked from the waist up, and then nails scratched and pawed at his bare skin. Hands crept under his arms and yanked him back to his feet. He toppled forward as they shoved him in the back. His body hit the wall with a thud but he was stopped from crumpling back to his feet by firm hands on his shoulders, pressing him into the wall, one cheek laid flat against the cold stone.

They grabbed Loki's wrists, bound behind his back, and forced them upward, twisting his shoulders in their sockets, rotating upward at an unnatural angle. His shoulders resisted, but the hands continued to wrench upward. Loki could not breathe for the horrible tearing pain in his shoulders as he arms were drawn above his head. With twin, sickening pops his shoulders dislocated and his arms swung free under his tormentor's force.

His yell of pain was lost somewhere in the gag that clogged his throat. Unbidden, his seidr flowed like hot blood to the points of injury, repairing without Loki's permission or control. His hands were over his head now. Dimly, through the fog of hurt, he realized he'd been lifted off his feet, wrists fastened in cuffs hanging from the ceiling.

The hands released their hold and Loki dropped, but his arms, closed in the fetters, wrenched him to a stop before his feet hit ground and he was left there dangling, chest to the wall, aching arms straining against his weight as his magic pulsed faster, trying to rebuff the pain rippling from his shoulders through his upper back.
His face was pressed to the wall. He could not see what was happening behind him. The scuttling creatures stilled. Silence clogged Loki's ears and his hastily stifled panic emerged again with thudding intensity.

Heavy footsteps pounded on the ground behind him. Loki tried to turn his head, but he could not see. He could not see. He could not see. The fact skidded through his mind and the panic latched onto it: the entering presence was more horrifying by far because it was unseen and unknown.

Let it come quickly, Loki shut his eyes and prayed to he didn't know what, kill him quickly. He knew it was futile. No one would hear him. No one would rescue him. Even death, Thanos had vowed, would not grant relief. Loki was not a worthy gift for his Lady.

It was worse. So much worse than last time because at least last time Loki had been promised some kind of escape – an escape he had rejected for far too long, but escape nonetheless of willingly becoming Thanos' pawn. Now no such offer existed. Loki was being kept alive with no glimmer of a future without torture, even if it was a future spent on his knees.

He couldn't even scream. His voice could not permeate the thick gag stuffed inside his mouth. He could only listen to the mute shrieking of his voice inside his own head, urgently trying to block out the other threatening sounds around him: faint rustling of scaly limbs, clanking chains, heavy breathing approaching – Loki could feel the hot, putrid breath on the back of his neck.

"My old friend." The spidery voice in Loki's ear sent chills of recognition whispering down his spine. The speaker was still out of sight, for he stood to the side Loki's face was turned away from. "You have again made my Father angry, I see?"

Corvus Glaive, cursed and despicable adopted offspring of Thanos; Loki had met him years ago and discovered the meaning behind his wretched moniker: the master of pain.

"Look how your magic labors," Glaive's voice rattled through Loki's ears. His pointed fingernails brushed against Loki's stressed shoulders and Loki could not stop from shuddering at the touch. Glaive cackled. "Does my touch unnerve you? You remember, perhaps, our first meeting? Why so silent, my friend? Have you forgotten your manners?"

Glaive moved so he was in front of Loki's face, yellow eyes lit with sadistic fire, fangs bared in a hungry leer.

"Ah, the wordsmith has forgotten his silver tongue," he crowed and stroked Loki's forehead with the back of his narrow finger and Loki flinched, trying to pull away, but Glaive's palm pressed against the side of Loki's head, forcing him into stillness against the wall. "Pity I shall not be able to hear your cries for mercy. But, no matter –"

With his other hand he suddenly slashed an unseen knife across Loki's exposed chest. Fiery pain erupted from the blow but, even before the blade withdrew, Loki's magic responded. Glaive stared, transfixed, as Loki's seidr flooded the wound, sealing the gash with new skin, stretched tight, barely leaving a scar. It had been a fascination last time: a constant ebb and flow as Glaive rent Loki's flesh only to watch gleefully while Loki automatically healed himself before striking again.

"Pointless magic," Glaive breathed, eyes wide with delight. "It will be your bane – keeping your body alive even as you will yourself to die. What good is a power that you cannot harness for your own destruction?"

Glaive whipped out of sight. Loki could hear his eager breathing, accompanied by grinding metal and a thud of something heavy, as he prepared some new instrument of torture.
Loki’s entire body was quaking and he could not stop it. He tried to gain control of his mind once again but his thoughts rebelled, turning inside out so he could not grasp hold and reign them back in. It was as though his fingers grappled against a blank, slippery wall inside his consciousness.

"Be still," Glaive warned from the terrifying unknown behind Loki’s back. "I promise, it won't hurt a bit."

The narrow point of a cold metal rod pressed into the dead center of Loki’s back. Horrifying realization shattered inside Loki’s mind and he was suddenly twisting in desperation, shout shoved down his throat by the muzzle, struggle rattling the chains overhead, but too late –

The first blow fell: a hammer to the head of a nail, and the metal rod ripped through Loki’s flesh with a clang of metal against metal, and –

And there was no pain, only a sheet of white panic across Loki’s mind as he willed himself away – away from this place – somewhere far away – before –

And then the second blow fell, rapidly after the first, and the point snapped through Loki’s spine, and then all there was was pain.

Excruciating pain splintered through his bones, chewed into his muscles, solidified into a second skeleton that made his first brittle, gripped his every cell, filled his mind until his vision was nothing but a swirling vortex of strange colors and his ears thudded with distorted, silent screams of ferocious, angry agony.

A third blow. Loki’s whole body convulsed with the force of it as the metal rod penetrated further through his torso. His magic was already fighting back, raging a war he had not commanded against the insistent, all-consuming pain emanating from foreign metal spit rending his flesh.

A fourth blow. Blood rushed up Loki’s throat but was swallowed back down, pooling in his esophagus, when it was impeded against the gag in his mouth.

A pause. "Oh, no, we can't have you suffocating," said Glaive, and hands undid the metal clasps of Loki’s muzzle, pulling free the rubber gag from his mouth. A mixture of blood and vomit burst from Loki's lips in a torrent, spattering against the wall.

Loki could hear the rush of the mallet swinging through the air and –

A fifth blow. The rod tore through Loki’s chest, point clattering into the stone wall against which he hung. Hot blood seeped from the wound at a rate too rapid to be stemmed by his waning seidr, which pulsed through his veins with urgent, volcanic heat that only served to intensify the pain wracking his body rather than ease it. It was as if it was its own desperate entity: desperate only to keep Loki alive for the sake of its own survival.

He hadn't realized until it was removed that he'd been using the gag to bite down on through the pain, now his teeth clenched his tongue and there was blood again his mouth.

He couldn't scream. He couldn't scream. There was no breath left in his lungs to scream.

A sixth blow and the rod cleaved into the stone, grinding into the wall, fastening Loki there like an insect pinned in a collection case. Pain thrummed through his body, radiating outward from the skewer through the center of his abdomen.

Glaive made a noise of satisfaction behind Loki and patted Loki on the shoulder. "That will hold you for now, I think, until I can return for more good work. Father wants to keep you near at hand."
Seems to think he may yet have further use of you. Pity," Glaive clicked his tongue, "I would so like to see how much you could take until you died. Oh well, perhaps soon. Perhaps soon."

Glaive swept from the room, taking the scampering Chitauri with him. The cell door clanged shut behind them and left shuddering silence in their wake.

Loki could now only hear his own ragged breathing, the steady splatter of his blood as it dripped to the floor, the thunderous pounding in his head. The agony was almost auditory – a high-pitched wine that clogged his ears and dissolved his sense of the surroundings.

His seidr and the spit through his torso held him in limbo: unable to die but obstructed from the relief of healing. His magic swirled uselessly against the metal rod, unable to find a way around it, to force it from his body where it sat static and unyielding.

His mind pitched and spun. He was unable to focus on any sensation or thought. Falling, falling, falling. He was once again falling. Tumbling through darkness and nothingness, condemned to an eternity of suffocating emptiness, retreating from Thor's outstretched fingers, slipping into the blackness that rose to hide Thor's desperate eyes, shout of protest –

Thor was dead, he remembered. He had watched the Asgardian's ship destroyed from Thanos' viewport, shattering under the fire power of Thanos' fleet.

Thor was dead – he had to be. If he wasn't – then Loki would have – Loki could no longer tell the difference between truth and lies. There were two pasts: one in which the Asgardian ship launched itself through a hole in space cleaved by the Tesseract, the other in which Thanos' squeezed his fist around the ship until it imploded into a thousand shards of rubble.

And Thor had to be dead because otherwise Loki would have again been a traitor – would have again told Thanos willingly and Loki could not – could not –

Thor was dead and Loki was falling. Falling again. It was just as it had been before. Loki was caught in an unending cycle, a shackle of recovered time and space, all seen and done before and Loki knew how this ended. He knew how it ended because he had seen it all before.

Loki yanked his seidr away from the rod through his body. The pain redoubled and Loki hissed through his clenched teeth. He pulled and plucked at his seidr until blood pooled again in the back of his throat. He tore his magic away from his healing – just enough so his body could still stay alive – but stored his seidr until it took shape within him, creeping through his veins and limbs, formed a mirror image layered atop his body.

And then Loki pushed his seidr outward, threw it into the center of the room where it flickered but took shape – a pale and trembling illusion that, in an imitation of Loki's own weakness, stumbled backward and hit the wall, sliding to the ground where it sat and stared up at Loki, look of strained concentration on its face as Loki's mind collected into a small point of focus within his skull.

Just the essentials. Loki just needed the essentials. Leave sanity behind; he had no need of it. He packed the necessities of his mind into a tight, crumpled ball, tied it into a fraying package and then – he squeezed his eyes shut and a shout of pain left his lips from the exertion – tossed the ragged bundle of consciousness into the patiently waiting illusion sitting on the floor.

The sensation of flying – then a juddering stop – seeping through darkness – and Loki blinked. He stared up at his limp body, pinned to the wall, blood trickling from the wound in his back, shoulders purple from the strain of holding up the weight of his body.
How strange, Loki thought, as he noted his limbs were flooded with a sense of detachment. He was unable to move the body of the imitation. But he had succeeded in casting his consciousness from his broken body into this new, more unstable form. And there was no pain. No longer any pain. And Loki had strength enough to make the illusion smile.

He could even shut his eyes. Even rest as some unattached part of his mind still thrummed with distant pain – but it was too far from him now. Thanos could not touch him here.

And Loki laughed, a sound that startled him in the darkness and silence of the cell. Madness, he though as his laughter clamored off the walls of the cell, how good it was to be back.

**OOO**

Breaking out of the second-story window of the motel was a relative breeze; Thor, Bruce, and Brunnhilde managed to clamber onto the pavement outside without detecting the attention of any of the guards. Thor feared it was only a matter of time before their absence was noted, and could only hope that Tony had not yet reactivated the observation devices in their rooms.

"We must make haste," he hissed to the others in the dark. "I would rather we evade any confrontations."

"Any of you ever hot-wire an engine?" Bruce stalled in the parking lot, empty save for the jeeps that had arrived at the crash sight earlier that morning.

"What?" said Brunnhilde.

Bruce didn't answer, just wordlessly gestured for the two Asgardians to follow him. He climbed into the front seat of one of the jeeps. With a few expert taps, he opened a panel below the steering wheel, revealing a network of wires and machinery within the dashboard.

"Tell me," Thor asked with a smile, "was it in the pursuit of one of your seven PhD's you learned how to steal cars, my friend?"

Bruce smiled ruefully and shook his head. "The PhD's have very little to do with it."

"You're a man of many talents," said Brunnhilde in appreciation just as the engine sputtered to life under Bruce's deft fingers.

Bruce's eyes glinted with the light of victory as he turned to Thor and Brunnhilde, "Buckle up, we don't want to get a ticket." He pushed the lever of the jeep into gear and pressed his foot on the gas. The jeep wheeled out of the parking lot and onto the street, illuminated by sparse streetlamps and traffic lights. Thor expected the roar of their engine to draw attention to their getaway but still there remained no sign of pursuit.

Bruce drove them through the quiet, empty streets of the small town of Broxton, lined on either side by shopfronts and dark houses, the population long slumbering and peacefully ignorant of the vitally important happenings that transpired right outside their front porches.

"There will be guards at the sight," said Thor as the jeep bumped across the steadily worsening roads as they moved away from the center of the town into the rural landscape beyond. "I wish to avoid any casualties. Midgard may be unfriendly at the moment, but it is a realm that still accommodates many of my friends."

"Don't worry," Brunnhilde, teeth gleaming in the light of their headlamps. "They won't know what hit them. I'll meet you there –" and with that – ignoring the gasp of protest from Bruce – she poll-
vaulted over the side of the jeep, sticking an effortless landing on the side of the road.

"Hell of a girl," Bruce muttered under his breath and Thor could not hide the grin that dug into his cheek as he turned to watch Brunnhilde dart into the cornfields, laden with some devious plan.

Their headlights soon turned onto a dirt road, at the end of which was a blockade of spotlights, detour signs, more jeeps, and several shadowy forms cradling artillery to their chests.

"Who goes there?" a magnified voice called into the night. "Only authorized personnel permitted beyond this – hey!

The voice was suddenly cut off and Bruce pulled up to the roadblock in time to catch Brunnhilde reflected in the spotlights, relieving one of the many fallen guard's of his bullhorn.

"Right this way, gentlemen," she called into the bullhorn and smirked as Bruce winced at the noise. She swung her legs back over the side of the jeep and perched atop the cab, feet planted on the backseat.

The jeep shuddered further up the dirt road. Soon their headlights spilled across the monstrous wreck of the Asgardian ship, half-way burrowed in divots of earth and uptorn stalks of corn.

Bruce tugged the lever of the jeep into park, but before the vehicle had stopped moving, Thor jumped out over the side, running toward the entrance hatch. Brunnhilde was on his heels. She helped him wrenched his way through the entrance hatch, still damaged and reluctant toward their efforts to open it.

Thor stepped through the narrow opening into the cavernous entrance way of the ship.

"King Thor!" They had walked directly into a makeshift barracks in the hold, cluttered with the ramshackle survivors around military-issued cots and crates emblazoned with red crosses.

"My King!" The Asgardians mulling in the half-lit hold, those not already attempting to get some sleep in the cots, turned in shock to see Thor and his companions enter the ship. Several palace guards approached, hands clapped to their shoulders in solute.

"What is happening?" voices chorused. "Why did you not return to us?"

"Do not worry," Thor said, and tried to muster a tone of convincing authority into his voice. "The mortals and I are deliberating upon our situation. The people of Asgard will not be forgotten by their king. But stay your questions. I must be away."

Thor swept by the ragged multitudes of his people, guilt stirring in his gut. The lies on his tongue tasted like poison. He crossed the hold and entered the corridor beyond.

"Oh, hey man." He was greeted by a casual wave from the crumbling rock giant Korg, lumbering down the corridor. "Does your being back mean we can leave the ship now? I mean, it's a nice ship, but it's kind of tiny, you know? Not really meant for someone my size –"

"I must speak with Heimdall," Thor said, pushing passed Korg.

"Oh sure, he's in the bridge probably. That's headquarters now, he said."

Thor rushed down the corridor without another word. Brunnhilde and Bruce followed, Brunnhilde patting Korg's arm in thanks as she ran by.
"Heimdall!" Thor declared as soon as he pushed his way through the limp and unresponsive doors to the bridge.

"My King," Heimdall replied, pristine and calm as ever, standing near the righted throne at the head of the bridge. "I saw that you were coming."

"Circumstances are dire, indeed," Thor began. "We have very little time. I must remove the Tesseract from this realm as quickly as possible. I fear I have brought the risk of Thanos' retribution to Midgard. I must draw him away."

"I have concealed the Tesseract from the mortals," said Heimdall. "It was not difficult. They are unwilling to enter our ship." He stalked across the breadth of the bridge, bending at a ruined control consul to open a hatch in the side, and withdrew the glowing blue cube from its depths.

"Where will you go, My King?" Heimdall asked no other questions than this. Thor had no doubt the guardian had been keeping an eye on their conversation inside the motel. "What you attempt is risky. I doubt you will be able to protect the Tesseract from Thanos' reach for long."

"I do not know, Heimdall," Thor answered gravely. He stepped forward to retrieve the Tesseract from Heimdall's hold. "I have no idea of a means of deterring Thanos permanently. My first avenue is merely to find a way off Midgard. I will seek my sorcerer friend in New York. I believe he may have the means for interdimensional transport."

"And what of your acquaintance the Vision, My King?" Heimdall asked pointedly. "The Mind Gem is bound to his life source. If Thanos should discover this –"

Thor shook his head. "My only hope is that Thanos is as yet unaware that Midgard plays host to another Gem. I must act as decoy and lead his gaze away from this realm."

"Wait just one damn second," Brunnhilde interrupted, face blazing with ire as she stepped forward. "What's all this about I? What about me? I'm sure as hell not being left out of this –"

"Brunnhilde," Thor said with a wince. He did not know how to speak to her. He could not meet her accusing gaze with even his one eye. "Once our escape is noted, I fear the Asgardians will be treated with distrust redoubled. They will need leaders of all the strength and moral courage I can leave with them. Brunnhilde, you and Heimdall –"

"That wasn't part of the plan, Thor!" Brunnhilde exclaimed. "I escaped with you so I could help you, dammit, not play at politics!"

"But this will be a help to me!" Thor yelled. He was getting desperate now. The Tesseract hummed with barely contained power in his hands. Why was it that people were so reluctant to listen to him? He was a king, dammit. "A help greater than I can say. I leave you with my people – with the trust that you will do them no harm, protect them with all your honor –"

"You are becoming as deceitful as your brother!" Brunnhilde shouted, and the reminder of Loki twisted in Thor's chest like a knife.

"And what about me?" said Bruce quietly. "In case you forgot, I'm not exactly Asgardian. And I just escaped from US military custody – I don't exactly have many options here that don't end up with me
being tossed into a brig or else locked up in an atomically secured facility."

"Bruce, my friend," said Thor, "I appreciate your willingness to help, but –"

"– But I don't think you thought this through too far ahead," Bruce intercut flatly.

"There is so little time," Thor implored them. He cowered under the combined weight of Brunnhilde's glare, Bruce's frown, and Heimdall's patient, frustratingly omniscient gaze. "I must be away before they send pursuit –"

"Too late," said a familiar voice and Thor whipped around to find Tony, garbed in his red and gold armor, standing in the open doorway of the bridge.

"Stark," Brunnhilde snarled but was stilled when Bruce's hand closed around her wrist.

"How did you enter this place?" Thor demanded, taking a step forward before he stopped himself. He could not afford to lose his temper. This was Tony for Norn's sake. Friend and comrade in arms.

"I came in through one of the large holes in the side," said Tony, seemingly aloof but Thor could detect a note of stiffness in his voice. "You did just crash out of the sky, you know. Ship's not exactly structurally sound."

"Tony," said Bruce, voice level, expression pacifying. "Just listen, Tony. Just listen to us before you jump to any conclusions."

"It's you who did the jumping here, Bruce," said Tony. "Not me. You couldn't have just waited until morning? I told you that I had things under control."

"Your control is an illusion, Tony," Thor said. He tried to contain the rage pounding through his skull. He could not risk accelerating the situation. He had no desire to use force on someone he once called friend. "You have no idea of the threat that barrels down on earth. I could not wait until morning to act. Thanos will waste no time in mindless waiting."

"My job is to protect earth from threats, Thor," said Tony darkly. "That's all threats. Even if they come in the form of someone I once thought was a friend. It's happened before – I'm not surprised to have it happen again."

Thor raised his hands to shoulder height to indicate he meant no harm. He carried no weapon. "I am still your friend, Tony. I mean earth no harm."

"Then hand over the Tesseract," Tony said slowly, as if speaking to a child. "Step out of the ship calmly with me, and come back to the motel. I promise I won't even let General Ross know you were gone."

Thor was already shaking his head. "That is simply something I cannot do, Tony."

"Then, I'm sorry, Thor," said Tony, raising his hands, propulsion gloves simmering with dangerous light. "But I'm going to have to take you back in by force."

"I am warning you, Stark –" Thor growled.

"No, Thor, I'm warning you," Tony replied calmly from behind his metal mask, bending at the knees, preparing to pounce.

"Tony, no!" shouted Bruce, but too late – the rockets of Tony's suit roared to life and Tony launched
himself directly at Thor.

Thor reacted on impulse: jet of lightning spiraling out of his palms to hit Tony squarely in the chest. Iron Man spun wildly backward, grasped and tossed toward the ceiling of the bridge with blue strands of electricity. The force of Tony's collision shattered through the ceiling and he was flung into the darkness of the night sky beyond, leaving nothing but a smoking hole in his wake.

Thor wasted no time; he scooped Bruce to his side and – calling forth the lightning that pulsed within his veins with surprising ease – leapt into the air and rocketed through the roof of the ship, punting a second hole through the hull. Brunnhilde's voice, shouting words of abuse, was swallowed in the crackling rush of electric power that enthralled him and Bruce as they hurtled away through the sky.

OOO

Vision glided onto the roof of the apartment complex, landing effortlessly on the ground. His form slid away as he walked toward the maintenance door atop the roof. His cape folded neatly into immateriality, and red and emerald uniform melted away, replaced by slacks and a gray button-down. His metallic scarlet casing faded until he was covered in entirely convincing human skin. He knew the Mind Gem still glowed yellow through his forehead, unwilling to be hidden from view. Just like always, he could feel its power burning close to the surface of his skin, a reminder of his life-force just as a heartbeat served as such for humans.

He opened the maintenance door and walked down the lightless flight of stairs beyond. He could see better in the dark than other humans. Besides, it was a trip he had taken many times by now. He moved soundlessly downward until he found the exit door on the sixth floor. He pushed the release bar and stepped through the door into a dimly lit corridor.

He walked down the hallway, already reaching for the key in his pocket. He fit the key into the lock of apartment 6d, and eased the door open, not making a sound, not wanting to wake her; at the best of times she was an uneasy sleeper, and these were certainly not the best of times.

He stepped into the apartment, which opened into a small and tidy combination sitting room and kitchen. It was dark, the only illumination from the streetlamps far below the window, of which the curtains were open, as if she had been watching the skies when she fell asleep on the sofa.

Vision smiled at her small form, curled into a ball under a blanket. She stirred under his gaze. Her eyelids flickered open and she sat up on the couch, rubbing the sleep from her eyes like a child.

"Vis?" Wanda asked, voice rough with sleep. "Is that you?"

"You should be in bed," he said, but crossed the room to her. He stooped and pressed a kiss to her forehead. She reached up and caught his cheek with the palm of her hand, stilling him to look into his eyes.

"I was worried. On the news –"

"I am alright," Vision smiled to reassure her and sat beside her on the couch. She shifted to make room, pulling her legs under her so she sat cross-legged.

"You're late," she scolded him, voice only half-jest. She was clearly not put at ease by his assertion, yet also relieved by his presence.

"It is a long flight from Oklahoma to New York."

"What happened?" Her eyes were earnest. "Everyone is going crazy – media crews are unable to get
in because of the military. People are saying it was another alien invasion, but I think that is something hard to keep secret."

"It is –" Vision hesitated. Wanda had warned him that there must be no secrets between them, and it wasn't that this was a secret, or that Vision wanted it to be, he just yearned so deeply to shield her from any more worry. "It is not an invasion. But I'm afraid it is technically more aliens."

"Is it Thor?" Wanda asked and Vision grinned. She was so astute; it was impossible to tell sometimes, whether she was just making an educated guess or was otherwise informed by the uncanny connection that existed between them. They could not read each other's minds, but there existed a cerebral link nonetheless, some unexplained bond that spanned physical distance between their twin minds, braided together by strands of consciousness that once upon a time had so ravished Wanda's mind and now existed in harmony within Vision's own. A similar connection, Vision thought, had existed between Wanda and her brother.

"Yes. Thor and Bruce Banner both, in fact."

"Bruce?" Wanda blinked in surprise. "Then he is alive? But how –"

"I do not know," said Vision. "General Ross allowed only Tony to be present for the debriefing. I stayed with the Colonel to situate the others. And I was then anxious to return to you, for I knew how unexpectedly I had to leave."

A thousand questions rose to the forefront of Wanda's mind and Vision quieted them with a brief recounting of the day's events, telling all that had happened since Tony had summoned him about a concerning blip on the radar screens, oncoming foreign object set to collide with earth in less than an hour so better get their asses into their uniforms.

"General Ross," Wanda said and rolled her eyes when Vision had finished. It was a show of bravado, for Vision knew how large a part the General played in the most recent additions to her nightmares. "It will please me to no end when you can finally stop pretending to work for that man."

"I know, my love," Vision sought her hand from under the blanket and found it, squeezing her fingers in his own. "But Tony feels it is the best course of action, the only way we might protect the others threatened by the Accords –"

"I know," Wanda silenced him with a squeeze of her own. "And trust me, if I was not convinced of your motives than I would never have agreed to move in with you."

"Something that I am infinitely glad of," Vision smiled. He kissed her fully on the lips, warmth of her flesh tingling through his own. Tony had done his work well; Vision felt and responded like a man in love, fully human.

It had taken nearly two months of careful, deliberate maneuverings to work his way back into Wanda's good graces – longer still to convince Clint, fulfilling the role of the gruff father-figure, of Vision's good intentions. Vision had a feeling Tony suspected where Wanda currently was, but Stark retained his honor; Vision trusted he would not reveal her whereabouts to General Ross or anyone else. Vision had found her at Clint's farm. True to his word to Clint, Tony had not divulged this information, but Vision had been led there by his own facility, drawn by the unnamed prompting of her mind. Even over the distance of half a country he had been able to sense the damaged pulsing of her consciousness, erratic and lacerated from the strain on her magic she had experienced aboard the Raft.

Kissing her now, in their apartment glossed by the light of streetlamps below, Vision thought he
would do anything in his power – or beyond – if it meant he could protect her from any further harm.

Wanda pulled away from the caress. Her lips were curled in a faint smile, eyes still too solemn to look coy as she stood from the sofa, still holding Vision's hand so she tugged him up after her. "I think it was you who mentioned bed?"

"Mmm, yes," Vision replied, matching her grin. "I think bed is just what I need."

A rumble of thunder, unanticipated from the clear night sky, rattled the dishes in the cupboards of the kitchen behind them.

Wanda's forehead wrinkled. "We were not supposed to get a storm tonight, I do not think."

Vision gently extracted his hand from Wanda's and walked to the window. He stood close, inspecting the quiet night, the skyline of the city that twinkled in the distance. He had no breath to fog the glass before his face.

A flash of lightning split the sky. Angry clouds billowed over the cityscape. A thick drop of rain spattered against the window, the first of a sudden torrent that clattered against the glass, tossed from the sky by an angry, whipping squall.

The Stark Phone in Vision's back pocket buzzed to urgent life. Vision thought he could guess well-enough what news Tony sent him, but nonetheless retrieved the phone and pressed his thumb against the screen to awaken it. Flashing across the screen, in red, distressed font: Point Break's gone rogue.

Vision sighed. "I think bed may have to wait."

Wanda was at his side, reaching up to his face again with her soft, delicate fingers that held so much concealed, coursing power. "Do you want –"

"No, love," he cupped the back of her hand with his own. "You stay here. Stay hidden. Stay safe. I shall be only a moment, I'm sure."

Her smile was resigned, but sad, when she allowed her hand to fall away from Vision's face. "That's what you always say."
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

I'm making an effort at including some of the scenes from the trailer, but most will be altered somewhat to fit into my plot, and otherwise largely out of context (because that context is obviously as-yet-unknown). I'll also be slowly introducing some more familiar characters. I've got plans ;)

Thank you again for the continued support of and response to this story. All your kind words are very much appreciated.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Thor was unpracticed in the art of his magic without the aid of Mjolnir. He found himself pinwheeling helplessly through the air, careening across great distance at a speed he did not know how to reduce. He grasped Bruce tightly to his side, afraid he would drop the mortal or that the beast, sensing Thor's lack of control, would emerge in an effort to counter Bruce's fear.

Thor's mind was preoccupied with whirling thoughts of the scene that had just transpired back in the bridge of the Asgardian ship. The last time he had had cause to strike Tony was before he had counted the man among his friends and teammates – how quickly it had all spiraled out of control. Loyalties betrayed in a blink of an eye: Thor's anxiousness over Thanos and Loki overtaking all other jot of rationality. All in the world had gone mad.

The cityscape of New York barreled out of the darkness, approached at a much too rapid pace. Lights buzzed beneath Thor, location indistinguishable through the haze of crackling lightning and conjured thunderstorm around him.

"Bruce," Thor grunted. "I am sorry, friend, but I am going to crash, and I do not wish to injure you!"

"Thor – what the hell – Thor!" Bruce's shout of panic was left behind as Thor allowed the other man to slip from his grasp, plummeting in a free-fall toward the earth.

Thor dipped dangerously toward the ground – tearing toward the street below at an alarming pace. He shut his eyes in preparation for the impact and, with a shattering blow, he tore into the road, ripping apart the pavement as he skidded across the earth.

Thor grated to a halt, and for a moment he lay still, heart hammering against his ribs, and allowed the rain to fall on his battered body. With a pang he thought again of Loki, and the quip that would readily fall from his lips at Thor's failure to control his newfound wings. He finally opened his eyes. The streetlights glared down on him and the damage his landing had enacted. The Tesseract was still soundly gripped in his right fist, undamaged by the crash.

Shocked pedestrians – soaked by the unexpected rainstorm – gaped at him from the sidewalk. Thor groaned and rolled over onto his hands and knees, painfully getting to his feet. He rolled his sore shoulders, attempting to work out the bruises and aches in his pummeled body. His skin was smoking, he realized, as was the gash he had left in the street.

Right. Flying: something to work on.
Thor limped away from the gathering crowd, too startled to address him, and approached the imposing brownstone edifice that overlooked the street. The front door was already opening, revealing the bearded, haughty – and slightly miffed – figure of Dr. Strange.

"You do like to make an entrance," Strange said dryly as Thor mounted the steps of the front porch. "You've caused a bit of a scene." He indicated the gathering crowd. Thor could hear police sirens keening in the distance.

"No matter," said Thor. "You offered me help willingly before. I now seek to impose upon you once again."

Strange opened the door wider to allow Thor entrance. "Your friend's already dropped in" he drawled.

Thor passed through the door and Strange shut it firmly behind him, unconcerned by the chaos stirring in the streets.

Within the foyer another man, bald and hefty, was assisting Banner in stepping out from the large cavern in the floor he had apparently created after he crashed through the ceiling. Rain was beating down through the hole in the roof. Fractured wood littered the floor.

"Are you alright?" Thor asked, brow furrowed in concern as Bruce picked splinters out of his hair.

"Yeah, sure," said Bruce. "That's a word for it."

"I am sorry to come so unexpectedly," Thor turned to Strange. "But the situation is dire enough to forgo pleasantries."

"Tell me, does this have anything to do with the Infinity Stone you're currently holding in your hand?" said Strange.

Thor's grip on the Tesseract tightened. "You know of the Gems?"

"I know that what you're holding is the very same artifact your brother used to transport an army into New York five years ago. I know it possesses great power – the ability to bend the cosmos to its will. I know there are few objects that could boast such a power other than the Space Gem of the Infinity Gauntlet." Strange met Thor's gaping mouth with a raised eyebrow. "I've done my research."

"Okay, okay," said Bruce, still trying to catch his breath. "At least you're one person who seems like they'll listen to us without blasting us out of the sky with a rocket-repulsor system. I'm Bruce, by the way." He ran a shaking hand through his mussed hair before offering it to Strange. "Doctor Bruce Banner. Renowned nuclear physicist. You might have heard of me. I turn into this huge green monster when I get stressed out –"

"Yes, Doctor," Strange said, ignoring Bruce's hand, "I know who you are. May I offer you a drink?"

"What?" Bruce sputtered. "No – no I don't want a drink. I want to know what the hell is happening and who the hell you are – scratch that. I know who you are. You're Dr. Stephen Strange – the most highly esteemed neurosurgeon in the entire world and what the hell are you doing wearing a cloak?"

"I think you should both follow me into the sitting room," said Strange, faint smile tugging at the corner of his lips. "This is Wong," he said, waving a lazy hand to his scowling companion. Wong frowned at Thor and Thor wondered if he was some sort of bodyguard. "My fellow Keeper."

Thor and Bruce fell into step behind Strange, rounded out by Wong behind them.
"Thor," Bruce hissed aside to Thor. "Do you realize you just attacked Tony."

"I was defending myself!" Thor said indignantly. "Technically Tony was the one doing the attacking!"

Strange led them into a study lined with bookshelves and fitted with a desk and two wingback chairs. Thor recognized it immediately as his place of conference with Strange on the previous occasion. How many mere days had passed since that moment? A month or more? Thor had lost track of the time.

"It appears we're in need of more seats," said Strange. "Wong, would you…?"

Without a word, without – in fact – any show of effort at all, Wong flicked his wrist and two additional armchairs sprung into existence.

"Okay, yeah." Bruce blinked. "Magic. Okay. Because that makes complete sense."

"Please, take a seat," said Strange. "I have a feeling we have much to discuss."

Thor exchanged a look with Bruce, who shrugged, before the two of them descended into their chairs. Strange took a seat across from them, folding one long leg over the other. Wong remained on his feet, hands clasping the back of his chair, beefy knuckles cracking ominously.

"Perhaps we should start with the Space Stone?" Strange suggested and Thor launched into an abridged explanation of all that had transpired over the course of the last few days, accompanied by an occasional interjection from Bruce.

"That is the essence of my tale," Thor wrapped up the explanation. "And now I come to you seeking aid. I understand nothing of the power you wield, but I know you are able to transport beings through the dimensions of the universe – a skill I am in crucial need of. I fear that the Gems are connected to each other by threads that span the cosmos. Thanos need only get his hands on one other Stone before he will be able to manipulate a portal to Midgard, just as he did before with the Mind Gem in Loki's scepter. My friend Erik Selvig described it as opening of a door from the other side."

"And you do not believe you can do the same?" Strange asked, intertwining his fingers across his knee. "You have the Tesseract. Can you not use it to bring you to another Stone?"

"I do not know how to tap into the Gem's power," Thor shook his head. "Besides, Thanos has aid of the Gauntlet, which I believe must act as a focus, the terminal through which all the Stones intersect."

Strange frowned in thought, tapping one long finger against his knuckle. Strange had no opportunity to respond, for, from outside the closed door of the study there came the sound of splintering wood – the unmistakable noise of a front door being broken inward by some heavy force.

"Ah," Strange picked up his head and Wong released the back of the chair, body rigid. "More company."

Thor made a move to stand, muscles already tensing in preparation for another battle.

"You stay put," Strange reprimanded him with a stern finger. "I'd rather avoid any more holes knocked into the ceiling, if you wouldn't mind."

Just then the door to the study clattered open, booted by a swift kick from Tony's foot. "Sorry to crash this little tete-a-tete, but your breadcrumb trail of wreckage wasn't exactly hard to follow,"
Tony quipped, helmet held in the crook of his elbow. His hair was singed and standing on end, evidently a result of Thor's lightning strike.

Another figure dissolved through the wall by the door, and the shape of the Vision took form beside Tony. "Pleasure to see you both so soon again," the Vision said politely, inclining his head to Thor and Bruce.

"I'm starting to get real sick of you bumbling through my country, Point Break," said Tony heatedly, but before he had a chance to fire up his suit, Wong stepped forward, hands bearing spinning orange saucers of light. Strange was also on his feet, red cloak whipping imperially over his shoulder.

"What the —" Tony began.

The Vision stepped toward Strange, hand raised, only to topple forward into a swirling yellow portal that spun out of nonexistence. He materialized across the room, walking straight into — and through — the opposite wall. He emerged swiftly again back through the wall, looking sheepish.

"I think it wise you do not test us," said Strange.

"Listen, I don't know who you think you are —" Tony growled.

"Take a seat, Mr. Stark," Strange interrupted him firmly as a chair materialized out of nowhere behind Tony, hitting him in the back of his knees and causing him stumble backwards into it.

"What the hell is this?" Tony spat, face red as he attempted to stand back up from the chair, only to be pushed backward with a lazy wave of Strange's hand.

The Vision looked from the spinning orange portals that capped Wong's hands to Tony, immobile in his armchair, and conceded the fight with a small nod of his head.

"I think we all need to catch our breath for a moment, don't you?" Strange cocked an eyebrow, surveying his captives. "Tea?"

OOO

"You did not bring along Colonel Rhodes?" The scowling God of Thunder asked from his chair across the room from Tony — looking much fiercer since the time Tony last saw him, with his eyepatch and roughly cut hair. Gone was the blond teddy bear who didn't understand cellphones and demanded frosted Pop-Tarts with the little blue and green sprinkles. Well, Thor probably still couldn't send a text message, but Tony had to admit, the guy had an undeniable style to him now — like a real thing going for him with the lightning bolts and overall crankiness.

"Didn't want to bother him," Tony replied. He sat with legs crossed, armor discarded around him to make himself more comfortable now that it didn't seem like they were going to spend the night trading potshots. "Rhodey's still getting used to his sea legs. I see you left the princess behind?"

"Her place is with her people," Thor frowned.

Damn, what did it take to get a smile out of this guy? Sure, they'd just had a minor scuffle in the middle of his crashed spaceship, but Thor had no cause to be so unpleasant.

"So yours isn't?" Tony asked, and boy was that the wrong thing to say.

Thor's forehead furrowed. "Do not dare speak to me of disloyalty, Stark." He leaned forward in his chair and Strange lifted a hand in warning.
Who was this guy Strange? Tony wondered. Of course he knew about Dr. Stephen Strange, had been vaguely aware of his car crash and fall from grace, his general disappearance from the world's sight, but to have him pop up again in the middle of Greenwich Village with a red cape and Harry Potter wizard powers was…puzzling to say the least. And then there was his pal Wong, who was Thor's only real challenger in the frowning contest they all had going on here.

"Listen to me, Thor," Tony sat forward, bracing his elbows on his knees. Tony was still pissed that Thor had tossed him like a rag doll with his sparkly lightning show, but more than he was angry, he was getting desperate. Tony had to make Thor understand what was at stake. He and Bruce both had no idea what had happened on earth recently. The last thing Tony needed right now was a ragtag pack of displaced superbeings with half-assed god complexes messing up all his hard work.

"Don't you realize what General Ross will do to your people if you don't cooperate?" Tony asked. "We're talking beyond World War II level internment camps, here. The US Government will most definitely mark Asgard as a threat purely because of their power – anything they can't understand has to be controlled or put down. How do you think Vision here has managed to stay out of trouble? Currently, the only way around the Accords is to play nice."

"What I have seen and heard of these Accords have revealed only discrimination and forced subjugation," Thor said stonily. "I have no intention of playing nice with such policy."

Look at him, using big words and everything. Little Thor had grown up; Tony was so proud.

"And I'm telling you," Tony said, "that it's not your choice. You play nice or pay the consequences – no room for a third option. Unless you just get off our planet, which seems doesn't seem likely any time soon, seeing as half of your spaceship is buried underground."

"And I am telling you, Stark," Thor met Tony's gaze boldly with his unpatched eye – really gave the guy a sense of disheveled je ne sais quoi. "– that no one dares tell the God of Thunder and King of Asgard what to do."

"Er – not to interrupt," Strange cut in smoothly, playing the part of a good moderator. This might as well have been couple's therapy. "But I don't think this is exactly the most pressing matter at hand. I believe we were going to discuss the issue of the Infinity Stones?"

Thor leaned back in his chair, arms crossed over his chest in frustration, but nonetheless sighed. "You are right, Doctor. With every moment we tarry, Thanos draws closer. I must be away from earth at once."

"So you're saying you want to take the Tesseract back into space?" Tony asked, just for clarity's sake, even though he didn't let Thor reply. "And what happens if I don't let you?"

"You are not in the position to let me do anything," Thor said through clenched teeth.

"If Thanos is indeed on his way to earth," Strange interjected again, getting them back on track. Tony could tell he was getting on Strange's nerves, but Tony didn't really give a damn. Strange was getting on his nerves, too. "How long do you think it will take for him to get here?"

"Yeah, how about it, Thor?" Tony didn't usually mean to be cruel, but in this moment he was paying especially little attention to what he was saying. "How long do you think your brother can hold up under torture? Or do you think he's already cracked?"

Maybe he'd expected Thor to get angry again, but Tony hadn't expected the guy to crumble. Thor's shoulders drooped. His face fell and a flash of hurt grazed across his single eye. Guilt stirred in
Tony's stomach and he tried not to remember Afghanistan.

"I do not know," Thor whispered. "If this is, indeed, not Loki's first time within Thanos' clutches... before his attack on Midgard, Loki must have spent more than a year with Thanos. I do not know how long it took for him to --"

"Hold the phone," said Tony, and for a moment he really didn't think he had heard or understood what Thor has said. "You mean Loki was working for Thanos when he tried to invade earth?"

"Yes," said Thor, and he looked back up, "but from the torment I watched my brother experience aboard our vessel, I do not think his servitude was entirely voluntary."

"Okay." Tony exhaled deeply. This was information he'd have to store away and examine later. He reminded himself to be gentler with his next words. "Okay, yeah. So, how do you think that changes things? Will it take Thanos a shorter amount of time to extract --"

"I think it is safe to say," said Thor, and it looked like the words caused him physical pain, "that we must act on the assumption that Loki has already revealed to Thanos where the Space Gem sent us. I... would not want him to have to withstand too much more..."

"You know, he's not a bad person," Bruce piped up unexpectedly, for Thor's benefit, Tony knew. Dammit, Bruce, always the better guy. "Your brother. Loki. He saved the Asgardians. Twice. We'll -- I'll do anything I can to help, Thor."

"Thank you, friend Bruce," said Thor, nodding to the man. "I appreciate your words immensely."

"Can we -- er -- discuss Loki's morality some other time?" said Tony. "I mean, no offense," he added quickly when he saw a shadow pass over Thor's face again. "It's just -- so, what's your plan? You know, if we jettison you back into outer space? What do you do with the Tesseract? Hide it? Hold onto it? Use it to barter for your brother's life?"

Thor did get angry then, and Tony was glad because a grumpy Thor was infinitely better than a sad one. He stammered, face red, "You dare suggest I would betray an Infinity Gem for the sake of -- even if it was to save my own brother, Stark, I would never dream --"

Surprisingly it was Wong who spoke up -- Tony had almost forgotten he was there, looking all surly in the corner like their disapproving parent: "This man Stark has a good point. We cannot risk an Infinity Stone being apprehended. Perhaps it would be wiser to keep it near at hand, even if it did draw our enemy closer."

"Thanks -- er -- Wang?" said Tony, even though he remembered the guy's name. It was a principle, dammit. "I mean, not to sound like Captain Obvious here, but it seems to me that the only plan that makes sense is if we can get to all the Stones before Thanos does. And, you know, then use them to blow the bastard out of the sky."

"We do currently have two Stones at our disposal," Vision added helpfully. Teacher's pet.

Strange exchanged a look with Wong, apparently debating whether or not to add something, but then Thor got there first:

"Only those who have an inflated sense of their abilities would assume they could bend the Infinity Gems to their will. They are artifacts steeped in a legacy of devastation and darkness. Only those who intend to use the Gems for destruction will succeed in fully exercising their power."

"Thor is right," said Strange. "The harnessing of a Stone's power is considered an act of the Dark
"Dimension, a risky and taboo idea to dare even entertain."

"Geez, sorry," said Tony, raising his hands. "I'm just new to the rules here."

"But could we not simply keep the Stone here without intending to use it," Vision suggested. "To keep it safe and defend it from Thanos when he comes?"

"And how should we defend it?" Thor demanded. "I cannot allow the people of earth to be put at risk. I must lead Thanos away. He does not know the Mind Gem resides on earth. He must not be made aware of that fact. To bring him here would be to give him opportunity to retrieve not only one Infinity Gem, but two."

"So it's just you, yourself, and yours in this equation, huh?" said Tony. He was getting a little tired of the God of Thunder's air of self-martyrdom.

"I have no idea of what awaits me on the other end of the universe," Thor said firmly. "I will not subject my friends to the dangers of the unknown."

"I mean, not that the word of a man who just tried to blast you out of the sky will hold much sway," Tony continued, "but you shouldn't be expected to shoulder all this by yourself."

"Nonetheless, it is to be my sole burden. It was my brother who attracted Thanos' attention by taking the Tesseract from Asgard's vaults, and it was me to bring the Tesseract to earth. It is my responsibility to see this situation remedied —"

"With, ah, all due respect," Strange began. Tony noted the barely-there quiver in Strange's hands. Interesting. Tony stored the detail away for further contemplation Alcoholism? Residual nerve damage from his injuries sustained in his crash? "But that is not, I think, exactly your choice to make. The Stone has fallen out of Asgard's jurisdiction and into our own. And I think it time now to take it in hand."

The look of confusion on Thor's face would have been amusing if Tony wasn't equally as baffled. "I do not understand," Thor said. "I was under the impression that you had agreed to help me."

"I intend to help earth," said Strange. He nodded to Wong, who cocked an unconcerned eyebrow – man had nerves of steel, Tony had to give him that much. "Wong once told me that we sorcerers had to protect the world from the mystical realm while the Avengers took care of that of the physical. But, seeing as you Avengers have done such a shit job, I thought it about time we started taking on more of a heavy load. And so thinks, it seems, an old friend of yours."

Strange stood from his chair, seemingly oblivious to the stunned silence he left after his pronouncement. "So, if you would follow me. I think it high time you and he are reintroduced."

The four of them also stood from their chairs. Tony caught Bruce's puzzled eye across the room, and he was glad that at least for now no one was throwing any punches or turning green. God, he'd missed that man – hadn't even had time yet to tell him how good it was to see that he was still breathing, or ask him what the hell being in outer space felt like, or whether the engine aboard the Asgardian ship ran on solid fuel or cold-gas chemical propulsion.

Strange pulled off one of his spinning, black portal things and – damn wasn't that the sweetest bit of tantalizing magic. What was that? Creating spaces between atoms? Or some kind of miniature wormhole? Tony felt cheated. Would have thought if there was someone on earth capable of interdimensional travel, they would have had the decency to let him know.

"After you," said Strange.
Thor readily stepped through the portal. Bruce followed, slightly more tentative, and Tony after him. In a mere blink of an eye he passed through the rotating ring of yellow light into an entirely different space, leaving Strange's study behind him.

Tony halted mid-step, and Vision ran into him – actually floated right through him, which felt like Tony had momentarily been doused in cold water. Damn, that was creepy when he did that immateriality thing. The office he'd entered was sparsely but tastefully fitted out with a desk, oak-paneled walls, and a swivel chair turned toward a grand, sweeping window that surveyed the city below. Even if the carpets and wallpaper had been redone, Tony recognized the office immediately: Stark Tower, home sweet home.

Tony's stomach panged. It was always painful to come into a redecorated space of somewhere he used to consider home. They'd ruined all of Pepper's careful designs. A little part of Tony would always miss the Tower, even from within his charming new nest in the Catskills. Just wasn't anything quite like city life.

"Strange, dammit," a voice barked as the chair behind the desk swiveled around to meet them. "Use the door for once in your goddam life."

"My apologies, Director," said Strange, stepping into the office as the portal condensed into empty air behind him.

"Stark, Thor, Banner," the swiveling chair came to a stop, "And it's the Vision, right?" With a familiar gleam of a cleanly shaven head, former director of SHIELD, Nicolas Fury, propped his elbows on his desk, clasped his hands under his chin, and surveyed the cohort with one glaring eye.
"Can't say it's good to see you again, given the circumstances."

Tony felt his jaw drop. "You're Stronghold Enterprises?" He demanded.

"I would advise you to pay closer attention to who signs your paperwork, Stark," Fury said, raising his one eyebrow.

"I don't even pay attention when I sign my paperwork."

Fury raised his hands as if to show off his office. "Welcome to the headquarters for the Special Tactical Response for Enforcement of and Intervention in Global Threats and Hazards," he rattled off. "Otherwise known as STRENGTH. That is, if anyone knew about us at all."

"What is it with you and ridiculous acronyms?" said Tony.

"Director Fury," Thor said, so earnestly Tony wanted to puke. "I am pleased indeed to see you well."

"Like the patch, Thor," said Fury.

"What happened to SHIELD?" said Bruce.

"It was about time it underwent a full makeover," said Fury. "Top to bottom refurbishing, with a shift in focus to threats even farther afield then before. We can't afford to be caught with our pants down again like we were five years ago."

"And you didn't think it would be useful to show your sorry ass back when Rogers was giving me hell about the Accords?" said Tony.

Fury shook his head. "While you two were busy with your little marital dispute, I was trying to
figure out how best to prepare for the real problems heading our way."

"And how the hell are you doing that?" said Tony.

"Let's try to hold our temper, shall we, Stark?" said Strange and Tony suppressed his urge to shove his fist through the good doctor's teeth.

"Dr. Strange for one," Fury answered Tony. "Helps keep an eye on those threats we didn't even know existed before shit like the Infinity Stones started showing up. And we've got Dr. Selvig on staff – working in concordance with your old flame, too, Thor. Dr. Foster."

"Jane?" the big guy perked up at that – although Tony couldn't tell if it was with enthusiasm or trepidation. Tony didn't blame the guy: girl could pull her punches in astrophysics, he couldn't imagine what she'd be like in her personal life. "Is she here now?"

"Sorry to disappoint you," said Fury. "Currently half-way across the world in an undisclosed location, working out some kind of molecular realignment shit. Frankly, I don't understand a word of it and I don't give a damn if I do or don't as long as she gets done what needs be. So, I hear you've brought us back the damn Tesseract, have you?"

Fury's gaze was fierce – Tony was glad to not be on the receiving end of the Director's disapproving glare for once – and Thor's fingers closed tighter around the blue cube he held to his chest.

"It shall not remain on earth for long if I would have my way," said Thor.

"Yeah, yeah," Fury brushed Thor away with an unconcerned wave of his hand. "I listened in on your conversation. You're not the only one clever about surveillance, Stark. And, to be perfectly blunt, I agree with you, Thor, the fewer of these goddamn pebbles on our planet, the better."

"Thank you, Director," Thor inclined his head just as Tony opened his mouth, just failed impulse control by now, and blurted out:

"With all due respect, Nick, old pal, but have you lost your fucking mind? What's the point of launching the Tesseract back into outer space? For starters, where do we send him – just cross our fingers and hope for the best? Sure, go ahead and damn me for wanting to dabble in the Dark Dimension whatever the hell that is, but the only way out of this is if we can beat Thanos at his own game –"

"Tony, do you just run your mouth off because it's habit or do you actually listen to what you're saying?" said Bruce, and it was so unexpected because this was Bruce for God's sake that Tony only stared and tried very hard to ignore the shocked hurt that rose in his throat to strangle him. Sure, maybe Tony attempted to place the guy under military custody only hours before, but that didn't mean they weren't still friends.

"I'm saying it because someone has to," Tony retorted. And dammit if his throat wasn't getting all clogged already. When did his emotions get so out of whack? He felt like he had whiplash from the many turns the night had taken. He needed a Xanax and a shot of whiskey fast or he was going to punt his foot through the wall or elsewise become a quivering heap on the floor.

"Someone has to just take a step back and think here," Tony continued. "A lot has happened in not a lot of time and the last thing we need right now is more rash action. You're telling me the survival of the earth is at stake. Well – alright. Alright. So I'll be damned if I see one more human life threatened under my watch again, and I'll do anything in my power – anything, dammit, even if it means going against a fucking god or the director of SHIELD or STRENGTH or SWORD or whatever the hell
it's called – if it means stopping one more goddamn supervillain with the ego the size of Texas from stirring up shit on my planet again."

"Tony," said Vision gently – and goddamn why was it the only inhuman of the bunch that could sound the most understanding? Everyone was looking at Tony. Tony realized his hands were shaking.

"So, yeah," said Tony, running his hand through his hair, trying to reign it back in. "That's my two cents."

"Appreciate the input, Stark," said Fury briskly.

Thor interrupted the Director, "You know already where I stand in this, Tony." Maybe Point Break didn't sound as mad as he had before, but a new tone of steely determination had entered his voice, a tone far more threatening than outright anger.

This wasn't happening, an urgent voice in Tony's voice insisted. This wasn't happening. Not again. Tony wasn't losing another friend to something like this again.

Thor's voice rumbled onward, somewhere in the back of Tony's mind as full-fledged panic took over. "You are resolved to defend Midgard in any way you feel is right. As am I. I accept our differences in opinion, but I also accept that I will allow nothing else to stand in my way –"

"Stand in your way from running off to rescue your murderous brother!" the words were out of Tony's mouth before he could stop them. "Because don't kid yourself, Thor! Don't kid yourself! You don't give a damn about earth. This is about saving Loki. Goddamn Loki! Who tried to conquer this place five years ago, if you don't remember. And who killed hundreds of people in the process!"

"You dare –" Thor began dangerously.

"Yes, I dare! I fucking dare!" Tony shouted. "I dare because no one else seems like they do! I don't often play the part of the voice of reason, but right now I have to be."

"I wonder if you could escort Mr. Stark back to the Sanctorum, Doctor?" Fury's voice was hard. Tony shut his eyes. Everything was slipping through his fingers, slipping through his fingers just like it always did. He wanted to blow something up, he thought, except he'd left his suit back in Strange's study.

"Tony," said Vision. "You told me when we agreed to work for Ross, that we did so in the interest of the greater good. Perhaps it is time for another such decision."

Tony didn't bother opening his eyes. He spat, "I made you, dammit. You're not allowed to go all self-righteous on me."

"If we're taking a vote," said Bruce carefully. "Then I'm with Thor, too. The Tesseract has to be off earth before Thanos catches wind of it."

"Stark," said Strange, "I know it will be little comfort. But, I too believe it unwise to send Thor without destination or plan back into space with the Tesseract. However, in this case, I willingly concede to Director Fury's decision."

"No shit, Sherlock," Tony muttered under his breath. His eyes snapped back open. Yep, everyone still looking at him. Thor's single eye weighed heaviest of all. Tony wished the guy at least had the grace to look victorious, instead of like a kicked puppy.
"I am sorry, friend Stark," he said. "I promise I will not allow any of you to regret your decision today. I will do all in my power to protect the Tesseract from Thanos, and to find a way to stop him from retrieving the rest of the Stones. Midgard will not suffer from the consequences of my folly. I vow it now. You are my witnesses."

Oblivious Thor, didn't he understand that vows served as poor defense against bona fide threats? Tony had learned long ago that no matter how hard he tried, how many times he said I promise, everything always went to shit. Inevitable failure was Anthony Stark's middle name, nestled right in there alongside Edward.

It was starting to get light out. White dawn crept over the points of the surrounding skyscrapers: the juncture of mother nature and human architecture, a sight to behold on any other day but this. Heavy exhaustion expanded in Tony's chest as the unstable emotions of the past night drained away. All Tony wanted to do was curl up into a tight ball beside Pepper in bed, let her be the big spoon for once, and sleep for about ten years. Not that that had any chance of actually happening – he had a long and frustrating day ahead of him. And now he had the added stress of coming up with an excuse to give General Ross about why his Asgardian golden ponyboy had not spent the night peacefully slumbering in his stable.

Tony tore himself away from the pitying faces of the people around him.

"Come on, Strange," he said, "weren't you supposed to be escorting me somewhere?"

Chapter End Notes

Totally pulled STRENGTH out of midair, inspired by Psalm 28: "The Lord is my strength and my shield..." which I thought a fitting connection for an offshoot of SHIELD. Basically I just needed some way to get Fury back into it all. No way is he sitting this one out.
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

You've been asking for 'em, so here they are. We get our first glimpse of the Guardians in this chapter.

Warning: description of wounds, tending to wounds, blood etc.

Tardy note, added a few days after posting: I'm super sorry I missed this, but I should add a spoiler warning for some of the Infinity War leaked scenes in this chapter. The middle section largely borrows from that footage. Nothing huge, though, and I soon deviate from the scene into my own speculations.

Thor marched down the grand hallways of the tower – rendered unrecognizable by its new occupants – walking abreast Director Fury. His argument with Tony had left a sour taste in his mouth. It seemed every move Thor made led him down a wrong path, marked with dissent and uneasiness. Was this the lot of a king – to never again be certain he was taking a step in the right direction?

"Director Fury," said Thor. "I am sure you are aware of my people in Oklahoma. Will you have a hand in their resettlement? We are in need of any ally we may procure."

"I'll try to keep an eye on them, Thor," said Fury with a sigh. "Whenever I'm not too busy keeping an eye on everything else."

"I am most grateful," said Thor. "They will be alright, I know, but I cannot pretend that leaving them on earth – an earth sorely different from the one I last left – is not troubling."

"The world is going to shit, Thor," said Fury. They stepped into a lift which shuttled them downward. "It's only natural people aren't acting quite themselves."

The lift let them out into a large room, and it took a moment for Thor to recognize it as Tony's penthouse suite near the top of the tower, with its slated ceilings and floor-to-ceiling windows that opened into a long balcony dangling over the city. The sitting area the Avengers had spent many a night, relishing in the victory of battle, had been replaced by a long table. Certainly now a luxurious and impressive space for board meetings, but Thor could not help the nostalgia from pooling in his stomach. So much. They had lost so much.

"Thor!" a shout greeted his entrance into the room, and Thor felt his lips spread wide in a smile despite his lingering gloom from the night's events.

"Erik, my friend, how good it is to see you again!"

Thor and Erik embraced. Dr. Erik Selvig looked well – disheveled as ever, but the slightly dazed glance in his eyes left by Loki's scepter seemed to have entirely dissipated. He looked healthy and fit, face alight with new scientific rigor afforded by his position with Fury.

"I have much to tell you, Erik, of all that has transpired over these years –"
Fury cleared his throat loudly behind them. "Not to cut this touching reunion short, but I think we were in the process of getting you back into space, Thor? Selvig, you have the chamber ready?"

"Right away, Director," said Erik, hustling away to retrieve a glass chamber, capped on both ends by metal handles. It was a similar model to the one that had transported he and Loki back to Asgard five years ago. "This should do the ticket."

"So, where are you headed with this thing?" Fury asked as they made their way into the early-morning air of the city, walking to the end of the balcony. Thor could see from here how the large Avenger's A had been removed from the side of the building, replaced by a much smaller and less imposing legend: Stronghold Enterprises.

"My first stop, I think, shall be somewhere I can acquire a new weapon," said Thor. "I think it high time I stop hoping Mjolnir will be restored to me, yet it is imperative I retrieve some vessel through which to channel my powers until I grow more confident in using them untethered."

"You know," said Fury, "I was going to ask, but then I remembered that sometimes it's better not to."

"Are there corner weapons shops in outer space?" said Erik.

"I know of one such place," said Thor. "It lies in the farthest, darkest reaches of the galaxy, home to outlaws and other disreputable folk, but there also lives a Collector of many mysterious artifacts. If he cannot help me find a suitable replacement for my hammer, then I do not believe anyone can."

"You sure you know how to use this thing, Thor?" said Fury, nodding to the chamber Thor now gripped in his hand.

"We shall certainly soon find out," said Thor. He grinned at his send-off party of two. "I thank you, Director Fury. And my friend, Erik, for all the help you have given me. I promise, I shall not fail you."

"Just concentrate on figuring out what this bastard Thanos has up his sleeve," said Fury. "I have a feeling this isn't the last time we'll hear about his sorry ass."

Thor nodded. "And, Erik," he added, aligning the chamber with a twist of one of the dual handles. "Do me the honor of telling Lady Jane that I hope she is well."

"Will do, Thor. Will do."

The Tesseract roared to life. Thor felt the force of the Space Gem prick at his innards, grasping hold of him from within and without as the Tesseract tore a hole through space and unspooled a twilit pathway through the sky. Thor's feet left ground, and he was engulfed in blue light, jettisoned by the Gem into the dark expanse of the universe and toward the distant slimy cavern of Knowhere.

"You're supposed to stop. You're supposed to stop when I raise my fist," Peter hissed from behind them, figure shrouded in darkness as they crept through the bowels of the Collector's hastily refurbished museum. Gamora rolled her eyes at Peter, hoping to god his antics weren't going to attract the attention of Thanos ahead of them.

"The Reality Stone," Thanos' voice crept through the stagnant air of the museum, clogged with the smell of chemicals and preservatives. Bloated, mutated beings hung immobile in murky test-tubes across the room. "Tell me where it is."
Gamora felt sick fear, unpleasantly mixed with roiling anger, boil to life in her stomach at the sound of Thanos' voice. She had vowed that the next time she ever heard the voice of her father it would be because she had a knife pressed to his throat and she'd asked him if he had any last words.

There was the sound of crackling bones and a groan. Taneleer Tivan said, crushed by pain, "I told you, I sold it."

Gamora stopped, crouched behind a crate of one of the Collector's many assembled artifacts. There was no telling what objects were hidden in the labyrinthine entrails of the museum. Lurking just out of sight could be the most powerful items in the universe – and no one would ever know unless Tivan revealed his secrets. Out of the corner of her eye, Gamora spied a Kree solar technetium warhead, one of the most powerful explosive devises in the cosmos. If it went off, all of Knowhere could be imploded into stardust in the blink of an eye.

"Who did you sell it to?" Thanos' voice was low and dangerous. Gamora could not see his large form from behind the crate. She spotted the tip of Tivan's mussed hair, body sprawled across the floor.

"I – do not remember –" Tivan choked and he was interrupted by the deep rumble of Thanos' laughter. Gooseflesh erupted across Gamora's skin.

"Lying…I imagine it's like breathing for you," said Thanos and Tivan gurgled in pain. "Tell me. Where is the Stone?"

Every breath was difficult to keep quiet. She heard the scuttle of one of Rocket's paws on the floor – easily just the pattering of some small vermin through the pipes, and the noise did not attract the attention of Thanos.

"Today," murmured a voice near Gamora's ear and she jumped in surprise, turning to see it was Drax, eyes glued to what part of Tivan was visible on the floor. "Today, he pays for the deaths of my wife and daughter."

"Wait, wait, wait, Drax, no," Peter hissed behind them, but Drax had already reached for the dagger hanging from the sheath at his hip, soundlessly drawing it into his hand. "Not yet. Not yet. Not yet."

Drax was not listening to Peter. Gamora did not think he could hear him, so absorbed was he with his hatred and lust for revenge. She did not blame him. She understood. She really did. "Drax," she warned him, barely moving her lips, and reached out, but Drax had already moved away.

"Shit no. Shit no," Peter said urgently under his breath and moved to intercept Drax. Drax stuck out his arm and stuffed his hand into Peter's face, shoving him out of the way. Peter toppled backward – Gamora darted over to stop him from bumping into a stack of wooden crates, but she got there too late, and with a mighty crash, the boxes over-ended, clattering across the floor.

Thanos' voice ceased. Drax stepped into the open floor, declaring solemnly, "Thanos, the Mad Titan, I am Drax the Destroyer. You killed my family and now I will kill you."

"What is this?" said Thanos, and he sounded amused. "What primitive being is this that dare confront me?"

Gamora helped Peter back to his feet. His teeth were clenched in concern but Thanos was preoccupied only with Drax and not yet aware of their presence. Rocket skittered away into the shadows. Mantis was utterly still, mouth opened in a perfectly circular O of shock.

"I said before," Drax repeated, approaching rapidly with dagger raised, "I am Drax the Destroyer."
You killed my family and now I will kill you."

"Ha!" Thanos shouted. Thanos lifted a weaponless hand – but Gamora caught sight of a flash of bronze and she knew his fist was encased within the Infinity Gauntlet. Dread thudded in her stomach. "Foolish creature. You will die for your impudence –"

"Not on my watch, you don't!" Rocket scrambled over a tower of metal boxes, cradling his laser cannon to his chest like it was a newborn child. He cocked his weapon and pointed it toward Thanos' chest, pressing down on the trigger with his paw.

His small figure kicked back from the recoil of the gun, tumbling back over the edge of the crates, as a laser stream shot forward and collided into Thanos, propelling him backward. But Thanos remained on his feet, staggering, head whipping to see Rocket stand back up from the ground. Thanos raised the Gauntlet once again.

"Filth!" he yelled, and colorless force leapt from his hand toward Rocket. Simultaneously, Drax pounced on the Titan.

"Peter, move!" Gamora growled, more to kick herself into action rather than to prompt Peter, who was already dashing toward cover.

The blast from the Infinity Gauntlet collided into the stacked boxes and they scattered through the air, shards of melted, twisted metal tossed asunder. Rocket flung backward and thudded against the nearest wall, sliding to the floor. He quickly scrambled back to his feet.

Drax tried to stab his dagger into Thanos' upper arm, but the Titan swung him off as easily as casting aside a piece of cloth. Drax collapsed to the floor. Thanos pressed his booted foot to Drax's throat to crush his windpipe.

"Hey, you!" Peter crowed, brandishing his quad blasters, "Purple people eater!" Twin blasts from Peter's guns toppled Thanos off Drax.

Rapidly, Thanos retaliated and Peter was thrown against a wall, shoved by another blast from the Gauntlet. Peter struggled to stand, clutching his ribs.

"No!" Mantis cried, dashing forward, fire blazing in her oversized eyes, looking like a furious baby doll. Thanos grinned at her, not even moving, and she tripped to her knees, crying in pain and clutching her head.

Drax was back on his feet. Together, he and Peter launched themselves at Thanos and were again quickly beaten back. Thanos looked bored by their petty display.

He was too powerful, Gamora thought desperately. Every attack they could throw at him would be countered with ease. There was no scenario that didn't end with heavy casualties, unless they could find a way to distract Thanos long enough to allow for a clear retreat –

"Rocket!" She slid across the floor to join Rocket against a stack of debris behind which he had taken cover, shoving a fresh cartridge into his cannon. Their first scuffle in this place had ended in fire – why not try it again? Peter's recklessness had evidently rubbed off on her.

"Little busy at the moment –" Rocket said through gritted teeth.

Gamora got to one knee to look the raccoon in the eye – something he hated with a passion, and she saw a look of irritation flash across his fury face. She didn't have time to worry about wounded egos right now. "On my command, blast that Kree warhead with your cannon. We've got to get him off
our backs or there's no way this has a happy ending.

"Are you insane?" he asked, nose twitching in astonishment or appreciation, Gamora did not know.

"Bout time," Gamora said, standing and drawing her saber. "The rest of you clowns certainly are."

As Rocket darted away, she heard him say into the crackling intercom on his wrist, "Groot, buddy, stop your sulking, we're gonna need a quick getaway."

Gamora shook her hair out of her face. "Alright, Daddy-o, let's see what you've got."

She poll-vaulted over the stack of crates, landing in the center of the room, a foot away from Tivan's motionless body. Thanos turned to face her immediately, kicking aside a desperate assault from Mantis on the floor.

An ugly grin twisted Thanos' face. "How good it is to see you again, my daughter." He lifted his hand to blast her away, but Gamora dodged, running toward him at a diagonal as he shifted his aim.

"Wish I could say the same, old man."

Her blade smacked against his breastplate, squealing across the metal and leaving no mark. She ducked backward as his fist flew above her face. She went for the open space between his armor under his arm, jabbing with her saber, but his fist, with a grip like a vice, closed on her arm, twisting her off her feet.

Her back slammed against the floor, deflating her lungs with a gush of air.

"Gamora!" Peter threw himself overhead. His feet collided with Thanos' face. Thanos reeled backward. Mantis crawled behind his knees and Thanos toppled – he fell to the ground with a shuddering crash. Drax plunged his dagger downward toward Thanos' stomach, but the Gauntlet closed around Drax's throat, stilling the Destroyer's monstrous body.

Thanos climbed back to his feet, still holding Drax by the neck. He kicked Mantis aside; she splayed across the floor with a whimper. With a mighty heave, he tossed Drax across the room. Drax smashed through the stacked artifacts and skidded to a stop against a large test-tube, which shattered on impact and poured green liquid across the room, dispelling the swollen carcass of an unrecognizable alien onto the floor.

"You – frikken – angry – eggplant," Peter permeated each of his words with a blow, frantically dodging Thanos' returned swings.

A backhand to Peter's face pitched Starlord into the wall, where he collapsed in a heap. Gamora staggered to her feet, stumbling toward Peter's crumpled, lifeless form.

"Gamora, daughter," Thanos panted.

Do not look back, she told herself but her head already turned, hair whipping behind her shoulder. My daughter. She had heard it so often: uttered in praise and disappointment, in command and in comfort, preceding or following pain. It made her fear him, but – more than that – it made her hate him.

"Return to me, my daughter. My most prized daughter," Thanos eyes gleamed above the raised Gauntlet on his hand. "There is room yet for forgiveness. Return to my side, where you shall share in the spoils of victory. And, in exchange, I shall not kill your companions."
Her heartbeat thudded in her skull. She shook with tempered rage. She yearned for nothing more than to plunge her saber through Thanos' wretched jugular, to see blood bubble out of his mouth as he gulped for his last breath.

"Never," she spat at him. "I will die before I would return to your side."

Thanos smiled. He opened the fingers of the Gauntlet, collecting the invisible force that throbbed inside it metal encasement into the palm of his hand. "Very well, daughter. As you wish."

"Rocket, now!" Gamora bellowed and a pulse of laser fire flew overhead. As if in slow motion, Gamora turned to see the stream strike the rusting warhead. The blast appeared to have been absorbed by the bomb: sparks webbed across the metal casing.

Gamora ducked and the blast from the Gauntlet thudded overhead, colliding with the roof. Chunks of metal scaffolding rained down.

"No!" Thanos grunted, but he was entirely enthralled by the bomb, now glowing as the explosive reaction crackled to life. The floor trembled. The warhead began smoking.

"Move!" she shouted. Drax had Mantis in his arms. Rocket dragged Star-Lord across the floor by one of his boots. Gamora hesitated only a minute before stooping to throw Tivan's arm around her shoulder and scoop the Collector off the floor, darting away from the sizzling warhead.

First there was light – an explosion of light that cast the room into sharp relief – then there was heat. Flames leapt up behind her. The warhead exploded with a shuddering boom.

A heavy blow hit Gamora in the center of her back and she was lifted off her feet, riding the tide of the explosion toward the doorway of museum. Her ears whined from the deafening blast. A chunk of metal hit her in the shoulder. Smoke billowed around her. Searing heat assaulted every inch of her exposed skin.

Her feet hit ground – she almost fell – but she continued to stumble forward. Tivan was dead weight in her arms. There was movement around her: other onlookers sprinting away toward waiting speeders and ships, airborne wreckage crashing around her. The ceiling was falling in. A ball of fire grew behind her, consuming everything in its path.

The Milano's hulking form descended from the sky ahead of her, buffeted by the rolling heat of the explosion, wings shuddering as Groot – visible in the cockpit – attempted to keep the vessel steady. The entrance ramp descended. Rocket was the first aboard, dragging Peter with him. Drax stumbled aboard with Mantis still in his arms, awake and looking over his shoulders with widened eyes.

"Go!" Gamora shrieked before she'd set foot on the ramp. The ship moved away. She took the last few feet at a leap and struck the ramp on her hands and knees. The ship wheeled around. The movement caused her to topple onto her side. She narrowly avoided slipping over the edge of the ramp as it ascended back into the belly of the ship.

Groot piloted the craft deftly through the other speeding ships and flying rubble. Gamora stared in horror as flames licked the back of the ship, heating the metal beneath her. They shot forward in a burst of acceleration, jetting toward the open space beyond the blue and yellow vapors of gas and dissipated fluid that surrounded Knowhere.

Gamora struggled to her feet and tugged Tivan after her into the ship's hold. Peter was sitting up against the wall. He gave her a goofy grin, rubbing his head. "Damn, girl. I knew there was a reason why I liked you."
Gamora rolled her eyes.

Drax was fuming. "I could have killed him! I could have killed him if you had not interfered!"

"You would have killed us all if I hadn't interfered!" Gamora snapped and Drax clamped his mouth shut in a sulky silence. She could tell he knew she was right. He turned his back, hands bundled into fists at his sides.

"How's the cargo?" Rocket asked, nodding to Tivan on the floor.

"He's dead," said Gamora, and flung away the Collector's wrist, where she'd been checking for a pulse. "Thanos broke his spine."

"Excuse my French," said Peter, "but what the frickle frackle was that?"

"I am Groot?" Groot echoed Peter's question from the cockpit, spindly limbs tapping the control panel as he dodged obstacles, slicking through space that was now littered with chunks of the detonated Celestial head and streaming with fluid. Rocket moved to join him in the copilot's seat.

"That," said Gamora, taking a deep breath, sitting on her heals away from Tivan's body, "was Thanos."

"That maniac was your dad?" said Peter.

"You're one to talk," Gamora shot back. "Your father tried to conquer the entire galaxy less than a year ago!"

"Okay, fair," said Peter, raising his hands in defeat.

"Groot, let me take over," said Rocket from the cockpit, making a grab for the controls.

"I am Groot," Groot protested.

"Come on, man, I didn't say you weren't doing a good job just – dammit – watch out! We're going to hit it!"

OOO

Thor careened through space, flashing lights and whirling colors surrounding him. It was very like transport through the Bifrost, but somehow tighter, as if he was being squeezed through a small tube at a velocity higher than could be calculated.

The power of the Infinity Gem pulsed against his hands clutching the chamber. It was almost a heat, but a sensation he could not fully describe – a constant hum of energy vibrating through his fingers and up his arms until he felt consumed by it.

The murky skull of Knowhere loomed in the distance, a mere speck through the tunnel of light and sound through which Thor flew. He had been there before in his quest for the Infinity Gems, hoping to reacquire the Aether, only to find the Collector had already disposed of it to another buyer – who that was, Thor had no idea. It would be his first point of business, to trace this possessor of the Reality Stone through the cosmos – whether to merely let the being know of the power they now held, or else relieve them of said power would have to be decided at a later date.

Thanos undoubtedly already pursued the same target – and if Thor should stumble across the Titan in his search, well then, all the better for Thor, and worse for Thanos.
Thor clanged shut the chamber handle on the Tesseract, and his stomach wrenched as he deaccelerated. He was close enough to the mining colony to need to slow his approach and prepare to make contact.

He dragged through space. The blinding light that encased him dimmed to reveal surrounding darkness, distant stars speckling the sky like dust.

Knowhere was fully in Thor's sights now, a reeking, despicable view of a gargantuan severed head, oozing blue and yellow gasses from its decomposing body. Surely a place of confluence for only the most infamous types: the galaxy's utmost offering of pirates, thieves, and other scum.

As Thor watched, he saw the skull glow yellow from its interior, a sickly, burning pigment that spread from the center of the head and outward. Spindly flames erupted across its visage and spread to the tendrils of gas that surrounded it.

The fire grew sharper and higher, consuming the head entirely. Beads of light – in the distance Thor guessed they were spaceships – splintered away from the burning colony.

A shout of surprise flew from Thor's lips as realization pounded to life in his brain. The colony was about to explode and Thor was still headed straight toward it –

He desperately yanked back the chamber of the Tesseract and he felt something tear around him. He was suddenly pinwheeling through empty space, still tumbling toward Knowhere when – in the clogged silence of the cosmos – an explosion shuddered mutely through the air.

Knowhere first seemed to crumbled, skull of the long dead celestial beast caving inward, but then everything spurted outward – bursting with a chaotic detonation that flung chunks of skin, bone, tissue, and metal into the surrounding space.

The force of the explosion took hold of Thor's body and tossed him as though he was a mere housefly, beaten back with a wave of a hand. Thor's chest compressed for want of air. He was helplessly adrift in the vacuum of empty space. A small vessel whizzed past Thor, containing a cohort of desperate escapees.

Debris spun through the air around him. Thor tried to grasp hold of – of what? What could he possibly do in this moment? What could possibly save him? His fingers fumbled against the chamber's handle, but his limbs were unwieldy and bumbling. Darkness crept into the corners of his vision.

He was going to die. Here and now he was going to die. Loki, a thought of clarity emerged as his mind rebelled in belated panic, brother, I have failed you.

His body slammed into something large and hard, face smacking into chilled glass. The last thing he heard before his lungs, deprived of air, squeezed him into unconsciousness was a muffled voice below him, crying urgently: "Wipers! Wipers! Get it off!"

OOO

Loki's eyes blinked open when they returned. He heard the clanking of the cell door before his eyes could focus on the figure of his returning tormentor. There was only one, standing in the shadows on the threshold, larger than Glaive and certainly not a Chitauri. The figure stepped into a shaft of light that filtered through the bars of the cell and stopped, staring down at Loki with large blue eyes.

"You're dead," said Loki.
"Loki," said Thor, grinning, teeth gleaming in the half-light. His eyes darted from Loki's illusion on the floor to the other body dangling parallel to the wall, fastened at his wrists to the ceiling, back now crusted with clotted and scabbed blood around the protruding rod.

"Or perhaps this is a dream," Loki slurred, eyes slipping shut again.

He heard shuffling footsteps and peaked through his eyelashes to see Thor step toward the body pinned against the wall. Something tugged against Loki's mind, some half-remembered thought, something he was supposed to know, supposed to –

"Wait," he said, and Thor paused, looking over his shoulder at Loki on the floor. "Don't…touch me. You will…shatter the illusion." And that must not happen. That must not happen because –

Loki flickered. For the space of a second he was back there, back against the wall, split in two by the metal rod, returned to the unending agony, the crushing despair, and then he yanked his consciousness ferociously backward, tumbled through darkness and thudded back into the illusion.

Loki gasped for breath, chest constricting, mind encased in panic.

Thor turned away, reaching again for the body.

"No!" Loki was on his feet, legs unfeeling below him, and he stumbled toward Thor. He tried to grab hold of Thor's wrist, but instead his arms passed straight through as if he was made of dust. He toppled forward – Thor tried to catch him – but Loki slipped through him entirely, disintegrating as he fell toward the ground.

Pinned to the wall, Loki snapped awake with a shuddering gasp, illusion gone.

Thor, also, was gone. In his stead was a scowling Nebula.

"Make a sound and we're dead," she growled, eyes glaring.

"Where…" is Thor? Thor is dead, Loki answered himself. Thor is dead. Thor had to be dead.

"Why…" are you here? Loki could not speak. His tongue was swollen and dry in his mouth. He waited for more pain – a patient, lingering agony in the dark. He had feared Nebula and her sister perhaps even more than Glaive the last time. Her torture was meticulous and unending, pain that multiplied with time, nothing sharp, nothing forgiving. Merciless dread that plucked unwearyingly at his sanity until he was nothing. Nothing. Only a shell. A trembling ghost.

Nebula withdrew an instrument Loki could not recognize from her belt. The metal casing around her eye glinted cruelly in the dim light of the cell. She unfurled the instrument: a metal wire plugged on both sides by handles which she held in her two hands so the string unspooled tautly between them. A flick of a switch and the wire glowed fiery red like molten glass.

"Be still," she warned him. She maneuvered the metal wire until it was flat against the wall, and, with difficulty, moved it upward between his body and the wall. Its heat seared his torso. Loki gritted his teeth, but the pain wasn't terrible yet. Not yet. But it would come. With Nebula it always came.

She moved too quickly and Loki's body jogged against metal rod. His breath faltered coming up his throat. Agony blared through his body. Nebula kept going as if she had not even noticed. She always remained so unaffected – pain did not give her pleasure as it did for Glaive. It was just a job. Just another impassive duty.

The heat was worse now. It must have been burning his flesh, but he could not discern from the new
pain of the wire and the old pain of the spit. Something gave way beneath him – the wire must have melted through the metal – for Loki suddenly swung free of the nail, full weight falling once again on his dislocated shoulders.

The rod was still inside him, and the wrongness of its presence, the intruding, penetrating force, made him want to scream. But his throat was raw. He could barely breathe, rise and fall of his chest disrupted by the metal skewer.

Nebula stepped away. There was the sound of clanking chains and Loki felt himself lowered closer to the ground as the shackles above his head cranked away from a pulley in the ceiling.

Nebula's hands were cold on his bare skin as she pulled him toward the ground. She laid him flat. He could not remember his feet touching ground, although they must have, because he was no longer dangling from the ceiling. She undid the shackles on his wrists. His seidr didn't respond, although it should have – should have immediately rushed to repair new damage, filled in the places now free to be healed. But it didn't, and Loki didn't have the strength to call it forth. He was back on Svartalfheim, dying in the whipping dust of a withered realm.

"We don't have much time," Nebula warned fiercely. "So don't fight me."

She rolled him onto his chest. It was harder to breathe this way, with the weight of his body against his ribs, but he didn't care. He shut his eyes. He heard the metal in her body creak as she got into a suitable position above him, kneeling on the ground at his side, both hands on his back.

Her fingers grasped firmly the head of the nail through his body. Panic was shuddering through Loki's mind, because he knew what she was going to do, and he couldn't stop it. He couldn't stop her. There was no strength left to stop her.

With an expert twist of her arm, she drew the rod from his back. It sucked through his torso and tore free, jolting his entire body. Loki's strangled yell was cut off by her hand clapped violently to his mouth. "Shut up!" she hissed. "They'll hear you!"

Pain chewed through his body as the wound overfilled with fresh blood. He could feel it pooling on the ground beneath his stomach. Tears pricked in his eyes and he willed himself not to cry but he was too exhausted, in too much agony to stop himself. The tears slipped soundlessly down his face, rolling onto the ground as Nebula's palm continued to press against his lips. She glowered at him in disgust.

"You just had to mess everything up, didn't you?" she demanded. And Loki wondered if maybe she was going to kill him now, that this was some strange errand of mercy, moved by some incomprehensible pity to put the shattered god out of his misery. But Loki was not so fortunate.

Instead she drew out a scrap of fabric and tore it into smaller strips. She released his mouth, hands busy behind his back. He could not see what she was doing. His breath battered rapidly against the stone beneath his face. A groan gurgled up his throat, but he could make no more noise than that – he did not understand, the thought whimpered through his mind. He did not understand –

Something pressed firmly against the gaping wound in Loki's back and white-hot agony flared to life under Nebula's cold metal fingers. She was packing the wound, Loki realized dimly as his jaw dangled open, unable to scream because his throat drew shut, blocking air from reaching his brain.

She worked rapidly. Soon she had finished with his back. She was not gentle as she rolled him over and set to work on the wound in his chest. She crunched the fabric into a ball and stuffed it into the gash the rod had left after it ripped free from his body.
The crown of Loki's head dug into the ground as he arched his neck, panting for the air that could not rise through his esophagus. He grappled against the floor with his fingers, wanting to grab hold of something, grasp something – something – something to ground him – to pull him back –

She finished with her bandage before shifting so she sat at his head.

"Stop –" Loki moaned, no longer certain what was happening – if this was indeed Nebula bandaging his wounds or merely another torture designed by Glaive, patiently tugging away at his reason. "Stop – stop."

"Shut up," she replied again, face mechanically unreadable as she stared down at him. Her hands closed around his shoulders and pulled him into a sitting position. A wave of dizziness made him fall against her. She propped him up in her arms and struggled to wrap another bandage around his torso in their awkward position. She tied the bandage so tightly it bit into his ribs – merely a small irritation weighed against the incessant agony juddering in the wound through his abdomen, already seeping blood through Nebula's hasty bandages.

"Alright," she said, and stood. She wrapped her hands under his torn shoulders and dragged him across the floor, legs trailing uselessly after him as she turned him toward the open door of the cell.

He couldn't feel his legs; somehow the thought penetrated the fog in his mind, startling and vibrant. He could not feel his legs. Bile rose in his throat. He should be terrified. He should be frantic at the realization. His legs were not there. No longer there, even though he could still see them, but instead of horror all he could feel was confusion.

She hauled him across the slick stone floor. Every bump across the ground hurt. It all hurt. He wanted to scream at her that it hurt. Let him go. It hurt. It hurt.

His mind slipped away into nonsensical repetition. He was not aware as she dragged him further into the ship, skimming in and out of consciousness. At one moment he heard shouts and sizzling gunfire, was left immobile on the ground as she evidently took care of the guards, but otherwise they were unimpeded in their journey.

She half-dragged, half-lifted him up the ramp into one of the attack-force ships. She dumped him on the cold metal floor as she climbed into the cockpit. He heard her clattering around the controls, pushing buttons and cursing furiously under her breath. She was nervous – Loki realized – afraid of being stopped in the middle of her escape, and how strange it was to see her unbalanced when she was always so brutally assured.

Loki blinked at the domed ceiling of the vessel, lights too bright after the darkness of the cell. He still did not understand this strange turn of events, but he was too fatigued to give it proper thought. Perhaps later he would understand, the missing piece would snap into place inside his mind, or he would otherwise wake to find himself still pinned to the wall in his cell, body afire with the excruciation of some new, inventive torture.

The ship's engine rumbled beneath him. His stomach pitched as the ship lifted off ground. His head lolled against the floor. Nebula appeared to have forgotten about him. Loki's eyes closed of their own accord. He couldn't sleep. He couldn't – not in this state of uncertainty. It would be folly to sleep when he did not know whether he was in the company of friend or foe – but, nonetheless, his mind collapsed inward, unable to function any longer, and he dissolved into a cloud of blissful darkness.
"I'm sorry, Tony," said Bruce as soon as they stepped back into Strange's study. Wong was waiting in the same spot they had left him. Did he just turn off when Strange wasn't in the room and wait to be reactivated again?

"Sure, Bruce," said Tony. He wasn't doing this now. He wasn't doing it because he was pretty sure that, if he did, he would end up flattening the other man with a right hook, and that's something he really didn't want to end up doing, especially since he didn't want the Jolly Green Giant to join the show, too.

Tony stalked over to his vacated chair and began gathering the pieces of his suit into his arms. He could easily reassemble it with a press of the button on the cuff around his wrist, but he wanted something to occupy his hands. "You're probably going to want to stick with Fury for now. Ross will be demanding your head on a platter pretty soon."

"Yeah," said Bruce. Tony was acutely aware that Strange was surveying them intently from the other side of the room. At least Vision had the decency to drift away and allow them a little privacy. "Er – thanks, Tony."

"For what?" Tony snapped. "Not hauling your ass back to headquarters? Well, it doesn't seem like I've got that much authority now, so…” Why'd he have to do that? Why'd he always have to say the wrong thing?

"Right," said Bruce, rubbing the back of his neck. "Well, thanks anyway."

Tony sighed. He straightened up and faced Bruce. "This isn't over. Not near over. If this Thanos guy is on the warpath, then he's not going to stop just because he can't get his hands on the Tesseract. This could be the start of something worse than we've ever faced before. And there's no way in hell earth is ready to fight back, not in the situation the Accords have left us in."

Bruce opened his mouth to say something suitably solemn and Bruce-like, but he was interrupted by the sound of a skidding vehicle from outside the window, followed by a shattering crash.

"What was that?" Bruce jumped in surprise.

Vision was the first to the window, pulling aside the curtains to look to the street beyond. "There appears to be some sort of disturbance."

New York commuters were racing down the sidewalks in a panicked rush, some looking over their shoulders in fear as they ran, others standing stock-still in shock, still others pulling out smartphones. Traffic had halted in the street. A car had plowed into a nearby lamppost. The construction crew called in for the damage Thor had left were looking agape at the sky.

"I don't think they're running for the ice cream truck," said Tony. He crossed the study floor in four paces. The door opened into the foyer. He was the first one to reach the front door. He opened it into the street, where sounds of distress – people gasping for breath, crying in alarm, talking rapidly into cellphones – crowded into the air. The early morning sun glinted off the stalled cars in the road. A taxi tried to wheel around in the tight space, but ground its bumper against the curb, locking it into place.

Tony stepped out of the Sanctorum onto the sidewalk, lined with skeletal pear trees. Strange, Wong, Bruce, and Vision piled out after him. Tony was buffeted by the rushing crowd as he walked into the
center of the street, craning his neck to get a view of whatever so captivated and frightened them.

His eyes latched immediately onto a large metal ring, obviously not of this world, which had materialized above the jagged skyline of New York, hovering ominously like some god-forsaken piece of giant jewelry.

"Holy shit," said Bruce behind Tony.

Tony had a feeling his predictions about Thanos not giving up so quickly were about to come true a lot quicker than he thought they would. And now they didn't even have a God of Thunder handy to temper the situation.

Dull dread thumped in his stomach and – strangely – he found his hand creep readily into the back pocket of his jeans. His fingers closed on the small, oblong chunk of metal he'd taken to carrying with him everywhere – as a good luck talisman or merely a painful reminder, Tony couldn't guess.

He pulled the small flip phone out of his pocket and punched in the only number in its contact list. He pressed the phone to his ear, swallowed because his throat had gone completely dry, and was almost glad when the call went straight to voicemail.

He didn't bother introducing himself: "Hey man. No idea if you check this gismo or not. Or know how to check voicemails on it. But you said anytime, anywhere, and well, this might just be it." He clapped the phone shut and shoved the thing back into his pocket.

Then he pressed the button on his cuff, and his suit whirred into action, sweeping through the door and nearly clipping Strange on the side of the head on its way to latch itself onto Tony's body, reconstructing seamlessly. Whatever that thing in the sky was – and Tony was certain it couldn't be good – he'd be damn ready for it. Nothing was going to mess up his city. Not again they weren't.

OOO

"You think Mr. Adley's gonna spring us a pop quiz today?" said Ned mournfully, scrolling his thumb down his Instagram feed, sitting beside Peter on the bus. "I bet he does. I just jinxed us, didn't I?"

The rest of the kids were rowdy as ever on a Friday morning, antsy for the weekend, tossing pencils and wads of paper across the aisle. Girls gossiped over the tops of seats. A couple of kids in the back were whispering about a guy who sold cheap weed which Peter knew was actually just oregano in little plastic baggies.

Peter leaned forward in his chair, bracing his chin on his arm as he stared straight ahead, not really paying attention. He'd got a text from Liz last night. Nothing big. Just a hey, how are you? But it felt big. Super big. The first point of contact since she'd moved.

Peter hadn't even replied yet, and now she was going to see that he'd left her on read all morning. She was going to think he was ignoring her. Which, granted, was what he was kind of doing, but not for the reasons she was going to jump to.

He hadn't told her yet, his role in her dad's arrest. He wasn't going to. He couldn't. How did he start a conversation like that – hey, uh, don't freak out or anything, but I'm the kid superhero who captured your dad while he was illegally dealing alien weaponry –

A tingling, like the shock of electricity he'd once experienced when he licked a sparkplug on a dare, ran up his spine. The hair on his arm stood on end. Peter sat up ramrod straight on the bench, body suddenly tensed with adrenaline, heart palpitating in his chest. Whoa, he thought. Whoa, whoa,
"Peter," Ned nudged him in the ribs. "You cool?"

Peter looked out the window of the bus and his eyes fell immediately on the humungous, bizarre metal ring that was suspended in midair above the tops of the skyscrapers.

"Shit," he breathed, and by then other kids on the bus had noticed the metal ring, as well, scrambling out of their seats to get a better look at it, shoving open the windows to stick their heads outside.

The bus driver swore and swerved the bus drastically, fist digging into the horn as a car in the oncoming lane veered into theirs because the was driver distracted by the alien object that had appeared in the sky over the city. Several kids tumbled out of their seats and into the corridor from the unexpected movement. Cries of alarm split the air.

Ned clambered over Peter to look out the window, eyes like saucers. "Oh my God. That's some Star Wars level shit right there. What is that?"

"Stay in your seats, please," the bus driver's voice crackled through the intercom above them. "Just sit tight. We'll be at school soon. Don't panic. Everyone remain calm."

Which was totally the wrong thing to say, because obviously everyone started getting infinitely more panicked then they had been a moment ago. A girl a couple seats back burst into hysterical tears and her friends jumped in to try to soothe her.

"I mean, like, what the hell?" said Ned.

Peter already had his phone out. He flicked past Liz's message, reread a million times since he'd gotten it, and pressed his finger against Tony's number – which had been given to him under strict order not to use unless it really was an emergency. Tony didn't want another thing to happen like with Mr. Toomes.

Hey – there's a giant metal ring the size of the Millennium Falcon hanging over NYC. I'm not crazy. Other people can see it too.

Peter was fairly certain it wasn't even Tony's real number, probably rerouted through about a hundred secretaries before it even got to Iron Man's inbox. But, to his surprise, a reply popped up almost immediately:

Eyes on. Stay put.

With all do respect, Mr. Stark, Peter thought furiously, head following the ring for as long as possible before it disappeared behind a building as the bus turned down a side street, but no way was he going to sit this one out.

As soon as the bus pulled up to the high school, Peter hustled toward the door, scrambling past the other kids who rushed forward, most on the phone with their parents. Peter leapt out of the bus, itching to race away back to his apartment and climb into his new suit – try it out for real instead of just fooling around with parkour on the weekends.

Ned emerged from the bus, squeezing past an assembled gang of jabbering band members. He joined Peter, panting hard and face flushed with excitement.

"Ned – listen," said Peter, grabbing hold of Ned's wrist. "I need you to cover for me."

"I don't know," Peter was already turning away, already planning his course through the streets – places he could swing to where he wouldn't be seen, but it seemed like most people were otherwise occupied by the giant metal ring in the sky. Peter didn't have much to fear when it came to being spotted. "Tell them I threw up or something, had to go home."


Peter sprinted away. He skidded to a stop and turned back around, "And if May calls because she can't get in touch with me, just tell her not to worry. I'll be totally fine."

OOO

Dr. Stephen Strange considered himself a level-headed person. His prior profession had demanded it of him, of course, and his current expansion of knowledge in the Mystic Arts had only served to further mitigate any initial impulses or rash action in the face of the unexpected, which was why he was largely unfazed by the apparent alien spacecraft that appeared overhead, despite the alarm that erupted across the pedestrians in the street. Besides, New York had seen one too many alien assaults in the past decade; it was by now becoming predictable.

He remained unperturbed even as the large metal ring suddenly flickered to life, sparking with electric blue light as it evidently prepared to do whatever it was it had been sent to do. Whether it was a weapon of some kind, or a transportation device, Stephen did not plan on waiting to find out. Beside him, Stark's rocket propulsors rumbled as he prepared to take off. A golden cape unfurled from Vision's shoulders. Wong nodded to Stephen and twin Tao Mandalas spun outward from his palms. Stephen followed suit, flicking his wrists to form the familiar spiraling circles which pulsed with comforting heat against his skin.

"Now might be a good time to get the Big Guy out of bed, Bruce," Stark's voice was slightly muffled behind his helmet.

"I can't," said Banner. He was pale, looking distressed at the ring, now grinding ominously as it began to spin.

"What?" Stark snapped, half irritated, half curious.

"I can't," Banner repeated. "He isn't – he just isn't responding right now. It's a long story."

"Well shit," said Stark. "Then stay out of the way. I have a feeling this might get a little messy."

Stark bounded off the street, whirring through the air toward the wheel in the sky. Stephen paused, checking to make sure most of the pedestrians had gotten safely off the street, before following Iron Man, Cloak of Levitation lifting him gently off the ground. First order of business: careful examination.

A lithe, suited figure swung out of nowhere, propelled from a nearby building, and landed neatly in the rotating ring.

"Shit, Parker, what part of stay put do you not understand?" Stark demanded. Stephen recognized Peter Parker, alias Spider-Man, right away. Iron Man and his protégé, the proverbial dynamic duo, had spent plenty enough time smashing up the city and making headlines back in September. Stephen gritted his teeth. They didn't need to worry about any children, right now.

"Hey, what is this thing?" Parker asked, running up the wheel like he was hamster.
"Peter, watch out!" Stark shouted, streaming toward Parker as the ring blazed blue, jets of power webbing across the surface of its opening. Parker nimbly swung away from the ring and Stark had to pull back abruptly to avoid flying through the sparking light.

"The suit feels great, sir!" Parker called from his perch on a windowsill of a nearby building.

The ring crackled. Blue light rippled completely across the opening. There was the sound of ripping – as if the very particles of the air had been rent apart – and then a dark hole formed in the center of the blue energy field, spreading outward.

Stephen caught the briefest glimpse of a star-filled night sky on the other end of the portal before his vision was blocked with an onslaught of bulky alien vessels – something he had seen before only on his television or the front page of the Times: Chitauri speeders, the swarm of vessels complete with their scaly mounts.

"Not these little buggers, again!" Stark shouted, and zoomed into action, firing two blasts from his repulsors that met their target and caused the speeders to pinwheel toward the ground.

"Sweet!" Parker crowed and shot a jet of web toward a Chitauri, catching it around its head and tugging it out of its speeder.

The speeders clogged the air. Blasts of energy from the creature's guns shattered into the walls of buildings. Glass erupted from an exploded window behind Stephen. He deflected another such blast with one of his Mandalas.

Parker snatched a speeder with his webbing and slung it around. "Yo – hey, sorry, don't know your name, but catch!" Parker hauled the speeder toward Stephen and Stephen reacted on instinct, forming a Sling Ring to meet the onrushing speeder and direct it into the concrete siding of a building, where it crashed and dropped in a pile of twisted metal to the street.

The portal sputtered and Stephen whipped around in mid-air in time to see a sleek ship belch forth from the pulsing blue film of energy. This ship was unlike the Chitauri vessels. It was made of polished black metal, so dark it appeared to suck out the very sunlight that fell on it. It was manned with two cannons which blared immediately with pulsing yellow gunfire. Stark had to spin out of the way of the blasts. The rocket-fire tore into the road below – demolishing cars and storefronts, blazing a pathway for the ship down the street.

"I will take this one, I think." Vision had joined the fight, and he whirled through the air to follow the ship, cape streaming behind him.

On the street below, Wong had conjured his quarterstaff and was standing on the roof of a van. He clipped a Chitauri on the head and its unmanned speeder ground into the street, erupting into flame. Banner had taken refuge behind an empty cab, but made a dash to retrieve one of the creatures discarded guns.

Sirens erupted in the distance. The police had been summoned, although Stephen hoped they would not appear just yet. They did not need the added complication of law enforcement at the moment. He caught sight of a flashing red light – an ambulance – and was it wrong that he thought only Christine and not of the other helpless civilians that could be in harm's way in the city below?

Stephen discarded one of his Mandalas in favor of his Eldritch Whip, which he cracked overhead and wrapped around the neck of a passing Chitauri, flinging it off the speeder and into the side of a building. There was too much at stake.
"Cool, man," said Parker in appreciation, sweeping past on his web on his way to dispatch another Chitauri with a kick to its chest. Stephen had to admit it – the kid was handy in a fight. Maybe Stark hadn't been so wrong to recruit him into the Avengers, after all.

The portal remained silent as the last of the Chitauri speeders left it. Stephen, Stark, and Parker made short work of the aliens in the sky, while Wong and Bruce took care of them on the ground. Smoke clogged the air. Car alarms blared. A last window caved outward, sprinkling glass across the street.

Stephen landed on the road, finding his footing on the torn pavement. Wong stuck the end of his quarterstaff into the skull of a struggling Chitauri on the ground. The alien stilled with a last rattling breath and Wong looked up, spinning his staff in his hand, where it disappeared without a trace.

"Think that was all of them?" Banner asked tentatively, emerging from behind the cab, cradling the alien gun to his chest.

Parker dropped from a building, sucking his webbing back into the jets inside his wrists. He tugged his mask off his head; his hair clung to it with static electricity. He was smiling, face flushed with the exhilaration of battle. "Hey, I'm Peter, pleased to meet you all."

"Don't you know the concept of no?" Stark growled and landed with a thud on the ground, barreling down on Parker. The grinned slipped off the kid's face.

"Sorry," he said. "I just figured you could use the help."

"No," Stark corrected him. "You thought it would be fun."

"Well, I mean it was." Parker faltered under Stark's masked gaze. "I mean – kinda fun."

"Stark," said Stephen tersely. They didn't have time for this now. Disquiet pricked insistently at a corner of his mind. "Don't you think this went a lot better than it could have?"

Wong, of course, knew exactly what Stephen was getting at. He said gravely, "A diversion?"

Horrified realization dawned on Banner's face. He asked urgently, "Where's Vision?"

OOO

Vision swooped downward on the sleek black ship, aiming for one of the cannons in the front with a beam of yellow energy from his forehead. The ship steered rapidly out of the way and Vision's energy blast streaked past it, colliding with the side of a building, spraying brick and plaster into the air.

Vision gritted his teeth. He would have to be more careful if he was to avoid any civilian casualties. The Avengers were on such unstable ground with Ross as it was. He spun out of the way of a returning blast from the ship's cannon.

The ship careened through the canyon-like New York street, lined on either side by towering skyscrapers. Vision directed another stream of the Mind Stone's energy toward the vessel and it veered aside with uncanny ability. Certainly it was no Chitauri that piloted this vessel. One of its wings clipped a building, scraping through glass windows. Screams sounded from within the destroyed office spaces.

Vision shoved himself through the air and managed to latch onto the ship from behind, fingers grappling against the slick metal. He turned his head to one of the exhaust ports, Mind Gem burning in his forehead as he prepared to let go another blast.
An unseen gun port unfolded from the hull. The gun clicked into place and released a blast toward Vision. Vision released the ship on impulse, flying backward away from the gun's fire. He tried to phase out his shoulder but he was a millisecond too late and the blast left a searing scar across his flesh. His pain receptors went into overdrive and Vision worked hard to suppress the burning of his nerves. He smoothed the wound over with regenerated synthetic skin and propelled himself forward without another thought.

A bay door shrieked open from beneath the vessel and Vision registered a half a second too late what exactly that meant as a bomb dropped from the belly of the ship, spiralling toward ground. Vision rocketed toward the falling projectile. He knew it was folly to try to stop it before it made impact, but he also knew that he must attempt something –

The bomb exploded on impact. Vision reeled backward, tossed aside by the detonation as if he was merely any other senseless piece of metal or cement. Flame and smoke billowed from the explosion. Vision plowed into the wall of a building, knocked to the ground as the street was torn inside out around him. Chunks of building rained down from the sky. A traffic light flew out of the smoke and hit above Vision's head.

Screams. Roaring flames. It took Vision a moment to focus his image processors through the onrush of information assaulting his receptors. He picked himself off the ground and shook his head to clear the overload of information buzzing through his mind.

He peered through the smoke to see the ship turn sharply and then dip drastically downward, nosediving toward the cavern the bomb had created in the street. The ship zoomed downward, slipping neatly through the chunks of pavement and cement the explosion had left behind, disappearing below the streets of New York.

Vision shoved his way through the wreckage that littered the street. He caught sight of a body crushed under a portion of scaffolding, tossed from one of the wrecked buildings above. He approached the dark cavity in the street on foot and peered into the jagged chasm. It opened into the domed tunnel of the New York subway system which spread below the city in a tangled, interconnected web.

Vision could still hear the roar of the ship's engine as it sped through the tunnel. Vision took a deep breath, even though he technically did not require breathing to keep alive, and dropped into the tunnel, catching himself before he hit ground, and sped off in pursuit of the vessel.

The tunnel opened into a cavernous space, supported by pillars rising out of the darkness, lighted intermittently by flickering bulbs in the ceiling. A spare subway car sat against the wall. Vision's eyes calibrated to the dim light and he spotted the ship ahead before he thought it likely that the occupants would be able to see him in the darkness. The ship had landed to the side of the tracks and waited there like a silent, black bird of prey.

Vision paused and touched ground, walking noiselessly forward, staying in the checkerboard shadows as he approached. He could hear voices ahead of him.

"What's taking so long?" a man growled, voice low and rough, like the growl of an animal.

"Patience, Cull," a woman's voice replied. "It will come to us."

"What if it gathered its forces again?" It was the man again, Cull. Vision stopped behind a pillar. He could see them: the man a hulking, reptilian form, and the woman a squat, muscly figure clutching a double-pointed scepter in her hand.
"Then we shall destroy them as we might a swarm of any other kind of vermin," said the woman.

"I see you have a very low regard for the prowess of my friends," Vision stepped out from behind the pillar, Mind Gem searing with angry power in his head. "A sentiment, I believe, you will come to rethink."

The woman smiled, baring fangs that glinted against her ebony skin. "Told you it would come, brother."

Cull matched his sister's smile and lunged forward, brandishing two blades that rimmed his knuckles. Vision dodged him easily, stepped aside as Cull lumbered past him.

"Is that really all you can throw at me?" said Vision, not quite as practiced in the art of taunting his enemies as perhaps Tony was, but he could not deny it gave him a certain amount of satisfaction to see Cull's face furrow in irritation.

Vision lifted off the ground and shot a blast from the Mind Stone toward the woman. Rather than leap out of the way of the blast, the woman stepped toward it, raising her scepter in front of her chest. The stream of energy connected with the staff and it glowed yellow within her hands, absorbing the energy instead of deflecting it.

"Not quite," she said triumphantly, and tossed the blast back toward Vision. Vision's smile dissolved and he ducked out of the way. The ball of energy collided into the pillar behind him, splintering it into rough pieces of concrete. The tunnel echoed with the rebounding sound of the crash. The roof overhead rumbled ominously.

Cull heaved out of the darkness toward Vision and managed to glance a blow across Vision's ribs, tearing through cloth and skin. Vision hissed in pain and repaired the damage swiftly. Cull's fist closed around Vision's cape, tugging him backward. Vision's neck was yanked violently backward before he disintegrated the cloak into empty air in Cull's grasp.

The woman lunged toward Vision with her scepter. Vision phased his torso out of its way, but the scepter hit solid flesh nonetheless, flat edge of the blade plowing into his ribs. Unbalanced and taken off-guard, Vision was knocked out of the air and landed on his back on the cold stone floor. The woman stepped onto his chest before he had a chance to get back up, heavy boots pinning him to the ground.

Her eyes gleamed in the darkness and she raised her scepter overhead.

"Join us," she hissed as she pressed the tip of the scepter to Vision's forehead, breaking flesh and making contact with the Mind Gem that droned just below his skin.

Vision shouted as yellow light exploded from his skull – and somewhere either close at hand or far away Wanda was screaming too – and a heavy sheet of darkness descended across his mind.

OOO

Wanda clambered over the edge of the subway track. She listened intently for the sound of any approaching trains, but the tunnel was utterly silent except for the drip of some faraway leak and the scuttling of rats as they scampered out of her way. She walked down the center of the furrow in the ground, taking care not to step near the electrically charged metal tracks.

The tunnel led her deep under the city. She could feel the constant pulse of energy from the metropolis above her, so many separate heartbeats of individual beings, all with buzzing minds. Her own heart thrummed with relentless unease.
She had not been able to sleep after Vision left her the night before. His busy thoughts had kept her awake, stimulated by the unattainable but undoubtedly present consciousness they shared through the Mind Stone. She formed such bonds inadvertently with those she was especially close to. It had been the same way with Pietro – before the connection had been so cruelly severed by his death. It had been how she'd been able to tell he'd been killed, even though she hadn't been there to see it happen.

Now the bond felt strained. Vision was in trouble. She could feel his distress and uncertainty inside her own chest. The feeling had led her into the city, below the streets to the maze-like subway tunnels. He was here. She was getting closer to him, and getting closer to whatever danger he was in.

An explosion from the tunnel ahead of her rattled the rafters in the ceiling, sprinkling dust onto her head and shoulders. Wanda's stomach squirmed with a detached shock and horror that did not belong to her body. She started running, footsteps echoing in the dark grotto.

She broke into a widening of the tunnel. Ahead of her was the massive form of a spaceship, blacker than the darkness that filled the cavern. She could see three figures in the distance, struggling in a fight. One was floating in the air. Vis.

She saw a second figure beat Vision down to the ground with a long, pointed spear. Wanda sprinted harder now, pooling her magic into her palms, gathering her strength to release a blast toward the two creatures who closed in on Vision –

There was a sudden flash of blinding yellow light and Wanda's scream mingled in the air with Vision's. She crashed to the floor, head in her hands as her brain exploded with slashing pain. He was being ripped away from her. Ripped away from her again – again – again – Vis – Vis – no.

Her scream had attracted the attention of the two aliens. Wanda could feel shuddering footsteps approaching her through the ground. She faltered back to her feet, heart pounding in her throat, and pushed her magic out of her fingers Her eyes fell on the sight of a disused subway car against the wall and she grabbed hold of it across the distance. With an almighty yank she dragged the car through the air and smashed it into the figure standing atop Vision's chest. The car and the creature smashed into the opposite wall, wiping out another pillar. The roof groaned overhead under the weight of the city above it.

Wanda was too late to defend herself against the alien that lumbered toward her. It was a large, burly beast. Its skin was made of rough scales with ridges across its skull. She watched helplessly as its beefy fist sailed toward her body. It caught her in the chest and lifted her off her feet.

Wanda flew through the air. She gathered her magic inward, creating an iron hull within her core, a protective shell that left the rest of her body susceptible as she rammed into the wall. All breath left her lungs. Her ears rung. She collapsed at the foot of the wall, utterly powerless.

The creature stepped forward. He wrapped his hand around her neck and hauled her back to her feet. Wanda sputtered for air under his grip.

"Pretty witch," he said. "Oh, yes, Father will have use of you."

Wanda flared her magic outward, taking hold of his body and shoving him away from her. He released her in surprise and she dropped toward the ground, but she was caught by strong arms. She looked up and her heart melted in relief to see that it was Vision gripping her around the waist to keep her from falling.

"Vis –"
But her relief was eclipsed by a new feeling of panic – harrowing disbelief – because this wasn't Vision. It couldn't be Vision. Not the Vision she knew, who woke up beside her in bed, burnt her waffles in the morning, and knew how many sugars she liked in her coffee – this was not Vision. The look of cold, inhuman detachment on his face could never have belonged to her Vision.

"Vis!" she screamed but Vision did not hear her. He crushed her in his arms, grip impeding her breathing so that her eyes filled with the darkness of encroaching unconsciousness.

"Do not kill her," a woman warned in the distance as Wanda faded into crushing oblivion. "He will want her alive."
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

Back to the Asgardian bros…

Warning: more tending to wounds

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Nebula veered her ship away from the massive shape of the Sanctuary II. Her vessel was bathed in the sickly yellow light of Knowhere’s explosion, which had startled but not shocked her. She had known Thanos to cause more damage than blowing up a mere mining colony when he was angry at not getting what he wanted. He would be in a dangerous mood when he returned to his ship. It was imperative that she was as far away as possible before he did so. Her miniscule attack-force ship could not handle more than one or two jumps through space, but it would have to do. Granted, it was her plan to have Thanos follow her, but not yet. She had to at least get to Sylvan first.

Sylvan: unanticipated and uneasy ally. It had been a stroke of luck to cross paths with the warrior, and an occasion that had nearly ended with Nebula’s death. It was not every day she found a combatant skilled enough in battle to truly challenge her own ability, but Sylvan was among the best Nebula had yet met in her journeys across the universe, intercepted in a shared purpose: a quest for the Infinity Stones before Thanos could claim them as his own.

In the body of the ship behind her, Nebula heard Loki groan. He had succumbed to pain and exhaustion almost as soon as she deposited him on the floor. She didn’t have time to deal with him now; she just had to keep him alive long enough to draw Thanos to them, to pull him into her perfect little trap – Loki her bait, Sylvan her secret weapon.

Of course, Thanos expected her betrayal. Nebula knew she had not convinced him with her repentant daughter playacting. But the key was to make him suspect her, to make him think he knew exactly what she was going to do and when she was going to do it, make him think he had caught her in the act – only then would Nebula strike him from behind where he’d least expected it. He did so love a clever trick. She looked forward to watching the life drain from his eyes with her rod dug into his spine.

Nebula punched the proper controls on the panel and her ship jetted forward in an interstellar jump. She easily disabled the tracking devise on the controls; she couldn’t make the puzzle too easy for her father. The ship shook under the strain of the high-speed travel. If she wasn’t careful she’d tear the thing apart and send herself and Loki tumbling into outer space. Not yet. She couldn’t die yet. Not when she was so close to enacting her revenge. She could already taste the sweetness of it on her tongue.

Not yet.

She pulled the ship out of the jump and cruised among the stars. She had the coordinates Sylvan had given her stored safely in her mind. Sylvan would be waiting there, expecting to plan their next move. Little did Sylvan know that Nebula was bringing the next move right to them.

The moon was without name, orbiting the graveyard planet Maveth, which had claimed the lives of
all who dared visit its surface. Nebula landed her craft deftly on the moon’s surface, raising dust around the landing braces that unfolded from beneath her ship. She did not bother contacting Sylvan about her arrival. The warrior, in exile, would notice that Nebula had arrived.

True enough, a cloaked figure arrived on the horizon visible through Nebula’s viewport, approaching the ship without guile. No one else knew of Sylvan’s presence on the moon accept Nebula; Sylvan had nothing to fear.

Nebula got out of the pilot’s seat and moved into the back of the ship. Loki stirred fitfully in a fevered sleep. His skin was deathly pale, but Nebula was certain his seidr continued to pulse through his body, even now healing the injuries he had suffered at the hands of Nebula’s brother.

Nebula released the hatch from the bottom of the ship, ramp extending downward to the surface of the moon. Cool air rushed forward. Nebula’s lungs – half mechanical after Thanos had her brother Cull once rip one from her ribcage – gasped in the thin atmosphere.

“You have returned,” Sylvan greeted her at the base of the ramp, face shrouded in a large hood.

“I have,” Nebula replied.

“Does this mean you know of the location of the next Stone?” said Sylvan.

“No,” said Nebula guardedly. “But I have brought along someone who will be able to help us.”

“You have brought someone else with you?” Sylvan’s voice had a dangerous edge to it. “You swore yourself to secrecy concerning my whereabouts.”

“Well, technically he doesn’t even know he’s here right now,” said Nebula, “because he’s currently unconscious in my ship.”

“You kidnapped him?”

“I rescued him,” Nebula snapped. Did no one think her capable of even the most menial act of kindness? Even this being who barely knew her expected the worst. “And he is an Asgardian, so you two should get along just fine.”

“Asgardian?” Nebula had managed to pique Sylvan’s interest with that. “Where is he?”

Nebula stepped aside and waved a permitting hand into her ship. Sylvan readily stepped forward, boots clanking up the metal ramp. Nebula followed Sylvan’s rippling cloak. Sylvan came to a hard stop at the top of the ramp, eyes widening at the sight of the still body of Loki on the floor.

Sylvan cast aside the hood of her cloak, revealing a curtain of dark hair, and fell to her knees, a cry of disbelief falling from her lips: “Loki, prince of Asgard, what has been done to you?”

OOO

It was pain he swam through in the abyss of dreamless sleep, pain that summoned him to dawning consciousness, and pain that met him fiercely when his eyes slipped open to find himself lying on something soft, his surroundings dim, and a strange pressure in his head and on his chest.

His head was stuffed with cotton, dulling his senses, blurring the world around him. He did not know where he was, and he could not remember what events had led him to this moment; his confusion frightened him. His mind grappled against the blank wall of his memory, struggling to place a voice or a face into his past.
He tried to move but his body was heavy and unwieldy, tried merely to raise his head but it was as though he had been tethered to the ground. Had he been bound? Bound and left here in this strange brightness? What new horrors were they preparing for him, waiting for him to wake and endure?

He struggling to sit up, push himself onto his elbows – his chest tore with stab of pain and he gasped, falling flat on his back, and Loki’s awareness snapped back into place. He remembered dangling in Thanos’ prison, Nebula’s rough hands, the weightless flight through space, and the memory roused a fresh tumult of agony in his body.

“Loki,” it was a kind voice – a familiar voice, a displaced voice, a voice that did not fit into this current life.

His body felt as though it was twisted in on itself, but he was tied to the ground with feebleness and could not move to relieve the terrible strain. His mind rebelled. There was nowhere to run. He could not fight this unceasingly, gnawing pain resonating from the center of his chest and spreading outward, piercing his torso and limbs with unending –

“Easy,” a hand on his forehead. “Breathe easy, my prince.”

Do not touch me, Loki wanted to scream but he was so weak he could not speak.

Bile and blood rose in Loki’s throat to choke him. He gagged and sputtered, trying to expel the rising liquid out of his mouth. He was coughing now, shoulders jerking against the bed beneath him. Each spasm brought a fresh ripple of pain through his chest. He could not breathe. Panic blanketed his mind. He could not breathe – help him he could not breathe.

“Get him on his side –”

“Shit,” said another voice.

Hands rolled Loki’s body onto his side and he vomited blood onto the ground. He coughed again and again. His throat was raw. His vision blurred; dizziness threatening to overtake him. His spine felt as though it was splintering.

For a moment his breath stuttered uselessly up his throat as Loki fought for air, entire body wracked with wet convulsions as more blood spurted from his lips. Pain rent his chest with every heave. Blackness crept into the corners of his vision.

Finally the fit left him. The hands eased him again onto his back. Loki shut his eyes. He was shuddering uncontrollably. Tears rolled down his cheeks but he wasn’t sobbing. He had no strength left to wail.

“Loki,” the voice again. Why could he not place the voice? It tugged on a corner of his mind, hinting at better times, whipping blades – Asgard.

Mother?

His eyes blinked open. She was leaning over him, applying a rag to his mouth to wipe away the blood from his lips and chin. The haze that covered Loki’s eyes cleared and her face came into focus – pretty as ever, and brows furrowed in concern.

“Lady…Sif?” Loki whispered.

“Can you not heal yourself?” Sif asked.
Foolish girl – could she not see Loki’s seidr was already fully extended? Jaded and tortured as it fought only to keep him alive. Stupid, ignorant girl, magic could not solve everything with a mere wave of a hand. But anger didn’t work. Anger could not fight back the pain charging through Loki’s every particle of being. Wrath could no longer serve as a distraction.

He nonetheless reached for the numbing power of his seidr, fingers outstretched as if a child to a parent, imploring and desperate to be lifted up. Perhaps the pain lessened slightly. Perhaps it did not thrum so insistently inside his body, chewing away at his sanity.

“So,” Nebula’s voice growled overhead. Nebula. Loki had nearly forgotten Nebula, unexpected savior. “The warrior Sylvan’s true name is Lady Sif, is it?”

“Shut up,” Sif said gruffly.

“What are…” Loki’s lips moved soundlessly as he struggled for the strength to speak. His fresh bandages and clean tunic meant that Sif must have undressed and washed him. Loki's cheeks burned with indignity. He did not want Sif to see his body in this condition, to have to tend to him like he was some sort of piteous infant. “How…”

“Be still, Loki,” said Sif, hand back on his forehead. What was this nursemaid pretense? This show of concern? Loki yearned to sneer at her, to ask her what had happened to her promise to run him through with a blade the last time he had occasion to appear to her in his usual body.

“Let him speak if he wants to,” said Nebula indifferently.

“What are you…doing here?” Loki managed to say. This fragility was pathetic. He did not even have control over his own voice.

“I might ask you the same question,” said Sif, and here was a glimmer of the warrior Loki had cast away from Asgard for the sake of the preservation of his ruse. “The last I heard of you, Loki,” Sif continued, voice hiding rising anger. She had never been one to hold her temper, “you had died in the arms of Thor on Svartalfheim, and was heralded on Asgard as a hero.”

Loki nearly smiled at the memory of his escapades now, or would have if he had the strength.

“My Lady…when have you ever known me to pass up the…opportunity for a trick?” It was easier to speak now, seidr pumping through his body, side-by-side with his blood, slicking away the sharpest of the hurts. It would take him a very long time to heal, but it would come.

“I might have guessed,” Sif said flatly. Comprehension dawned on her face, and it was swiftly eclipsed by rage. “It was you, was it not? You behind the guise of your father, your king? My king when he cast me from the realm?” She narrowed her eyes, hissing, “And what did you do with Odin? Did you kill him?”

I may as well have. But he would never admit that to Sif. Loki closed his eyes. He had his weakened state to fall back on as an excuse to avoid her questions.

“And what happened?” Sif demanded. Gone was any previous note of sympathy in her voice. Calling on her natural inclination for pity would not work. “Did Thor return and toss you from the throne? Has he usurped you in his rightful place?”

Rightful place. Asgard.

Asgard, the name thudded dully in Loki’s stomach.
Loki felt ill. She did not know. She had no idea yet of her home’s destruction, the annihilation of her people, the death of her friends and family. She did not know, and Loki would now have to tell her. It would take a new kind of strength to explain this, a moral constitution that Loki felt sure he did not possess.

“Sif…” he began.

“Asgard?” Nebula scoffed. “Have you not heard by now, my Lady?” Her words were full of scorn.

“Do…do not…” Loki attempted to stop Nebula, but he did not know why he so desperately wanted her to discontinue, or what to say to her to make her do so.

“Asgard has been destroyed.” Nebula paid Loki no mind. “It was burned by the flames of Ragnarok that the fire demon Surtur released on its Golden City.”

Sif blanched. “You lie –”

“It is the truth,” said Nebula impassively. “My father Thanos intercepted the vessel of the last Asgardian refugees on his way to Knowhere. It is how he came across Loki in the first place.”

“Loki –” Sif cried and Loki winced as her too-bright eyes – anxious and fierce eyes – turned on him. “Loki, she lies. Tell me it is not so.”

Funny that she should ask the God of Lies for the truth. Although Loki yearned to be able to give her the reply she wanted. “It is not a lie,” he said. His voice was cold. Why? Why could he not respond to her in sympathy – reach out to her as another hurting being, a fellow destitute creature for some kind of solace?

Sif rose from her place by his bedside. Her face was red. She was trying not to cry, Loki knew, as he also knew that she would succeed. She would never deign to the dishonor of letting him see her succumb to tears.

“How did it happen?” she said rigidly.

“Hela, the Goddess of Death, first daughter of Odin, returned to claim the throne,” Loki recited as if it was ancient history, memorized in his childhood lessons. “She killed most of Asgard’s people. Inducing Ragnarok was our only hope of destroying her.”

“Who –” Sif’s words caught in her throat. She swallowed and pressed firmly onward, refusing now to let even herself acknowledge her grief. “Who is dead?”

“We managed to rescue only…” it was difficult to talk but Loki was not sure if it was because of the pain in his body or the undercurrent of unexplored emotion waiting in his mind. “Only perhaps one-thousand…I should say even less than that."

Did Nebula sense Loki’s hesitation? She took over the narrative. “The ship escaped from Thanos, fleeing to earth.”

Even to hear Nebula say it aloud did not convince Loki of its reality. He could no longer trust what sat before his own eyes. Nebula, and now Sif, could still be mere illusion. Thanos had his talons deep in Loki’s mind, any information he received could easily be tampered with by the Titan. But away from Thanos’ ship it was easier to discern truth from lies. He thought he could be reasonably certain he had seen the Sakaarian vessel flee using the Tesseract…reasonably certain Thanos had not destroyed it before Loki’s eyes…reasonably certain.
“What of Fandral, Volstagg, and Hogun?” Sif demanded rapidly.

A jet of pain caused Loki to wince and slump against the cushions beneath him. “No.”

I’m sorry, but he didn’t say it. Was Loki sorry? He had grown up with the Warriors Three at his side, same as Thor. They had been – been friends in childhood if not for…since everything else that had passed between them.

How quickly it had all unspooled. How quickly childhood sureties dissolved into shades of gray, overshadowed by lies. Loki was sorry for much, but uncertain about more.

Sif made a noise very near a sob. She lifted a fist to her mouth and bit down on her knuckle. “And Thor?” Loki could see she did not want to hear the answer. Foolish Sif. She always wore her thoughts so clearly on her outer shell. It had always been easy for Loki to read her, even when she’d tried so hard to hide things.

Nebula shrugged and Sif’s eyes fell to Loki again. Loki breathed shallowly, trying not to disturb his aching chest. “I – I do not know. He was among the survivors. Since then, I….”

“Then he may likely still be alive?” The very thought of it made a gleam of hope flash through Sif’s eyes.

Loki looked away from her. Silence hammered in the room. They were in a small shelter, walls unadorned, space fitted with only the bed Loki lay upon, a small stove for cooking, and a wooden table. A pile of Sif’s weapons and armor were stacked by the door. Loki simultaneously wished Sif would speak and not speak: he did not want to be left in the silence of his own thoughts, but he also dreaded what she would say to him.

“You banished me.” She snarled, voice accusing. She would have liked to kill him now, Loki knew, although she restrained herself because she was unwilling, as she always was, to kill a defenseless creature.

Loki could not bare to meet her gaze. “If I had not banished you, you would now likely be dead.”

“Do not!” she cried. “Do not dare turn this around like that, wordsmith! This is your doing! All your doing! If you had not left Asgard defenseless – if you had not deprived her of her warriors – then her people would not have perished. My friends, my fellow soldiers, would not now be dead and my home demolished!”

“Do not tell me things I already know perfectly well,” Loki snapped, and he had not meant to speak. The words had flown from his lips without his command. He was breathing heavily, heart palpitating painfully in his breast. His body was shaking.

Sif tossed him an ugly look. “Spare me your regret,” she spat. “I have no want of it.” She turned on her heel and swept from the room, slamming the door on her way outside to the dark and cold surface of the moon.

Nebula looked from the closed door to Loki on the bed. “ Didn’t realize you two knew each other,” she quipped.

OOO

Nothing was ever quite so lovely as Asgard at dusk, bathed in the ruby glow of its setting sun, crystalline spiers of the Golden City glinting orange in the half-light, kingdom spread below Thor from his perch atop the palace balcony. Thor leaned against the railing, unable to stop from smiling at
the sight below him. Loki shifted beside him, brothers standing side by side, basking in the warm
glow of their homeland. Loki turned. He grinned, familiar mischievous glint in his young eyes,
“Brother?” he said before it all faded away to darkness – Loki, Asgard, the ground below Thor’s
feet.

A gentle, simpering voice breathed through Thor’s mind, the soothing voice of a child calling him
back from the recesses of dream, uttering one word: awaken.

Thor jolted upward, heart in his throat, shout leaving his lips. There were faces around him – curious,
crowding alien faces – and Thor reeled away from them, clattering to his feet. There was no where to
go. He was trapped within the confines of a small spaceship. Trapped. Imprisoned.

“Whoa there, cowboy,” said what looked to be the only human of the group, a scruffy man with
whiskers and a patchwork leather jacket.

“We’re not going to hurt you,” said a green woman with dark red hair, raising both her hands.

“Told you it wasn’t dead,” said a furry animal near the floor. Thor vaguely recognized it as a creature
from Midgard, although he had never seen one speak before. He believed Jane had called them
squirrels.

There was also a gray-tinted, red-veined giant, a cute yellow thing with antenna and unnaturally
large eyes, and a lithe walking, blinking tree. Thor had rarely found himself confronted by such
bizarre company. His body ached. He was a disheveled mess from the explosion of Knowhere, and
he was in no mood for further complications. He growled: “Who the hell are you guys?”

“We’re the motherfucking Guardians of the Galaxy,” said the squirrel.

“Guardians of the Galaxy?” Thor echoed the animal in amazement. “That is certainly a bold claim.”

“I guess it’s just cuz we’re pretty bold people, right guys?” said the human and the green woman
rolled her eyes at him.

“Not to be rude, and not that I care about being rude, but who the hell are you?” the squirrel
demanded. “And what the hell are you doing on my ship?”

“Our ship,” the human corrected, frowning at Thor and crossing his arms.

“Come on Groot,” the squirrel snapped aside to the tree. “Take the earbuds out, man. We’ve got
company.”

Thor drew himself to full height, straightening his shoulders, ignoring how unkempt he must look in
this moment. “I am Thor, God of Thunder, King of –”

The green woman interrupted him: “Thor, brother of Loki?”

Usually it was the other way around. Thor’s heart jumped into his throat at the sound of his brother’s
name. “You know of my brother?” he said warily. He knew not what kind of reputation Loki had
garnered across the expanse of the universe, nor what company he had had occasion to keep.

“The one you dreamed of?” the yellow alien asked. Thor immediately recognized her voice as the
one that had traversed his mind and prompted him from his sleep.

“I – we’ve met before,” the green woman faltered, and Thor could tell she was not someone
accustomed to be taken off-guard, as the mention of Loki’s name had certainly done. “But I don’t
think he’d have very fond memories of me.”

“Okay Thor God of Thunder,” the squirrel scoffed, “Who’s being bold now, huh? And you still haven’t told us what they hell you meant by smashing your face into our spaceship.”

“I did not choose to be rescued by you,” Thor retorted. “Although I suppose I must be grateful that I was. As for my purpose in this sector of the galaxy, that is my concern and no other’s.”

“Oh really?” the woman stepped forward, and Thor could tell she would be a formidable opponent in battle even by looking at her. Her body was well-shaped and muscular. Her face held a daunting ferocity behind its features. “If it has anything to do with that,” she pointed to the Tesseract, still encased in its tubular chamber, propped against the wall and coated in yellow slime, “then I would say that it’s the concern of the entire universe, not just you.”

Thor felt a mixture of relief that the Tesseract had somehow also managed to be salvaged from the explosion and dread that these Guardians had already apparently recognized the Gem for what it was.

He was silent for a moment in thought, and decided that a portion of the truth was perhaps in order: “I sought the Collector of Knowhere to ask him what he knew of this artifact. I was curious as to its origin, for I am unfamiliar with it.” Not too much of the truth.

“Feel free to ask him anything you’d like,” said the squirrel, pointing to a body covered in a sheet, rolled near the wall of the ship. Thor had not noticed it until then. “Though I doubt he’ll be able to give you many answers.”

“He will not be able to answer you because he is dead,” the gray giant added helpfully.

Thor’s face fell. “Taneleer Tivan? I will admit this is troubling news.”

“He was killed by The Dark Lord Thanos,” said the woman. “We did not arrive in time to save him.”

“I am sorry, indeed, to hear –”

In one swift motion, the woman unsheathed a retractable blade, stepped forward and pinned Thor to the wall with the sword pressed to his windpipe, cutting off his voice. “My blade is called Godslayer, God of Thunder,” she hissed into his face, “And you brother is a much better liar than you are.”

Thor decided it was not yet time to be concerned, but perhaps that time was coming very soon.

“Gamora,” the human said in warning, but did not move to intercept the woman. He evidently knew better than to step into her way.

“You seek the Infinity Stones,” Gamora said. “You are a fool. The Stones cannot be controlled by a being such as yourself.”

“I seek them not to control them,” Thor said carefully, sensing that these creatures were no friends of Thanos’. “But to stop the one who hopes to do so.”

“Than you are a still a fool,” said Gamora, but she lowered her sword away from Thor’s neck. “Thanos cannot be stopped. I would know. He’s my father.”

“Your father?” Thor was dumbstruck.
“He is mad for power and will not hesitate to cut down anyone who stands in his way,” said Gamora. She waved her hand to the covered body of the Collector. “That’s who Thanos is.”

“Death follows him like a shadow,” the yellow alien piped up. It was exceptionally disconcerting to hear her say such a thing because her voice was one of a little girl.

“He is responsible for the deaths of my wife and daughter,” the giant said solemnly. “I am one that he will not be able to cut down so easily.”

“I am Groot,” said the tree sadly.

“We learned about Thanos’ plans,” said the human. “There were rumors that Tivan had the Reality Stone so we set out to warn him…but we got there too late.”

“But where is the Reality Stone now?” Thor asked urgently. “I have before witnessed its power, to have it unleashed in the hands of Thanos –”

“Thanos doesn’t have it,” said the squirrel. “At least not yet.”

“We do not know where it is,” said yellow alien. “The Collector carried his secret into death.”

What now? The thought sunk into Thor’s stomach. He had traveled half-way across the universe to confront the Collector, hoping it would provide him with but a semblance of a plan for his next step. Now he was left with nothing, just this gang of ragtag warriors – a small and unconvincing force in the face of the enemy that faced them.

“And Thanos –” Thor mustered enough will to speak. “He survived the explosion? And where has he gone now?”

The squirrel shrugged, “Back to his ship, I suppose.”

“The Sanctuary II,” Gamora added.

“Real clever when it comes to naming things,” said the human.

“I must get aboard,” said Thor. He needed to trust someone. He could not think of rescuing Loki without some sort of allies supporting him from behind.

“Are you out of your mind?” the squirrel yelled. “No one gets onto that ship and comes back out of it alive.”

Cold fear rose in Thor’s chest, but he fought it back. “Perhaps I am mad. Nevertheless, I must try. Thanos has captured my brother. I am his only hope of rescue. I cannot guess the untold horrors he has undergone upon the ship, already.”

“I mean, not to be a bummer, but your brother’s probably already dead.” The human’s eyes widened and hastily added, “I mean, it sucks. Totally sucks. I wasn’t saying it didn’t.”

“Shut up, Peter,” Gamora snapped and the human looked startled at her harsh tone. Gamora turned to look at Thor. She ran her tongue over her lips. “Your brother has –” she hesitated. “He has survived Thanos before. You can only hope he’ll do so again.”

“What do you know of this?” Thor asked darkly. He swore – if he learned that this woman had had a hand in Loki’s torment before –

Gamora’s face was impassive. “More than you,” she said. “I better than most know of Thanos’
cruelty. And Rocket is right. You’d have to be insane to try to infiltrate his vessel.”

Thor shook his head. “I must try,” he said again.

“I understand your urgency to rescue your brother,” the giant rumbled. “Yours is a noble quest.”

“Well,” said the squirrel, Rocket. “Unless you plan on jumping ship at the nearest asteroid, I don’t see that happening. Cuz we’re heading as far as possible from Thanos and his spaceship of horrors. We’re off to Xandar.”

“Xandar?”

“Last known location of the Power Stone,” Peter answered Thor’s unasked question. “In cold storage with the Nova Corps. We’ve got to get there before Thanos does.”

“Did you not tell me I was a fool to attempt to stop Thanos?” Thor addressed Gamora.

Gamora shrugged, “Sure. You’re a fool. But maybe the rest of us are fools, too.”

Chapter End Notes

We’re fast approaching some BIG action…occurring in the next five chapters. I have up to chapter 14 written…currently struggling with a bit of writer’s block, but I *think* I just figured out how to maneuver around it, so I should be able to push on soon. I want to get as much done with this story as possible before my life is overtaken by the next semester.

Thank you, as ever, for the continued support. If so inclined, I’d love to hear your thoughts on this chapter…surprise character reveal as it contained.
Tony is becoming one of my go-to narrators. His snark is just too much to resist.

Be advised – things are supposed to be feeling a little shaky as far plans go. No one is being entirely rational. Imagine a group of people, all at the ends of their respective ropes, trying to smother a whole lot of tension that has been building between them for years, thrown into a room to try to come up with a solution to an alien invasion on the fly. A whole lot more shit is going to go down before a resolution even begins to come into sight.

That being said, in this story there will be casualties – just like there will be in the Infinity War film. The stakes have to be high for the threat to be convincing, and the eventual payoff to be worth it, and Thanos is supposed to be the biggest threat our heroes have yet faced. Buckle up, it's going to be a bumpy ride.

"Tony," said Bruce across the table, voice stunned. "Is that Wanda?"

Tony hadn't needed Bruce to point out Wanda Maximoff, who appeared without warning into the grainy footage Tony had acquisitioned from the city's transit authority. She sprinted out of the darkness, wielding the spidery flames of her magic. She hauled a subway car through the air so it wiped out the alien figure who had incapacitated Vision. Damn, girl had some chutzpah.

The faces around the conference table, somewhere in the spinal cord of Stark – wait, Stronghold Tower – became stricken as Vision rose from the ground, only to turn on Wanda like some kind of mind-controlled puppet. Whatever the alien had done to him when she'd stuck her scepter into his forehead had apparently manipulated the Mind Stone to their control.

"Whoa," said Peter in awe as the footage ended.

They already knew the rest of the story. Their ragtag crew had arrived at the crater in the middle of 14th Street in time for the sleek spaceship to emerge from the ground, zooming up and away into the air too fast to stop. Tony and Strange took off in pursuit, but they were too late: the ship flickered through the portal before they could hinder it, with apparently both Vision and Wanda aboard as prisoners of an interplanetary war.

Too late. Again, too late.

Tony's chest ached to think about Wanda, the blank look on her face seared into his memory after he saw the footage of her wrapped in a straightjacket in the Raft. How had she known where to find Vision? Obviously, the aliens wanted her alive, otherwise they wouldn't have bothered to take her aboard their ship. She's a kid! A scared kid, Tony! She never asked for any of this! Tony could only hear Clint and Steve's voices thundering in unison through his skull. Tony's eyes flickered unconsciously to Peter, looking way to enthralled with all of this.

"Underoos," he said, and Peter looked up to meet his eyes. "You owe your aunt at least a text," he said sternly. "Go on. You've got five minutes."
"Oh – oh, sure, Mr. Stark." Peter scooted out of his chair, fishing for his phone in his back pocket. "Be right back." He dashed from the room.

"Now that the kid's out of the way," began Fury gravely at the head of the table, surly and unmoved as ever, as if he hadn't just seen one of the most disturbing things since Barton's eyes turned icy blue six years ago. "What the hell are we gonna do about this?"

"I think the obvious answer would be to find a way to destroy that portal so no more alien ships will be able to make their way into our city," said Strange, speaking above his steepled hands.

"It's not like that will stop them from somehow just constructing another one," Tony snapped. He was going to make damn sure his opinion wasn't ignored this time, and the first step to that was holding his temper – already a lot of effort. "I think before we figure out how to shut down the portal we should consider the possibility of going through it."

"Not an option, Stark," said Fury. "We don't know what's waiting on the other end of that portal. We can't risk it."

"Vision and Wanda are waiting at the other end of that portal," said Tony.

"Sure, along with a hole host of those alien bastards," Fury replied.

"Are we going to talk about what exactly that portal is?" Bruce cut in. Bruce was the only one who had suffered any visual injury – a minor blow to the face from a Chitauri's fist – and held an icepack against a blossoming black eye. He hadn't been graced by even a whisper of green throughout the entire battle, a new and baffling development that Tony would have to grill him about later. Add it to the ever-growing list.

"It appears to be of similar construction to the one Loki opened last time," Bruce continued, "but he required the Tesseract for that – and I think we can be sure Thanos doesn't have that, seeing as Thor left earth with the Tesseract in hand this morning."

"And maybe if you hadn't shot Thor out into the atmosphere we'd still have someone around who knew about this shit," Tony retorted.

"Point taken, Stark," said Fury grimly.

"Yeah, just taken about five hours too late," Tony rolled his eyes.

"This isn't about you," Fury said, voice raised slightly and good – good. Tony wanted to rile him up. Tony was pissed and wanted someone to lay into.

"No, you're right," said Tony. "We shouldn't be talking about me. Maybe we should be talking about Wanda or Vision, abducted by aliens. And the last time I checked they were citizens of Earth – or, at least, Wanda is – and deserve the protection of their planet."

"Which we'll give them." Fury's single eye blazed across the table. "If we can."

How many caveats would it take before Fury just admitted that Wanda and Vision had finally left the solar system – two big problems taken off their hands for free? Weapons of mass destruction, Tony thought and winced. Hindsight really was a bitch.

Tony was done with this shit. He was done with taking orders from other misled figures of authority – Ross or Fury, they were all the same after a while: talking heads with other people working their jaws, pulling their strings, and Tony was sick of it. Obedience was a collar that was starting to itch.
"And if we were to go through the portal, Stark, what then?" said Strange, staring at Tony with calculating eyes. Tony struggled not to squirm under the other man's gaze. His eyes were piercing and much too perceptive for Tony's liking.

"Then we nab Vision and Wanda before they're killed," Tony replied. "Game's changed. Thanos has one of the Stones now, and we can't allow him to take out two of our biggest players."

"But how will we find them?" said Bruce tiredly. "The universe is a big place."

"If we're lucky, the portal will take us right where we need to be," Tony answered. "If we're not… then I guess we'll have to get the coordinates from Selvig for wherever Thor ran off to. If we can find Thor, we'll have free use of the Tesseract for our intergalactic transportation convenience."

"Sounds a little far-fetched," said Fury. "We don't know a goddamn thing about traveling through space."

"Now's our chance to learn," said Tony. "Bruce, you should be jumping at a chance like this."

"I think I've seen enough of space over the past week, thanks," said Bruce. Right. Yeah. Stuck on another planet for two years and all that. Tony had forgotten.

"What do you say, Strange?" said Fury.

Strange frowned over his hands. "I think it's…unwise to go through a portal into space without knowing exactly where it will bring us out," he said slowly. Tony wanted to point out that Strange was the only one among them with any experience at charging through interdimensional portals. Strange continued, "That being said, Stark has a point."

"I'd like it taken down that the good doctor has conceded that Stark has a point," said Tony. Strange rolled his eyes across the table but proceeded without comment. "We can't just abandon Vision and Wanda Maximoff. Yet neither can we deny the swiftness with which Thanos was able to overpower Vision and gain access to another Stone. We cannot leave earth defenseless."

"But there aren't anymore Stones on earth," it was, surprisingly, Bruce who spoke up. But, then again, he had always been an open-minded sort of fella. "Shouldn't we be thinking about how to protect the rest of them now?"

"Strange," Fury growled and Dr. Strange lifted a hand in warning.

"Director, please," he said.

Fury clamped his mouth shut, and Tony stared in awe. Never had he seen someone with enough power to shut Nicolas Fury up. Teach me your ways, oh master.

"Right, Bruce," said Tony, deciding to ignore that puzzling exchange for now. "Exactly what I was thinking. And the rest of the Stone are out there," he waved his hand vaguely over his head, figuring they'd get the point he was referring to the cosmos within which earth dangled like a miniscule Christmas ornament. "So that's where we should be heading, too."

"We can't abandon earth —"

"Sending one Iron Man into the galaxy isn't exactly abandoning earth, as much as I'd like to think I do the majority of the grunt work as far as saving the world."
"No, I think earth would actually have a better chance of survival if you were not on it, Stark," said Strange – and did the good doctor just crack a joke? A miniscule smile gone in a flash across his stiff lips? Tony was impressed.

Bruce scrubbed his eyes with his fists. "I think we're starting to talk in circles."

"And I think the Itsy-Bitsy Spider will be barging back through the doors in a second," said Tony. He stood from his chair. "Which reminds me, I've got some phone calls of my own to make. Coffee break?"

Fury looked peeved at the interruption, but Tony hadn't exactly meant it as a suggestion. He left through the one of the large double doors, letting it swing shut behind him. No one followed him. Let the mean girls gossip about him while he was gone, he didn't care.

Sure enough, Peter was dawdling in the corridor when Tony stepped out, sulking on his phone, but his face brightened when he looked up at Tony. "I couldn't get back in. Doors lock from the inside."

"Nobody ever teach you to jimmy a lock?" said Tony. Innocent kid. He didn't even guess that maybe the point was to keep Spidey outside in the hallway while the grownups discussed their options. Didn't want junior to see Mom and Dad fight.

"Well, yeah," Peter shrugged sheepishly. "But it seemed kind of rude, you know? And it's all sound proof, so I couldn't even listen in through the wall. So, what's up?"

"Nothing's up," Tony sighed, trying to keep the frustration out of his voice. Last thing he needed to do right now was rant to a sixteen-year-old. "Just a whole lot of convoluted litigation – which translates to bullshit, if you didn't know the SAT words."

"No, no, yeah, I got you," Peter nodded enthusiastically. "So, what are we gonna do?"

"We?" said Tony. "We aren't going to do anything, Peter. In fact, it's past your bedtime. High time you went back home."

"It's barely one o'clock in the afternoon," Peter objected.

"So it's high time you went back to school. What are you, some kind of lousy delinquent?"

"School closed because of the attack," Peter said readily.

"Peter –"

"Ah, come on, Mr. Stark. You're the one who wanted to make me an Avenger in the first place."

"An offer you declined," Tony reminded him. He couldn't believe he was having an argument with a teenager right now. He had things to do. Plans to set into motion. Still, he didn't feel right just leaving the kid hanging. "Because you wanted to stick to being a friendly neighborhood Spider-Man. So why don't you just run along and stop some petty crime or something?"

Peter's eyes narrowed. "You're planning something, aren't you?" he demanded. Shit, the kid was observant. Tony tried not to let a tell-tale expression of shock show on his face, but he had a sneaking suspicion he was too late. He felt like he'd been caught out by his father after sneaking in past curfew – a feeling that really should be reversed, considering who he was talking to here.

"Wrong, guess again," said Tony. "No cards up my sleeve."
Peter gave Tony a look that made it clear he didn't believe him. He looked over his shoulder to make sure no one was listening in on their conversation. "But, like, if you were," he whispered. Did the kid think they were some sort of cold war spies in the middle of a bad 1980's action flick? "Can I come?"

Tony was already shaking his head. "No way. Even if I was planning something – which I'm not – there's no way I'd be taking you down with me."

"But –"

"No," said Tony flatly. He took off down the hallway; Peter jogged to catch up. He pulled out his phone from his pocket and saw that there were fifty-seven and counting missed calls from Rhodey and Ross combined, and another fifteen from Pepper. Boy, was he in trouble.

"But, Mr. Stark, it's –"

"It's outer space?" Tony guessed and, damn, when did he get so serious? It was no fun to be the adult in the situation. "This isn't some kind of amusement park. This is serious. Way more serious than Toomes, and you're going to have to take my word for it, kid. There's no way I'm letting you get mixed up in an intergalactic space battle."

Intergalactic space battle – wrong thing to say. Peter's eyes glinted even brighter at the idea of such a thing. "But I could help –" he babbled. "Fight off more of those weird reptile creatures on the speeder bikes. You know. Fight laser guns and –"

Tony halted in the center of the hallway and reeled on Peter, who backpedaled, eyes wide and so goddamn hopeful.

"No, Peter. No. I said no." Tony was dangerously close to shouting. Peter's face crumpled like Tony had just revealed to him that there was no such thing as Santa Claus.

"Oh," Peter blinked, trying to keep his voice light even though Tony could still hear the note of hurt. "Okay. Yeah, sure."

Tony took a deep breath. He ran his hand through his hair. He wasn't going to have a child's blood on his hands, no matter what Peter said to try to convince him otherwise, and puppy-dog eyes be damned. "So the way I see it," he said gruffly, "is you've got two options. Either you're going to scram on your own or I need to call your aunt to come pick you up."

"You have my aunt's number," Peter said in disgust.

Tony raised his eyebrows, waiting for the kid to make his decision.

Peter rolled his eyes. He scuffed the ground with the toe of his Air Jordans. "No, it's fine," he said glumly. "I'll leave."

"Good," said Tony shortly. "Look both ways when you cross the street and all that." Peter didn't answer. He was clearly upset. Tony tried not to care. "It's for your own good, you know."

"Sure," said Peter.

Tony rolled his eyes. He turned away from Peter and stalked back down the hallway. He was glad when the kid didn't follow him. He couldn't deal with much more teenage angst. He already had enough of his own to deal with.
He turned down a corridor, looking for a private place to make his calls. Damn, had they rearranged the hallways in this thing, too? Nothing looked remotely familiar anymore. He finally came to a stop in a windowed alcove with a view that plummeted downward fifty stories. He paused to wave at a small security camera hanging from the ceiling before he disabled it into static by ratchetting up a frequency emitted by the cuff on his wrist. He had about fifteen minutes before one of Fury's staff noticed the disturbance and got cranky.

"Talk to me, Rhodey," said Tony, lifting up his phone and punching the callback button.

"Tony, where the hell have you been?" Rhodey yammered into Tony's ear. "Ross is losing his shit. He's about a second away from issuing a warrant for your arrest – and mine too. If you don't report in fifteen minutes –"

"Tell Ross he's behind the times," said Tony. "My letter of resignation should be en route to his inbox in about five minutes."

Okay. Okay, so Tony was wrong. Sue him (which they would, probably. It had happened often enough). He had thought they would be better prepared against Thanos' attack – Loki's previous assault on New York hadn't been exactly very well thought out and Tony had figured that was just Lord Palpatine's style. But Tony was wrong, and now Vision was captured, and so was his teenybopper girlfriend who possessed more power than a nuclear bomb. And Tony hadn't seen this coming, he really hadn't. But now it was time to take matters into his own hands. He didn't have the patience to deal with Ross's or Fury's doublespeak, any longer.

"Tony, what the hell?" said Rhodey, but he didn't sound exactly disapproving.

"Listen," said Tony. "I know you've probably got a list taller than Stark Tower to yell at me for, but I've got a huge favor to ask of you."

"Yeah?" Rhodey's voice held that familiar note of wariness Tony had grown to so know and love.

"So, you remember little miss Asgardian princess?" Tony began. "Well...I'm going to need her specific set of skills for a highly classified mission I'm planning." Fury was right; Tony didn't know a goddamn thing about space travel. He needed someone who did, even if she was a pain in the ass.

"Tony..." Rhodey cautioned, sigh of resignation in his voice.

"Have her flown over ASAP," Tony pressed onward. "Special delivery. Not expecting anything less than your trusted hands for this one, Rhodes."

"You're going to get me court-martialed, Stark," Rhodey growled, but Tony grinned behind his phone, because he knew he had him, hook, line, and sinker. Sure enough Rhodey added, "I'll get her to you in three hours, tops. And, Tony?"

"Yeah?"

"You're a bastard, you know that?"

"You too, Rhodey, old pal. You too," Tony chuckled, hanging up the call.

He dialed Pepper's number next and winced as soon as her voice snapped through the line, greeting him with a line of profanity. "You told me you would warn me the next time you went off to fight more aliens! Have you seen the news? New York is a shambles and you're on every single smartphone video circulating on YouTube –"
"Rhodey just finished calling me a bastard," said Tony, "so there's no need to tell me again."

"Well, good for Rhodey," said Pepper. Tony smiled. He could tell she wasn't actually angry at him, just concerned – bless her precious, long-suffering heart.

"So, er, Pep," said Tony. Now for the hard part. "I know you've been planning this big dinner party shebang for –"

"For three months, yes," Pepper said sweetly. "And you're calling me to let me know how much you're looking forward to it and that you'll be bringing two bottles of Cabernet Sauvignon with you when you come home."

"Er – not exactly," said Tony.

"Anthony Stark –" Pepper began, pulling out the full name, which meant Tony was in worse trouble than he initially thought.

"Listen, Pep," Tony said hastily. "Something's come up with work. You saw it on the news, scary aliens and everything."

"You can tell the scary aliens to wait until morning," said Pepper.

"I wish I could. Really I do." Tony hoped his earnestness translated through the phoneline. "But that's not going to happen right now. So I hope you dinner party goes right as rain – which it will, because you're the tops, and everything you touch turns to gold. And I love you." And I love you, Pepper. I really do.

"Tony – don't you dare –" Pepper warned, having experienced way too many of these kinds of calls not to know exactly where it was heading.

"Hugs and kisses, love bug," said Tony. "Don't bother waiting up for me."

He blew a kiss into the phone. "Tony –" Pepper's voice was cut off when Tony hit the end call button, guilt swimming in his stomach, but he didn't have time to deal with that now. Pepper would be there. Tony had to believe she would always be there. There to pick his pieces back off the floor, there waiting for him until he finally figured out how to screw his head on the right way.

He could hear distant footsteps down the hallway now. He was running out of time before the STRENGTH personnel arrived to find out who the hell had knocked out their camera.

Tony didn't bother to check Rogers' prehistoric artifact, even though he wanted to. Maybe Steve had gotten his message, maybe he hadn't – Tony couldn't worry about that now. Mr. Stars and Stripes would be on his own now; maybe Fury would have better luck in motivating him out of his sulk.

"Friday?" Tony tapped his cuff around his wrist, waking up his user interface from her peaceful slumber.

"Yes, boss?" she replied readily with that jilting Irish brogue of hers.

"Get me the security codes for every door in this building." Good thing about once owning the Tower, Stark knew exactly where the goods would be parked. "And I'm gonna need a sign-on for one of the quinjets, too."

"Right away, sir," said Friday.
"And, Friday?"

"Yes, boss?"

"Send a letter of resignation to Ross, sign it with my big John H, and don't bother to be too polite."

"With pleasure, sir," said Friday.

OOO

Stephen walked through a revolving Sling Ring into his study, only to find Wong waiting for him, characteristic frown on his face. Wong had little interest in politics, so he had elected to stay behind while Stephen addressed Fury for the debrief. Stephen envied Wong his wisdom to avoid it.

"Stephen," said Wong with a nod. "And how did it go?"

"Awful," said Stephen, pinching the bridge of his nose between his thumb and index finger. "Fury is angry, Stark is pitching a hissy fit, and so is his teenage apprentice. The only one keeping a level head is Banner – and even that is wrong, because he should still be a raging green monster right now. And two of the most powerful beings on earth have been kidnapped by an alien warlord."

"And the Mind Stone has been apprehended," Wong added.

"That too," said Stephen.

"Will you go after them?" said Wong.

Stephen shrugged. He collapsed into a nearby armchair. He would not let Stark or Fury see how drained he was, but he did not mind if Wong knew that he was exhausted. Wong would tell him to embrace his human weakness, to accept it lest it should control him. "Fury thinks it unwise. I'm inclined to believe him. Yet…"

"Yet," said Wong. "If you do not, then who will? Can we really condemn them to a cruel and unknown fate?"

"Yes, we can," said Stephen heavily. "If it means saving earth from a similar destiny. In fact, we must."

"And you believe that?" said Wong.

"What do you want me to say, Wong?" Stephen demanded. He wasn't in the mood to play games. Wong was a hard man to read. Stephen could not tell if he was prompting him to agree with Fury or urging him to commit mutiny.

"I want you to be truthful with yourself about what you think is right," said Wong. "Fury is a smart man, but he does not know what you do. Although he is aware of the Time Stone's presence on earth, he has no true idea of its power, or its threat."

"You think Thanos will return for it?" said Stephen.

"I think it is inevitable," Wong answered.

Stephen sighed again. "So do I."

"And you think it likely we will be able to protect it?" said Wong. "Thanos easily acquired the Mind Stone. With its possession he will only grow stronger and more unpredictable. How can we hope to
hide the Eye from him?"

"I don't know," Stephen murmured. And dammit, didn't Wong have his own answers? Why did everything always have to come in riddles?

"This Stark," Wong changed the subject. "Do you fear he will act rashly, or in some other way damage the safety of earth?"

"I think he's just crazy enough right now to make a dash for the portal regardless of Fury's orders," Stephen answered. "In fact, I wouldn't be at all surprised if I got a call from Fury in the next twenty minutes. As for endangering earth, I think anything any one of us does right now could jeopardize our planet."

It was Wong's turn to sigh, a rare show of emotion. "If only we could see into the future," he said.

"It's not like you to yearn for the impossible, Wong," said Stephen, although he could not deny that he wished for the same thing. They needed more Time.

Stephen stood. He had made his decision. Wong stared at him levelly from across the room. Could the other man read his thoughts? It certainly seemed so, for Wong said, "Stephen, I have warned you before of the dangers of manipulating the Stones. Only ruin waits at the end of this road. So, I implore you, do not do what you have in your mind to do." Wong paused, taking a breath. "But, if you feel you must, I will not stop you by force."

"There is no other choice," said Stephen. Stephen, himself, had warned Stark of the dangers of using the Stones, but Stephen had already successfully wielded the powers of the Time Gem. He was confident he could do so again if the need should arise, which Stephen felt sure it would. These were dire times, and he was certain that the only way to combat an Infinity Stone was to use one of its sisters. And he could not simply leave it laying around on earth for Thanos to pick it up as if stopping by the corner store.

Stephen and Wong's surroundings rapidly altered as Stephen teleported them through the Sanctum. The dimensions of the Sanctum were thin, nearly transparent, allowing for seamless transportation through its walls that did not require the aide of a Sling Ring. Stephen and Wong now stood in the center of the archive of relics, a level below the street.

The Cloak of Levitation swept through the room of its own accord and snapped onto Stephen's shoulders. Stephen patted it welcome and stalked up to the pedestal in the center of the room. Stephen had removed the Eye of Agamotto's pedestal from Kamar-Taj to the New York Sanctum. He stepped up to it, fist closing around the chain and drawing it from the dais. He placed the chain around his neck, where the pendant dangled as a heavy weight against his chest. He could already feel the tantalizing power within the Stone, calling to him, almost taunting him.

Wong watched him silently, eyes following him from his place across the room, unmoved since Strange teleported him there. He nodded briefly when Stephen looked at him, in acceptance of Stephen's choice, Stephan knew – although Stephen could not stop a slight feeling of misgiving from flickering through his stomach, regardless of Wong's reluctant approval.

As if on cue, Stephen's pager beeped, indicating an urgent message from Fury. Stephen pressed down the receiver, already knowing what Fury was calling him to say.

"Stark's gone AWOL," Fury's voice crackled through the intercom.

"Is that so?" said Stephen. Not a moment too soon, Stark.
"Intercept him. He's headed toward the portal in a filched quinjet."

"On my way, Director," said Stephen. He switched off the pager.

Wong caught his eye across the room. "I wish you good luck, my friend."

Stephen smiled tightly. "I don't believe in luck."

"Neither do I," said Wong solemnly. "I was merely a figure of speech."

"Well, then, thanks," Stephen replied. Without another word, he tossed a Sling Ring into the room ahead of him. Flinging his cloak over his shoulders, he stepped into the swirling vortex and emerged a second later into the steel confines of a SHIELD era quinjet.

"What the hell?" a woman Strange had not met yet turned to face him, already reaching for the sword she kept at her hip. She was clad in armor and leather – one of Thor's friends, perhaps?

"Don't you dare, Stange," it was Stark, emerging from the cockpit and already warming up his suit's repulsors, ready to blast Stephen back down the gullet of his Ring. "I'm warning you –"

Stephen cocked an eyebrow, letting the Ring dissolve behind him. He raised his hands into the air, palms forward, to indicate he meant no harm. "Dare what, Stark?" he asked. "Dare help you fly this bird across the galaxy? Because, like it or not, you've just earned yourself another passenger."
"You are lucky I do not take advantage of your weakness and shear off those tangled locks of yours," said Sif, rousing Loki roughly out of sleep to pull him into a sitting position, propping him up with cushions behind his back. "Let's see how you like it."

He tugged his arm out of her grip, wincing in a combination of pain and embarrassment; he was not about to let her manhandle him.

"I see you are now in a more charitable mood," Loki snapped and Sif scowled at him. He did not know how long he had been sleeping. He did not think it could be long; he felt far from rested.

"You need to eat to regain your strength and Nebula refuses to feed you," she explained shortly, crossing the room to the stove on which a pot of some bubbling brew laid in wait.

"I can feed myself," Loki protested.

"You can barely breathe by yourself," Sif retorted. She returned to his bedside with a steaming mug and lifted a spoon from within.

Loki shoved her hand away. The hot soup landed on the blankets over his legs and Sif hissed in irritation. "Your pride will be the death of you!" she exclaimed before pushing the mug into Loki's hand. "Here, struggle with it yourself if you so insist."

For a moment Loki could only marvel at the way his legs refused to feel the heat of the liquid seeping onto them through the blankets. With difficulty, he swallowed past the shout of surprise that rose in his throat. He thought he had managed to hide his distress suitably from Sif. It was a conversation he was unwilling to have at the present moment.

He turned his attention to the mug in his hand. The idea of ingesting the gruel made Loki's stomach swim with nausea. He couldn't remember the last time he had eaten anything. To dodge the inevitability of her daring him to take a bite, he taunted her, "You have come to accept Asgard's demise so quickly?"

Rather than rouse her to anger, a flash of hurt crossed her face. "It is useless to grieve. What has come to pass had passed," she said, and Loki was unintentionally impressed by her ability to move on.

Guilt stirred in his chest, which he ignored as he continued to glare at her. The situation was unacceptable. He was pitiful and weak and she had no right to see him in this condition – she had no right to see him again after he banished her, succeeded in getting her out of his hair for good and – Loki saw a strange gray tint to her skin and dark circles under her eyes that he had missed when he'd first seen her. "Are you ill?" he snapped.
Sif blinked in surprise. "No," she said guardedly, drawing away from him. "I am not ill."

He unconsciously lifted a hand to touch her, because clearly she was lying and he didn't want her to keel over atop of him, seeing as she may be needed in battle at a moment's notice. Sif flinched violently back from his hand, standing from her stool at his bedside. "Do not touch me!" she cried.

Loki looked at her in puzzlement and Sif's eyes grew wide when she realized what she'd done.

"Am I really such a monster, Lady Sif?" said Loki. He had meant it as a cutting barb, but his voice was small. His hand fell limply back to his side.

"Nothing. You startled me --"

Loki thought. He looked at her and thought. He thought about Sif's and Nebula's curious affiliation, of Sif's exile across the universe, of her dealings in the past, and an unwilling suspicion dawned in the back of his mind, but he smothered it quickly, for surely she would not be so foolish. Loki narrowed his eyes. "Then what did you mean, Sif?"

"With the same man I sold it to in the first place," said Sif. "The Collector of Knowhere."

"And he is the only one who knows what you possess?" said Loki. He tried to prop himself forward with his elbows but stopped when it made a sharp pain shoot through his sternum. He fell against the cushions behind his back. Damn his injuries and his lagging seidr. Damn the useless drag of his legs at the end of his body.

"He and Nebula, yes," said Sif. "And now you."

"Sif, if anyone else was to discover what you contain, then your life will be in grave danger. You have no idea the strength of he who seeks the Gems--"

Loki's voice was severed as though by a blade. It was no longer Sif who stood above him, no longer the small shelter built around him, but he knelt at the base of a hovering throne, face bowed before the familiar harrowing form.

"Discover what, little god? Discover what? That the location of the Reality Stone is on a moon of Maveth, the planet of the dead? Thank you, God of Lies, for being so kind as to let me know. For my sons' journey will now be doubly fruitful. Not only will they reclaim you and my traitorous daughter, but they will also secure the first of the Gems for
Thanos’ voice tore away from Loki’s mind and he collapsed back into his body, limp in the bed, breathing hard, head screeching in pain.

"Loki?" said Sif, voice taught with concern. She leaned over him, clasping his shoulders in her hands. The mug of soup had spilled completely across the blankets, but sat unnoticed by both of them "What is it? Are you alright?"

Loki’s eyes darted to the door as it swung inward. Nebula stepped through it and paused, eyeing Loki and Sif curiously. "I see you've made up –" she started but Loki cut her off.

"You are mad to bring me here," His voice was hoarse. Had he yelled aloud, he wondered, when Thanos had again penetrated his mind? "Thanos – the connection has not broken. He can still see inside my head. They will be here soon." And I have just now revealed all to him, allowed him once again to invade every ounce of truth unprotected inside my mind.

Sif looked at Loki in alarm. "What do you mean? What has he done to you, Loki?"

Nebula spoke from behind Sif, grin flicking across her robotic face. "All according to plan."

Sif whipped around toward Nebula. Loki caught only a glimpse of the murderous rage that appeared on her face. "According to – what?" Sif demanded. "You planned this? You brought Loki here so that they would be led to me on purpose?"

"Are you really so surprised?" Nebula asked indifferently.

"You're a traitor," Sif spat. She drew forth her blade from its sheath across her back.

Nebula was unaffected by Sif's accusation, or the threat of her sword – unwise, Loki knew from experience. "Yes, I am a traitor. But not to you."

"Do not tempt me with your excuses," Sif warned. "I have had plenty experience with double-talking spies." Which, of course, was a reference to himself, but Loki would let the insult slide for now. They had more important things to deal with.

"Sif," said Loki, still trying to gain control over his breathing. The pain slowly faded from his head.

"Leave her. You must get off this moon at once. They are already on their way."

Sif had a primitive scanning consul set up in the corner of the room; it must have been how she had detected Nebula's ship before they landed. The screen suddenly blipped to life, indicating an approaching vessel.

"It's too late," said Nebula levelly. "They're here."

Fear stuttered in Loki's heart. If you fail, if the Tesseract is kept from us, there will be no realm, no barren moon, no crevice, where he cannot find you.

"Can you stand?" Sif still held her sword in one hand, but she had forgotten Nebula, turning her intense gaze on Loki instead.

It was impossible to tell her no, but it was equally impossible to ignore the dreadful numbness of his legs. If he mustered enough magic, he may be able to stand, but he doubted he would be able to walk without Sif's support. The very idea of it made shame burn in his stomach.
"We must get to the ship at once," said Sif. "I can help you –"

"No," Loki growled, and with sheer will, pushed himself into a sitting position with his elbows. His chest wrung with pain but he discarded it. His wounds may have healed on the surface but internally he was still clearly damaged. Seidr only accelerated the healing process. It could not bypass it entirely.

Loki hastened to gather his seidr into his core and then tried to wend it through his unresponsive limbs, but it was not that his magic would not bind to his legs, it was as though his magic was blocked from reaching his legs in the first place, refusing to traverse through nerves that were no longer connected to his mind – as though they simply no longer existed at all. Now there was panic, but Loki fought it. He could not afford to lose his concentration.

Thanos' ship – or whoever he had sent – was approaching rapidly. They had likely already landed. Nebula watched him impassively from the doorway, Sif impatiently from his bedside.

"What's wrong?" she snapped.

"Shut up," Loki said through his clenched teeth. He strung his seidr in a web around his legs, encasing his flesh in an exterior armor of invisible magic very like a guise, binding it to the muscles in his abdomen. If he could not reach his legs from the inside, he would have to work from the outside.

With effort, Loki was able to drag his legs over the side of the bed. He could see his feet on the ground, but he could not feel them. He would have to trust his memories and sight to relearn movement without proof of touch. But how to walk – how even to stand? It was maddening. He was a child. An infant learning to crawl.

He constructed his armor and leather around his body, replacing the flimsy tunic Sif had dressed him in, preparing himself in the clothes of battle. He forced himself upward, clawing at the wall beside him to support his weight. Immediately, pain seared in the base of his spine as severed nerves discovered this new pressure; he could not stop a gasp from flying from his lips.

"You are infuriating, Loki son of Odin," Sif said, and, ignoring Loki's fierce protest, dipped below his right arm and wound her arm around his waist. Loki's pathetic weakness betrayed his pride and his body readily conformed to Sif as a crutch at his side. Nebula moved to take Loki's other arm but Sif brandished her sword, "Get away, traitor."

"Whatever you say," said Nebula. She stepped back indifferently.

Sif half-supported, half-dragged Loki across the floor. They shoved past Nebula in the doorway and into the frigid darkness beyond. The moon was dark, illuminated only by the blue light of Maveth. Leaning on Sif, it was easier for Loki to imitate the motion of walking, and he was able to shift some of his weight away from Sif and back onto his still senseless legs. It felt as though he was dangling unsuspended in midair, merely his torso hovering over the ground.

He heard a dangerous rumbling in the distance. A wind kicked up. Sif shouted in alarm and frustration as a blinding light arrived overhead, together with a whirlwind of air as the landing gears of the spaceship churned through the thin atmosphere. Sif tottered from the force of the wind, hair blowing into her face. She nearly dropped Loki and he clung to her pitifully like a rat to a log in rapids.

They're position had been discovered easily; Loki knew his connection between Thanos much have acted as a homing beacon. He had doomed them all.
Nebula stalked forward, whipping out her dual electroshock batons and clipping them together to form a long staff. Her face was alight with intrigue as the ship descended, dousing them in white spotlights. Loki had never seen her so pleased before.

Loki's head spun with rapid thoughts. Nebula was an imbecile to lead Thanos willingly to another Stone. He did not believe she intended to betray Sif to Thanos – Thanos' wrath had been too genuine against his daughter for this all to be some sort of trick.

Yes, I am a traitor. But not to you, Nebula had told Sif.

It all clicked into place. What better way to lure an enemy to their doom but to dangle something they wanted in front of their noses, only to snatch it away at the last second, using its very power against them?

"Sif, you must use the Aether!" Loki yelled over the roar of the ship's engines.

Sif glanced at Loki in shock. "I cannot," she said. "I do not control the Stone."

"You have to try," Loki insisted just as the landing deck descended from the belly of the ship – a smaller task force craft: sleek, black, and threatening. From within the lighted interior, two silhouettes appeared, both tall and skeletal.

Loki recognized immediately the form of Corvus Glaive even before the creature stepped close enough to reveal his face. Sick fear bubbled in Loki's stomach, coupled with a desperate resolve not be taken again. Loki would drive a blade through his own heart sooner than allow Glaive to put his claws on his body again.

Standing beside Glaive was another figure, someone Loki had only ever seen at a distance before, but knew to be Thanos' eldest son, Ebony Maw, a being of cruel cunning and merciless determination. Maw held no visible weapon in his hand and it was he who spoke first, voice calm and cold.

"Sister," he spoke to Nebula, horribly diminished by the ship before her. "Stop this madness at once. There is time yet to be forgiven by our father. You have led us to the Reality Stone. Step away now from your helpless allies and you shall return to the Sanctuary as a victor, instead of dragged back as our prisoner."

"You will not persuade me," Nebula shouted. "I will not rest until our father is dead. My only disappointment is that he himself has not come to face me now."

Glaive cackled, and Loki's skin rose in gooseflesh. He reminded himself frantically that he was not now still under the work of Glaive's brutal blade, slicing flesh again and again in the lightlessness of Thanos' prison.

"Our father has more important things to occupy his time," Glaive hissed, "other than fetching back his wayward daughter."

"It is a pity," Nebula snarled, "I will simply have to kill you first."

She launched forward, spinning her staff through the air. It wacked against Maw's chest, sending him reeling backward, but he stayed on his feet. Glaive easily sidestepped Nebula's thrust. He brandished his own spear, tipped by a curled scythe.

"Did you learn nothing, little sister," he taunted her, "when we tore apart your body and put you back together again?"
"It is useless," Maw added, readying himself for the fray. "We taught you to fight. You will be unable to touch us. We know you too well."

Sif hesitated for only a moment before looking at Loki, supported at her side. "Loki," she said and deposited him without ceremony onto the ground, "just stay out of the way."

"I still have my magic, wench," Loki hissed, impact of his words somewhat depleted from his position below her.

Sif bounded forward, blade a gleaming blur in her hand. She swung at Maw, who had drawn his own weapons – two narrow katanas – and their blades clattered together. Maw spun nimbly out of the way of Sif's attack. He was too fast for her – too skilled, Loki knew, for Sif who favored blunt force in her fighting rather than well-practiced dexterity.

For the moment Loki would have to abandon his effort to stand, and he collected his magic away from his legs, casting his seidr outward from his body. An army of his mirror images scattered across the battlefield. One leapt toward Maw, drawing him away from Sif. Maw shouted in surprise and swung one of his blades toward the illusions chest. It passed right through the illusion, but Sif was there again, striking Maw on the side of his ribs.

Nebula shouted in pain, drawing Loki's attention to where she was still grappling with Glaive, trading hits with their staffs. Nebula clutched one of her arms to her chest. She had obviously caught a blow to her wrist. How much left of her was flesh and blood, Loki wondered, catching a glint of metal through her torn jacket.

Loki slumped, arms trembling under his weight as he fought to remain propped upward. The illusion, charging toward Glaive, made a flicker of confusion cross Glaive's face and Loki relished it, yearning only that it could in fact be his real self standing before Glaive, beating the creature into a pulp at his feet.

It was Sif who was in trouble now. She yelled in surprise as her sword flew from her grip after a ferocious attack from Maw. Maw barreled forward, twin blades sweeping through the air. Loki pulled his attention away from his illusions, knowing his strained seidr would only be able to concentrate on one task at once. The illusions flickered, some dissipated, but other remained standing, all but immobile without Loki pulling their strings.

Loki grabbed hold of Maw's breastplate across the distance, fists closing around the cold metal – it was incredibly difficult to manipulate matter that was not inanimate, even more so concerning Loki's weakened state, but he was not going to let Maw's blade plunge through Sif's belly. There was no way in hell Loki could explain that to Thor.

With a grunt of effort, he toppled Maw backward, dashing the alien against the side of the ship. Maw crumpled to the ground but he was barely dazed, and easily picked himself back up again.

A kick to Loki's side pulled him brutally back into his own mind. His illusions shattered into thin air. Glaive loomed above Loki on the ground, spear raised.

"Silly god, I shall stick you again – this time through the heart." Loki's magic sputtered, spent after protecting Sif from Maw. He could not move. He could not even kick out from his helpless position on the ground. Glaive's eyes flashed with sadistic pleasure and he heaved his staff toward Loki's chest.

OOO
Sif hated Loki.

She despised the coldness in his eyes when he looked at her, and his unaffected voice when he told her of the death of their kingdom as casually as remarking upon the weather. She hated him, but he was Thor's little brother, the tail to all their shared adventures, a mischievous child first and foremost in her mind, which was an image that refused to coalesce with the broken body of the man who appeared before her now, years of blood on his hands.

And he was hurt. He could not even walk on his own – for she was certain his pride would never permit his body to be dragged across the ground by her, even for a trick. Sif would deign to take care of him, even protect him, until he was well enough to get out of her hair for good. She would do it for Thor – sentimental oaf who was unwilling to hear a word against his brother, even after all this time – if not for Loki, himself.

And she would be damned to see a son of Odin taken again by these villains. For Asgard's sake alone, she would die before she let it happen. She would not let Asgardian blood be spilled on her watch, even if it was adopted blood.

Sif raised her head from the ground, tasting dirt and blood in her mouth. She was disoriented, but her eyes fell immediately on the figure of one of the creatures, the one who had been battling Nebula, standing above Loki.

"Silly god, I shall stick you again – this time through the heart," growled the beast looming over Loki, raising its spear above its head to strike the mortal blow.

Sif had no sword. Her opponent had knocked it from her hand with a trick of his double sabers. Sif stumbled back to her feet. She knew her opponent was also climbing back to his feet from the place Loki had tossed him with his seidr. She had less than a second to act – and she had no weapon. No weapon to aide her.

Save one.

She had told Loki she knew not how to wield the Aether she'd accepted into her body. In fact, there could be no controlling it, Sif knew. But she also knew it sought only its own protection, and that it would fight for the preservation of its host.

With a cry of rage she sprang toward the creature just as it brought its blade down toward Loki's chest. Her hands closed around the creature's sinewy arms, yanking it backward. The creature snarled and lashed out, hitting her in the face with its pointed elbow. Sif reeled backward, white lights popping across her vision.

"Asgardian filth!" the creature roared and spun its staff overhead, then lunged the blade toward Sif's stomach. The point easily penetrated Sif's breastplate, rending the flesh of her abdomen. She had no time to cry out.

The Aether within Sif's body detonated. She no longer had a body. All was light and rushing sound, rising red flame. A skeletal red form that was half solid and half smoke burst outward from her every pore, spilling form her body in defense of the attack thrust upon it.

Sif was lifted off the ground, suspended in the air as the Reality Stone's energy poured out of her, tearing apart everything in its path. Red. All was red.

All was red. Blue. Yellow. Green. Orange. Purple. She saw the Gems, hovering just out of reach, tied together by strings of immaterial power. Drawing toward the Gauntlet. Calling to their master,
yearning to be reconnected, return balance to the cosmos. Blue pulsing in a swirling vortex through the universe. Yellow containing the minds of multitudes. Green winding through a cycle of unending time. Orange giving fertile life to a withered land. And purple sitting in a dark vault, ripe for the plucking – calling, calling, calling –

Sif's eyes flew open. She was on the ground. She was breathing. There was still a hole punched through her breastplate, but her stomach was untouched by the creature's blade. Her body was splayed across the dust that coated the moon's surface.

"Get up," a rough voice commanded her and a hand descended from the darkness, gripping Sif's wrist and hauling her to her feet.

Sif tottered, chest aching, head spinning, and the figure of Nebula slowly focused in front of her vision.

"What happened –" said Sif, eyes darting wildly to the crater of torn earth she stood at the center of.

The air was filled with smoke and the metallic taint of blood.

"We need to move now," Nebula growled, clambering out of the crater.

Sif followed on instinct, heart hammering against her ribs. Loki was propped up weakly on one elbow. He was covered in blood, but it did not appear to be his own. In fact, it belonged to the slaughtered corpse of the creature that lay beside him on the ground. Its spear was a mere twisted piece of metal in its decimated claw.

Sif swooped down on Loki, pulling him back to his feet. He did not fight her, but neither did he help her, and all his weight fell upon her throbbing spine. Sif dragged Loki forward. His legs tripped under his body.

"Nebula, leave him! We must go!" Sif yelled as Nebula hesitated between either dashing after them and running forward to see whether or not the other creature, flung across the ground, had survived the blast from the Reality Stone.

Nebula tore away, teeth clenched as though she was in physical pain. She dashed forward and took hold of Loki's other arm, stringing it over her shoulder. For once, Loki did not protest. He appeared to occupied in keeping himself breathing.

Together they raced for the ship Nebula and Loki had arrived in. Nebula released the entrance hatch when they reached it and they climbed into the body of the small vessel. Nebula clambered into the cockpit, readying the controls for takeoff.

Sif lowered Loki to the ground. He fell against the side of the ship, face pale under the creature's blood. She needed to clean him up. Something was wrong with him. He was – he looked as dazed as Sif felt. She was quaking from exhaustion. Her entire body ached. The Aether was riled; she could still feel its power swimming through her veins, angry and looking for another outlet.

Its presence was foreign and wrong, but there was nothing Sif could do about that now. She had invited it into her body. She could only bear it now until some other solution was discovered.

The ship lifted off ground, engine shuddering through the floors as they veered toward the stars, as far away as possible before the other creature could take pursuit.

Loki suddenly pitched to the side, retching dry heaves, clutching his stomach. Sif dropped to her knees beside him and pulled his hair out of his face, uttering meaningless sounds of comfort, and what was she doing? This was Loki – Loki – likely the cause of her people's downfall, the crazed
destroyer of worlds – Loki. Loki, little brother to Thor…Thor.

Sif shut her eyes. She heard Nebula shift in her seat behind the controls.

"Thanos," Sif began, swallowing bile. Loki stopped retching and looked blearily up at her. "Thanos – I saw. I saw…I do not know how, but I saw the other Stones. I felt Thanos approach them. He is heading to Xandar, to the Nova Corps, where they keep the Power Stone. There is little time. He is already on his way."

"You're sure?" said Nebula, but rather than disturbed, she appeared intrigued, perhaps even pleased.

"Yes," said Sif. She pressed a hand to her temple in an effort to stop the pounding of her head. "I am certain of it. The Gauntlet was drawing closer to the Power Stone. That is surely Thanos' next target."

"Xandar is less than six parsecs away," said Nebula. "We can be there in time to head him off."

"You are mad," Sif breathed. She could not believe her ears, and for a moment worried the Aether's blast had damaged her mind.

"You can stop him," said Nebula, looking over her shoulder and Sif fought the desire to snap at her to keep her eyes on the space in front of them. "You destroyed Glaive. You nearly destroyed Maw. You can kill him."

"And nearly destroyed the rest of us," said Loki hoarsely, leaning back up against the hull with his eyes shut, breathing hard. "Including yourself."

"I saved your life," Sif retorted. "A thank you would suffice."

"Considered yourself thanked then," Loki snapped.

"Another Stone is the only thing in the universe that can counter the Gauntlet," Nebula insisted, ignoring Sif and Loki's bickering. "And we must act quickly while the Gauntlet is yet unfilled."

"We cannot," said Sif. "We are not strong enough. His sons nearly defeated us. We cannot hope to go up against Thanos, himself."

"You do not understand," Nebula growled in frustration. "Thanos retains the power of the Gems. He can use them even from afar with the Gauntlet. Their power is weakened, but it is still there. It is why he is able to see into people's minds even though he no longer has the Mind Stone, and why he may still push things through space using the Tesseract. He understands how these Stones work because he has before possessed them, but he will likely be able to manipulate even the others as long as he has the Gauntlet. This ability will only grow stronger the closer he gets to the other Gems. We must stop him before it reaches the point of no return. The time to act is now. Sif, you are our only hope."

"I am not a weapon!" Sif yelled. "I do not command the force within me. It was its own self-preservation that saved us, not anything of my doing."

"You do not need to control it," said Nebula. "You need only tap into its power like you did moments before. The Reality Gem will do its work for you."

"How do you know the Gem will fight against its own companions?" said Sif. "I sensed its desire to return to the Gauntlet. It will not let itself attack the one who wields it."

"We can only try," said Nebula.
"You cannot bring me," said Loki weakly from the floor. He sounded so uncharacteristically defeated that Sif wanted to take him by the shoulders and scream at him. "He will look into my mind again and see your plans."

"It doesn't matter if he knows we're coming," said Nebula fiercely.

"You are blinded by revenge," Sif accused Nebula.

Nebula left the controls. The ship continued to stream through the stars on auto-pilot. She glared at Sif, "Yes. Yes, I am. I will not rest until Thanos is destroyed. And I will do anything in my power to see that he is."

The stark honesty in Nebula's mechanized face took Sif aback. Perhaps Nebula was just as desperate and confused as the rest of them; she was just better at hiding it behind a mask of cold resolve. Hate was easier to rely on than fear.

"I will not let him obtain the Infinity Stones," Nebula finished in a growl. "Even if I have to fight him by myself, I will not."

Sif stared hard into Nebula's gaze. Nebula may have been dishonest in leading Loki to Sif's refuge, but they had fought by each other's side now, a pact that was considered in Asgard to be stronger than blood. Sif may have been stubborn and at times rash, but she would be damned if anyone ever accused her of being disloyal.

Sif said firmly, "You will not be by yourself."

"I'm sorry, what?" Loki exclaimed from the floor. "You're both insane. I knew it already of you, Sif, but Nebula – you better than all know that Thanos will only accept us as lambs for the slaughter."

"I see you are recovered," said Sif. "You grow more sarcastic by the minute."

A light on the control consul suddenly blared to life and Nebula whipped back around. She cursed furiously and slid back into the pilot's seat. "Ship in pursuit, closing in."

"It is Maw?" said Loki. He struggled for a moment, pressing his hands against the floor in an effort to get to his feet, but he eventually slumped back against the wall, expression a mixture of distress and frustration. For the first time a numb suspicion entered Sif's mind that perhaps there was something wrong with Loki's legs beyond lingering weakness.

Sif crossed the floor and leaned over Nebula's shoulder. She had never been a pilot; Asgard was largely unconcerned by traversing the stars outside of the Yggdrasil – besides, all transportation had been shepherded through the Bifrost (a pang in her stomach, every thought of Asgard brought pain now; it was easier when she forgot while enthralled in the momentum of action) – and Sif was unaccustomed to the grand, sparkling expanse of the cosmos spread before her through the viewport. It was breathtaking and, as most beautiful things were, lethal. She saw on the radar screen a blip of approaching light as the creature they had left on the moon, this Maw, loomed closer behind them.

"What can we do?" Sif breathed. "Have we enough firepower to fight him off?"

"No," Nebula said tautly, fingers flying incomprehensibly across the controls. "His ship is constructed especially for the Black Order. We don't stand a chance."

"The Black Order?" Sif asked.

"My brothers and sister," said Nebula, eyes on the viewport in front of her. "It is the band of
specialized assassins, weapons, and tyrants that Thanos calls his children. My sister Gamora and I were once part of it. No longer."

"Gamora, too?" Loki asked from the floor.

"Can we talk about this later?" Nebula snapped. She pulled the ship abruptly upward in an effort lose Maw's ship behind them. Sif grabbed the back of Nebula's chair to steady herself. The other vessel had surprisingly not yet fired at them, even though it was clearly in range by now.

"Why don't you shoot us out of the sky, you bastard?" Nebula hissed, wrenching the controls in evasive maneuvers only to time and again right herself as Maw corrected them from behind.

"We don't have fuel enough to run?" said Loki.

"No," Nebula answered. "He's driving us toward Xandar."

Dismay thudded in Sif's stomach. She had agreed to travel with Nebula to Xandar, but she had not expected it would be like this. "Our hand is forced, then," she said.
Clint woke with screams still echoing in his ears.

Screams six-years-old by now. Screams he hadn't even technically been there to hear, but he still somehow remembered them. He remembered the shockwave of his own explosive arrow head ripping through the Helicarrier, the smoke, the carnage. Fifteen agents. Fifteen.

Clint lay heavily back against the pillows, trying to regulate his breathing.

He thought he'd gotten all that PTSD shit figured out, but lately everything had just gotten worse again: the nightmares redoubled, a sense of uneasiness throughout the day, a fear that his mind was not his own, that what he was seeing before his eyes was only illusion, or else could be wiped away with the mere touch of a blade to his heart. It was all so fragile, and Clint hated that there wasn't really a goddamn thing he could do to guarantee it never broke again.

"Are you 'kay?" Laura murmured sleepily, rolling over in bed next to him. She had an uncanny sense about whenever someone in her family was upset – all that talk about women's intuition must have some element of truth in it. She touched his leg and her palm was warm, steadying. She was real. She wasn't going to dissolve into blue mist.

"I'm okay," Clint answered, folding his hand over hers.

"Another nightmare?" she asked. Clint didn't have to confirm for her to understand. "You think it's because what happened in New York yesterday?"

The news about the alien attack in New York had hit Clint like a punch to the gut. Seeing the wreckage on TV had been like he'd stepped back in time, knocking arrows into his bow from the top of skyscrapers and taking aim at Chitauri, Loki's taunting laughter still reverberating in his skull.

He'd thought about contacting Stark to get the lowdown, but he forced himself not to. It wouldn't be fair to Laura. Not again.

"We could call Blake again," said Laura. She nestled her head onto his shoulder. "Get a tune-up for the noggin."

"I will if it gets much worse," Clint replied. He reluctantly tugged away from Laura's warm presence in the bed, sitting up and swinging his legs onto the floor. " Might as well get up. I promised the kids pancakes, anyway."

"Mmmh," Laura mumbled and rolled back over to get a few more minutes of sleep on the Saturday morning, an opportunity to take advantage of when Lila and Cooper didn't need to be hustled out of bed and off to school.

Clint grabbed his robe off the bedpost and slung it over his shoulders. Then he grabbed a pair of sweatpants off the floor and pulled them on. In the hallway he could hear Nate making noises in his room, and he figured he had about T-minus five minutes before the two-year-old decided to pitch a fit about being ignored for too long.

Sure enough, as soon as Clint peaked his head through the door, Nate looked up from his railed
toddler bed. "Time get up now," he ordered Clint, sticking out his arms.

"Sure thing, bud," said Clint. He bent and lifted Nate into his arms. He was already getting so heavy. Seemed like yesterday he was just a baby. Time went so fast.

Nate was squirming to be put down by the time Clint brought him downstairs. After Clint dropped him off, Nate pattered into the living room, where Lila was already up and watching TV. Lila was too absorbed by her show to toss Clint more than a "Morning, Daddy." Coop had reached the age when sleeping in took precedence over Saturday cartoons; they'd be lucky if they saw him before noon, unless he was roused earlier by the aroma of sizzling bacon.

But, first, coffee.

Clint headed into the kitchen. He fitted a pod into the Keurig and stretched his arms over his head while he waited for his cup to brew. Damn, he was sore. Maybe he needed to get a new mattress. Maybe he was just getting old.

He brought his steaming mug with him outside onto the porch. He needed the air to clear his head. It was chill and quiet. Early morning, golden sunlight glinted on the rows of pine trees across the field. The lawn was tipped with frost. The sky rolled over head, crystal blue and cloudless. Safe.

His family was safe. Clint had made sure of that, especially after that scare with the Accords. And now it seemed like he had Stark on the same page, too, strung along on a thread to make amends for spilling the secret in the first place. Clint wasn't going to let anything touch them. He'd even protected them from Loki's scepter – but he didn't know if that was something to celebrate or not, because that meant he had been able to resist, at least a little, yet he'd still caused the death of so many SHIELD personnel. So many friends.

Clint held his mug of coffee in one hand, with his other he rubbed his eyes. Why did he keep thinking about Loki all of a sudden?

His phone in the pocket of his robe buzzed as a message came through. He carried the phone everywhere, force of habit after being called so many times out of the blue for a mission. He kept having to remind himself that he was technically retired.

He pulled out the phone and looked at the message, from Nat, which was sometimes concerning and other times completely innocuous: Be there in five minutes. Checkered flag.

Clint chewed on his lip, concerning then. Checkered flag, it wasn't a pack your family into the bunker kind of emergency, but it was urgent. Never a dull moment.

Clint swallowed the rest of his scalding coffee and pushed through the screen door back inside the house. "Sweet pea," Clint called to Lila, "go wake up Mommy. I'm sure she'll love it if you jump on her bed. Take Nate with you."

"Yeah!" Lila said, beaming, and grabbed hold of Nate's hand; both were giggling as they dashed up the stairs.

Clint could already hear the buzz of approaching motors, the distinct whir of a quinjet. It was serious, then, if she was using Fury's old transports instead of approaching the house from the road. Clint threw off his robe and exchanged it for a jacket hanging on the hook by the door. He left the house to meet her.

A quinjet streaked across the sky, slowing its pursuit until it hovered over the field spreading upward from the driveway. The exhaust pipes shuddered air against the long grass. The motors cut as the jet
settled to the ground, and the exit ramp descended as Clint approached, hands in his pockets.

Natasha appeared at the head of the ramp, dressed in her characteristic black leather, but her hair was no longer the familiar red waves, but a bob of platinum blond.

"Just me," she said, because she clearly knew Clint's fingers were about an inch away from the derringer in his pocket.

"Like the new look," said Clint. "Very chick."

"Chic, Clint. And thanks. But I didn't do it to look pretty. Red's just too recognizable," Natasha answered, descending the ramp.

When she reached the bottom, she and Clint embraced. They didn't see each other nearly enough any longer. Clint would never admit it out loud, but he missed her stupid grin across the table at Sunday dinner. Her body was tense under his arms. He let her go and stared hard into her face. She looked anxious, never a good sign if even the infamous Black Widow could not disguise the fact that she was worried.

"I take it this isn't a social call," said Clint.

"Let's wait until we get inside first," said Natasha.

Laura was in the kitchen when they walked back into the house. She looked nonchalant as ever, but Clint saw the small wrinkle between her eyebrows, the telltale sign she was concerned. "Nat," she greeted Natasha with a ready smile and came forward to give the other woman a hug. "It's so good to see you."

"Sorry to interrupt your Saturday morning," said Natasha. "You were probably hoping to sleep in."

Clint shrugged. "Kids'll have to wait for their breakfast, but they'll survive."

"They're upstairs with me," said Laura. "I'll keep them out of your hair if you need to talk."

"Thanks," said Natasha. Her voice was strained. In fact, everything about the way she held her body was taut and coiled. Clint had seen her on missions too often not to recognize she was in full-blown operational mode, even if she was trying hard to hide it under a guise of easy smiles.

Laura left them to go back upstairs and occupy the kids. Clint made Natasha a cup of coffee and refilled his own. He had a feeling he was going to need the extra kick of caffeine. When he turned back around, Natasha was still standing, propped against the counter behind her; she'd never needed an invitation to sit down before, and now Clint was getting worried. Her edginess was rubbing off.

"If this is about the aliens in New York," Clint began, sitting astride a chair at the kitchen table, hoping Natasha would catch the drift and also take a seat. "Then the answer's no. I'm not getting suckered into this again."

Natasha didn't laugh. "It's related to New York, yes."

"Were you there?" said Clint. "I didn't see you on any of the footage."

"No," Natasha shrugged, a small spasm as if this was the least important thing they could be discussing right now. "Fury briefed me yesterday afternoon."

Natasha took a deep breath. She was hesitating now not because she didn't have the right words, or
didn't want to relive something, but because she didn't want Clint to know. She was protecting him from something. And that made Clint very uneasy.

"Is it true that Thor's back?" Clint demanded, hoping to startle a confession out of her.

"What?" Natasha blinked and it took her a moment to comprehend what Clint had asked. This was bad, Clint realized. Damn bad if it had reduced Natasha's reaction time to anything less than .001 seconds. A brick of dread settled into Clint's stomach.

"That was Asgard in Oklahoma, right?" Clint clarified. "Media's not able to get close enough to get good pictures, but I thought I recognized those lightning strikes."

"Yeah, Thor," said Natasha. "Here and gone already, actually." Clint raised his eyebrows in interest but Natasha didn't elaborate.

"And – uh – Banner's back, too," she said after a pause, rubbing the back of her neck.

"Bruce?" said Clint, shocked. "Where's he been? Is he okay?" Was this really it? The thing bothering Natasha Romanoff was that her old flame was back in town? Something about it didn't sit quite right with Clint. There had to be more to it than that.

"I don't know," Natasha replied. "I haven't seen him yet. I likely won't. Fury wants to ship him over to Wakanda to work with Jane Foster, but you aren't supposed to know that."

"Wakanda who?" said Clint and Natasha cracked a smile that was gone in a blink of an eye. He'd spent a sweltering three weeks in the country before Stark worked out the details to ship him back home. It was a beautiful country, almost unnaturally lush for being an oasis in the middle of the Sahara. There was something uncannily lovely about the place – a land that existed separate from space and time as was known on the rest of the planet.

"Did Fury send you?" Clint tried again as Natasha went silent.

"Yes…" said Natasha unwillingly.

"And he wants me back?" Clint guessed.

"Just let me talk, Clint," Natasha said impatiently.

Clint rolled his eyes. "What I've been trying to do since you got here."

Natasha ran her hand through her hair, sighed, and launched into an explanation. "Maybe it's better if I started from the beginning. The attack on New York was motivated by the desire to capture the Mind Stone from Vision. Apparently, there's some big alien baddie trying to conquer the universe by assembling the Infinity Stones. His name is Thanos."

Thanos. Clint was certain he'd never heard the name before, but what was this shiver of misgiving that ran through his body? A tugging at his mind that was very nearly déjà vu.

Natasha must have spotted a shift in Clint's expression, because she was immediately on the defensive. "We're way out of our league on this one. We need people on the ground that have," she hesitated, "experience."

"Experience?" Clint could not keep the incredulity out of his voice. "If I'd known being brainwashed by an alien psychopath would be a popular job requirement, I'd have put it on my resume."
"I know," Natasha said quickly, voice so damn understanding – Clint hated when she pulled out that tone because it made him remember that she did understand. She did. She knew what it was to be unmade. "I know, Clint. But we need help –"

"Get someone else," Clint hadn't meant to sound so severe. The nightmares he was experiencing now were just a taste of what he'd gone through for the first few months. There was no way he would willingly delve back into that again. No way he'd put Laura and the kids through that again.

"There isn't anyone else," said Natasha in her trademark flat tone, unaffected and level-headed. "Everyone's gone. Thor, Stark, Strange –"

"Wait," Clint cut her off. "Two questions. Where the hell is Stark and who the hell is Strange?"

"Strange is a neurosurgeon who's since become a Master in the Mystic Arts. You might recall, he got into a bad car accident May of 2016 –"

"Nope," said Clint. He was pissed off. Natasha knew better than to ask him for this. She didn't have any right to try to wheedle him down and away from his family again. "Right around then I was too busy in jail to bother about reading the newspaper."

"Right, well," Natasha pressed onward. "He's been working with Fury, keeping an eye on psychic vibrations from other dimensions or something."

"That's great," said Clint flatly. "Fantastic." She didn't answer him about Stark and that nigged restlessly in the corner of his mind, but for now Clint would let her have her secrets. Not for too much longer, though. "So what about Steve? Isn't it about time he stopped sulking?"

"No one knows where Steve is," said Natasha. "As far as we know, T'Challa was the last one to see him alive."

"Sam knows where Steve is."

"Probably, but Sam's not talking," Natasha brought the conversation back to a place where she had more control. Clint knew how she worked. She wasn't going to pull anything over on him. "But none of this negates the fact that, besides Selvig – who we've already got – you are the only one who has any personal experience with an Infinity Stone."

"And Vision," Clint corrected her, narrowing his eyes, because that was an easy slip-up. "You said the attack was focused on Vision. Is he alright?" And Wanda, but no way was he going to bring her into this if she was already lucky enough to be overlooked by Fury and his goons.


"Nat." Time was up. Clint had pancakes to flip and other more important things to see to. He couldn't sit here in the kitchen saying no to Natasha for the rest of the morning. "What aren't you saying? Did someone get hurt?"

"No one is…hurt," said Natasha slowly, as if tasting each word before it dropped from her lips.

"For God's sake, Nat!"

Natasha sat down then, falling into a chair at the table, her coffee was untouched and long cold. "Clint, it's bad," she said finally.

"I can take bad," said Clint instantly, even though an icy dagger plunged into his stomach.
"The aliens, they –" Clint met Natasha's eyes and glared, refusing to let her back down from this. "They came for Vision and they got him. He's not dead. They must want him alive so they can bring the Mind Stone to Thanos."

Again the flicker of disquiet – a distant, vague recognition that Clint could not place. He knew that name. Somehow he had heard it before.

"And what about Stark and that Strange guy? They get taken too?"

"No," said Natasha. "They went AWOL. Disappeared through the portal over New York in pursuit of Vision."

It finally sunk in, what she was telling him. Vision had been the victim of an intergalactic kidnapping. Damn…Clint didn't actually like the guy, on a matter of strict principle – he was way too old, and Wanda was way to young – but he couldn't help but feel a pang of sympathy for what Wanda must be going through right now.

Wanda.

Wanda, who hadn't let Clint know. Wanda, who would have sent Clint or Laura a text. Wanda, who –

"Nat…"

Natasha was already speaking. "And, Clint –" She shut her eyes. She didn't want to look him in the face when she said it. "Clint, they took Wanda, too."

The silence that met Natasha's pronouncement grew exponentially in the small, enclosed kitchen. It billowed and suffocated Clint like smoke until he couldn't breathe. Wanda, the name thudded through his mind until it was all he could think. Wanda, Wanda, Wanda, who had already gone through so much, been hurt so many times, and Clint had tried so hard to protect her, to guarantee nothing touched her.

For a long time, all he could see when he looked at Wanda was her brother's eyes, the faint smile on his lips before he died: didn't see that coming. His first desire to protect her had come from guilt, but it had rapidly shifted to a desire to protect her solely because that was what she deserved. She needed someone to look out for her because she'd had to do that since she was ten-years-old, an age right smack in the middle of Coop and Lila, and if Clint ever died he'd sure as hell expect one of his friends to step up and do the same for his kids.

"I'm sorry, Clint," said Natasha, but Clint could barely hear her. She was apologizing for a lot of things, Clint knew. Apologizing for the distress her news had brought him, but also apologizing because she'd used the news as her final guarantee. They both knew that Clint couldn't possibly walk away from this now. Natasha had used Wanda to secure Clint back to her cause – master manipulator, even old friends weren't immune.

"She's a kid, Nat," said Clint, and he wasn't yelling, even though he wanted to. "A damn kid. Dammit, how would you feel if Coop, or Lila, or –" Clint sputtered, unable to continue, unable to even think it, but this tearing in his chest at the thought of Wanda was just as bad.

"Don't," said Natasha. She looked up and her eyes were bright. "Don't even say it, Clint."

Clint was on his feet, pacing a trench into the kitchen floor. He couldn't remember making the decision to stand.
Natasha breathed deeply, shudder in her throat. "We'll get her back, Clint. We will. But we need your help to do so."

"Why?" Clint demanded, turning on Natasha, wanting to be angry. He wanted to blame her, but he couldn't. He couldn't be upset that she'd used his vulnerability against him. Clint would do anything if his family was threatened – and Wanda was family, now, or close enough for it to count. "What the hell can I do? I don't know how to get into space – I can't follow her."

"You can tell us all you know about the Mind Stone," said Natasha evenly. "All you can possibly remember. I know it showed you things, opened your eyes like it did for Selvig –"

"And what use will it be?" Clint's voice was raised. He knew Laura could probably hear him through the floor. Dammit. He'd have to tell Laura about Wanda. It would break her heart, the kind heart of his wife who'd accepted the broken Maximoff twin with open arms, made Wanda paprikash, let her hold Nathanial Pietro even though Wanda was afraid of dropping him, smoothed away the nightmares leftover from the Raft.

"There's no point, dammit! It's not like they'll be back with her. Earth is useless to them now. There aren't anymore of those damn stones left, right?"

Natasha chewed on her lower lip – one of her tells. "No," she said finally. "There aren't. But that doesn't mean Thanos won't be back. He wants to destroy the universe. Earth won't be spared. And there's only one place left on this planet that might give us even the smallest chance of fighting back."

Clint's stomach plummeted. He watched the news. He wasn't stupid. Hell, he'd witnessed firsthand the media whirlwind T'Challa's announcement to the UN had caused, and watched with more distant curiosity the scientific frenzy which had followed. The appearance of another world power out of midair was never going to be simple.

"Wakanda," he said. It wasn't a question.

Nat nodded curtly. "Wakanda."

OOO

The long and short of it was this: Bruce was exhausted. Not accounting for time changes, he was relatively certain it was very early Sunday morning by the time his private jet, of which he was the sole passenger – barring the two beefy black-suits keeping him stony company, for his protection or someone else's, he didn't know – landed in the dimly lit, single-strip airport. That made for a Thursday morning crash landing from outer space, Thursday night escape from US custody, Friday morning alien attack, and Saturday a blur of briefings, debriefings, a short cat nap, maybe-a-hamburger-he-couldn't-remember, and then shuttle down to the airport for takeoff.

He'd dozed a bit on the flight over to East Africa, but now he was wide-awake again, reaching that state of nearly nirvana-level bliss that only the perfect measures of little sleep, abundant caffeine, and replete stress could achieve.

He stepped off the jet, clutching the small suitcase one of Fury's underlings had purchased for him, containing about enough for an overnight and little else. Bruce hoped there was a Walmart somewhere near at hand; he was going to need it.

Although it had been long dark, the warmth of the day had not yet dissolved into cooler night air, and the dry, static heat of the Nile basin slid over Bruce like a cocoon. The runway was illuminated
by haloed lampposts. Bruce kicked up puffs of dust behind his heels as he walked. There was no wind. The air smelt like burnt rubber and airplane fuel. The two goons debarked after him, carting black, locked trunks that Bruce didn't want to think too hard about what was inside.

"Dr. Banner?"

Bruce peered into the patchy darkness and caught sight of two parked black sedans at the end of the landing strip. The passenger door of the lead car opened and a figure stepped out: a woman wearing black pants, scuffed sneakers, and a denim jacket. Her dark hair was pulled into a tale at the back of her head, revealing a young face and alert brown eyes. Bruce recognized her immediately from her profile image on Culver University's website.

"Dr. Foster," he stepped forward, extending his hand. "I have to say, I'm pleased to finally meet you."

"You as well, Doctor," she said. She shook his hand firmly. "I've heard so much about you from Erik. And, well, Thor too."

"And I've heard a lot about you," said Bruce. "You can call me Bruce, by the way."

"Bruce," she nodded. "And I'm Jane."

"I'm a real fan of your work, Jane," Bruce smiled at her to set her at ease. She seemed a little jittery. Maybe socially awkward and science was just a winning combination.

She grinned sheepishly. "I'm afraid most of that's been usurped by now, considering what we've seen recently concerning interdimensional travel."

"Still," said Bruce. "Impressive to predict something before you know for sure it can happen. Science is built on theories that will likely never be backed by solid proof. You're lucky."

"Don't I know it," said Jane. She ushered him toward the car. "We'll drive you to the villa."

Bruce climbed into the backseat of the car. Jane followed after him. The two nameless thugs got into the second car.

"King T'Challa's still pretty particular about security, so we'll have to wait until tomorrow for you to be vetted," Jane explained. "We figured we'd just drop you in South Sudan first, worry about crossing the border later."

"You know," said Bruce ruefully, "last time I was on earth, Wakanda was still just a third world country."

"It's been a hell of a year," said Jane. "The science community has been sent into a tailspin."

"Sorry I missed it," said Bruce.

"Well," Jane answered. "You're in the thick of it now. Soon you might be wishing you were back in space." Bruce felt sure, given her research, that space was likely where Jane would rather be – no matter how interest the science on earth had just become.

The car pulled away from the runway and onto the dark, narrow dirt road that wound through the desert. They were tailed closely by the car containing the muscly bodyguards.

"Are they, uh, here for you?" Jane asked. "I mean – sorry, I didn't mean to –"
"No, it's okay. Really," Bruce interrupted her. "It's definitely not a secret."

Jane flashed him a cautious smile in the darkness of the backseat. Was she nervous to sit so close to him? Bruce was used to the twitching uncertainty in people's glances, the subtle edging away and tightening grips on weapons when he walked into a room. He'd gotten used to it a long time ago. He no longer minded, and he certainly didn't blame them. It wasn't easy being green.

"If it's any comfort," he reassured her. "I don't think I'm in any immediate risk of losing my cool. I think he's angry at me or something, sulking in his room."

Jane's smile flickered again. She clearly didn't know whether or not to take him seriously. "You talk about him like he's a totally different being," she said slowly. "But isn't he just a part of you? The Id and the Super Ego or something?"

"I used to think so," Bruce answered. He shrugged. "But now...I don't know. It feels different. More separated. He's definitely still there. I can still feel him there, but he's not attached to my mind in the same way as before. We don't react in unison to things anymore. It's hard to explain, sorry."

"No, don't be," said Jane quickly.

Bruce couldn't explain it even to himself. The Hulk's lack of response in the battle of New York was troubling to say the least. Bruce had experienced something similar on the Rainbow Bridge in Asgard. It didn't seem that he could count on the Hulk to respond in predictable ways any longer. It felt like – Bruce was unwilling to state it in such bald terms – but it felt like he'd been betrayed by a close friend.

"By the way," Bruce said to disturb the sticky silence. "Erik told me to tell you that Thor says hello." Bruce wasn't sure how he became the middleman between the exes, but oh well.

"Thor's an idiot," Jane sighed, a mix of both grief and fondness in her voice. Bruce recognized the signs of a breakup, alright. She swiftly changed subjects. "I can't believe Fury let him leave with the Tesseract after we finally got it back on earth. That was our chance to really study it, you know? Instead of just using it for its power like SHIELD tried six years ago."

"I'm afraid we live in an age for which the first question asked of new technology is how to make it into a weapon," Bruce answered.

"It's just so frustrating," Jane continued. "That was my theory. The Foster theory of interdimensional transportation incarnate in that little blue cube and they never even let me near it."

"I know," Bruce sighed, sharing her exasperation. "Sometimes it feels like science is the only rational thing left."

"No shit," said Jane, sharing a weary grin with Bruce as the car continued to bump along farther into the expansive, arid landscape.

Bruce and Jane were separated from the driver by a glass partition. They were technically safe to speak freely, but Bruce was still on his guard about all this surveillance crap, even if STRENGTH was supposed to be an ally.

"So," Bruce began, "what exactly are we doing here?"

Jane looked over her shoulder, to the tailing car, as if on impulse. "I'm assuming Director Fury has told you about the Vibranium...ah...situation?"
"Yeah," said Bruce quickly. "Told me Klaue was dealing only the tip of the iceberg. We're supposed to be some sort of scientific emissary."

"Congratulate yourself," Jane said dryly. "We're the first outside scientific eyes Wakanda has ever let across her borders. I haven't even been to Birnin Zana, yet, but based on the goodies T'Challa has been teasing at UN meetings, we're supposedly in for a treat."

"I've been looking over footage from Vienna and Busan. Impressive, to say the least." Tony must be upset he was missing it. "Still," Bruce continued. "I'm not sure why they need a nuclear physicist or why they'd pull a leading astrophysicist out of the woodwork just to study some rock."

"From what I've gathered so far," Jane replied, "apparently Vibranium isn't native to Wakanda – or earth, in fact. It arrived on an asteroid millennia ago. Which is where I come in, I guess. Also, we're picking up strong Gamma radiation interference. We need someone with first-hand experience on the ground."

"Well," Bruce grinned. "I'm your man."

Jane mirrored his smile, looking more at ease now.

"So we're running tests, studying, observing?" Bruce confirmed.

"Yes," Jane hesitated. "At least in part. Remember what you said about making weapons? Well, we're also supposed to be working on defensive measures. We have to believe that...well, whatever happened in New York isn't the end of it. I'm told I'm the foremost authority on astronomical anomalies and interdimensional manipulation, and we need to figure out how those things are getting from planet to planet so quickly, and then we need to figure out how to blast them out of the sky."

"Lovely," said Bruce.

Jane sighed again. "What I'd really like to do is go back to New York and study the portal that shut down after Stark's exit...but orders is orders and I'm apparently just supposed to sit tight."

"Bureaucratical red-tape has existed since the beginning of time," said Bruce.

"Tell me about it," said Jane.

"So, what have you found so far?" Bruce prompted her. He didn't know how long the drive would take, and he wanted as much information as possible to digest before he finally got to work himself.

"Mostly we've found that Wakanda is incredibly unwilling to let us get too close," said Jane. The frustration was evident in her voice. Bruce felt for her. "We're working against centuries of isolationist policy. The only response Wakanda has ever experienced from Western powers toward Vibranium is the desire to pilfer it, so I can't blame them for wanting to withhold this power from the rest of the world. True, they're starting to open up now, but it's still too new. It will take some time before trust can be built, and until then we have to watch out step."

Bruce blew out a breath. "Complicated."

"I know," Jane laughed unexpectedly. "What I wouldn't give for my poly-sci intern back."

"And, scientifically?" Bruce continued. "Any headway at all?"

"If I'm totally honest," said Jane. "No. I haven't even been let into the mines yet. We've set camp up outside of the capital. What we've picked up on our instruments from there is...confusing. Spatial
extrusions, particle reconfiguration and transmutation, the anti-electron collisions – this isn't any element I've experienced before, and it certainly isn't merely a metal. It's totally absorbent of kinetic energy. We haven't found anything yet that will break the bonds of its molecular matrix. Oh – it has medical properties, as well. Don't ask me how."

"Yikes," said Bruce, and tempered his comment rapidly with a shrug, "well, you are working on stuff we've never seen before."

"True," said Jane, voice weary. Bruce remembered it was somewhere in the very early hours of the morning. He wondered how many hours of sleep Jane got at night. Scientific lab-work was grueling at best and punishing at worst, especially so if it seemed to be yielding few results.

"Thor told me once," Jane added, note of reluctance back in her voice to be talking about her old boyfriend again, "that what we used to call magic in the old days is what we call science now, but on Asgard, it was one in the same thing." She paused. "I have to believe that's what it's like in the rest of the universe, too. Things don't just happen. Science has to still be rational. And if magic is science, then it has to be rational, too."

"So, you think Vibranium is magic?" He wanted to agree with her: there had to be some kind of rational pull behind all this, but he couldn't be certain anymore. Not after everything he'd seen. He stared out the window, past the desolate landscape whirring by on the side of the road, and craned his neck to look at the expansive night sky. They were surrounded by multitudes…merely a speck in the grand scheme of the cosmos, and he couldn't help but wonder where all this was bringing them, throttling full-speed ahead toward the unknown.

Jane shook her head and sighed. "It's certainly something we've never seen before."

Chapter End Notes

Thank you, as ever, for comments, kudos, and bookmarks!
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

You'll be reading this note sometime late January, but I wrote this chapter on New Year's Eve instead of partying, because Marvel is so much better than getting drunk or having a midnight kiss.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

"Holy shit," said Tony as the quinjet pulled through the portal hanging over New York and was spit into black, gaping space somewhere on the other side of the universe. All the constellations were different, Tony thought, and that was all he had time for before his chest tightened painfully in the familiar emergence of a panic attack.

No. No way was he going to stumble right into a flashback of plummeting back through the portal above New York, tugging frantically at his waning consciousness, positive that blank, unfamiliar space was going to be the last thing he saw before he died. No way was he going to do that right now.

"Still with us, Stark?" Strange asked, nudging him in the side with his elbow and, damn, how did Tony get stuck with both Strange and the Asgardian princess for his only company on this acid trip of a mission?

His irritation at Strange did serve to pull him slightly away from the building anxiety in his chest, and for that he supposed he should be grateful.

"It's just – it's quite a – damn," said Tony.

"Must be if it's got you at a loss for words," said Strange, who was apparently nonplussed because he spent his time bending space and time to his smallest desire.

"You've seen nothing yet," said Brunnhilde. She was at the helm, easily adjusted to the controls without so much as an introduction from Tony. Leave flying spaceships to the aliens, he guessed.

"So where are we, Princess?" said Tony. He had a hold on himself now, just keep thinking nice cozy thoughts about Pepper back home…ready to tear him to pieces as soon as he got back for not telling her he was leaving in the first place.

"Getting coordinates now, Stark," Brunnhilde growled, doing her scary Asgardian warrior bit. "It looks like we're...in the outer circle of the Messier Spiral. You would know it as Andromeda."

"Andromeda?" Tony sputtered, "like the Galaxy?"

Brunnhilde lifted an eyebrow. "You did know we were heading out into space, did you not?"

"Yeah, but, well – shit," said Tony. Strange was right; for once he really didn't know what to say. Strange said it for him, "Any sign of our friends?"

"None," said Brunnhilde, scanning her instruments.
"We are at least four hours behind them," Tony reminded them.

"As long as the portal brought us out into the same place, they'll have to still be somewhere nearby," said Brunnhilde. "That was a short-range ship. It will need refueling soon, so that means either a meetup with the mothership or at a base."

"And maybe even the big guy, himself," Tony added.

"What do you think would interest Thanos here?" Strange asked.

Brunnhilde shrugged, clicking random buttons on the control consul; Tony assumed it was to keep them from drifting aimlessly out into the suffocating void of nothingness around them.

Cozy thoughts. Cozy thoughts with Pepper.

"I don't know," said Brunnhilde, "Last time we ran into Thanos we were still five-hundred kiloparsecs from here. Only thing of interest this side of Messier is Xandar, unless he's planning on recruiting the Kree off Hala – which could be concerning."

"Can you speak English, please?" Tony requested – politely, dammit, but Brunnhilde still rolled her eyes.

"Xandar is the capital of the Nova Empire," Brunnhilde rattled off. "It's the melting pot of the galaxy, home to as many different species as you can count. It's also a handy service stop, the half-way point to almost everywhere else."

"The Grand Central terminal of the cosmos?" said Strange. Thanks Mr. Metaphor Guy, thought Tony and, see, he could hold his tongue if he tried hard enough.

"Sure," said Brunnhilde.

"And what's this freaking Nova Empire you mentioned?" said Tony.

"They think they rule the universe," Brunnhilde answered, "but they've really only got a good hand on twenty-odd systems, and an eye on maybe ten-or-so more. The rest don't give a damn about what the Empire has to say. They direct wars and peace-treaties, pretend to keep an eye on intergalactic crime."

"Sounds like the United Nations we all know and love." Tony was glad for the comparison this time, and even gladder that he got to it before Strange. He needed something familiar right now. The last time he'd checked, Thor had only mentioned nine realms, not more than thirty, and certainly not those ruled by a Star Wars level Evil Empire bureaucracy. Well, hopefully not Evil.

"What do you think Thanos would care about on Xandar?" said Strange.

Brunnhilde shrugged again. "Take out the Nova Corps and he's got almost free reign of the universe. They're one of the few existing forces with enough resources to put together an offensive large enough to threaten Thanos – if his might is really all its chalked up to be."

"Are they friendly to earthlings?" said Tony.

"You thinking what I am, Stark?" said Strange.

"Better not be," said Tony. "If so, I'll have to belt you one and tell you to keep your hands of my girlfriend."
Strange gave him a look. Brunnhilde ignored both of them. "They don't have any reason to be unfriendly. They're not too concerned with earth, seeing as you technically don't have the capacity for intergalactic travel yet."

"Well," said Tony, "won't it be a nice surprise when we drop by, then."

"Guardians, are you aware," Irani Rael, Nova Prime, began haughtily, hair still curled in the ridiculous quiff which couldn't help but remind Gamora of that Terran musician – Elves, she thought his name was – now that Peter had shown her a picture of him. "That you have collectively broken at least twenty-seven laws since the last time you stood before me?"

"Twenty-seven?" said Rocket. "That's all?"

"Hey," said Peter with a shrug. "We promised to keep the galaxy safe, not to not break any laws while we saved it."

"You technically – uh – did," said Denarian Rhomann Dey cautiously. "You did promise not to break anymore laws."

"Oh well," said Peter brightly. "Can't have everything I guess."

"Nova Prime," said Gamora, cutting to the chase if no one else was going to. "We're sorry for any inconvenience we've caused you –"

"You have caused the Sovereign more inconvenience then us," said Nova Prime sternly, "It is to them you should apologize."

"But we don't really care too much about that," said Dey covertly and earned himself a look of disapproval from Nova Prime, even though she didn't refute him. "I mean, they're kind of jerks to begin with."

"Nova Prime, Denarian Dey," Gamora tried again. "Unless you're planning on arresting us again… we've come with important news. We've just traveled from Knowhere. There we encountered the warlord Thanos. The mining colony was destroyed in the course of our confrontation –"

"Which, to be fair, was her fault," said Peter, pointing to Gamora.

Gamora ignored him. "We have reason to believe he's seeking Infinity Stones. It is likely he'll travel next to Xandar to attempt to secure the Power Stone."

Nova Prime digested this information with a frown. "Thanos the Mad Titan," she said slowly. "I thought he was dead."

"She would know," said Peter helpfully. "He's her dad."

"Can you stop telling people that?" Gamora snapped. "That's the kind of information I'd like to tell people myself."

"Your planet is in grave danger," said Thor earnestly, taking the reins as Gamora went off-topic; she was getting into bad habits with this troop of lunatics she'd started hanging out with. "We are certain Thanos will strike at any moment."
"And who are you?" said Nova Prime, addressing Thor with a mixture of curiosity and disdain.

Thor drew back his head to look more imposing – Gamora couldn't help but think it would work a lot better if he had long hair, but his eyepatch did lend him a little something. "I am Thor, Son of Odin, God of Thunder, King of Asgard –"

"An Asgardian?" Nova Prime interrupted, raising her eyebrows. "We don't have many Aesir visitors on Xandar. They keep mostly within their so-called Nine Realms. So you are their king now, are you?" She did not look impressed. "And you have joined the Guardians?"

"My association with these Guardians is purely circumstantial," said Thor. "Although our quests do coincide. We all seek to keep the Gems out of Thanos' clutches."

"A mission I also readily support," said Nova Prime. "I assure you, Guardians, that the Orb is perfectly safe within our vaults. We will not allow Thanos to get his hands on it. But we do appreciate your concern."

"With due respect, Lady Prime of the Nova Corps," said Thor, inclining his head in deference, "but it is crucial you should understand the danger if Thanos was to attain the Gem. He should wield power only found in legends –"

"I am perfectly aware, Your Highness," Nova Prime answered coldly. It obviously irked her to have her capability questioned. "We have protected the Stone with all due measures."

"Nothing can beat Nova Corps' state of the art security systems," Dey boasted, bobbing on his toes, looking pleased with himself.

"Famous last words," growled Rocket. Gamora fought the impulse to kick the raccoon behind her so Nova Prime didn't notice, but it was too late; Nova Prime pursed her lips at Rocket in displeasure.

"And what would you have us do?" she demanded. "If we should remove the Stone from our vaults surely the danger of its discovery would only be doubled?"

"Call your people to arms," Thor urged immediately. "The city must be defended."

"Drama Queen much?" said Peter, and shot Gamora a grin, but he stopped smiling when Gamora didn't match it.

"I have to agree with Thor," said Gamora guardedly and Nova Prime turned to look at her in surprise. "We can't afford to take chances. You should have your soldiers on standby in case Thanos does decide to attack the city. He will have a powerful army. He spent nearly all of the Chitauri on his attack on Terra five and a half years ago, but he has to be using something else –"

"You know of Thanos' attack on earth?" Thor demanded. Gamora whipped around to face him, taken aback by his aggressive tone.

"I was there when he planned it," she said answered without hesitation. She wasn't backing down from her past any longer. Thor's face was impassive, but she could see anger simmering behind his eyes. She continued, "And that's when I decided I wasn't going to witness the annihilation of another people by his hand. Not if I could help it."

"You were there, then," Thor said menacingly, "when Thanos pressed my brother into servitude?"

"Hey, man," Peter stepped forward. "Give my girlfriend a break!"
"Peter," said Gamora, irritated because she couldn't stop the unexpected jump of pleasure in her heart. "I'm not your girlfriend."

"Then what the hell are you, huh?" Peter demanded.

"If a girlfriend is someone who is in love with a man who is also in love with her, then you are his girlfriend," said Mantis unhelpfully.

"Yep," said Rocket. "Definitely girlfriend."

"I am Groot," said Groot definitively. If a tree could smirk, Groot would be smirking. Wise-ass kid.

"I do not understand this need for strange words like girlfriend," said Drax. "If you are married you are a spouse. If you are having sexual intercourse you are sexual partners—"

"Drax, dude!" Peter protested hastily, eyes going wide with shock and embarrassment like the school-boy he was.

"You're all a bunch of traitors," said Gamora. She couldn't help from grinning, even though she was angry at herself for giving in to soppiness so easily.

"Do not try to mollify me with your squabbling," Thor said, sulking, but he did not try to return to his argument with her.

Nova Prime coughed pointedly. "If you don't mind—" she began but was interrupted by a sudden beeping alarm from Dey's headset. They turned as one to look at the Denarian.

"Sorry!" said Dey, abashed, pressing a finger to the receiver. "Thought I put that on silent—" He spoke into the headset. "Denarian Dey here. Listen, I'm in an appointment right now. Can you—oh." His eyebrows furrowed. "Right. Yeah. I'm with her now. I'll let her know."

Dey looked up. Nova Prime addressed him expectantly. Dey swallowed before speaking. "It—ah—appears we're under attack, Ma'am. Upward a thousand offensive vessels just launched from a large starship in the atmosphere."

"Speak of the devil," said Peter.

"Devil would be a good word for him," Gamora growled. She raced to the large windows that walled in the room. Small, attack-force ships were already streaking out of the sky, in which Xandar's double sons hung heavily near the horizon.

It was approaching what the Xandarians called the Golden Hour, and it struck twice during the planet's thirty-hour rotation: once at dawn when one of the three suns dipped below the horizon and the other two rose, the other at dusk when two suns set and the other ascended, making Xandar a place of forever daylight.

Peter whistled long and slow, joining her at the window. "Better get our mean faces on, Guardians," he said. "This is about to get hella messy."

OOO

Thor gaped in horror as the flock of fighter ships streamed out of the sky, gunfire blasting from their laser cannons, peppering the citizens on the streets below. What could they have done to stop this? He wondered desperately. Was Thanos really so far ahead of them in his plans?
"Not again!" The regal, white-haired woman called Nova Prime dashed over to a circular table in the center of the room and punched a control button on its edge. A hologram map of the city burst onto the tabletop, flickering with ships flying overhead. "Why is it you always bring us trouble?" she barked to the Guardians.

"Tried to warn you," said Rocket the squirrel with a shrug.

"Dey, send the order to evacuate! Civilians are to find cover immediately," Nova Prime pointed to the Denarian Dey, a man with pudgy cheeks and curly hair – a friendly man, Thor thought. Dey nodded readily and started talking rapidly into his earpiece. "And get the rest of my military advisers up here!"

"Right away, Ma'am!"

It happened so quickly Thor had no time to prepare. One of the ships shot through the sky, firing furiously toward the control tower to which the Guardians and Thor had been brought for their conference. The guns shattered through the glass walls. The floor exploded around them. Thor dived out of the way. He knocked Gamora off her feet and covered her with his body.

He may not be certain what part she had played in Loki's previous torment at the hands of Thanos, but for now she was an ally – and he would not see her blown to pieces.

Flames and smoke leapt across the room. Thor's ears rung with the sound of the explosion. The rest of the Guardians had also been knocked off their feet. Thor squinted through the smoke to see if anyone had been seriously injured.

"Get off me!" Gamora grunted beneath Thor and shoved him onto the floor with admirable strength.

"Anybody hurt?" Peter, called Star-Lord although he certainly did not appear to be of royal blood, sat up, face black with soot.

"Groot was on fire but I put him out," said Rocket.

"I am Groot," said the strange talking tree, sounding disgruntled.

"Don't be such a baby," Rocket snapped. "It barely singed you."

"Nova – Pilots," Nova Prime coughed in the smoke. Thor's eyes were drawn to her. She was still on her feet, bent over a communication devise on the table that evidently connected to others outside of the room. "To – your vessels…" he voice faded. She tottered.

"Nova Prime!" Dey shot to his feet and caught the woman in his arms before she fell. He lowered her carefully to the ground.

"To your vessels, at once," she murmured. Thor saw blood spread across the front of her uniform. "Engage…the enemy." Her white hair was full of ash.

Thor stood to his feet, unsure of how he should help. Dey pressed his hand futilely against the wound in her chest. Blood seeped between his fingers. Thor caught the gaze of Star-Lord across the room. The human's eyes were wide with dismay.

"Ma'am," said Dey frantically. "Ma'am, you'll be alright. We'll get a medic up here, right away. You'll be alright."

"Protect…city…at all costs," said Nova Prime and she slumped in Dey's arms. Her eyes were glassy.
For a moment Dey stared at her as though he could not comprehend what had happened.

The room was utterly still and silent. Even the squirrel, whose incessant need to speak reminded Thor forcibly of Tony Stark, did not make a sound. Thor lowered his head. She had been a strong woman, a worthy leader, and he could mourn her death even though he had met her less than an hour before.

"You heard her!" Dey said suddenly from the floor. "Protect the city at all costs! Get your ship into the air – these guys aren't hurting our people again, not if I have anything to say about it, they're not."

"Come on," Rocket said roughly. "To the Milano."

"We have to protect the Power Stone," Gamora said, shaking dust and rubble out of her hair. "What if this is just a diversion?"

"Then it's a hell of a good one," said Star-Lord. Another ship passed much too closely to the shattered tower's windows, tailed by two Star Blasters. Star-Lord ducked on impulse.

"And we must not leave the Tesseract unguarded for long," Thor added.

"Either way, let's get moving!" Rocket demanded, skittering toward the door on all-fours. Groot followed him.

"I'll send an extra security detail to the vaults," said Dey. He stood and took off his jacket, spreading it over Nova Prime's face and upper body. He was once again busy chattering into his earpiece as the Guardians and Thor hustled from the room.

OOO

"Can we seek help from the Nova Corps?" said Sif from behind Nebula, peering infuriatingly over Nebula's shoulder as she tried to work. In the viewport, out of the darkness, three bright stars grew larger as they drew closer: Xandar's triple suns.

"No," Nebula answered shortly. She had no use for a lot of pointless questions. Thankfully Loki was largely silent. Nebula wondered if he was otherwise preoccupied by the terror of possibly once again being apprehended by Thanos. "He'll see our transmission signal and know what we're doing."

"Then what are we going to do?" Sif demanded. "We cannot fly willingly into Thanos' clutches?"

"I'm working on it!" Nebula snapped. "You –" Nebula spun in her chair and pointed to Loki on the ground, who was startled enough actually to look surprised behind his usual mask of contempt. "You have magic, don't you? Can't you do something to throw him off?" She just needed a spare second, dammit, anything she could use to formulate some kind of plan before they charged blindly into Xandar's atmosphere. The planet was just a spot in the center of the three suns now.

"Yes, I have magic," Loki answered coldly. It had not been a question. Nebula knew very well his magic. She had seen it at work under her patient hand as she carved his skin from his bone in Thanos' cells. "But very limited stores at the moment, and nothing that could help with this. I'm not a miracle worker."

Loki was more of a burden now than a help. He'd done his work well; Thanos grip on his mind had led Maw and Glaive to them on the moon of Maveth which ultimately brought about the death of Glaive, but now Nebula had no further need of Loki – in fact, he only served to make Thanos aware of each of their subsequent steps, and the God of Mischief was still too weak yet, from his injuries, to be of any use in a battle.
Still, Nebula could not merely discard him. Aside from encouraging swift retribution from Sif, Nebula could not deny it had been more than her plans against Thanos that had motivated her to free him from his torment aboard the Sanctuary II. In fact, she had been perfectly capable of leading Thanos to the Reality Gem by herself, but something inside of her, some nagging part of her mind that spoke lately with Gamora's voice, had insisted Nebula could not leave Loki behind.

She owed him – for what she had done to him in the past, she owed him – and would now continue to owe him until she figured out how to get them free of this situation.

Xandar was the size of a marble now. Soon the size of a small throwing ball. They were losing time.

"When we land," said Nebula. "If we land, you'll need to cast a diversion for Maw. We will have to act until then exactly as he wants us to. It's only the preservation of the Reality Gem he's concerned about now, but he will not hesitate to pulverize us into stardust if we threaten his plan. But after we land – that's our chance."

Nebula could see the thoughts racing through Loki's mind and uneasily realized that Thanos could probably see them as well. New plan: whatever Loki suggested, whatever Nebula told him they were going to do – do the exact opposite. Only then might they have some semblance of a chance.

"I will –" Loki swallowed, "I will be able to hold it for only a moment, but it may be enough time. Maw wants Sif. We must make him believe we are going to give him her."

"Right," said Nebula, hardly listening, head filled with her own churning thoughts. They would have only a slim chance – only a slim chance if Nebula kept her head and acted quickly.

A red light blinked on the control panel.

"He's hailing us," said Nebula tautly, clinging to the controls in one sweaty hand, the other was closed tightly around the lever in her familiar cold, metallic grip. She didn't think she'd ever get used to not having her arm. Things inside her body were different; she stopped feeling them after a while, but the lifelessness of her own flesh would always unnerve and surprise her.

"Ignore it," Sif said at once, but Nebula was already pressing down the receiver.

Ebony Maw's voice seeped through the ship-to-ship transmitter. "Sister, you are wise to open channels. Listen carefully to me. Thanos desires the Reality Stone in possession of the Asgardian. If you promise to land your vessel quietly and give up the Stone, you will be spared."

"You lie," Nebula hissed. She knew her brother. She was intimately acquainted with his deft handling of the truth, his haughty mastery of other beings as though they were puppets tied with strings. He was the most sharp-witted of her siblings, barring perhaps Gamora – although Nebula was loath to admit it. The rest of them had always favored brute force over intellect. "Thanos does not know the meaning of mercy."

"The siege has already begun," said Maw. "The Orb will be in our father's hands in a matter of moments. It is useless to resist, sister." The blue ball of Xandar, striped by gray clouds, consumed the viewport. It was impossible to imagine a battle raging somewhere on its surface.

"Tell Father," said Nebula. Her heart thudded against her cybernetically enhanced ribcage. Her heart was still mostly whole at least, nothing ripped out of there by Thanos if she could recall correctly, "That we'll be dropping in on him in a minute, then."

She cut off the transmitter. Without a second thought – because she was worried she would lose her nerve if she hesitated – Nebula slammed down the accelerator, shooting toward the atmosphere at a
breathtaking pace.

It took only a moment before Maw’s ship followed suit. The radar screen showed him closing in on them by every heartbeat. Sif pitched forward onto the floor from the unexpected acceleration.

The ship screamed through the fiery red atmosphere, engulfed in flame as the friction tore at the outer hull's heatshields.

"What are you doing?" Sif cried in alarm, disgruntled as she picked herself back onto her feet.

"Maw mentioned the battle has already started," Nebula said. She had no time for explanations. The ship broke free of the tugging of the atmosphere into the clear air beyond. Nebula zoomed the ship toward the cityscape of the Nova Corps headquarters. "It'll be our best bet if we can lose him in it."

They careened toward the city. Loki and Sif were twin points of stressed silence in the back of the ship. They blared through the city, charging between skyscrapers, under bridges, and over streets. Another ship flew past them – identical to their own. They had found the battle.

A tower came into view. Nebula did not alter her approach.

"You're going to hit –"

Loki's warning died on his lips as Nebula simply blasted the tower spire out of the way. She had no time for evasive maneuvers. Maw's ship was barreling down on them – cannon fire from behind exploded from the ground. He had now apparently decided that the Reality Gem could just as easily be attained if its host was dead.

They emerged into the thick of the battle. The sky was clogged with Thanos' attack force ships and Nova Corps Star Blasters. Laser fire and smoke choked the air. Nebula kept her eyes fixed ahead.

Out of the corner of her eye Nebula caught sight of a horribly recognizable orange and blue M-ship. Of all the unlucky –

Nebula's stomach twisted. Damn, in this moment Nebula wished more of herself was mechanical because then she would not have to acknowledge the mixture of relief and irritation that came from spotting Gamora's ship among the chaos. Big sister, always the first at everything.

One of the Milano's gun ports turned directly on Nebula's ship. An oath flew from Nebula's lips as she remembered her vessel looked identical to all the other enemy ships. Gamora had no reason to know it was Nebula behind the controls. Nebula yanked her ship desperately out of the line of fire and the Milano's cannon blast ripped past, inches away from cutting them out of the sky.

"Shit, that was close!" said Sif. "You sure you know what you're doing?"

"Shut up!" said Nebula. She pulled their ship back on course. Maw was still on their tail. He wasn't giving up. Nebula gritted her teeth. There was still time yet to get to the Power Stone before Thanos' forces made landfall.

"They will keep the Stone in the city's vaults," Nebula said, more to herself than to either Sif or Loki. They were just along for the ride by now. "They are in the archives building. There!" Nebula spotted the proper structure and turned the ship toward the target.

There wasn't a point in finding a proper entrance. Besides, Maw would simply blast them to smithereens if they made any signs of docking. The only thing keeping them alive – barely – was Nebula's ability to keep every so slightly out of the full range of his cannons.
Nebula turned their ship abruptly upright. For a moment it jerked to a stop, perpendicular to the ground, then she wrenched it over into a barrel roll, forcing it into a nosedive toward the ground.

"You're mad!" Loki cried. Obviously the sharper of her two companions, he had figured out Nebula's course of action before Sif.

"Maybe," said Nebula – and their ship plowed headfirst through the roof of the archive building, shattering metal and plaster as they carved their way toward the Power Stone.

OOO

Rocket and Groot procured their own Nova Corps ship to lend their talents to the city. The rest of the Guardians and Thor scrambled into the Milano. Thor felt exceptionally useless as Star-Lord and Gamora took a gun each in the cockpit and Drax moved to take the port in the rear of the ship. Mantis and Thor were left standing in the middle of the floor, nothing to do. Mantis looked nervous. Thor was just frustrated; he wished he might find some way to put his powers to use, but they were so much more valuable in combat on the ground.

The Milano pitched into the air. Thor shifted to find his footing at the ship zoomed headlong into the aerial battle that raged above the city.

Star-Lord and Gamora were apt combatants in the air, diving and dipping through the enemy crafts, picking them out of the sky easily, working off each other's slack like partners well-accustomed to how the other worked. It reminded Thor pointedly of the way Clint and Natasha could work together.

"Aw hell no –" said Star-Lord and he turned his gun upward to blast an oncoming enemy vessel out of the air. It went up in flames and plummeted toward the ground.

Drax was busy yelling and cursing in the back of the ship as he took potshots at the surrounding enemy ships.

"You're mine!" Gamora crowed, swiveling in the chair to follow a zooming enemy ship with her gun. The ship ducked out of Gamora's reach and the blast soared past into empty air. "Damn good pilot," Gamora said through gritted teeth and yanked on the controls to put the Milano in pursuit of the ship.

Star-Lord suddenly snatched the controls from Gamora's hands and dragged the Milano into a sharp turn "Big ship!" he said urgently. "Big, big ship – incoming!"

"Is it chasing the other?" said Thor in confusion, leaning over Gamora's chair to peer through the viewport, wondering if it was just the confusion of the battle to make it seem like the two ships were in a tight contest with each other.

He was drowned out by Gamora; her voice was filled with foreboding. "That's a Black Order ship – if they're here it must be for the Power Stone. We have to get to the vaults now!"

"That's where they're headed," said Star-Lord, and turned the Milano in a wide arc to pursue the black beast that lumbered through the battle, blasting Nova Corps' Star Blasters out of the sky left and right.

A small fleet of enemy ships closed in around them, obviously favoring taking out the larger threat of the Milano over the smaller Star Blasters. Gamora tried to veer out of the way while Star-Lord peppered them with gunfire, but more closed in to replace those that fell.
"There are too many of them!" Gamora snarled in frustration.

"Which building belongs to the vaults?" said Thor, scanning the skyline through the viewport. He could still see the small enemy ship through the fray, followed by the Black Order vessel.

"There," Star-Lord took his hand off his gun long enough to point. As Thor watched, the leading enemy ship punched through the building's roof, creating a burst of flame and black smoke. "But it's no use if we can't get there."

Thor tugged away from the view, scanning the arch of metal overhead. He spotted what he was hoping for – a small maintenance hatch through the roof. Mantis saw Thor looking and, as though she could sense what he was thinking, backed up, eyes wide.

Thor made quick work of the hatch, punting it clear off its hinges into the sky outside. Air was sucked into the ship, whipping through with a roar through the hull.

"What the hell are you doing?" Star-Lord demanded in unison with Gamora, who shrieked, "Are you crazy?"

"Perhaps now you will learn why I am called the God of Thunder," said Thor, buffeted by the rushing air. He tugged at the power within him, igniting the fuse, and lightning engulfed his body, flicking across his skin.

Crouching at the knees, he mustered his power into his core, where it crackled and lashed out with fiery intensity, and then he released it – bounding from the floor and shooting into the sky in an arch toward the vault.

Chapter End Notes

BTW, shit gets real next chapter
Thor tore across the sky, propelled by sizzling webs of lighting. A zigzagging enemy ship obstructed his passage through the air and he was forced to propel himself toward the ground sooner than the crumbled ceiling of the archive building, through which the Black Order ship had descended with guns blazing.

Thor hit ground hard, but managed to land in a crouch – landing much improved since New York. He straightened, tossing his cape out of his way, and marched forward. The archive building was being torn aside from the inside. Thor could hear gunfire and shouts beyond the walls. He shoved his way through a collapsing space in the side, pushing into a long corridor, stunted on the other end by large doors. The floor was scattered with bodies and ablaze with movement.

It took Thor only a moment to grasp the situation: the hallway was clogged with Nova Corps security personnel, scrambling frantically against a hulking, reptilian figure bound in armor and brandishing twin, bladed knuckledusters in its beefy fists. The vaults evidently lay beyond the doors at the end of the corridor. Thor only had to get beyond this beast to get to the Power Stone.

"Another one!" shouted one of the Nova Corps personnel, hair spilling out of her cap as she turned her gun on Thor and let loose a barrage of bullets.

Thor shouted and leapt aside, gunfire pinging off his chestplate and scattered across the room. The Nova Corps guard ducked, yelling in panic.

"I am on your side!" Thor roared as the alien beast lunged at him from the side. Because of the loss of Thor's sight in his eye, he could not see the giant until it was already upon him. Thor turned, unbalanced, to meet the attack, but was flung off his feet by a vicious cut to his ribs by one of the beast's fists. Its bladed knuckles sliced effortlessly through Thor's armor but did not reach flesh.

Thor spun out across the floor, coming to rest against a chunk of wall. The Nova Corps personnel paid him no attention, too preoccupied were they by the rampaging creature in their midst – it appeared vaguely humanoid, but its eyes were lit with a dangerous, bestial fire as it swung left and right at attacking Nova Corps guards. Already a pile of bodies lay at its feet. Nova Corps was clearly losing this battle.

Thor was back on his feet in a moment and charged forward. What he would not give for Mjolnir at this moment – his new powers were so unwieldy.

Lightning skittered out of Thor's palm and smacked the beast across the face. The beast whipped his head back around to face Thor and roared in rage. The Nova Corps gunfire pattered futilely against the its thick scaly skin.

There was a deafening crash somewhere beyond the door at the end of the hallway. The floor rumbled; dust fell from the creaking roof as the building's structure was challenged. The beast spared the distraction not a moment's notice, but lumbered toward Thor.

Thor managed to keep his footing as several Nova Corps guards were tossed to the ground by the shockwaves of the explosion beyond. A second battle must have been raging in the vaults. Thor could only hope the Nova Corps guards within would be able to keep this beast's cohorts away from
the Stone for as long as it took Thor to join them.

The beast was on Thor in a blink of an eye, barely time enough for Thor to draw his sword and thrust toward the creature. The giant raised its fists, blades shrieking steel as they deflected Thor’s blow easily. Thor ducked out of the way of the beast’s swinging fist, flinging out of the way toward the wall. Another Nova Corps guard was struck down. He toppled to the ground and was replaced by his comrade.

There were five of them less, plus Thor, versus one enemy. They were not doing this right. They needed to make formations, attack the beast systematically from all sides, but battle strategy had never been Thor’s forte – it had always been Loki’s knack – and Thor simply shoved himself off the wall and back toward the creature.

Thor was not quick enough to raise his sword and his pounce was refuted by a backhand to his face. The beast’s blade sliced through Thor’s cheek and warm blood poured onto his neck. Pain erupted across his skin, and with it an urgency in his chest.

The creature was stronger and faster than Thor anticipated. This was going to take more work than he’d first thought. He ducked under the beast’s swinging arm and brought his blade upward, aiming for a gap in its armor. The beast seemed to anticipate Thor’s move, and grunted in irritation as its hands closed around Thor’s sword, wrenching it from Thor’s grasp.

A kick to Thor’s gut sent him careening backward. His head cracked against the wall. His vision swam.

The creature cut down one of the guards by slicing its knuckles across the man’s neck.

"Xyn, no!" shouted the Nova Corps guard who had greeted Thor upon entry with a rain of bullets. She shouted in anger and ran forward. The g struck her down with seeming ease.

Thor shook the popping lights out of his eyes and staggered forward, aiming a kick at the creature’s stomach. The beast grabbed Thor’s ankle and smashed him to the ground. Thor heard cement crumble under his slammed weight. He saw and heard things as if they were coming at him from a great distance, unable to draw breath through the weight pressed onto his chest.

"I am Cull Obsidian, son of Thanos," the creature declared, looming over Thor, foot on Thor’s breast, drawing back its fist to bury its blade through Thor’s face, "You are a fool to confront me!"

Thor put out his hands and a blast of lightning crackled from his fingers, heaving Cull Obsidian’s bulky form off his feet and plowing him into the wall. Thor struggled back to his feet.

"I am Thor, son of Odin, and it is you who are a fool!" he shouted, tearing forward with another blast. His lightning left blackened scars across the floor. His fingers burned with its power, electricity stinging up his arms and thrumming through his chest as though it was a second heartbeat.

The lightning glanced across Cull Obsidian’s scales and he snarled in pain. He swung wildly for Thor’s charging figure. Thor was forced to call off his attack to dodge the hit.

There were still crashes and thuds in the room beyond. Thor wondered if the Guardians had perhaps managed to thread their way through the fight above the city and had joined the fray with the Black Order vessel.

Another explosion ripped through the air, shuddering through the corridor. Cracks splintered across the roof and chunks of rocks and metal shattered from the ceiling. Thor ducked out of the way; Cull Obsidian did not flinch as a rock caught him on the shoulder, but pushed off the wall behind him,
lunging incessantly toward Thor. Thor scrambled out of the way, conscious that he was running now instead of fighting.

A blow to Thor's shoulder splayed him across the ground. He shouted as the creature plowed the toe of his boot into Thor's ribs. Pain cracked through his chest. He fought the urge to curl inward, out of the way of further hurts, but forced himself to grab hold of Cull Obsidian's incoming foot, toppling the giant to the ground.

Cull Obsidian. Son of Thanos. Had he been there, Thor wondered? Had this ugly, evil brute been witness to Loki's torture?

Perhaps it was merely the thought of Loki that made Thor suddenly aware of voices in the vaults beyond the corridor. And was it? Not. It could not be. It could not possibly be Loki's voice Thor heard shouting on the other side of the doorway. It was unfeasible, ridiculous – but Thor could not smother the jump of fervor at the thought of his brother, and desperation only served to make his powers unexpectedly flare with fresh strength.

He hauled himself to his feet, skin dancing with white-blue light of electricity. Thor, God of Thunder, felt his power awaken fresh in his chest as it had done first in the Grandmaster's arena, and second in the final throws of desperation while battling his sister.

His eyes flickered white, vision hyper focused on the hulking figure of Cull Obsidian. Monster. Thor would not suffer Thanos or any of his kin to lay a hand on Loki again.

Thor let go a battle cry as he turned ferociously on the beast. He shoved his arms forward, crackling with lightning. The corridor was too small to contain his power and electricity swept through the air, cobwebs of blue-white light that sizzled across the walls and chunks of ceiling on the floor.

Cull Obsidian tottered backward, taken aback. The beast rammed into the wall behind it. Thor's fists closed around the creature's wrists, arms straining to keep its blades away.

Thor yelled, voice tearing up his throat as his lightning surged, building with murderous intent inside his arms, buckling across bone and sinew, spilling out of his clenched fingers.

The creature jolted in Thor's hands, skin transparent as electricity shot through its body, revealing a glowing skeleton beneath. Its eyes found Thor's face – and glinted with unexpected pain and horror. The horror of the certainty of coming death.

Thor's lightning convulsed the creature until it was lifeless in Thor's grasp, and Thor released it with a final thunderous shout, power severed from his arms as though it had been physically ripped from him, leaving an aching emptiness in his strained muscles.

Cull Obsidian slid down the wall and into a lump on the floor, eyes blank and staring as its head lolled to the side. The hallway was black from Thor's lightning. Thor's arms continued to twitch as the electricity slowly dissipated.

He panted for breath, blinked the white film from his eyes, and his stomach lurchied in guilt and shock when he looked at the charred husk of the creature he had just killed with his bare hands.

There was one Nova Corps guard still alive. He stared at Thor with circled-eyes, speechless and... afraid.

Thor shoved the uneasiness away and stepped away from the slaughtered beast, staggering toward the door at the end of the corridor. He had taken too long. He could not possibly still be in time to stop the theft of the Power Stone.
He reached the door just as a quaking blast echoed to life from the inside of the vault. It ripped the door off its hinges and slammed headlong into Thor's chest. He was flung through the air and slammed faraway into the floor. The back of his head hit stone, and his vision flooded with black.

OOO

Nebula clenched her half-metal jaw as her ship cleaved through the roof of the archive building, shrieking metal against metal and leaving a trail of splintered wreckage as they crashed into the floor and skidded to a fragile halt. The ship tottered on its belly. They had lost a wing and it pitched to rest on its side.

Loki and Sif slid across the floor and landed in a pile against the wall. Sif disentangled herself from Loki with a disgruntled growl and pushed herself to her knees, breathing hard.

"Get off me!" Loki said through teeth gritted in pain as Sif helped him up, aggravating his previous injuries.

"Come on," Nebula urged them. She clambered with difficulty out of the tipped pilot's seat and stumbled over to help Sif with Loki.

"Let go –" he snarled but Sif and Nebula said in unison, "Shut up."

Nebula had to force open the exit hatch with her shoulder. She and Sif both pulled Loki out of the wreck. His legs stumbled uselessly beneath him. His face was strained and Nebula could tell he was drawing on his magic, trying to work up enough strength to walk on his own so he didn't have to face the humiliation of being dragged.

They emerged into a large space, filled with light from the hole through the ceiling the ship had punted through. The walls were lined with sealed shelves, and the floor was a gridwork of storage aisles. Several shelving units lay scattered across the floor, contents spilled by the crash.

Nebula noted the floor was also strewn with bodies, all wearing the Nova Corps insignia upon their uniforms. Sif noticed this almost immediately after Nebula, and stopped dead in her tracks.

Sif's mouth dangled open, "What –"

"Who are you?" said an emotionless, robotic voice and a red humanoid floated out from the labyrinth of shelves, hovering inches off the ground, for the moment unthreatening.

"Who the hell are you?" Nebula demanded. She released Loki's arm; he tottered against Sif. Nebula drew forth her electroshock batons in case the being proved to be hostile. Something, after all, must have killed the Nova Corps guards.

"I am called Vision," said the figure. Nebula's eyes were drawn to the being's hand, which clutched a round metal encasement: the Orb. A mixture of fear and relief flooded her body at the sight of the Infinity Gem's containment vessel.

But what was this being? A guardian of the Stone, or a thief?

"We've come for the Orb," said Nebula, taking a step forward.

The being crooked its head as though Nebula, Sif, and Loki were vaguely interesting. "I am sorry," Vision said finally. "But I cannot let that happen. I must secure the Stone for my master."

Dread slunk into the bottom of Nebula's stomach. Whatever it was, it worked for Thanos.
"Not if we have anything to say about it," said Sif.

Nebula grinned. "So be it then." She brandished her rods and launched forward – Sif would be at her side, she knew, as soon as Loki was secured.

Vision floated backward. It was not quite alarm that flashed through its eyes, but gentle shock at the idea of being confronted. Vision's forehead was lit with a strange yellow glow. It must have been the synthetic being's power source. Nebula aimed for that as she struck out. Her baton met empty air as it slipped through Vision's face and she stumbled blindly forward.

Vision rematerialized behind her. The yellow light flared dangerously and a beam of energy burst forth from it forehead. Nebula dived aside. The stream seared close to her skin, blasting apart the shelves in a shower of glass and metal.

"Don't! It has the Mind Gem!" Loki shouted, voice breathless with startling panic. How he knew, Nebula could not tell – perhaps because of his own previous experience with the Gem. His fear made a shiver run down Nebula's spine. For a moment he was begging her to stop hurting him, so weak he could no longer either writhe from pain, and Nebula could not stop – even if she had wanted to – because it would mean facing the same pain, herself.

With a flurry of blaster fire the back wall of the room imploded inward, falling away to reveal the sleek black shape of Maw's Black Order vessel. Flames and rubble leapt into the air. A wave of heat swept across Nebula's skin. She could no longer discern from where the explosions were coming from: Vision's Mind Gem or Maw's ship. She cowered pathetically behind a partially collapsed shelving unit.

"Stay down!" Sif yelled to Loki somewhere among the chaos.

Maw's ship stopped firing, leaving smoking, melted wreckage behind. Nebula peered through the haze to see the Black Order ship had settled on the ruins. The ramp lowered; once Maw joined the fray they would be done for.

They were going to die. Nebula had led them all to their death.

Nebula screamed in rage and clambered out of her hiding place, swinging her batons furiously, aiming for the Orb in Vision's hand. If she could knock it lose – if she could only get her hands on the Stone –

Vision easily side-stepped her, letting her batons swipe through phased matter. It directed another blast toward her from the Mind Gem and she was too slow to spin out of its way. It caught the end of one of her batons, melting it away to the hilt.

"Release the Stone!" It was Maw. He stood across the room and he was bearing down on Sif, who had her back to Loki, propped on the ground, with her sword raised over her shoulder. "You cannot win this fight!"

"You will have to ply it from my dead body!" said Sif. She pounced toward Maw, who met her blade with his dual sabers, one in each hand.

Vision turned his face to the roof and sliced through the arched ceiling with a beam of energy. Chunks of the roof gave way, plummeting downward toward Nebula.

"Watch out!" shouted Loki and he managed to catch the raining debris with his seidr, face twisted in pain and concentration as he tossed it aside. Maw furiously shoved aside Sif, launching toward Loki. Loki lost concentration, rolling on the ground away from Maw's blow.
A stone smashed into Nebula's shoulder, knocking her off her feet.

"Kill her, pawn!" Maw yelled at Vision. "Use the Power Stone if you must!" Sif was back on her feet. She struck Maw from behind, who howled in pain but stayed standing, slashing toward her again.

Nebula blinked past the pain in her shoulder and saw that her mechanical arm was pinned to the ground by the chunk of scaffolding that had fallen from the sky.

Vision examined the Orb in its palm. Without a word, it untwisted the top from the bottom, revealing the glowing purple nucleus within. With its bare hand, Vision plucked the Stone out of the Orb. Its face was chillingly blank as it observed the Gem, as though it was completely indifferent to the unspeakable power it held in its palm.

"Don't!" Nebula shouted, but she didn't truly believe her voice would have any effect. Nebula could not stand. She tried to lift the stone on her arm, but she was not strong enough. Fear pounded in her skull and she acted without thinking – Nebula took her upper arm in her opposite hand and twisted, screaming at circuits tore lose from nerves, detaching her metal arm from her socket.

Vision's eyes were drawn to Nebula by her scream. It pointed the Power Stone in his hand toward her. The Gem thrummed with ugly purple light –

"Over here, villain," said Loki. He was somehow on his feet, unsteady, and Nebula knew he would not be able to stay so for long. Vision turned its attention to Loki.

Multiple Loki images sprouted across the floor, all exact replicas, grinning in triumph. It was impossible to tell which was the real God of Lies – but not, apparently, impossible for Vision, for the being simply drifted forward, unperturbed. Loki's smile flickered in dawning doubt, and the rest of his mirrors did, as well.

"You cannot fool me," said Vision calmly. "My ocular implants allow me to see your heat signature."

He lifted the purple Stone once again, deadly light building within –

"I told you – stay – down!" Sif plowed through the rows of Lokis with her shoulder. She must have hit the real one, for the images scattered into midair as Loki stumbled.

Purple light sprouted from Vision's hand and Sif rushed forward to absorb the impact. The light hit Sif squarely in the chest – striking her backward with a screaming explosion of red from the Reality Stone that was housed within her body.

The blast from the Power Stone met the flames from its sister and the air in the room shifted as purple and scarlet light whipped in a vortex through the air. The explosion picked apart the roof and walls.

Nebula was hurled off her feet. Something hit her hard in the back and she was crushed to the floor by a hunk of wall. Pain erupted throughout her body. She could not breathe as the chunk of wall crushed her.

Smoke clogged the air. Nebula's head spun. Her mechanical jaw readjusted itself, grinding in protest. She could not see. She could barely hear behind the high-pitched squeal in her ears.

A sound growled somewhere in the back of her head with harrowing recognition. The smoke cleared. The sound solidified into a rumbling –
Laughter. It was laughter.

Nebula picked her head off the ground. Sick terror bubbled in her stomach.

The smoke cleared. "Well done. Well done," the large, armored figure of Thanos picked his way across the wreckage.

Where had he come from? Had he been waiting there all this time? Watching them as they struggled, ready to intervene if favor shifted away from Maw and Vision – ready to crush Nebula, Sif, and Loki at a moment's notice. Nebula would not be surprised. He had always observed from afar as his children tore each other to pieces in their sparring exercises.

"Give me the stone, my worthy servant," said Thanos, and held out his hand, encased in the empty Gauntlet. Vision came forward, lifting the Power Stone in his palm. Nebula numbly wondered why Vision had been sent at all, if Thanos had been there the entire time. Perhaps Thanos could not touch the Stone with his own bare hands and needed the strange mechanical being to do his dirty work.

Nebula's jaw gaped. She wanted to scream, but nothing her mind was empty. She could not comprehend – She could see no sign of either Sif or Loki. Perhaps they were dead. No matter. If they were not yet dead, they all soon would be.

Vision fitted neatly the first Gem into the Gauntlet's knuckles. Thanos nodded in approval, observing the glowing purple light.

"Pick up our little prodigal, Ebony," Thanos said to Maw, who emerged from the rubble and picked out Loki's still body among the wreckage. He hauled the God of Mischief off the floor.

Loki's eyes opened groggily, stirred by the movement. He lifted his face and his eyes widened in horror as soon as he saw Thanos. Nebula saw his lips fall open silently in disbelief.

"No!" Loki was suddenly thrashing in Maw's unyielding arms like a man possessed. "No! Stop – no!"

"Does he beg?" said Thanos, smiling.

Loki's eyes darted wildly around the room as Maw began to tow him toward the Dark Order's ship waiting behind him. Loki searched for one last avenue of escape, trapped in the iron grip of Maw, being dragged once again to his doom. His eyes fell on Nebula, half-buried under the wreckage.

"Kill me!" Loki screamed but Nebula could not even raise her one remaining hand to answer his plea, although she would have. She would have, and she hoped Loki read it in her face that she would have.

Something shifted behind Nebula – a stack of fallen concrete lifted off the ground. "Let – him – go," Sif panted, emerging from her prison of debris. She held one arm to her chest. With her other she grasped her sword.

Thanos laughed again.

"Leave her to me," he said to Vision as it drifted toward Sif, yellow Gem blaring in its forehead. The Gem mellowed immediately and Vision came to a stop. "Go with Ebony. Leave the little god mostly undamaged. We have yet to tempt his brother with him."

"No!" Sif shrieked and dashed forward. Thanos opened his palm and a rush of purple light left his fingers. It bolted toward Sif, but she raised her sword to meet it and it was deflected with a flash of blinding red light as the Reality Gem seized her weapon as a shield. The shock waves of the clash
thudded through the room, tossing Sif once again off her feet. She was too weak, Nebula knew – too weak to withstand the Stone's unforgiving power.

Her sword skittered out of her reach on the floor. In three large, unconcerned strides Thanos was standing over her.

The engines of Maw's ship flared to life as the ramp closed. He, Loki, and Vision had disappeared within. It kicked off the ground, flinging rock and rubble into the air as it took off through the open roof.

Nebula could not move. Her legs were pinned beneath the rubble. She could not move. Even if she was to cut off her legs she would be useless, for then she would bleed to death before she managed to reach a weapon and attack Thanos. She shouted in frustration, upper body pointlessly writhing on the floor, single hand grappling for something to hurl at the back of Thanos' head.

Thanos ignored Nebula entire; she was as much use to him as any other inanimate piece of rubble now. He bent at the waist. His fist, sheathed in the bronze Gauntlet, closed around Sif's neck. He pulled her up by her throat. Her feet dangled in the air off the ground as her face flushed, gagging for want of oxygen. She weakly wrestled against Thanos' fingers around her neck, but her hands slid pointlessly off the Gauntlet.

"No! You bastard, do not touch her!" Nebula yelled, voice scraping so harshly up her throat she thought she would draw blood, and were these tears? Were they tears that pooled in her eyes and spilled across her metal cheeks? She had not realized she was still capable of crying.

A spidery net of red spilled from Sif's body, unspooling from her eyes, nose, and mouth, engulfing Thanos' fist in flame. Thanos sucked her dry. The last tendril of the Aether tugged away from Sif’s body and she spasmed as if a blade had been withdrawn from her chest. The red energy pooled and solidified into a hard oval, fitting neatly in an empty socket on the knuckle of the Gauntlet, side-by-side with the Power Stone.

Sif kicked for a moment longer before she went limp in Thanos' grasp. He released her and she spilled onto the floor at his feet. Thanos clenched the Gauntlet into a fist. He grinned at the new ruby Stone that glowed along with the purple. When he spoke, he spoke so quietly Nebula could not tell whether or not he was speaking to her or just to the air, gloating in triumph to none but himself: "Fun isn't really something one considers when balancing the universe. But this does put a smile on my face."

An unexpected crack split the air and Thanos looked up in surprise.

The smell of ozone preceded a crackling flash of lightning. Fragments of scaffolding, plaster, and twisted metal were hurled out of the way of the door at the other end of the room. The lightning cleared; a caped figure emerged from the wafting smoke, blond hair glinting gold in the shaft of sunset-light spilling through the open roof.

Thanos roared in anger and pointed the Gauntlet at the disturbance and a blast of purple, bled through with veins of scarlet, leapt from his open palm. The resulting explosion shuddered through the building and what was left of the roof caved inward.

A falling chunk of metal clipped Nebula on the side of the head, and then all she could see was darkness.

OOO
Thor feebly stood, pushing a heavy beam off his chest. He clung to the wall, head spinning and legs wobbling beneath him. The second blast had tossed him like a ragdoll back into the hallway as the building collapsed around him. The cut on his cheek had stopped bleeding, crusting the side of his face with dried blood.

The air was still now, and full of dust and ash. Thor did not know for how long he had been knocked senseless. He stumbled through the wreckage. It was useless now to seek the Power Stone, he knew. He had seen the figure who wielded it, had seen the terrible power it contained. It was too late. He had failed.

He stepped through the doorway, shoving aside rubble that impeded him. The figure who had held the Stone – Thor could only conclude it had been Thanos; he had seen the glint of bronze Gauntlet – appeared to have fled. Thor doubted there would be any survivors. He could see more bodies of guards here, covered in debris and dust.

"What the hell happened?"

Thor turned to see Rocket scampering toward him, followed closely by a loping Groot. They must have landed their ship somewhere outside. The battle above the city no longer seemed to be raging. The sky was colored dusky gold as night approached.

Undoubtedly, they would soon be joined by the rest of the Guardians and, sure enough, Thor heard the whir of the Milano's engines as it approached from the other side of the ruins.

"Thanos has secured the Power Stone," said Thor.

"Yeah, no kidding," said Rocket. "Me and Groot saw the explosion from our ship."

The Milano landed unevenly on the wreckage across the room. The ramp lowered and Star-Lord, Gamora, Drax, and Mantis disembarked.

Thor stepped down from the pile of wreckage, scanning only half-heartedly for any sign of movement that would indicate life within the graveyard.

"Nebula!" Gamora's voice was strangled and she darted suddenly over to a pile of rubble. Star-Lord jogged after her. There was a body barely visible beneath the fallen ceiling. Thor saw a metallic blue head and part of an arm. Star-Lord and Gamora struggled to dislodge the crumbled ruins from off the figure's crushed body. Drax lumbered forward to help, and the three of them managed to remove the wreckage well enough for Gamora to slip beneath it and pull out the body, cradling the figure to her chest.

"Nebula!" Gamora said urgently, shaking the figure's lifeless shoulders. Thor could see she was missing an arm, socket in her shoulder a disconcerting mix of severed wires and clotted blood. "Don't you dare, dammit! Don't you dare do this to me, sister!"

Sister. The realization caused a pang to ripple through Thor's stomach and he looked away. His eyes fell on the dark hair of a body, sprawled across the floor in the center of the room. There was less wreckage here, and the body was untouched by rubble.

For a moment Thor stared uncomprehendingly at the body, because surely it was not – it did not make sense that – she could not possibly – no.

Thor's heartbeat thudded heavily in his ears. He stumbled forward and was on his knees in a second, clutching at the body's shoulders, eyes glued to the face of – it could not be – but it was – it was – and a cry rose to choke Thor in his throat.
"Sif," he breathed. "Sif. Oh Sif, what misfortune could possibly have led you here today?"

He pulled her body onto his knees, stroking her hair, one hand clasped to the side of her head.

"Do not. Do not leave me here –" Thor's eyes burned. He was angry at his grief, angry that he should find her, angry that he should be too late. "Sif." He shut his eyes.

She was dead. She had to be dead. Thor dared not hold out hope when her body had not been counted among those perished in Asgard, but now – now, she must be dead, for this room was full of death. No hope could survive among these ruins.

"Do not…tell me you are crying for me…you oaf."

Thor's eyes snapped back open, meeting Sif's bleary gaze on his lap. She smiled weakly. Her teeth were stained pink with bloody saliva.

"Sif," he said, heart aching with too many emotions to discern one from the other. "Do not speak," he said hastily. "Rest, Sif. Rest. I will take care of you. Dear Sif."

"I will not stand… for your mawkishness," Sif murmured, eyes drifting closed, but she forced them back open. For a moment she peered up at Thor in confusion, as if she could not believe he was there. "Thor?"

"I am here," said Thor, brushing her cheek with his thumb. "I am here."

It was too like Svartalfheim, when Loki had perished in Thor's arms, and Thor felt sick at the comparison.

"Thor…Loki was – Loki –"

"What do you know of my brother?" said Thor, dismay rending his heart. He did not know if he could stand any more surprises today. Fandral. Hogun. Volstagg. Sif. It was too much.

"He was…taken. Thor, I am sorry."

"Do not be sorry. Dear Sif, you have done so well. So well."

Sif did not seem to hear him any longer. Her eyes grew distant. "They took him and – and I could not stop them."

She coughed, body jerking in Thor's arms, face twisting in pain. Blood dribbled from her lips. Thor hushed her, wiping her face clean with the back of his hand.

"I am sorry. Thanos has…retrieved the Reality Gem."

"It is not your fault, Sif," said Thor fiercely. His throat was raw. He could barely speak. He did not understand and he needed help.

Thor looked up. The rest of the Guardians had gathered. Gamora was supporting the tattered figure of Nebula at her side. Nebula's eyes were unfocused as she stared down at Sif on the ground.

Help – but Thor did not know what to ask for.

"He goes…" Sif's eyes once again focused on Thor's face, grasping hold of it as though she was afraid he would leave her. "Thor," she said urgently. "He goes to Midgard…the Reality Gem…it showed me –"
"Rest now, Sif," said Thor. He eased her to the ground. One hand still clung to her head, the other entwined with the fingers of her hand. She did not have strength enough to squeeze his hand even as he pumped hers reassuringly. "We will take care of you."

Mantis joined him at the ground, face troubled. She lay her palm flat against the top of Sif’s head. Thor almost wished she would not. He wanted a private moment just with he and Sif, but he knew Mantis was just trying to help, trying to soothe Sif into sleep, perhaps, so he didn't say anything.

"I go to Valhalla, Thor…to join our people. I only hope –" Sif struggled for a moment to find the words, brow furrowed. "I only hope I may be…counted worthy enough…"

"Dear Sif of Asgard," Thor whispered, bowing close so she could still hear him even as she faded. "It is Valhalla that is unworthy of you."

Sif’s lips upturned weakly in a smile. "My…King," she breathed. Her eyelids fluttered closed and head rolled away from Thor's palm. How peaceful she looked, even with smudges of dirt and blood on her face. How like Sif, beautiful and fierce Sif. Thor dipped his head over her still body.

"You knew her?" It was Drax. His voice was unexpectedly soft.

"Yes," said Thor. He gently crossed Sif’s arms over her chest in the resting position of a warrior. She should have her sword. It was not right for her to be without it, even in death. Especially in death.

"She loved you," said Mantis, voice choked with tears.

Thor smoothed Sif's disarrayed hair across her brow and pressed a kiss to her forehead, still warm from the heat of worthy battle. "She was an old friend. An old and dearly loved friend."

Chapter End Notes

Yeah, so just imagine Loki screaming "Kill me!" in the same voice he used to scream "Tell me!" at Odin in the first Thor film and…. My baby, why do I torment you so?

Also, Vision was super interesting to write in this. I wanted to show him in action as Thanos' pawn, and originally I was going to let him be a silent threat, but then I thought: how much creepier would it be if he's the same, polite Vision we all know and love, just trying to kill the good guys?

And y'all thought the action was done? Think again. Tony and Co. (as I call them in my notes) are still headed your way.
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

Erg. Writing this chapter was like pulling teeth. Writer's block is a bitch because even when I know what I want to say it just won't let me.

Another warning for spoiler-ish leaked footage reveal (the comic con trailer, which I can't image hasn't circulated to everyone by now).

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Toto, this sure as hell ain't Kansas anymore," Stark said, spewing nonsense as usual, as Brunnhilde glided the spaceship toward the blue and green surface of Xandar, very like Midgard or a plethora of other realms. Really, Midgardians had such an exaggerated sense of their exceptionality. Stark's eyes were glued to the landscape spilling across their viewport.

Brunnhilde did not spare Stark a second glance, but piloted the vessel -- the Midgardians had named it a quinjet -- toward the Nova Corps headquarters. She had been to Xandar once or twice, a very long time ago, before she settled -- crashed -- on Sakaar and decided she didn't have enough motivation to make her way out of the trash heap again. It had been comfortable among the wreckage.

"I don't think that's what Dorothy said," said the Sorcerer Strange at Brunnhilde's elbow, also entirely absorbed by the rapidly approaching world. They were astonished like children might be at the sight of some celestial marvel, things Brunnhilde had long ago become indifferent to. "So this is what another planet looks like up close?"

"I guess so," Brunnhilde shrugged. "All start to look the same after a while."

"Holy shit," said Stark in appreciation. They were close enough to the ground now to pick out snaking rivers through towering trees, and the occasional dwelling place of those few Xandarians who lived outside the metropolis. "George Lucas ain't got nothing on this. You know where we're headed, Princess?"

Brunnhilde did not bother to answer Stark. She simply pointed through the windscreen to the cityscape that rolled toward them on the horizon, lit behind it by twin setting suns. Golden light spilled across the skyline. Xandarian sunsets were always talked about to be a thing of beauty, but when it came right down to it, Brunnhilde didn't really give a damn about things of beauty anymore. What she really needed now was a good stiff drink.

"Is it--ah--always this busy?" Strange tendered the question with a frown, leaning forward slightly to get a better look out the screen. He was a man Brunnhilde could admire: level-headed, curt, and quieter than Stark, which granted him double portions of Brunnhilde's grace -- but she did wish he wouldn't stand so damn close to her while she worked the controls.

Brunnhilde followed his gaze to see that the city ahead of them was, indeed, swarming with an inordinate amount of air traffic. Yes, Xandar was a place of mass transport among the galaxy, but--

"Er--" said Stark. "Unless they're having a citywide firework show, I'd say they were being
"Damn," said Brunnhilde under her breath, because Stark was right. The streams of light visible across the distance were definitely gunfire, and there appeared to be two brands of spacecraft swooping above the towers: Nova Corps Star Blasters and a slightly larger, sleek offensive craft that Brunnhilde took only a moment to recognize as the same ships that had attacked the Sakaarian vessel.

"I have a bad feeling about this," Stark intoned, and for some reason shot both her and Strange a swift smile before sobering when he received a scathing look from Strange.

"Do you think it's Thanos?" said Strange.

"That's my first guess," Brunnhilde gritted her teeth and sharply pulled back on the controls, causing the quinjet to enter a tight turn away from the city. "And we're not sticking around to find out if I'm right."

"I thought Asgardian warriors charged toward battle, not away from it?" said Stark.

"We came here for information, Stark," Brunnhilde snapped, even though she hadn't meant to, but her throat was wound too tightly to let her voice escape if not abruptly. "Not to risk getting killed in battle before we can rescue your friends."

Stark had not sounded deliberately goading, but his words had stung, though Brunnhilde would never let him know why. "But you know all about cowardice, don't you?" Loki's voice was forever twisted into the same hidden memories she had tried so long to suppress which he had dredged back up with his invasive claws.

"They could need our help!" Stark protested. Stark needed to learn to hold his goddamn tongue – which granted, Brunnhilde often didn't know how to do, either, but still. She at least had more tact than this Man of Iron did.

Besides, she did not trust him, and that was reason enough to dislike him, as well. No matter the flimsy excuse he fed her about that buffoon General Ross, Stark had threatened her people and her King, for that he was unforgivable. She was only on this wild goose chase because it gave her a better chance at finding Thor again.

"What help could we possibly give them, Stark?" said Strange.

"The quinjet's fitted with artillery. I've got my suit. You've got your handy twirly things. And I'm sure Princess here can –"

"I am warning you, Stark –" Brunnhilde began. Anger woke in her chest like a living animal, a beast entirely detached from herself and for the first time since she'd learned the Hulk was not his natural form, she wondered what Banner felt like on a daily basis.

Strange interrupted her: "We're stranger's here. They'd likely mistake us as enemies and shoot us out of the sky." Damn him for his voice of reason. Why didn't he just let her shove her hand down Stark's throat and yank his tongue out by force?

"Nobody ever wants to do what I want to do," Stark pouted like a petulant child.

Brunnhilde kept the quinjet flying firmly in the opposite direction of the city. Her thoughts were racing, called back from unwelcome places.
Why had Thor left her behind? The thought whipped through her head just as it had replayed countless times since Asgard's infant king hurled himself out of the hull of the Sakaarian spaceship, toting Banner at his side. Thor did not think her a coward. He could not possibly think her a coward. That was not why he had left her, shouting insults up at his trailing lightning, again abandoned in a hollow metal shell, another reminder of the level of Sakaarian refuse she had sunken to.

"Sorry to interrupt your inner monologue, Princess," said Stark, "But we've got an incoming blip on our radar screen." Stark pointed to the grid-like screen on the dashboard Brunnhilde had largely ignored until then. Plebeian technology. Brunnhilde was surprised it was of any use at all.

Sure enough, however, a small blotch had appeared on the screen, blinking on and off as it moved across the grid.

"Friend or foe, ya think?" Stark asked.

"Either way, I think we're still undetected," said Strange. "It's not coming toward us."

"Yeah, well," said Brunnhilde, and made the appropriate evasive maneuvers, "Let's hope it stays that way."

"Nope," said Stark, and reached across the controls, arm nearly hitting Brunnhilde in the nose in his eagerness. "Not headed toward us, but I bet it's aimed for that beaut right there."

They were near enough the ground to see a clearing through the sparse trees and brush, and sitting in the field was a large black spacecraft, shaped like a soaring bird of prey.

"Look familiar dunnit?" said Stark, sounding exceptionally pleased with himself, which put Brunnhilde's teeth on edge.

"It's certainly the same ship that took Vision and Wanda Maximoff," Strange added, craning his neck to keep the ship in view as Brunnhilde resolutely flew passed it. "Or at least one that looks just like it."

"We up for a closer look?" said Stark. "It's possible they could still be aboard."

"If the approaching ship belongs to an enemy," said Brunnhilde. "We'll want to stay as far away as possible. We're not prepared to take them on in battle."

"Ah, come on," said Stark. "We're more than capable of taking on a few alien bastards. And I'm itching for a fight. What do you say, Princess—"

"My name is Brunnhilde, Stark!" Brunnhilde did not know what made her snap. She shoved herself out of the pilot's seat and rounded on Stark, words leaping out of her throat before she could stop them. "Brunnhilde of the Valkyrie and I am not a princess!"

"What kind of stupid ass name is Brunnhilde, anyway?" Stark snapped.

That did it.

She had had enough of Stark's arrogance and insufferable prattling. She launched herself forward and stuffed her face into Stark's own. She thought how easily it would be to snap his spine over her knee like splintering a tree branch. Puny mortal, no wonder Loki had tried to conquer them. "It is the name for a warrior and a name granted to me by my sisters. It means 'Sword in Battle.' It's a name I have discarded for Millenia too long, but now take back up. It is my name, for I am a warrior of Asgard once again."
Stark faltered backward two steps, but seemed swiftly to recover himself. "Er – right-o, Princess Brunhilde."

Brunnhilde seethed. "I. Am. Not. A. Princess." She fought the desire to heave Stark to the ground. Boldness like his would get him slain in battle quicker than Brunnhilde could bat an eye. She could not comprehend how he had managed to evade death for so long. How, indeed, could even those who were counted among his allies not become sick of him?

"Right," said Stark again, nodding briskly, lifting a finger in the air as if to mark her words. "Not a princess. Warrior. Got it. Wielder of swords in battle and all that jazz. Brunnhilde. Okay if I call you Brunn? Hilda? Bruno?"

"My name is Brunnhilde," She hissed through her teeth.

Strange surveyed Brunnhilde and Stark with eyebrows raised, not getting involved but there to intervene if things got ugly.

"So, we – uh – gonna go kick some ass?" said Stark after a pause.

Brunnhilde yanked herself away from him, scowling, but pushed the controls to the side, wheeling the quinjet back around. "Be wary, Stark, or I might kick yours," she growled.

Thor could not possibly consider her a coward, and she would be damned if anyone thought so of her any longer. And – if they did – she would show them very wrong.

OOO

It turned out heading back to the grounded spaceship was not one of Tony's hottest ideas. Just like little miss princess had warned, the other ship was headed straight toward the one in the clearing, and that meant it was also barreling straight out of the sky toward the quinjet as soon as they circled back into view.

"Dammit," Brunnhilde snarled, but she seemed to know instinctively where the triggers were on the quinjet's control panel and let loose a spray of gunfire toward the approaching ship – apparently foe – and it returned the fire from the quinjet's Gatling gun instantly.

Brunnhilde shouted as she veered the quinjet out of the way and angled it again to take another shot at the enemy craft. Tony – although he really should have learned his lesson by now – made another note never to cross this chick in battle.

"Hold on!" Brunnhilde cried, "This is going to get rough!" She jetted toward the enemy ship, firing incessantly until the ship was forced to serve out of the way or turn into a pile of molten metal. Brunnhilde didn't stop there, but banked the controls steeply upward so that the quinjet pitched onto its stomach.

Tony didn't have time to brace himself. He was on the ground in an instant, sliding across the floor and smacking into the wall as Brunnhilde pulled the quinjet into a barrel-roll over the top of the other ship. She straightened the jet with the enemy ship once again squarely in their sightlines.

The Gatling gun rattled, strobe-light gunfire erupted from the belly of the quinjet, and the enemy ship spiraled through the air, wing clipped by Brunnhilde's shot.

"Yes!" she crowed, pumping her fist. The enemy ship pinwheeled toward the ground and made impact with a puff of flame.
"Oof!" a muffled voice cried just as a compartment in the wall behind Tony popped open and a tangle of arms and legs spilled onto the floor.

Strange and Brunnhilde turned in surprise at the disturbance. Tony stood with difficulty, body aching after being tossed to the ground by Brunnhilde's maneuvers. Horrible recognition contorted Tony's gut, looking at the latex-fitted body sprawled on the ground, and he said, dumbstruck, "Kid, what the f –"

Peter scrambled to his feet in seconds. He was wearing his suit, but his mask was off, revealing tousled hair and a face flushed ruby red. "Mr. Stark, don't get angry – I can explain –"

"Explain!" Tony shouted. "Are you out of your fucking mind! I told you to stay on earth – to get back home to your aunt!. How many times will it take before you finally listen to me, kid? How many times –" Something about Tony's voice sounded so damn familiar and then he realized, with a sickening thud in his stomach that clogged his throat immediately, that he sounded just like Howard.

"Mr. Stark, I – I'm sorry," Peter stammered, "but I – I couldn't just –"

"Yeah, so, I don't know who you are, and, frankly, I don't give a damn –" the princess cut in sardonically from the cockpit, "but are we going to finish what we started, or waste time arguing?"

"Land the jet," Strange said, and Tony could imagine him standing over an operating table, coolly asking for a scalpel. "We'll see if there are any survivors. Perhaps they can tell us where they've taken Vision and Wanda."

Peter opened his mouth to utter more apologies, but clamped it shut again when Tony pointed in his face, "I don't want to hear it, Peter. I mean it."

Tony's head was reeling with the surprise of the kid's presence. He couldn't wrap his head around it – and all he could hear echoing in his skull was his father shouting about how disappointed he was when Tony snuck back into the mansion one night, drunk on stolen whiskey and smuggling in some nameless, giggling girl.

"Wasting all your damn life on filth when you could be so much more. You could be so much more if you just tried damn harder."

"Here goes nothing," Brunnhilde said on an exhale as she punched in the landing coordinates. A small shudder ran through the quinjet when it touched ground. The exit ramp descended with a hiss of metal against metal and a rush of air.

Brunnhilde hopped out of her chair. Strange passed Tony and Peter with one of his unnerving gazes, like he could read their minds or something. Tony wouldn't put it past the Sorcerer; he was a creepy fella.

"Stay put," Tony barked at Peter, who was rooted to the ground and nodded with wide eyes. "We'll talk about this later. I mean it, kid. But for now, just don't you dare get yourself killed."

Tony punched the button on the cuff around his wrist and his suit flew into action off the floor where he'd piled it. It assembled seamlessly around his body. "Afternoon, Boss. Change of scenery noted," said Friday chirpily into his ear and he ignored her.

The air outside was cool and clear – not what Tony had expected of an alien world. He hadn't known what he'd expected, but certainly not this. It might as well have been earth, with its bright green shrubbery and weed-choked ground. All that was different were the two swollen suns that hung low on the horizon.

"One small step for man, one giant step for mankind," said Strange, nodding at Tony as they
disembarked from the quinjet. Was that a joke? Tony couldn't tell. He was too busy being angry at Peter, but really being worried about Peter, and just being sick of all this shit already, and they hadn't even started the real show yet.

The enemy ship was a smoking ruin, ground into the dirt. Brunnhilde led them forward – nerves of steel, that girl – as they approached it cautiously, respective weapons drawn: Tony's repulsors simmered at the ready, Strange palmed those geometrically-patterned glowing discs, and Brunnhilde lifted her blade over her shoulder – damn, the Iron Man suit was cool and all, but Tony would never achieve the same level of bad-asserity as Princess Asgard Warrior girl unless he got himself a sword. With rockets.

"Add to the list, Friday," he said, "make rocket sword for the suit when I get home."

"Will do, boss," Friday answered readily, withholding any snarky remarks.

They stepped closer to the ship, looking for any sign of life and ready to blast it out of the sky if it should appear – like the good little earthling welcoming party they were. Tony thought about Peter left in the quinjet and hoped to God the kid would have enough sense to stay out of the way if things got messy. He was not going to have sixteen-year-old blood on his hands. No way was he going to explain to insanely hot Aunt May that he was responsible for the death of her nephew.

"Yoo-hoo," Tony called when they were close enough. "Anybody home?"

He shouldn't have asked: rather than simply open the exit hatch, the ship exploded from the inside in a spray of purple and red sparks. Brunnhilde scrambled for cover. Tony ducked, snapping his mask into place. His eyes adjusted through the liquid crystal display of his goggles, but he couldn't see a thing through the haze of smoke and dust kicked into the air from the explosion.

"Friday, scan for heat signatures," he said tautly.

"Only one, boss," Friday answered. "Coming right toward you."

"Damn," said Tony, but he didn't need her warning – he could see a hulking form emerging through the haze – and he lifted himself into the air, firing dual blasts from his repulsors that were deflected with alarming ease back through the dust. Tony ducked and rolled midair to avoid his own firepower, cursing furiously under his breath.

Brunnhilde let loose a battle-cry as she eruption into action. Tony could barely see her whirling blade through the suffocating smoke. He still couldn't make out the form of their attacker.

Another burst of blinding light – very like what had caused the explosion in the ship – but this time it was like red lightning, sizzling viciously toward Tony through the dust. He cut out of the way, but knew at least some of it was going to make unavoidable contact –

A black, yellow-rimmed vortex spun out of nowhere, swallowing the red lightning whole.

"Yer a wizard, Harry," Tony crowed in delight toward Strange, who was stalking forward into battle looking almost bored. Tony revved his suit for another dive toward their attacker.

The dust was clearing now. Tony caught sight of purple skin and bronze armor before a deafening wave of colorless power swept outward through the air. It picked Tony up like he was a lifeless puppet and tossed him carelessly backward. Tony rolled into the sky, alarms screaming to life as his suit suffered a multitude of minor bumps and bruises.

"Calm your tits, Friday," Tony said through clenched teeth, struggling to stabilize. Whatever this
thing was, it had *gall*, refusing to back down from Iron Man.

"Consider them calmed, sir," Friday answered. If a robot could sound pissed-off, Friday had just managed it.

Somewhere in the battle he heard Brunnhilde grunt in pain and a clatter of metal armor against hard ground as she was shoved backward from her foe.

Tony could see the figure at the center of the fray clearer now: a gigantic alien form with purple skin and a self-satisfied smirk on its face. It was the smirk that really ticked Tony off – no one was allowed to look that pleased with themselves while beating the shit out of someone except Tony, himself.

"Hey – beet-head!" Tony shouted, "Catch this!" And he launched an anti-tank missile from his left forearm straight toward the monster's ugly maw.

The alien turned at the sound of Tony's voice and lifted its left hand, closed in a gleaming metal glove and simply caught Tony's missile, as easy as a game of football. What the hell was this guy? And that wasn't panic buzzing in the back of Tony's mind. That sure as hell wasn't panic.

He dove out of the way as the creature turned the missile back around, launching it toward Tony. He felt the heat of the explosion behind him as the missile made contact with the forest that rimmed the clearing, uprooting trees, tossing more dust and rocks into the air. The shockwave swept him up like a wave in the ocean and slammed him into the ground. His suit, still ill-recovered from the first blast, groaned ominously. Not good. Not good. Friday groaned like she'd been punched in the gut.

Tony pushed himself onto his knees, vision blinking with warnings as his suit struggled not to entirely fail. Where the hell had Strange and Bruno gone?

Something clicked into place inside of Tony's head as he connected giant metal glove to Gauntlet and then to Thanos and then to *oh shit* as the Gauntlet's fingers opened wide, bearing the palm for another blast of energy aimed straight toward Tony's chest –

"Yo, grapefruit, over here!" A rivulet of thin webbing shot forward and wrapped around Thanos' hand, locking together the fingers so he could not open his palm, eliciting a growl of frustration from the purple giant.

"Peter, no!" the shout ripped from Tony's mouth as the familiar, lithe form of Spider-Man swung out of nowhere, headed straight for Thanos. Peter landed a firm kick on Thanos' chest, but Thanos barely tottered. He struggled against the restraints around the Gauntlet, snapped the webbing with little effort and freed his hand once again.

He launched a blast of purple light at Peter's perch on a patch of grass. Peter leapt out of the way – ground spraying into chunks of earth behind him as he arched back toward Thanos. He released another stream of webbing from his wrists, but Thanos swept it aside as though it was mist, swiping at Peter with his gilded fist.

Peter's cry was muffled as Thanos' hand wrapped around his legs and yanked him out of the air, hurling him toward ground.

"Get your hands of my kid!" Tony roared, suit sputtering as he forced himself forward in wobbling flight. Thanos let go of his crushing hold on Peter on the ground in time to swat Tony away with a lazy backhand.

Tony spun wildly backward and grinded to a halt in the dirt.
"Boss – critical –" Friday crackled into silence. Tony's suit shut down with a harrowing, final whir.

There were footsteps on the ground. Thanos was approaching. Approaching and there was nothing Tony could do about it –

A flutter of red cloak and Dr. Strange zoomed into view, arms wrapped with curious bands of glowing green.

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There were footsteps – wait. What the fuck was happening?

Thanos was confused, as well, and growled, "What is this magic, Sorcerer?"

"Perhaps it's time you get a little taste of your own medicine," said Strange, and released a string of sparking yellow light toward Thanos, wrapping around the creature's chest. Thanos yelled and snapped the strings of light as if pulling apart thread.

There were footsteps on the ground – approaching and nothing Tony could – a flutter of red – glowing green –

"You cannot defeat me!" Thanos bellowed.

"Shall we try again?" Strange asked, note of poised arrogance in his voice that Tony could not help but admire.

More yellow light. Thanos was shoved backward and stumbled, but raised his fist and scarlet flames erupted from his fingers, searing through the air toward Strange. Strange dropped to his knee, holding one of his twirling disks up like a shield. The beams of energy collided with Strange's shield and rebounded, shredding the sky, cleaving the earth into a shower of dirt and rock –

Footsteps. Footsteps retreating. A flutter of red. Strange aiming tethers of yellow light toward the roaring engines of the black, birdlike spacecraft which lifted off the ground, pitched forward, spilled dust into air from its furiously spinning rotors and screaming with grinding metal gears – launching up and away into the sky and then –

Stillness.

Tony collapsed backward and shut his eyes. He brought his hands to the sides of his helmets and twisted it off of his head, gulping breaths of the dust-clogged air. Damn. His body felt like it was one giant bruise.

"What the hell was that?" Tony asked, eyes still firmly shut. If he couldn't see it, maybe it would all just go away.

"I'll tell you later, Stark," said Strange. He offered a hand from above Tony and helped hoist him back to his feet, Iron Man suit creaking in protest.

Tony had a thousand questions whirring through his mind, but all were immediately erased by a stabbing pain in his chest when he remembered Peter and – God no – Peter –
"Underoos!" He clunked across the ground, disabled suit infuriatingly cumbersome, but he wasn't going to take the time now to take it off.

Spider-Man was still on the ground where Thanos had pounded him into submission. He stirred weakly when Tony dashed forward, Strange on his heels.

Tony was on his knees in a second. He removed the armored gloves from his hands and gently lifted away the hood of Peter's suit.

"Talk to me, kid," he said urgently. Peter's face was ashen. His eyes were wide open and haunted. Tony felt like he was going to be sick.

"Tony?" said Peter, voice breathless.

"I'm here. I'm here. Where does it hurt? Can you get up? Wait. Wait, don't try to move."

"Tony," Peter choked. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry."

"Why the hell didn't you listen?" Tony wanted to yell, but instead he could barely speak.

"I'm sorry." A sixteen-year-old kid. A damn child. "I shouldn't have come. I'm sorry. I – I climbed into the storage – compartment. Like – like stowed away like in – in that movie –"

"Easy, easy," Tony said urgently, and gripped Peter's hand as the kid gasped through pain and shock. He wanted to cup Peter's head in his hand but he couldn't risk jogging his neck if there was any spinal damage. "Strange, dammit, do something!"

Strange was at Tony's side. He nudged Tony so he could get better access to Peter but Tony wouldn't budge, dammit. No way was he moving even a millimeter farther away.

"Peter," said Strange, voice maddeningly calm. "Where does it hurt?"

Peter gulped for breath. "I – I don't know – in my – my head hurts."

Slowly the dust settled around them, coating the smoking wreckage of the battle in a grimy film. It landed on Tony's face and tasted salty in his mouth.

Peter blinked rapidly. "Tony –" his voice was tight, and Tony realized it was because the kid was afraid. Tony's chest burst with agony as if someone had shoved a metal beam through his ribcage. "Tony – I – everything's all blurry and I – I can't –" Peter kept blinking and his eyes filled with tears. His face screwed up in an effort to stop himself from crying. "It's hard to see."

"You're going to be fine, Pete," said Tony. "Just keep talking to me. Just keep talking, kid. I'm right here. Right here. I'm not going anywhere."

"Look up at me, Peter. Look right here." Strange lay a hand on Peter's forehead and stared intently into the kid's eyes. He looked grim when he glanced back up. He silently checked Peter's body for other evident injuries, running his hands over his limbs to check for breaks. Tony waited with baited breath, strangled by his desire to take Strange's shoulders and shake the man until his teeth rattled, shouting fix him. Fix this, dammit. You're a goddamn sorcerer. Make him stop hurting, damn you.

"It hurts," Peter whimpered.

"I know it does. I know." He pumped Peter's hand in his own. "But you're going to be fine. I promise you're going to be fine. We'll fix you up good as new."
It was sunset, Tony realized distantly. The twin suns dipped fully below the horizon, covering everything in a golden haze.

Brunnhilde limped out of the dust, clutching her ribs but otherwise unscathed. She stopped in her tracks and stared at Peter on the ground, unreadable expression flicking across her face. She didn't ask what had happened. Tony wanted to demand where she'd run off to, because if she'd been there then Peter wouldn't –

"We need to get him to the quinjet," said Strange quietly, but Tony didn't move.

The suns dipped below the skyline and for just a moment murky gray shadows spilled across them before another sun rose on the opposite horizon, making the sky glow dusky gold once again.

"Mr. Stark?" Peter whispered.

"Yeah, kid?"

"Are we…are we really on another planet?"

Tony could not speak. A nob formed in his throat and rose to choke him.

"Stark," said Strange, voice firm but not unkind. "We need to move him. He's fractured his skull. Help me carry him into the quinjet."

"Right," said Tony tautly. He moved on instinct. He didn't think he was capable of rational thought any longer. He gripped Peter's shoulders as Strange moved to grab his legs. Together they carefully hoisted him into the air. Peter winced in pain and bile rose in Tony's throat. He didn't think it was possible to feel this much on behalf of another person. With Rhodey it hadn't been like this. Even with Pepper it wasn't like this.

Peter was just a kid, dammit. Just a kid and Tony had – Tony had done this to him.

They traversed the uneven ground slowly, cautiously avoiding pitfalls and obstacles that lumbered erratically out of the dust. Brunnhilde hurried forward to beat them to the quinjet. She went inside and lowered one of the retractable bunks from the interior hull, scrounging in the numerous compartments for a pillow and thin blanket. The quinjet really wasn't outfitted as a proper medevac transport, but for now it would have to do.

First point of business was getting Peter comfortable. That was all Tony cared about.

"Stark," said Strange in that god-awful doctor voice of his. "Er – Tony – let me get to him."

Tony moved numbly out of the way. He dropped into one of the swivel chairs set against the opposite wall. Brunnhilde watched silently from the cockpit. Strange was doing something over Peter, muttering comforting things under his breath, moving to retrieve medical equipment, running scans over his prone body.

Tony unclasped his suit manually from his body, disassembling it by hand because whatever Thanos had blasted it with had totally fried all its mechanics. Thanos. Thanos was too strong for them. He would have killed them if Strange hadn't – hadn't done whatever the hell he had done when he'd made time go all wibbly-wobbly.

Tony couldn't see Peter's face behind Strange's back. Tony couldn't think. There was nothing to think about, accept the wide-eyed look of terror in Peter's eyes when Tony removed his mask. I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry.
Finally, Strange stepped back. He patted Peter on the shoulder before turning to Tony and nodding his head toward the ramp, wanting to talk to Tony outside. Tony's stomach twisted in a painful cramp but he managed to stand, putting a hand against the wall to steady himself.

He stopped by Peter before following Strange down the ramp. "You'll be okay, kid. I promise."

Peter smiled weakly. "Is she – is she carrying a sword?"

"Sure is," said Tony and smiled widely, even though the movement felt strained and unnatural on his lips. "She'll let you play with it if you're a good boy. Hey, Princess, let the laddie admire thy saber."

Brunnhilde moved to comply, for once not offering a goddamn snarky comment, and Tony walked away, chest aching, eyes burning, toward Strange who waited at the end of the ramp, hands clasped behind his back and face resolutely turned toward the rising sun in the distance.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for that sort of abrupt ending; I needed a chapter break and came up with…this.

Marvel films thrive on verbal confrontation, physical conflict, and necessary coincidence. I hope my story has been able to so far provide all three. That said, what are the odds Tony would spot the Black Order's ship from the quinjet? Probably not good, but I could not resist the opportunity for more drama.

Full discloser: Peter's grapefruit line was stolen from a Tumblr post. I don't have Tumblr (I'm just a chronic lurker) so now I can't find the post…I'll update this space if I find the source, but for now just know I'm not taking credit for that one.

Also, just wanted to rec Three Queens by gaslightgallows (hearts_blood). It covers fresh ground for Loki's parentage concerning a certain someone introduced in Ragnarok and has become my new headcanon (but won't be making its way into this fic…I have no room).
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

Black Panther is released TONIGHT. And I'm not seeing it 'til Saturday. Sigh. But I've already been spoiled about one of the end-credit scenes and I just want to say that I totally called it, y'all.

Also, next chapter picks things up where I left things on earth…and will require a bit of adjusting per any Black Panther wrenches, so I'm not entirely certain I'll make my weekly deadline.

Update: saw the movie on Saturday (so good. my heart), and I'll also be *easing* a few minor (very minor) edits into past chapters to make my story a smidge more canonical (until Infinity War inevitably mucks it all up again, that is).

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Wanda shivered in the darkness and damp, knees drawn to her chest, head buried in her arms. She was eighteen-years-old again in Strucker's facility. There was that same gnawing fear in her chest, that horrible feeling of suffocating captivity, the realization that she could not get out, augmented to the nth-degree within these bars, deep within the belly of a vessel out in space, lightyears from earth and the remotest possibility of help.

Wanda did not panic. She had never panicked. Even as the other volunteers dropped away, leaving only Pietro's voice sharing space in her skull, reaching out to her behind the wall of their separate containment rooms, she had not panicked.

Instead, her mind felt curiously numb. She retreated inward, as she always did, unconcerned by the world without her. Wanda watched; she thought; she rallied her magic and strength, and told herself she would not panic. When they inevitably came for her, to torture her, to kill her, to bend her mind to their will as they had done to Vis – Vis – she would not panic. She would not let them see her fear, just as she had not let Strucker and Dr. List, or Ultron, or the guards aboard the Raft as they strapped her arms to her chest and clicked the shock collar into place around her throat see her fear.

They could strip her down to the bone, wrench apart her squirming consciousness bit by bit, pick her apart and put her back together again, stuff her full of warped and twisted power that could not be properly contained within her frail human shell, and she would not let them see her panic. Wanda Maximoff would survive, just as she always survived.

She lifted her head as she heard footsteps on the ground, echoing in the cavernous prison as they approached. A dull feeling of apprehension thumped to life in her belly, barely accelerating her heartbeat. It was harder without Pietro's mental squeeze of her hand as the scientists returned for another experiment, a wordless encouragement that all would be alright because he would be by her side, but Wanda gathered herself. No fear.

She would not show them fear.

But she could not help the horrible twist in her stomach, the unraveling of her resolve, as soon as Vision came into view behind the bars.
He walked differently, more heavily, and Wanda spotted why. He had slung over one shoulder a limp body: another prisoner. Wanda wondered where they had gotten the other prisoner from, what corner of the universe they had stopped at, or if another smaller ship had docked with this larger vessel just as Wanda had been brought aboard.

Vision bypassed Wanda's cell without even a glance. The door to the cell beside Wanda shrieked open on its rusty hinges and Vision heaved the unconscious figure onto the ground. The body smacked the wet floor and lay unmoving. The prisoner was slim and dark, tangled hair covered their face. She could not tell if they were male or female...even if they were human. Surely there were other alien species of interest to Thanos. Wanda could see their hands were bound and, strangely, mouth was muzzled.

Her captors had made no such precautions for Wanda, imposed no safeguards even for her magic. Largely, she thought, because she had endeavored no resistance and also because there was nowhere for her to run to, even if she was to use her magic to escape the cell.

The cell door clanged shut. Vision moved to leave.

Wanda's entire body trembled and she could not get it to stop. Hiding her fear – it did not mean hiding her grief. She could even beg.

"Vis," she scrambled to her feet. She did not reach through the bars toward Vision's shoulder – she did not think Vision would let her touch him – but she did grab hold of the cold rails with her hands, clenching her fists so tightly her knuckles turned white.

Vision turned at the sound of her voice. For a moment he looked at her inquiringly, as though expecting an order.

"Do you not know me?" Wanda whispered.

"You are the prisoner," said Vision calmly.

Wanda's stomach churned. She was afraid she was going to be ill. She had vomited twice already. Her eyes filled with tears. It was so easy to cry.

"I know you," she said through her taught throat. "I know you, Vision."

"I am not to speak to the prisoners, I am sorry," said Vision, and he turned, indifferent.

Wanda shut her eyes, but she could still hear his footsteps retreating into the darkness, even though she no longer had to watch him leave.

Her fellow prisoner stirred feebly, drawing Wanda's eyes to the figure on the ground. She dropped to her knees, close to the bars that separated their cells. The floors were filthy with blood, stale excrement, and other stains. She could not reach the figure through the bars.

She watched for a moment silently. It was man, she saw, gaunt and trembling as he slowly regained consciousness. He tried to move his arms but he winced when he tugged against the bonds behind his back.

"What have they done to you?" Wanda breathed. She had not meant to speak aloud but the man jumped at the sound of her voice and his eyes wildly fixed themselves on Wanda through the darkness.

He stared at her over the muzzle that blocked his voice, eyes wary and piercing, seizing her up to see
if she was a threat.

"Can you move?" Wanda asked gently. "I can see if I can remove the gag."

The man did not respond. Perhaps he did not speak her language. Perhaps he did, he simply did not trust her.

"I won't hurt you," Wanda added.

Or perhaps he was too injured to respond. There was a bruise on his left temple, and his eyes were glazed with suppressed pain, but there were no visible injuries that Wanda could see.

Finally, as though it required great determination, the man urged his body forward. He used only his upper body, and – as his hands were bound – could only force himself to roll over to her.

His head landed close enough for Wanda to reach it through the bars. She brushed a tentative finger against the muzzle that wrapped across the man's jaw and around his neck. There appeared to be no seam; it evidently required a special tool to unlock. The man's eyes glared at her as if to say he knew she would fail.

Wanda called her magic into her fingers, flesh glowing red –

The man recoiled, jerking back from Wanda's hand, his eyes widened in surprise – was it fear, also? Wanda withdrew patiently. She was used to people being afraid of her.

She smiled reassuring, wiggling her fingers, making the strands of magic dance. "Don't worry. I know what I'm doing."

Hesitantly, the man eased, tension leaving his shoulders. He offered her the side of his face again. She pressed her fingers against the cold metal, magic easily picking apart the gears and mechanisms until the entire thing detached into several pieces.

The man worked his jaw, wincing. He wetted his lips with his tongue. "And the cuffs?" he croaked. Though weak, his voice was more an order than a request. With difficulty, he maneuvered himself into a more suitable position and Wanda reached through the bars again to make quick work of his bonds.

Once free, he rubbed his chaffed wrists. He pushed himself into a sitting position with his arms, legs dragging after him, propping himself against the bars behind his back. He messaged his freed jaw with a hand.

"What are you?" he asked.

Wanda examined her fellow prisoner. Something nagged at the back of her mind, something she should have realized about him. There was an uneasy feeling in the pit of her stomach. She knew this man. Something about the way he moved, his voice, the way he thought, was indisputably familiar to her.

"My name is Wanda Maximoff," she said, and added after a pause. "I am from earth."

The man eyed her in disbelief. He shook his head. "No. You are certainly not of earth. Unless they are in the business of breeding sorcerers now."

"If you mean to ask me if I was born with these powers," said Wanda slowly, unwilling to say too much – she could not speak of the Mind Stone or the scepter, not when so much hung in the balance.
For all she knew, this could be some elaborate trap: this man sent to weed out answers from her, although she could not guess what knowledge she might possess that would be of any importance. "I will tell you I was not."

"You learned them then?" said the man, cocking an eyebrow in interest.

She knew him. She knew him; she was sure of it, but Wanda could just not say from where.

Wanda was apparently too long in answering, and the man decided to change tactics. "Tell me, how have you found yourself an enemy of Thanos?"

Was this a test? A veiled interrogation? Wanda could not tell. She did not see the use for it. Surely these creatures had instruments clever enough to tug what they desired directly from her body and did not have to resort to petty mind games.

"Tell me, first, who you are;" said Wanda, voice well-measured.

The man grinned wanly at her, as though impressed. "Very well, Wanda of earth. I am Loki of Jotunheim, God of Chaos and Lies."

"Loki," Wanda echoed dimly. Of course, and the memory flooded in like poison. She had not been very aware of the attack on New York while it occurred, of course, as she had been young and half-way across the world, more concerned with keeping alive on the street with Pietro then with the crumbling of a Western power's megapolis – little had she known the significance the event would later play in the throes of Dr. List's most intensive experimentation.

But she had learned plenty of Loki's siege later from the news and the other Avengers – and Clint, of course.

Clint rarely spoke of Loki; Wanda had gleaned the details from an occasional word of encouragement Clint offered her about her own traumas, drawing on his past to help her face the future. She knew only too well how the rape of Clint's mind had left him scarred and distrustful – disturbed and frightened by the betrayal of his own body.

"Ah, yes," Loki whispered, eyes drifting shut with fatigue. He must have seen something in her face. "Earth. I am not liked there."

Loki shifted against the bars. He must have moved too quickly, for he winced, clutching a hand to his chest.

Wanda could not help a stab of pity from piercing her heart.

"How have they hurt you?" she asked. How could she tell he was not feigning weakness – was not manipulating her into helping him just as Clint had cautioned he was capable of?

"Are you talented in healing, too, witch?" he snapped.

"No," Wanda answered calmly. "But I may be able to ease some of your pain."

"I do not need your help," Loki slumped against the bars, irritation gone from his voice as quickly as it had come, replaced by ragged exhaustion.

"You are --" she hesitated and Loki's eyes turned lazily toward her. "You are very different than Clint described you."
In this moment, Wanda found it very difficult to muster even a semblance of Clint's hatred for this frail and diminished god. She could not believe this withered creature had been the cause of so much death and destruction.

Loki's eyes glinted with a mixture of intrigue and confusion. "Clint Barton, the Archer?"

"I did not think a master troubled himself to remember his slaves," said Wanda coldly.

"Oh, I remember him well," Loki said, and leered – perhaps now she could catch a glimpse of the monster who had ravished New York, although she still had to peer hard past the dark shadows under his eyes, the lines of pain he could not disguise across his face. "His was a sharp mind – almost worthy of my possession."

Wanda pulled away from him. She did not want to hear him gloat over Clint. She would not give him the satisfaction of an audience and shut her eyes. She was tired. Very tired, but she thought the prospect of sleep was unlikely.

"Tell me then," said Loki unexpectedly. Did he miss the sound of her voice? Did he seek the comfort of conversation in the crushing darkness and uncertainty of the cell? "You must know the other Avengers if you know Barton."

"Do you care?" said Wanda cautiously, but proceeded when Loki did not answer. "Yes. I was once an Avenger, myself."

"And how endures my former vanquishers under Thanos' assault? Have they been slaughtered and you the lone survivor, taken captive?" Did he sound victorious? No, Wanda did not think so. He was too tired for any kind of triumph.

"No," she said. I do not know, she meant.

"Have they come for you yet?" He said after a pause. His words were haphazard and almost fevered, as though he did not quite have control over himself. Clint had always said he was crazy.

"No," said Wanda, nauseating dread drumming in her chest. She pressed a soothing hand to her belly, letting warmth spread from the tips of her fingers into her flesh.

"They will," said Loki, swallowing with difficulty. Was this regret in his voice? Or merely forewarning?

Cautiously, Wanda spread out the fronds of her mind toward Loki, probing the air between them, drawn by curiosity more than anything else. The God of Lies, how interesting it would be to release the truth that must exist somewhere inside him, unspool the mysteries tangled in his voice.

It worked better if she could physically touch her subject. She had not done this for some time – not since Ultron. Not since she'd sunken into the nightmare caverns that existed in the minds of her bygone teammates.

Her fingers barely brushed Loki's hand, lying limply at his side.

*Pain. Aching in his body. How much longer? How much longer would it be until they came back for him? What else could they possibly want him –*

Loki flinched under her touch as though she had burnt him. Her magic fizzled and dissolved under her fingers, forced back inward. Surprise from his reaction almost sent Wanda toppling backwards. She stopped herself with a hand to the floor.
"How –" he sputtered. "Do not! Do not touch me –"

How quickly he turned from mournfully resigned, masked by haughtiness, to utterly terrified, masked by aggression. They were all masks, Wanda realized, layers upon layers of lies that hid a shrunken core, twisted in on itself in desperate, keening fear that matched Wanda's own. She bled for him, wanted nothing more than to reach out to him through the bars, find warmth and comfort in his –

*Get out!* Loki cried as Wanda's mind inadvertently once again trespassed into his own. *I told you to get out!*

"I'm sorry –" Wanda protested rapidly as Loki physically cringed away from her, eyes wide with horror. "I'm sorry – I do not mean to."

"You've been –" Loki swallowed with obvious effort. "You have wielded the Mind Stone –"

"The power of the Mind Stone has been embedded into my body," Wanda explained. She wanted him to understand, to know that her intrusion was not intentional. "I do not understand how they did so, or, indeed, all it means for my powers."

Loki put his hands over his ears and bowed his head, eyes squeezed shut as Wanda's unfamiliar, encroaching consciousness lingered in the back of his mind, distant, but still present.

*Not again. Not again. Get out. Get out. GET OUT!* She could hear his thoughts, too, and struggled to suppress them, to stifle them before they consumed her.

She choked on bile. *What had she done?* "I'm sorry."

Her words were small and pointless, she knew. The damage had been done, another connection been made – like the one that had existed between her and Pietro, and the one that still pulsed weakly between she and Vision, even now. There was nothing she could do to stop it; it was the Mind Stone's own vicious doing, a collection of broken minds, a multiplicity of consciousness joined within its hull.

She reached out for him again, hand grazing his shoulder. He was shuddering and he tensed under the pressure of her palm but did not try to pull away again.

*I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry,* she thought fiercely. *I will not hurt you. I promise I will not hurt you.*

Wanda did not know what to do, how she could possibly reverse this terrible wrong. She desperately tried to convince him – tried to soothe his violent shivering, the panic that seeped wildly through his being. The horrible, dead weight that dropped into her stomach at the idea of violation that she, herself, knew only too well.

*I'm sorry.*

She could summon more than nightmares from the tips of her fingers, and she pressed her hand firmer into Loki's back, reaching for – for something to calm him, to lessen the pain of the wound she had inflicted. Never had she felt a mind like his. She did not know how to get a hold on it, where to grasp, where to touch to relieve pressure.

Images and feelings – as they always did when she made a connection with another consciousness – began to slicker into her mind. She found a moment of relief with difficulty: a brief glimmer of gold
among the other frightening images Wanda rapidly skimmed past, trying not to pay attention to them, wanting to respect his privacy, but finding some impossible to ignore (mocking laughter, dust drifting across the ocean, leaping flames, blade in his chest, crushing darkness, Loki no, hands turning blue).

Wanda furiously refocused on the flash of golden hair, blue robes, kind smile, gentle hands, you are our son, Loki, and we your family. You must know that –

Loki choked as though with sobs, and Wanda had never imagined the murderer that still visited Clint in his nightmares could be capable of tears. Sorrow – it was impossible to tell if it belonged to her or to Loki – dredged up her throat.

She hadn't meant for him to grieve; she had meant to find comfort, to make things better. She had not meant – A tear rolled down Wanda's cheek and she let go.

She fell back, heart pattering in her throat. She had pulled away too abruptly and tendrils of Loki's thoughts continued to surge inside her mind. For a moment she did not know where she was, then her vision cleared, and she was back inside the cell, lying flat on her back on the filthy stone floor. She was too weak to again rise. Tears spilt down her cheeks and she couldn't remember why she was crying.

She could hear Loki's harsh breathing through the bars, but he appeared to have composed himself.

"What did you see?" he demanded roughly, not looking at her.

Wanda did not need to answer him. She shut her eyes, willing herself away – away from this cell, away from this terror, away from Loki and Wanda's guilt.

I'm sorry.

Loki did not answer her. She sensed his struggle as he futilely sought to shield his mind from her. Too late. It was too late.

Wanda let herself drift toward darkness. Away…away…away.

OOO

She could not guess for how many hours she lay in the prison. They did not come to feed her. She wondered if they had forgotten humans had to eat to survive. No matter; Dr. List had run experiments on how long Wanda's magic could sustain her without food. She could last longer by far than an unenhanced human; although she did soon grow lightheaded and disoriented from a combination of dehydration and exhaustion.

Her mind flitted to strange places, filling with thoughts and memories she could not recognize as her own.

Loki, too, dwindled. He fought his exhaustion for longer than Wanda; she could feel him grapple against his body's need for rest and his paranoia to be left so vulnerable with her unfamiliar power at his side, but even gods, it seemed, could only handle so much physical abuse and – side by side – they drifted together into the liminal space between waking and slumber, traversing the cavities of each other's minds unbidden, perhaps unwillingly.

His mind was not only unfamiliar, but wrong somehow, damaged in a way Wanda could not put her finger on. It appeared to her like a gaping wound would, oozing blood and thought, unhealing although the hurt appeared many years old – or perhaps it had once been healed, but recently again opened, like a scab cruelly scraped away from a cut.
She could feel Loki inside her head now, too. Whether or not he was aware of it, Wanda could not
tell, but his mind slipped readily into hers, wending side by side with her thoughts, going anywhere
he pleased – tentatively curious now as he probed deeper. Wanda could not bring herself to care
about the intrusion.

She would let him go anywhere. Anywhere, that was, except for the careful pockets of space inside
her head that she had spent years constructing, little guarded cells that no one could reach – even
Wanda, herself, had trouble sometimes accessing them. Not that she tried very often.

Once she felt a slight tugging – but her sentries held, and Loki retreated with a brief flash of
frustration and – jealousy? Was he angry that she had such free reign over his mind but he did not
exercise the same privileges over hers? Wanda thought it was likely. She felt his hurt pride and need
to prove himself – felt it all before she remembered she had promised not to pry.

She tried to feel his magic – strange magic, similar and dissimilar to her own in many ways – but it
skittered out of her reach as Loki refused her touch. Perhaps he, too, had places carefully guarded
that Wanda could not reach, no matter how damaged Thanos had left him.

Soon they had laid themselves bare, explored each other so thoroughly they may as well have been
stripped naked. Wanda did not care. She wondered why Loki did so. Was he seeking some way of
controlling her? Hoping to capture her mind like he'd done Clint's?

But no. No. That was not the case. Wanda found her answer easily enough. Loki barely tried to hide
it: he was scared and alone, tired of fighting, broken and waiting to be shattered again. To delve into
someone else's mind, to find a companion in the dark was welcome relief, even if she was just
another petty mortal.

Wanda's heart ached, but rather than try to comfort him, she reached out warily with a more cogent
cord of thought, loosening only a bit one of the locked rooms inside her head to release something
she'd only ever shared with Pietro – deep within the confines of Strucker's house of horrors – *Me too.*

Loki didn't answer her, but she knew he had heard her.

Footsteps scuttled on the stone corridor. They were coming back. Wanda's eyes snapped open and
she raised herself onto her elbows but did not attempt to stand.

Was it wrong that Wanda, for the briefest moment, hoped they had not come for her? As soon as the
thought came, it was replaced by twisted guilt, which Loki clumsily attempted to soothe:

*It is not wrong to fear pain, witch. I know too well.*

Two creatures – Wanda recognized them as the same Chitauri aliens responsible for the attack on
New York – skittered into view, insect eyes blinking with grotesque double lids. But Wanda's eyes
rapidly slid off the two Chitauri, and landed on the figure that drifted idly after them. Vision.

There was no point to cry out to him again. He would not acknowledge her. He would not see her.
Perhaps, this time, he would not even speak to her. *Vision. Vision, my love –*

*You know this creation?* Loki asked her, and Wanda did not answer, snapping shut another avenue
in her mind but she did not think she'd been quick enough; cunning understanding glinted briefly in
Loki's eyes.

The Chitauri passed Wanda's cell door – she could not smother the relief that blossomed in her
stomach, and again hated herself for her selfishness – and stopped outside Loki's. The door squealed
open and the two Chitauri stepped forward as one. Why the extra guards this time? Wanda wondered. Did they expect a fight?

Wanda did not think it likely Loki could offer one. All she could feel from the cell next to hers was crushing despair.

The Chitauri approached Loki on the ground and bent to haul him to his feet while Vision surveyed impassively from the open doorway. Loki did not offer a hand, nor even a sound, of resistance.

His legs would not support his weight. He flopped toward the ground and was only stopped from hitting stone by the iron grip of the Chitauri's claws on his arms. They began dragging him toward the door.

The raw panic that burst to life in Wanda's body did not belong to her. A trembling gasp flew from her lips; she curled in on herself on the floor, quivering as Loki's fear wracked through her body, stronger even than her own. Wanda reached out urgently with her mind as Loki was pulled away, tugging his mind, and whispered just as Pietro used to: *it will be alright. I am here. It will be alright.*

_Do not follow me here, witch,* Loki answered weakly in reply. *You will not like what you see.*

And then he was carried outside the range of audible thought, and Wanda was left only with his simmering fear inside her chest.

The choice to stand was impulsive. Wanda's head spun and she gripped the bars beside her to steady herself, willing her knees not to buckle from weakness. Clint's voice thudded through her mind, a memory: *But if you step out that door, you are an Avenger.*

She would not be able to get far if she escaped, but now she did not need to get far, only far enough to help Loki. And then, if they killed her, she would die doing something good, even if it was for someone who was mostly a stranger – although she could hardly consider him one now that she knew his mind so intimately.

*I am coming,* she thought urgently, even though it was not likely Loki could still hear her.

But he would. Soon he would.

Chapter End Notes

I was worried this came out a little Loki/Wanda shippy, but don't worry, that's not what I'm intending for this story. Canon only pairings – and not a whole lot of those, either.
I have two papers to write and a math test to study for, and am I doing that? No. Am I writing fanfiction, instead? Yes.

We interrupt this program for a brief check-in back with earth. These events take place after the Black Panther film, and, as such, may be mildly spoiler-y. Tread carefully if you haven't seen the movie yet.

Maria Hill continued to squint across the sprawling, grassy plains that rolled out from her perch atop one of the palace's many sweeping balconies. It was calm out here, crackling with dry heat, grass swaying in a light breeze, a sharp contrast to the buzz of the streets – and air – of Birnin Zana that lay on the other side of the turreted palace. Almost like an entirely separate city, like someone had peeled back a curtain over a theater stage to reveal El Dorado.

Which, Maria thought, they technically had.

"Admiring the view?"

Maria didn't flinch as a mild, familiar voice sounded behind her, and she was joined at her side by CIA operative Everett Ross. It had been some time since she'd last seen him, but Ross was just as she remembered: fit, earnest, composed, and ultimately unreadable. She wondered if he was uncomfortable in his black suit under the hot Wakandan sun. She was sweating in only her no-sleeve pencil dress.

"Agent Ross," she greeted him. "Didn't know you decided to stick around after the Stevens debacle."

"That's – ah – technically confidential," said Ross delicately. His forehead was beaded with sweat and he wiped at his trimmed hair with the back of his hand. So he did get warm, then. Nice to know he was human at least.

"Confidential?" said Maria with exaggerated surprise. She wondered if she should clap a hand to her mouth. "Please, do excuse me."

Ross sighed. "I won't ask how you know about it. Expect I wouldn't like the answer."

"No," said Maria measuredly. "I don't think you would." She added, "I didn't think you were still covert action staff. Langley demote you after the Raft? I noticed you're not Deputy Task Force Commander anymore."

"Not confidential this time," Ross answered her, unemotional as ever. "But it is personal."

"Sorry," said Maria quickly. And she was sorry. Sort of. Ross was a good agent, always had been, and he was just trying to do his job, but neither could Maria deny that it had been her team he'd fucked with two years ago – her team that she'd witnessed born, raised, and torn apart again – Ross at the center. Along with Ross the elder, Secretary of State, who was admittedly more to blame. It
wasn't as if it was fair to fault Everette for having the same name as his repugnant boss, but it didn't exactly score the guy any points.

Maria was surprised Secretary of State Ross hadn't slithered his way through T'Challa's palace doors, yet, but — then again — it wasn't completely out of the question. It had been almost a relief to have Asgard crash in the middle of Oklahoma; it was nice to relegate good-old Thunderbolt to something that made him feel important but kept him out of the way. Stark and Roger's pissing contest had been a media shit show: it was impossible to deny that, no matter how many times grim-faced news anchors said it on television, convincing the American people that Captain United States, himself, was supposed to be a war criminal just wasn't going to happen. Thaddeus had a lot of saving face to busy himself with, and an alien refugee crisis was just the ticket.

"So," Maria continued, "why are you still around — would have thought there were plenty of diplomats to take care of international relations now. Or are you babysitting?"

"Please," said Ross, and looked genuinely indignant that she could suggest he'd been demoted to the place of CIA bodyguard. "I'm here as a friend. Seems T'Challa likes me."

"Oh, sure," said Maria, cocking an eyebrow.

"Some people do find me likable, you know," Ross retorted. "And what about you, Agent — I'm sorry — Ms. Hill?" Ross clasped his hands behind his back. Scoring points — suave and subtle. He never seemed to age, never shifted the way he did business; Maria could admire consistency. "What brings you to this charming neck of the woods?"

"Taking some overdue vacation time," Maria answered readily.

"Time from what?" said Ross, casually raising an eyebrow. "I've lost track of who you're working for."

So have I. Maria almost smiled before she caught herself. Officially she was an attaché with the UN emissaries come to explore the not-third-world country of Wakanda. Unofficially…well, Maria didn't know what the hell she was anymore.

Maria shrugged. "I've heard such great things about Wakanda, but never got the opportunity to visit." It was a bold-faced lie, and Ross would know it was a lie, but at this point in the game the truth was rarer currency than deceit. Shame, really. Maria liked telling the truth. She had very little patience for the cloaks and dagger drama Fury was always so fond of.

"Mmh," Ross acknowledged her. "I thought maybe you were involved with those science-types T'Challa invited."

Maria laughed shortly. "Not me. I failed eighth-grade geology and never got a taste for it again."

Ross turned to give her an unconvinced smile. "Somehow, I find it difficult to believe you ever failed anything in your life, Ms. Hill."

"I appreciate the vote of confidence," Maria replied.

"You still cleaning up after HYDRA?" said Ross.

"HYDRA?" But it was difficult to keep the note of uneasiness out of her voice. How had he known to guess? She hoped she could play it off as merely surprise. "What makes you mention them?"

Ross shrugged and, damn, she recognized that wry smile, alright — her play at innocence hadn't
fooled him one bit. "HYDRA wasn't relegated just to Europe. I figured you were interested in some of the activity surrounding old bases in North Africa."

The Sahara had been crawling with Nazis before they were finally driven out by Operation Torch, the allied invasion of the North African Campaign, choking the Germans out through a combination of brute force and obstructing their supply lines. Maria had never cared much for history, but she did care about what it meant for today – in this case, the underlying threat that existed below all Nazi activity: HYDRA's slow poison, the brutal experimentation, occultism, and fascination with the preternatural.

"Hmm," said Maria. "Haven't heard about it. Sounds interesting."

Ross decided to play along with her. "Then you haven't heard about the vigilante figure who's been popping up lately? Uprooting old HYDRA bases over the border?"

"Which one?" said Maria measuredly. "I've lost count of all the new would-be superheroes who have popped up over the years."

"Metahumans?" Ross corrected her.

"Sure," Maria shrugged. "What, have you lost one? Thought your Accords ironed all that out."

"They weren't my Accords," said Ross. He rubbed the back of his neck sheepishly – had she managed to unsettle him, or was it just an act? She couldn't tell. She decided to give herself a point, anyway.

Maria batted him down with an impatient flick of her wrist. "You sure it isn't just T'Challa causing more trouble in his cat suit?"

"He'd be well within his right if it was," Ross countered her. "Back in the day HYDRA was largely responsible for the black market Vibranium trade."

Yet, curiously so much of it ended up in US hands, Maria thought, but she didn't say it. Throwing stones in glass houses, and all that.

"But it isn't T'Challa?" She persisted. She turned to face Ross, but he continued to stare out over the grasslands, hand over his eyes to block the glare of the sun.

"You know it isn't, Maria." Ross could never really do threatening; the most he'd ever managed was vaguely peeved. "Let's give up the game, alright? Tell me, are Banner and Foster really here for science or have you recruited them as spies, too?"

"Banner and Foster aren't trained for that," Maria answered swiftly.

"No," said Ross slowly. "I guess they wouldn't be. But it doesn't mean you haven't got others on your payroll who are. Roped your favorites back into it, have you? Barton? Or is it Romanoff?"

Ross finally turned and met her gaze, face unmoving and mildly interested, betraying nothing. He was good. "Both?"

Maria didn't answer. She didn't have to. Ross continued abruptly, "Is this where they came? Rogers and the rest of them? They were brought to Wakanda."

"Don't worry," said Maria scathingly. Maria fixed him with her very best don't-screw-with-me look. Ross didn't even bat an eye. She wasn't used to people being unintimidated by her. She was a bitch-ass-boss-lady after all – as Stark had once called her; it made her smile but she'd never admit that to
Stark. She expected people to quell before her. "I'm sure they cleared out long before you arrived. You haven't been lied to by your friend T'Challa."

Ross didn't react to the barb. He remained unflappable as always, but had that been a glimmer of interest she saw waken in his eye? "You know I'll have to report back to the Secretary of State, right?" He did actually sound sorry. She could admire that in him too: honor among thieves, liars, and spies.

"You think that worries me?" said Maria. She didn't give a damn whether the US government caught wind of STRENGTH's presence in Wakanda or not. Sooner or later the shit was going to hit the fan and petty interior squabbles would be a thing of the past – whatever was behind the attack in New York a few days ago wasn't going to be dormant for much longer. She added waspishly, "I think I'm more concerned by whether or not T'Challa is aware he's been nursing a snake in his court."

Ross raised his eyebrows, nearly imperceptibly. Had she hurt him? Maria didn't care. She had never been opposed to playing dirty. When Ross spoke again his voice was slightly more clipped than it had been before. "You're starting to sound like Nicolas Fury. He back in the game, too?"

"He's a smart man."

"A crazy one," Ross corrected her. He shook his head. "You didn't answer my question."

"Did you expect me to?" said Maria levelly.

Ross sighed and ran his hand through his hair again – a rare show of frustration. "Can we level with each other, Ms. Hill?"

"Please let's do," said Maria.

"You've heard about Oklahoma. You've heard about New York. You know things are about to get a hell of a lot more complicated. If Fury's planning something behind the government's back – again – I really need to know about it."

"Don't treat me like a child, Ross." Maria actually rolled her eyes, and was immediately irritated at herself for letting him get to her.

"Listen to me," said Ross, and he sounded absurdly earnest. "If there's anything I've learned while I've been in Wakanda is that secrets do the world very little good. We're not going to face whatever this is if we're not facing it together."

"So says the CIA operative," said Maria. Although she did not suppose that she, who's livelihood depended on how well she lied, should really be the one talking.

Ross straightened his shoulders. Eyebrows furrowed, he traced Maria's figure from top to bottom, as though seizing her up. I'll show you mine if you show me yours. She stared at him steadily, not speaking.

"I have to warn you," he said finally. "This vigilante you say you don't know anything about – he's a total recluse, on the run and evading any contact whatsoever. We've tried. The locals call him Nomad. Whatever Stark did to him, he's not interested in your schemes anymore."

"That's what you think," said Maria. What the hell – the game was up. And they could cut out this 'Nomad' crap. It wasn't just the Wakandans who had a bone to pick with HYDRA. She'd been in the country for less than a day before she was calling Fury to confirm the rumors about a lead to their misplaced Captain. "You don't know him like we do. We know how he works – knows what he's
"Sure as hell sounds a lot like a threat when you say it like that," said Ross flatly.

"Either way," Maria pressed forward. "You can leave it to us. We don't need any more secret agent try-hards with political aspirations getting in the way of our team. Frankly, I'm sick to death of bureaucracy."

She turned on her heel and walked away. Ross was frowning where she left him at the edge of the balcony.

"Ms. Hill." Maria contemplated ignoring him, but paused before passing through the drapes that separated the balcony from the palace interior. "Sure, the Accords might have torn them apart," he said from behind her, voice heavy and resigned rather than angry. "But you and Fury forced them to work together in the first place. You can't make a team out of repulsive forces, and you're still grasping at straws – hoping to fulfill the wet dream of a one-eyed despot who thinks he's keeping peace by holding everyone else at arm's length. This was never going to work."

Maria didn't turn around. No way was she going to let Ross know how close his words had scraped passed her own feeling of impending doom. There was no way of going back to the good old days – because the good old days had never been any damn good in the first place. She thought for a moment of replying to Ross, but then decided she was done with this conversation. She had work to do.

She left Ross on the balcony, Fury's words echoing in her ears. How can you really be sure they'll come back?

Because we'll need them to.

OOO

Jane felt like a kid in an art museum: everywhere she turned she was confronted with 'do not touch' signs. She could keep her distance, observe quietly, but was allowed no actual contact with anything she'd been sent to study. This Dr. Shuri – or whatever the name of the leader of the Wakandan Design Group – was guarding her work with a jealous obstinacy. Someday that would change, but for now…it was beyond frustrating.

Jane sighed and kneaded her temples with her fingers. It was well after nightfall. She really should be in bed, but she couldn't sleep. It was too hot out in the open-air tents she and Bruce had set up in the outskirts of the countryside. They had perfectly comfortable accommodations in Birnin Zana, but given the fact that they weren't allowed to even visit the Vibranium mines yet (any day now was the promise, but it had already been days), Jane found it infinitely more inducive if she removed herself entirely from the city to explore the second most fascinating thing about Wakanda's uncanny natural lushness: the fact that it had a cutoff point.

Her superiors in SHIELD – STRENGTH, dammit, why did they need to change the name at all? – weren't happy about her relocation, but she had told them she'd been hired to do the work because they kept telling her she was the best one for it, so she was calling the shots: in essence, go-fuck-yourself. Besides, if she had any hope of figuring out how to protect the Vibranium, she needed to get the lay of the land.

Wakanda was a beautiful, flourishing land: a sprawling valley in the nook of towering mountains. Jane could nearly describe it as a country-sized oasis, a peculiarly fertile pocket of terrain that sprouted at whim out of the arid regions that surrounded it. In fact, the shift in energy had been
almost physically palpable as Jane crossed the boarder from South Sudan.

Desert oases were common enough, irrigated by natural springs or other aquifers, or perhaps manmade wells. But Wakanda was different. At its heart was the first dregs of what would eventually become the Omo-Bottego River, one of the sources of Lake Turkana, spilling across the Wakanda's sacred Warrior Falls in the process. Jane, of course, had never seen the Falls. They were off-limits just like seemingly everything else in the country.

Jane tried to temper her irritation, reminding herself that the Wakandans had every right to protect their land and people – especially from Westerners like her. The grubby hands of colonialism were an all-too ready threat to countries like Wakanda; Jane couldn't let herself fall into the trope of western arrogance so easily. She supposed she should be grateful T'Challa had allowed her and Bruce in at all.

Jane tapped her computer screen as the schematic diagram flickered in the uneven Wi-Fi signals. Wakanda was different, her thoughts replayed. Even with the source of the Omo-Bottego, there simply was not enough water to allow for the kind of fertility Wakanda displayed, and yet the area required no man-made sources to supplement it. Everything was too lush, the grass too green, trees too tall and fruitful – and the land that surrounding the country too sparse, too withered and choked. And then there were the rumors of other things: the mysterious flower that granted T'Challa his powers…but perhaps those were just legends.

Jane dug her thumbs into her eyes. Her vision was blurred from fatigue. Jane wasn't a geographer, dammit. She was an astrophysicist and an astronomer; she was supposed to have her eyes trained on the sky, not the ground. None of this made any sense.

"Bruce?" she said over her shoulder to her sole companion in the command-center tent, bathed in the soft glow of their two computer screens that were powered from the humming generator in the center of their campsite. Bruce had been mulling over diagrams of recent seismic activity. Jane hadn't given much thought to what he'd been doing – both of them were too lost in their own work, thoughts, and exasperations, to pay much attention to the other.

Bruce looked up from his papers now. He rubbed his eyes under his glasses. "Bruce," Jane began again. "If I'm not hallucinating, I think I might have found something interesting."

She honestly didn't know if it would be interesting or not. By now she was just so desperate to pull herself out of her mind that she was willing to talk about anything.

Bruce stood from his foldable, metal chair and took a moment to stretch the aches out of his body, cramped form sitting too long. He approached her and leaned over her shoulder, peering at her computer screen.

Jane maximized one of the topographic maps she'd been studying so it filled the screen. It was a scanned copy of an ancient document, worn and crinkled on the screen. Jane could barely recognize it through its age for what it was: an exceptionally detailed map of Wakanda from centuries past. Bruce frowned over her shoulder, apparently just as confused by the ancient calligraphy and symbols as she had been when she first saw it.

"Thankfully Wakanda is unusually consummate in its record keeping," she explained. "I got these out of the archives in the palace…they date back to circa one-thousand BC, which predates western cartography by over one-thousand years. T'Challa wouldn't let me touch the originals, but he had the archons scan me a copy."

"Mmh," Bruce hummed thoughtfully, in true scientific fashion not speaking until he'd gotten a good
look. Jane let him scan the document first, still working out what she wanted to say and how she wanted to say it.

"Okay," he said finally. "I give up. What am I looking for? Something special about two-thousand years before the common era?"

"Well," Jane complied. "The Vibranium had to come from somewhere. There are legends of an asteroid – the say the valley isn't actually a valley, but a crater."

"The Vibranium came from outer space?" Bruce looked troubled. Jane waited for a moment to see if he was going to say anything more, but he merely continued to frown.

"They say so," Jane shrugged.

"It would…make sense I suppose," Bruce said slowly. "It certainly isn't any element or compound we recognize from the periodic table and its… properties certainly don't seem earthlike."

"Right." Jane nodded and pressed onward. She was completely out of her element here, and already feeling silly – assaulted with as bad a case of imposter syndrome as she had experienced since grad school, but at least this time it was warranted. She really didn't know anything about geography or environmentalism. Fury had to learn that one type of scientist couldn't just be substituted in lieu of another.

"And you can see here," Jane flicked from the ancient sketch to a more modern map, charted on GIS. "How much the country has altered over the Millenia. It's seen extraordinary growth, shifts in river patterns, increased vegetation…"

"Surely that's not unprecedented, though," said Bruce. "All regions must experience some kind of geographic flux. The world isn't exactly static." His tone was gently curious, not ridiculing her, and Jane felt bolstered.

"True," she said, "but the normal geographic variation growth rates of a given region in a given year are approximately .01 percent. That's only thirty-five percent flux in the last three-thousand-five-hundred years, allowing for some disparity, of course."

"But these maps are showing a whole lot more than a thirty-five percent variation?" Bruce guessed.

"Yep," said Jane. "Closer to a seventy-five percent. Even given Wakanda's advances…that's double the normal rate. And it's usually the opposite case for a region like Wakanda – so like an oasis as it is; they usually diminish over time rather than flourish."

Bruce blew out a slow breath through his nose. Jane let him take the computer mouse and flick back and forth to compare the diagrams himself.

"So Wakanda is growing?" he said finally. "What do you think it means?"

"Well…” here was the tricky bit. "If you combine those figures with the disproportion between soil pH and microbial properties in the arable land of Wakanda and the outlying terrain, and compare the geographical data from Wakanda and the corresponding variation in the outlying land, then you'll see that the change is reversed. While Wakanda grows –"

'The bordering lands becomes less fecund," Bruce cut her off, and he did so with so much interest, she couldn't bring herself to be as irritated as she usually got when her other male colleagues tried to steal her thunder.
"Yeah," Jane finished. It wasn't a stupid theory, she chided herself, she needed to be more confident in her work. She was just so used to being shot down. "Whatever is helping Wakanda grow, it's expanding its influence. And it's sucking the life out of the surrounding countryside while it does."

"Wow," said Bruce, exhaling a deep breath. He straightened up, pressing his hands into the base of his back to stretch his spine. The troubled look was back – the one that appeared when Jane mentioned Vibranium might have been from space. "That's…quite something."

Jane steadied herself. She said on her exhale, without giving herself the chance to doubt, "I think it's the Vibranium."

Bruce just looked at her. He didn't look convinced, but he also didn't look doubtful. "What makes you say that?"

Jane shrugged. "Correlation. These changes started showing up approximately when the asteroid was supposed to have struck. Plus, Vibranium absorbs kinetic energy – and that's just one thing we know for sure. Who know what else it's capable of."

Bruce nodded slowly. He chewed his lower lip thoughtfully, eyebrows furrowed. Jane awaited his judgment nervously, but whatever she'd expected him to say, he didn't say it. Instead he began uncertainly, "Maybe I should have said something sooner, but I wanted to be sure…there are still more tests to run, and I didn't want to send us off on a bum steer –"

"Go ahead," Jane prompted with a smile. "It won't be the first strange theory aired tonight."

Bruce nodded, but his eyes were unfocused, as if turned inward instead of to her. "Well, I have a lot of experience with gamma radiation, as you well know." He smiled weakly and proceeded, "and that's part of why I got roped into this…because of the peculiar readings you've been getting from Wakanda – from the Vibranium, I assume. It's not noticeable in small amounts, which is why I never picked up on it with Steve's shield, for instance, but in such a concentrated area…it's hard to miss. And it's – they aren't readings I haven't seen before."

It was Jane's turn to furrow her eyebrows. "What do you mean? Where are they familiar from?"

Bruce cleared his throat, scratched the back of his neck, and nodded almost imperceptibly as if steering himself to make the decision. "Well…Loki's Scepter, for one. And the Tesseract."

Jane hadn't realized her mouth was dangling open in shock until she tried to speak again. "The Infinity Stones?" Her voice was slightly breathless.

Bruce nodded curtly. "Yes. I can't be one-hundred percent sure yet, but so far Wakanda – even so far out from the mines – is giving me the exact same readings that I found when I was pulled into the Avengers to trace Loki."


"I have no idea," Bruce answered. "And I don't know what we're supposed to do about it. This seems way too big to keep to ourselves."

With difficulty, Jane gathered herself back together, stomach still squirming, but she did her best to make her voice reflect a firmness she did not feel. "You're right. We have to tell someone. And, I don't know about you, but I think it's high-time we started getting some straight answers from this Dr. Shuri. I'm booking an early morning appointment with the King."

She minimized her windows and clicked her computer to sleep. First things first, it was time they
both went to bed. She didn't think she could stand any more earth-shattering discovering tonight.

"You – ah – think he'll listen to you?" said Bruce.

"Don't worry," Jane was sure Bruce didn't mean to doubt her, but she offered him a wry smile nonetheless. "I have plenty of experience when it comes to dealing with men who think they're gods."

OOO

Proxima Midnight surveyed the towering spires that gleamed with artificial vibrancy in the night – an active, nearly chaotic scene of a city that did not know sleep, nestled in the arms of a bowl-shaped mountain range. Silly humans – this was what they considered the pinnacle of their technological advances? All this could be wiped clean by her Father with barely a second thought. Wiped away by her if she got her hands on merely a fraction of the power her Father promised her and her siblings when his plans succeeded.

"Corvus and Cull are dead," said Ebony grimly.

Proxima lifted her macrobinoculars away from her eyes and tuned back into her brother's voice, speaking from the holoprojector set before her. The projected image of Ebony looked disapproving, as usual, at Proxima's lack of attention. Ebony had never managed to command her as he had their other siblings.

"Pity," she said, betraying not an iota of her fleeting shock at hearing of her brothers' deaths. She was not upset – not at the idea that they were no longer alive – but perhaps surprised to hear they had fallen so soon. Strong beings, indeed, must have met her brothers in battle if they did not come out the victors.

"Father has attained three Gems now," Ebony proceeded seamlessly. There was no use dwelling on the lack of sentiment between the siblings. "He is confident he will soon lure the next into his possession."

"Excellent," said Proxima, allowing herself a small smile, gone in a flash. Soon. Soon their plan would come to fruition. Soon they would become invincible. Her Father and she at his right hand.

"The humans are weak," Proxima began her own report. It was prudent to be quick. It was not likely her campsite in the wilds of the jungle would be detected, but there was still a chance the humans had the technological means to trace her if she allowed her communication devise run too long. "And foolish. They manipulate the Stone's power but are not aware of what they yield. We shall strip it from them with ease."

"You are confident we will meet no resistance?" said Ebony, voice nearly reprimanding, perhaps the memory of their brothers' failures still rankling in his mind.

"None that we cannot easily crush," Proxima answered firmly. "The Outsiders will have no problem laying waste to this realm. Tell Father the time to strike is now."

"Very well," Ebony nodded once. "I shall tell Father to ready his fleet. Expect an attack within the next rotation of the planet."

"With relish," said Proxima, allowing herself a full smile now, sharpened points of her teeth grinding in her mouth. Ebony's projection winked away as their report came to a close. Proxima tucked the holoprojector into the belt of her armored suit. She bent to retrieve her two-tonged scepter from the ground, imbued with the power of the Gauntlet – a gift from her Father.
She straightened and stared down at the city. Petty humans. They would not see her coming. When her Father mounted an attack in a day's time, she intended to have a gift for him. After all, it would only be the worthiest of his children – just she and Ebony now, she remembered – who Thanos would allow to remain by his side. Proxima intended not to be left behind.

Chapter End Notes

Something that super bugs me about Jane Foster in the movies is that they never let her actually science. They talk about her sciencing a bunch, but we never get to see her actually science. The trouble now, though, is that I absolutely do not know how to science anywhere close to the degree Jane knows how to science, so all her science will just sound like a lot of science bullshit cobbled from the foremost authority on bullshitting: Wikipedia.

Also, it really irks me that there are two Rosses – Everett and Thaddeus – just like, there are so many names you can use, Marvel.

Anyway, thank you for your continued support and patience! Next two chapters are written, so they will be posted on schedule!
"It's an acute subdural hematoma, Tony," Stephen began at once, not turning when Stark joined him at the bottom of the ramp. "I think you know what that means."

"Humor me, Strange. What does that mean?" Stark demanded unsteadily. Stephen had hoped to avoid any hysterics, but he now saw that he couldn't evade the inevitable. No way was Stark going to take this calmly, and Stephen couldn't exactly blame him.

"Blood is collecting between the dura and the surface of his brain, compressing the occipital lobe, most likely, hence the disturbance in his vision."

Stark shut his eyes. His hands were curled into tight fists at his side and Stephen wondered if he was fighting down the desire to hit something – or someone. Stephen was probably the most likely candidate at the moment. "He's going blind?" he asked, voice raw.

"Tony," Stephen swallowed to give him time to sort out the buzz of activity in his mind. Stephen was well-practiced in relaying bad news to people concerning his patients. But this somehow felt different. He was not accustomed to knowing whoever he was telling the bad news to. Or knowing the patient. "If we can't alleviate the pressure on the brain he's going to die."

Stark blinked, face blank, like he hadn't heard what Stephen had said.

Stephen didn't tell him that – even if Peter did survive – only about twenty percent of people who suffered an acute subdural hematoma regained full brain function afterward. The longer they delayed, the greater a risk that Peter would retain permanent damage.

"I'm sorry." The word crawled out of Stephen's throat without his volition. For the first time – after the plethora of times he'd told bad news to crestfallen relatives or close friends – he thought he might actually mean it.

"How do you do that?" Stark said rapidly, eyes still glazed in concerning detachment. "How do you do – how do you alleviate the pressure or – whatever the hell you can do to – what do we – how do we –"

"Tony," Stephen said quietly and Stark stopped talking. His eyes were empty and haunted; Stephen felt a twinge in his stomach. Stark was waiting for an answer. Waiting for an answer that Stephen could not give him. "I can't help him, not the way he needs to be helped. He'll need a craniotomy, burr hole trepidation to relieve the building pressure –"

The color bled from Stark's face. He bent double, hands on his knees, breathing hard. Stephen stepped forward automatically, sure the other man was either going to hyperventilate or be ill. His hands hovered uncertainly near Stark's shoulder, not sure how Stark would react to being touched.

"Will it –" Stark spoke with difficulty, gasping through his words. "Will it hurt?"
"I can't do it, Tony," Stephen said firmly, because it appeared as though the other man had not understood.

Stark looked up. "What the fuck do you mean you can't do it?" he shouted. "What do you mean – you with your – your crazy ass magical swirling lights – what the hell do you mean you can't help him?"

"He can likely hear us," Stephen said coldly and Stark's mouth clapped shut, eyes going wide.

"The quinjet doesn't have the proper supplies," Stephen continued patiently when he was sure Stark wasn't going to keep yelling. "Besides..." he lifted his still-quivering hands helplessly. His injury had never before felt like so much of a pointless, cruel mistake.

Stark gaped at Stephen's hands, jaw hanging limp. "You're telling me," he said slowly, keeping his voice low. He took a step toward Stephen; Stephen didn't back away, "that because you decided one night to go careening off the road in your Lamborghini – you're telling me that you can't help that kid in there – my kid in there –" Stark sputtered. "You were probably drunk, right? Yeah, totally drunk. What is this, some kind of joke?"

"There's nothing I can do, Stark." Stephen tried to keep his voice level as Stark dredged up all the old wounds – the terrible dread that had wakened in his chest when he clawed his way out of the anesthetics to see his hands – eleven stainless steel pins in the bones – immobile.

"Don't give me that shit!" Stark yelled again, and then clenched his teeth to silence himself. He took another step forward, face shoved right in front of Stephen's. He hissed. "I saw you, dammit, doing whatever the hell you did with Thanos. You can reverse fucking time – you can do whatever you want – you can –"

Stephen was already shaking his head and he saw how the gesture only caused more anger to build in Stark's eyes. "It's not possible. At this stage – some things we can't risk undoing."

"Bullshit," Stark said flatly. "Alright, Strange, no more secrets. Out with it. Whatever you did back there, it was enough to make Thanos retreat, enough to make that monster run off with his tail behind his legs. What are you trying to hide?"

Stephen sighed. He'd wanted to avoid just this kind of confrontation, but part of him felt guilty at trying to hide it for so long. He withdrew the heavy pendant on its chain around his neck, letting it dangle in plain sight across his chest. "This is the Eye of Agamotto, created by the founder of the Masters of the Mystic Arts on earth, Agamotto, himself. It has been passed through the long line of Sorcerers Supreme who followed him. It gives its wearer the ability to manipulate time."

"It holds the Time Stone, doesn't it?" Stark guessed and Stephen reminded himself that the man did have a genius-level intellect.

"Yes," said Stephen without hesitation.

"And you're only thinking to tell me this now?" Stark growled. Stephen tensed – sure that Stark was going to throw a punch at his jaw.

But no blow fell. Instead Stark breathed deeply, and his entire body seemed to deflate. Stark pinched the bridge of his nose with his finger and thumb. His hands were shaking worse than Stephen's. "We're wasting time," he said heavily. "We need to get back to earth."

"Tony –"
"Don't pretend we're on first-name basis, Strange," Stark snapped, hand falling away from his face. Stephen thought he saw a glimmer of moisture in the other man's eyes.

"Stark," Stephen began again. He'd always prided himself on being more than a proficient orator, but he found it now exceptionally difficult to find the right words for what he was about to suggest. "If we leave now it means abandoning Vision and Maximoff to a cruel fate —"

"Are you serious?" Stark interrupted him, face clouding at once with thunderous anger.

"They were the reason we came out here," Stephen persisted, despising the sound of his own voice. "If we leave now than Peter's sacrifice will have been for —"

Stark flung his fist toward Stephen's face and, even though he saw the blow coming, Stephen didn't shift out of the way, but let Stark's knuckles collide with solid flesh. The hit was surprisingly hard, despite Stark's slight frame – clearly there was more to Stark than just his metal suit. Stephen reeled backward, hand on his jaw, but kept his footing.

Stark came at him again, but this time Stephen slid rapidly into a Sling Ring and rematerialized in a blink of an eye behind Stark. Stark tumbled forward and landed on his knees. He didn't try to get up. He didn't even look over his shoulder to face Strange again.

"He's a child –" Stark said, voice rough. With tears or anger, Stephen couldn't say. He was almost glad he couldn't see the other man's face. Christine had always accused him of being bad at handling emotions, his own and other's. Perhaps she was right. "And you're giving him as good as a death sentence," Stark finished harshly.

Stephen let Stark's words wash over him, even though they scratched like barbs. First do no harm.

"He is one child among many other children who will also die if Thanos is not stopped," Stephen said. He sounded callous even to himself. "We cannot allow Thanos to have access to Vision and Wanda Maximoff – their powers are too formidable."

"Are you insane?" Stark spat. He stood shakily and turned back around. "Or are you just covering for yourself, huh? Maybe you can't bring us back to earth at all. Maybe your powers are all just a big hoax. Magic tricks and illusions –"

"I can bring us back to earth, Stark," Stephen said coldly. One thing he would not stand for was being accused of being a fraud. He'd worked damn hard to develop these powers. "And I will. As soon as I have a go at rescuing Vision and Maximoff."

"What makes you think they're even still alive?" Stark demanded. "What if you're stumbling into a wild goose chase, even a trap, and both of them have already been killed?"

"It's a chance I'm willing to take."

"Well," Stark scoffed. "I'm not. And Peter isn't, either."

Stark was right. Stark was damn right. Stephen couldn't – but he couldn't not –

"Now may be our only chance!" Did he really sound that pathetically desperate even to Stark? "We must act quickly before he realizes fully my hold on the Time Stone. He will not expect a second assault so soon after his retreat —"

"You know what?" Stark said, some of his familiar lofty tone reentering his voice, but it sounded twisted and strained. "You are crazy, Strange. Out of your fucking mind."
"I can do it, Stark," Stephen insisted. Was it a lie? Could he do it? Thanos' power was... impressive. Two Stones against one. Stephen was lucky that using the Time Stone had been a surprise; he could not be so sure the next time. But, if he played his cards right, he might be able to slip in and out without attracting Thanos' attention at all. "I can get to them unnoticed. And I know where they are now. The Time Stone is being drawn to the others in the Gauntlet; I can feel its tug. It will lead me to Thanos' vessel. Once I get in, all I have to do is grab them and return to the quinjet. Then we will return to earth, barely a moment wasted -"

"You're out of your mind," Stark said again.

"I'm the only one who can get us out of here, Stark," said Stephen firmly, not meaning it to sound like a threat, but he was pretty sure he failed at that, too. "I'm holding all the cards right now."

Stark swallowed. "You can't gamble with Peter's life."

"Um – guys?" An uneasy voice cut like a knife through their argument. Stark spun on his heel toward the ramp of the quinjet. Brunhilde had descended partially and looked from Stephen to Stark with raised eyebrows. She had clearly witnessed their fight. Stephen hoped to god Peter hadn't heard anything. The important thing now was keeping him as calm and comfortable as possible. "Sorry to interrupt this...discussion," she said. "But you might want to come inside. The kid says he can't feel his hands."

Stark raced up the ramp without another word, ramming his shoulder into Stephen on his way up. Stephen trailed after him, dead weight dropping into his stomach at the futility of the situation. There was nothing he could do for Peter, he'd already concluded that. But maybe – just maybe there was still something he could do for Vision and Maximoff, and he wasn't going to let Stark or anyone else stop him from trying it.

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"Thanos has both the Power and Reality Stones on the Gauntlet and easy access to the Mind Stone. It's only a matter of time before he makes a move on another," said Gamora somberly. The Guardians and Thor sat aboard the Milano, around a cramped circular table, discussing their next move.

Denarian Dey had invited them to partake in the Nova Corps committee, but the Guardians had preferred to debrief on their own. Thor accompanied them, feeling more than ever like an unwieldy and obtrusive outsider. The others treated him with near wariness after Sif's death. They were separated now by too many discrepancies in history, distanced by grief and uncertain words of comfort.

"Sif said he has turned his sights on Midgard," Thor said heavily, "although I was not aware of another Gem on that realm."

"And we've still got the blue space cube," said Star-Lord. "Do you think he knows that?"

Thor's thoughts wandered. The adventures Sif must have experienced in her journey to reacquire the Aether must have been the subjects of several deserving tales, indeed. But they were tales that had died with her, just as many other things had.

She deserved a warrior's funeral on Asgard, to drift on a pyre across the River Ífingr, and burn into golden ash as those worthy few had done before her. It was not right that she should lie now as just another dead body covered in canvass among the strangers of Xandar. It was not right that Asgard should have been risen to the ground in flame before Sif received her moment of recognition that she
had fought so hard to earn. It was not right –

Thor was pulled out of his bleak thoughts by the rough, almost metallic voice of Nebula, Gamora's sister who had been pulled from the wreckage of the vaults.

"Thanos will know," she said in a growl. She was clearly injured, bandaged around the nub of her shoulder where her arm had once been, but also fiercely resisting any kind of sympathy. She reminded Thor of Loki in that. "The Gauntlet can be used as a map to the remaining Stones. And now that he's filled two of the slots, its power will only grow. He could probably teleport into this ship right now using the Tesseract if he opened the avenue from the other side with one of the Stones he already has."

The lot of them turned to stare with trepidation at the Tesseract in its glass chamber, propped against the wall of the ship. It pulsed blue quietly in the corner, deceitfully unassuming. What history that small trinket had, Thor marveled – what trouble it had caused he, Loki, and so many others over the years.

Thor knew from Nebula now that she had rescued Loki from the cells in Thanos' Sanctuary II, but that Loki had been taken once again by Thanos' forces...mere footsteps from Thor as Thor battled the monster Cull. Thor still did not know whether it had really been Loki's voice he'd heard on the other side of the door, or if it was merely a sign granted to him by the Norns, but it pained Thor now more than he could say to know that his brother had been so near...so near and Thor had been unable to save him. Unable to save him again.

Thor stood, pushing back his chair so its legs squealed on the metal floor. He was restless and could not stand the thought of sitting at the overfilled conference table in the cramped belly of the Milano for a moment longer.

The adrenaline of battle had not yet completely ebbed away, and Thor needed to move. He needed to walk, to run, to hit something with a hammer. He needed to get away from these others who did not know him, who did not understand –

"Hey, dude, where are you going?"

"Out," Thor said, and he hadn't meant to snap.

"Just let him go, Peter," Gamora sighed.

Thor did not stick around for a further consensus. He stomped down the Milano's ramp onto the landing platform. The air was still clogged with the smell of smoke and burning metal. It smelled like battle, a scent Thor was well-familiar with, but today it made his stomach churn with sickness.

Thor walked aimlessly through the city. The second daylight was moving past its peak, single sun glaring from its perch directly overhead, revealing in stark detail the ruins of battle. Star Blasters and enemy attack-force ships were crumpled heaps littered across the streets in equal measures. Occasional citizens kicked at the rubble cautiously, but mostly the streets were empty. The Nova Corpse Post-Combat Recovery Division must have already swept the area, removing the bodies.

Thor did not know how many of them had died.

It was strange. He had seen so much of death lately, he supposed he should have become desensitized to it by now. But, still, he did not. He hoped he never would.
"God of Thunder," said a deep, laughing voice. "It is good to finally meet you myself. I've heard so much about you from your brother."

Thor's heart squeezed in surprise and alarm. He spun on his heel, immediately recognizing the voice as the one that had echoed within the walls of the Sakaarian vessel days ago when this had all started – Thor drew his twin blades, weight still unfamiliar in his hands no matter how long he had been using them, causing him a twinge of regret for Mjolnir.

"Where are you, villain?" Thor shouted to the wind. "Show yourself!"

The street was empty around him – but then the air seemed to shift oddly, the world tilted, blurred, darkened, and the armored, brutish figure of Thanos emerged abruptly where no one had stood before. Thor blinked, for his surrounding had also been changed – he was still standing in an empty street of Xandar's capital city, but the air around him seemed almost to shimmer or drift, as though he had been emerged in a large bubble.

Thanos laughed at Thor's confusion. "The Reality Gem, child king." He held up the Gauntlet to observe the red jewel on his knuckle with admiration. "Isn't it marvelous? Isn't it spectacular? This small ornament containing power enough to contort the very matter of the world, bend atoms around my being to allow me the ability to distort space, even be in two places at once –"

"What are you?" Thor demanded roughly, grip tightening on his blades. His heart thumped insistently against his ribs. How terrible it was to finally confront Thanos face to face. From all he had been told of the Titan, Thor should have been terrified, instead all he could feel was cold wrath – the same murderous rage that had prompted him to shock Cull to death with his lightning. This monster would pay for every finger he'd dared lain upon Thor's brother and the life he sucked from Sif's body.

"Do you mean am I really standing here before you? Or am I simply an illusion?" Thanos grinned, a grotesque, unnerving leer. "Let this answer your question."

Thanos raised his hand clasped within the bronze Gauntlet. Thor shouted in surprise as the same purple and scarlet burst of energy he recognized from the vaults erupted from Thanos' palm – Thor had no time to seek cover, but this time Thanos was not aiming to kill and the stream of energy blasted into the pavement feet from where Thor stood. He was shunted backward, toppling onto his backside by the shockwaves, but scrambled back to his feet at once, panting but uninjured.

Thanos chuckled at Thor's struggle. Blood rammed angrily through Thor's ears. "I am real enough. The Reality Gem allows me more than one option with which to occupy my time at once, and the means to do so. Yes, God of Thunder, I am here. But you will not be able to reach me. Just as no one will be able to reach you. For we are surrounded by a blister of torn space. No one shall hear or see you until I am done with you. No, you cannot touch me. Or your brother."

Just as the words dropped from Thanos' mouth he was joined by another figure: a man on his knees at Thanos' side, Thanos' fingers were tangled in dark hair, pulling his captive's face upward, revealing clearly the horribly pale and bruised face of Loki.

Nausea squirmed in Thor's belly. His wrath grew to a crescendo but was furiously beaten back by the fear that shined in Loki's eyes – little brother –

"Loki," Thor cried and started forward, stumbling over the crater Thanos' had left in the street. Thanos laughed as Thor dashed forward but Thor did not seem to get any closer to Thanos or Loki, figures permanently out of reach, taunting him with their inaccessible nearness. Thor could see the spots of sweat that rose on his brother's forehead.
"Not so quick," Thanos jeered. His hand closed its grip on Loki's hair and Loki's face tightened in pain but he did not make a sound. His eyes clawed at Thor's face across the distance, desperate and begging – begging Thor to help him – help him – help him –

"Loki," Thor whispered. Tears burned in his eyes and a roar rose to his lips: "Release him, fiend! Or you will endure the wrath of Odin's sons!"

"You are in no position to threaten me, Thor, sole son of Odin!" Thanos' voice cracked like a whip. He tugged again on Loki's hair, revealing the pale underside of Loki's neck as his head was drawn back. "It is I who have come to you. I hope to barter with you the life of your counterfeit brother, if you so desire the life of a failure and betrayer."

"Speak not of my brother in that way!" Thor was still yelling, but he could detect now the note of desperation that had entered his voice. What could he do? He wondered urgently. There was nothing he could do. Loki was out of his reach, Thanos untouchable. "I shall run by blade through your throat so it is blood that replaces the filthy insults gurgling from your lips."

"You have spirit, little king," Thanos chuckled in appreciation. "The stories I have heard of your boldness ring true. But perhaps this will make you more inclined to listen to me –"

Thor watched in paralyzed, helpless horror as Thanos shoved Loki onto the ground so that Thor's brother lay on his stomach at the Titan's feet. Thanos rose the Gauntlet, running it over the length of Loki's prone figure. Wisps of purple bled from the fingers, engulfing Loki's body as though with violet smoke. First Loki began to shake, then he squirmed, writhing on the ground, convulsed, hands thrown over his head as though to guard himself from the feathery strands that coated his limbs, seemed even to travel through his flesh – Loki made not a sound until his jaw suddenly dropped open and he shouted in terrible pain –

"No!" Thor shouted instinctively.

Thanos closed the Gauntlet into a fist and the gas-like substance dissipated into thin air, leaving Loki shuddering in its wake. He was gasping. Thor could hear him clearly across the distance, breaths hard and labored like he was stifling sobs.

Thor had – it had been so long since he had last seen Loki cry. His heart bled. He – he did not know what to do.

"The Power Gem," Thanos whispered, eyes glinting with a harrowing light. "It does more than destroy worlds. It can also absorb other powers into its hull. The use of each Gem is not without its price, little king. The Power Gem must be fed if it is to fulfill its purpose – it would drain me of my own force if I did not allow its appetites to be satisfied with other tempting morsels."

Thanos crouched at Loki's side and petted the back of Loki's head with his unadorned hand. Loki whimpered under Thanos' touch. Every particle within Thor shouted at him to pounce – tear this tyrant limb from limb –

"This is my bargain, child king of Asgard," Thanos looked up and fixed Thor with his icy glare. "Listen well, or I shall have to give you another demonstration of my power. I shall suck your brother dry of his magic. Drain him of his lifeforce before your very eyes. Destroy his mind and body painfully and thoroughly if you do not fetch me the Space Gem, finish for me the job I tasked your brother with years ago which he failed miserably to complete. Do so and I will let you and him live. I will release you to flee to whatever end of the universe you so please, excused from the vengeance I enact on the galaxy."
"No –" Thor choked again without thinking.

"Still you do not listen, insignificant god," Thanos grinned and released his fisted Gauntlet over Loki, spilling the purple vapors again over his body.

Loki started yelling immediately this time as the strings of power chewed through his body, attacking the seidr that pulsed within Loki's very blood. It did not even sound like Loki's voice, this frantic, keening cry of pain – pain – pain and Thor could – it would be so easy to put it to an end –

"Stop it!" Thor was yelling, trying to drown out the horrible echo of his brother's screams. "Stop! Do not hurt him! I beg of you –"

"You beg of me?" Thanos said, but the purple smoke again withdrew from Loki's thrashing form – Loki went limp on the ground – and Thanos stood from his perch at Loki's side. "It is your brother who begs, Thunderer. Listen to him if you will not listen to me."

"STOP!" Thor shouted as Loki started screaming again. Screaming. Screaming. Thor could not think for the sound of Loki's terrible screaming tearing through his head – shredding Thor's very grip on reality, rending through his being as if it was physical agony.

Tony was right, Thor realized dimply. This was why Thor had fled with the Tesseract, a harsh truth concealed behind good intentions. Ever since Loki had disappeared into the mouth of Thanos' ship, Thor had been frantic to get his brother back – return Loki to his rightful place by Thor's side, a place for too long neglected. A place Thor had just been beginning to hope again might be filled again before Thanos showed up and everything dissolved into dust and illusion, just as it always did. And Tony was right, right to accuse Thor of wanting to bribe Loki away from Thanos' clutches.

Now Thor was desperate to erase any trace of pain in Loki's body – little brother, little brother – Thor would do anything – anything to save him. Protect him. Fulfill the abandoned promises of their childhood. Because that's what Thor had intended all along. All along he had had one purpose, and one purpose only, save Loki and get him far away from harm as possible.

Tesseract be damned. Infinity Gems be damned. Thanos be damned. Let them do as they will, as long as Loki was safe –

"Alright," Thor heard himself whisper, although he did not feel the word leave his lips. "Alright," he said louder when Loki did not immediately stop yelling under Thanos' torture. Thanos wrenched his hand away. Loki thudded into the ground and lay still.

"Dark Lord Thanos, Destroyer of Worlds," Thor swallowed. His body ached with a deep and penetrating exhaustion. "I yield. I will – I will do as you ask. The Tesseract for my brother's life."

"A wise choice, Thor Odinson," Thanos leered. Thanos prodded Loki with the toe of his boot and Loki stirred, groaning pitifully. "Your brother would not have been able to withstand much more. Now, fetch me the Space Gem and I will let you and this miserable wretch go free."

Thor hesitated. His fingers cramped in their hold around the hilts of his swords.

Loki painfully lifted his face from the ground. Blood streamed from his nose and mixed with the tears from his eyes, and for a moment his mouth worked without making a sound, and then he croaked, "Thor…" Thor, help, Thor expected his brother to say, but instead Loki whimpered, "Thor…don't. Don't."

"Silence, little god," Thanos snarled and kicked Loki harder in the ribs. Loki gasped and tried to curl inward, but didn't see able to move.
Thor flinched. "Do not hurt him," he said, voice hoarse. His entire body was shaking. "Please…you promised you would not hurt him if I helped you."

"So I did," said Thanos. "Return to me with the Space Gem and the terms of my mercy will go into effect –"

Thanos’ eyes trained on something over Thor's shoulder, jaw going slack in surprise. Thor whipped around to see for himself what Thanos was staring at, thinking wildly that it must be some kind of ambush.

But there was no one there, only the blurry film of the pocket of unreality the Gem suspended them in. Thor turned to look back at Thanos. Thanos appeared to have forgotten Thor was there at all. Perhaps he could not even see him anymore.

"No!" Thanos cried. "Little witch, I will not allow you to disrupt my plans –"

The bubble of unreality shifted; Thor realized what was going to happen and a cry of alarm rushed out of his throat. He darted forward but it was too late: the Reality Gem's strange enchantment shattered around him and Thanos and Loki melted back into immateriality – drawn away to somewhere else, somewhere faraway…faraway.

Thor dropped to the ground where Loki’s form had once been but his knees hit sharp pavement and hands clawed only at empty air. They were gone. Thor shut his eyes against the onslaught of tears that boiled in the terrible pressure inside his head.

They were gone and once again Thor had failed to save his brother.
Chapter 19

Chapter Notes


See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was pain beyond which Loki was capable of imagining. His very skin was being ripped from his muscle. He was being torn apart, cleaved limb from limb. But it was worse than that. Worse then that because of the twisted, wrongness of the agony – an unnatural, vicious pain – irreversible pain, leaving Loki limp and empty.

The Power Stone was consuming him. It chewed through the defenses of his seidr, extracted every ounce of him, leaving no inch unpenetrated. He was laid bare. Defenseless. Stripped to the bone.

Screaming. Screaming. Someone was screaming and it could not be him. It could not be Loki because that was not Loki’s voice, high-pitched and pleading – begging pathetically.

"Alright," said a voice that Loki should have recognized, but it thudded meaningless through the tatters of Loki’s mind, in which only existed more screaming, more pain, more terrible separation –

"Dark Lord Thanos, Destroyer of Worlds," said the voice and the pain stopped. Did the voice control the pain? Loki did not know. He lay with his face pressed to the ground, unable to move and unwilling to try. He did not want to provoke the voice again.


"A wise choice, Thor Odinson," Thanos said overhead, voice vibrating through the floor under Loki’s still body and Loki quaked with terror and the memory of horrendous, wrenching agony, pulling him apart. "Your brother would not have been able to withstand much more."

Thanos’ voice rumbled incomprehensibly through Loki’s head. All he could think about was the pain. The memory of the pain. The promise of more to come. The shredding of his seidr, the very particles that held Loki together, untouchable force that he had guarded jealously but had been snatched from his body so swiftly, so easily. It was the ultimately indignity, the ultimate defeat – and – and Thor.

Thor.

Thor. Giving up to Thanos. Thor was – and Thor was – and Loki had tried so hard to –

Loki lifted his head clumsily. He saw only a blur of blond hair and red cloak through the cloud across his vision, but it was undeniably Thor. Brother, help, Loki wanted to scream, make it stop. Please, make it stop. But his voice instead left his lips in a feeble whisper: "Thor…don’t. Don’t."

"Silence, little god." Thanos kicked Loki in the side and Loki choked on the sharpness of the blow. He tried to curl into a ball, draw himself inward, make himself smaller, less of a target, Thor – Thor, help –

"Do not hurt him," Thor's voice lumbered distantly in Loki's ears. Loki was fading, drifting away into the welcome embrace of oblivion, perhaps even –

But no. Loki had to stop thinking of death. Death could not possible await him, not after all this cruel time.

"No!" Thanos yelled abruptly but Loki was too faraway now even to flinch. Pain. More pain would come, now.

"Let him go," demanded a voice detached from the foggy interior of Loki's skull, and the same voice wound gently through Loki's mind, firm and comforting. *I am here.*

*No.* Loki's heart stuttered and he dragged himself with grueling effort back toward harsh consciousness. *No. I told you not to come. He will kill you.*

*I am not afraid of death,* Wanda replied from within Loki's head. She stood on the threshold of the throne room, balls of scarlet flame dancing in her palms, facing Thanos fiercely unafraid, *by now I know well its company.*

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"I said, let him go," Wanda repeated, marveling at her steady voice. Thanos whisked to face her. The peculiar gray shroud that had rippled around he and Loki collapsed into wisps of smoke. Vision hovered to the side, as yet uninvolved and watching the proceedings with that achingly familiar expression of curiosity on his face. The two twisted corpses of the Chitauri guards lay at Wanda's feet. She had disposed of them easily, crept her magic into their skulls and imploded their brains: a disquieting blend of organic and robotic matter.

"You dare challenge me, witch?" Thanos said, and he was smiling, amused by her unassuming figure, Wanda knew, her seeming weakness.

"I do," said Wanda simply. She released the simmering orbs of magic from her palms toward Thanos. They streamed toward him. He lifted his gloved hand and a shimmering sphere, like a shield, spiraled from his palm. It rose to absorb the onslaught of her magic.

Thanos leered, showing his blunt teeth. He flung her magic back toward her. Wanda ducked out of the way. The red beads of power collided with the wall behind her, charring the shining, inlaid metal.

Wanda released another thread of magic from her fingers and coiled it in a whirlwind around Thanos. It blocked him entirely from her view, picking at his mass. She strained her muscles to lift him off his feet, hurl him toward the ceiling –

"Stop this," said Thanos, and he batted her magic back with a mere flick of his wrist. He sounded almost bored. "You cannot hope to defeat me. This is child's play. If I were really trying you would already be dead."

"Then, by all means, try harder," Wanda grunted with exertion, pummeling Thanos with a rapid-fire assault of swirling red magic.

Wanda could see Loki's lifeless body on the floor behind Thanos. *Rise,* she urged him silently. *Get up. Fight.* Loki did not stir. No hint of a thought rose in answer to her plea. She did not think he was dead, but the connection felt distorted somehow…weakened although it should have been bolstered given their proximity.

*Silly witch.* It was Thanos' voice, but it was coming from inside of her, thundering through her head.
You do not know who you fight.

Get out! Wanda screamed and tore a metal sheet off the wall while she distracted him by her beating magic. She swung the sheet at Thanos' head. He grunted in surprise and raised his arm to bat it away, releasing her mind with a harsh yank.

Wanda did not scream, although one rose in her throat like bile. She knew this game well. She would not let him so easily win.

"Neither do you," she panted. She grabbed hold of Thanos' bronze breastplate and shoved him backward. Thanos kept his footing. He rose the Gauntlet that enclosed his left fist and a cloud of colorless power shot toward her.

Wanda ducked, raising her arms to shield her head and sending out a stream of her magic to deflect the force billowing toward her. The two powers met in the center of the room; shockwaves rolled through the room at their point of collision, knocking Wanda off her feet. She skidded across the floor, already conjuring another vortex from her fingers.

Get up! Wanda shrieked at Loki and out of the corner of her eye, she thought she saw him stir.

Wanda's magic tore against Thanos' purple arms, leaving no mark. Thanos stepped toward Wanda on the ground, raising his palm once again, but this time did not let go a blast from the Gauntlet. He was not trying to kill her, Wanda realized suddenly. It was true. He could crush her like she was an insect underfoot if he was really trying, but he was not trying. Why was he not trying?

The answer came almost immediately. Thanos' voice clawed back through her mind as if it had never left: You are mine! He crowed in triumph. I will have you, little witch. Bow to the inevitable. You cannot escape.

No! Wanda thought desperately, and grappled at Thanos' fingers that squeezed her mind in a terrible grip. She was back in Strucker's lab. The Mind Stone was tearing into her, plucking her apart, bending her mind to its will. Shoving its power into her head. Intruding. Penetrating. I. Will. Not. Let. You. Wanda thought ferociously and was dimly aware that she was yelling, thrashing on the ground under his hand.

Thanos was approaching her, laughing as he continued the assault. Wanda struggled to muster her magic, tossed it toward Thanos across the distance, but he shoved her power back inside her, tugging the reigns of her magic away from her.

Terror erupted in her breast. Do not panic, she thought urgently. Do not panic. Do not let him see your fear.

You are a fool not to fear me! Said Thanos inside her head, and then spoke only feet away from her, grinning, "And now, little witch, shall you show me some of your magic tricks?"

He grabbed hold of her like a ragdoll, Stand, he ordered and Wanda stood, fighting for control, storm raging inside her head. She could not think. She could not think. Her body was no longer her own. Her mind was collapsing inward. She fled inward – running away from this place – this place – Pietro, help me!

Icy shards erupted through the floor between Wanda and Thanos, jagged icicles that cleaved through the floor. Thanos stepped backward from the points that charged toward his chest, and Wanda dropped from Thanos' hastily released grasp.

Thanos looked over his shoulder in surprise, and his eyes fell on Loki at the same time as Wanda's.
Loki was barely sitting up, hands outstretched, eyes glassy. His fingers were blue, Wanda realized distantly as Loki toppled backward, utterly spent with this last desperate effort at magic.

"You have foiled me for that last time, petty god," Thanos growled, and left Wanda to stalk toward Loki.

_Do not touch him._ Wanda thought, mind forcing itself into Thanos. She tugged at the thoughts inside his head. She pulled him backward from Loki. _Rage._ All she felt was rage as she sunk her fingernails into his thoughts as he had done to her only moments before. _Rage._ And power. _Unconquerable power._

Thanos snarled like an animal. He fought against Wanda's talons clawing into his mind. He tried to pry himself free but Wanda only closed her grip tighter. Tears streamed from her eyes. Her body was shaking on the floor as strength fled from her physical body, mustering in the attack on Thanos' mind.

_Leave him._ She ordered, and wrenched him away again. _Rage._ _Rage._ _Rage._ Towering rage. She was inside of him, lobbed into the dark recesses of his mind. _Destroy them. How dare they? Petty mortals, how dare they question him? He would kill them. Kill them. Kill them for their impudence. Kill them simply because he could. He was Thanos. Lord of the Universe. Yielder of Uncontainable Power. Kill them. Kill them._

It was Ultron all over again, shuttling through the thoughts and desires of another being, tumbling uncontrollably – unable to get out.

_I will kill you. Kill you for insolence and daring, little witch. I will kill you and watch with pleasure as you bleed._

Wanda stumbled backward. She felt as her consciousness slammed back into her body on the floor. Her skin burned. Her mind was disconnected, tumbling through the dark, struggling once again to find footing inside her own mind, fighting against the murderous rage that thrummed inside her heart as if it was her own.

Thanos' shoulders heaved. His hands grasped his head and eyes were wide in – in terror? Wanda could not tell. Thanos appeared unwilling to step again toward her. He turned instead to Vision, still watching with interest, and growled, "Kill her."

Vision swooped into the air, switched on by the simple command. Wanda was glued to the floor in shock and horror, mind still unraveled from its foray into Thanos' consciousness. She did not have time to react – rather, she did have time, a second of time, but she did not. She could not. She would not raise her hand. Not again. Not again would she –

Vision hovered overhead. His face was horrifyingly blank as his hand closed around Wanda's throat and he drew her into the air. He slammed her against the wall. Pain shuddered through her body. She tried to gasp, but no air could travel up her throat under his throttling grasp.

_Vis. Vis, please_ – His eyes were disinterested. He was not staring at her. He was not even facing an enemy. He was completely unaware of what he was doing. Completely uncaring and indifferent. Indifferent when he had once stared at her with such compassion, such utter adoration, and fascination as she brushed her hand against his cheek, kissed the shallow dip of his temple, traced the softness of his lips with her fingers.

_No. My love. No._
Chaos erupted around her. She was not aware of what was happening. Perhaps Thanos had finally killed Loki, defenseless Loki who had spent his last ounce of strength protecting Wanda, and – and perhaps Vision's lifeless eyes were going to be the last thing she ever saw.

Vision's eyes. Visions lovely eyes. It was not a terrible sight. It was not a terrible way to die. She reached out, looking desperately for some little gap in his guarded consciousness to slip into, to crawl her mind once again into his, rest in their connected thoughts. His mind was sharp and unyielding but she caressed the well-known corridors and pathways with trembling fingers.

I love you, she whispered as her eyesight blurred under his grip on her throat. I love you. His mind softened under her touch. Wanda saw a shadow of something – something achingly recognizable – flash through Vision's eyes: a flicker of the look of surprised satisfaction that would cross his face when she teased him, kissed him unexpectedly, put her head on his chest – but the expression was rapidly obscured by horror.

"Wanda –" he said and dropped her, hand loosed from around her neck. She crumbled to the ground at his feet, gasping for breath. She grabbed without thinking for his legs, wanting to hold him – some part of him – as if her mere touch could stop him from slipping away again.

"No –" Vision choked and again his eyes lost their light as the threat of the Stone breached the control of his consciousness. "No – I – shall – not – allow –" he choked on each word and buried his face in his hands. His fingers clawed at his skin as if he was in supreme agony.

He reeled backward, out of Wanda's grip. She could only watch in terror as his fingers pierced the casing of his forehead, digging into his skin, burrowing until he was knuckle-deep in his own flesh.

"No…" she whimpered, dazed, uncomprehending. "No!" she shrieked but it was too late:

Vision's hand pulled free of his head, gripping the glowing yellow orb that had powered his cognizance, strands of membrane clinging to the spherical crystal as it separated from his body by his own volition.

For a moment he staggered. His eyes focused fleetingly on the gem in his hand, as if he held his own heart in his fist – and then he crashed as a puppet whose strings had been cut, collapsing into a heap of lubricated joints, synthetic flesh, and hollow metal parts.

Wanda could not breathe. Dual pains exploded in her head and chest, as if Vision had removed the gem from her own body. It was Pietro's death all over again: an abrupt amputation, a tearing of a twin consciousness, a shared mind that had been severed in two, leaving bloody stumps of nerve-endings behind.

Wanda could not even scream, the agony was too great. She scrambled for him – brain desperately grasping toward his, but the tendrils of her thought slicked off a blank slate. There was nothing there. Nothing there.

Dimly, she was aware of noises around her. Yelling. Rushing footsteps. Lights. But it did not matter. It did not matter because Vision was dead – dead after he was so close – so close to returning to her.

"You know, really didn't think I'd have to fight you again so soon," said a stranger's voice somewhere in the distance and Thanos erupted in anger as he lost his trusted servant. The hair on the back of Wanda's neck stood on end in response to the tell-tale skittering of magic through the Throne Room but she did not care. She did not care anymore about Thanos. Thanos could kill her. Thanos would kill her, and she did not care.
Wanda crawled to Vision's still body. She reached out a hand to touch his shoulder but stopped with her fingers inches from his red, metallic-like flesh. She did not want to feel him, feel how cold he must be. Unwilling, her eyes drew to the jagged pit in the center of his forehead, marring his face. She could not recognize him. All she could see was the dark, gaping wound of broken flesh revealing the stems of severed wires within – mechanical – artificial –

There was no blood.

Curl in his still fingers, crusted in flecks of scarlet flesh, the Mind Gem pulsed a sickly yellow.

*Vision. Come back. Please. Come back.* But it didn't work. Wanda had tried it before. She had attempted to force life back into Pietro aboard the Hellicarier after the battle of Sokovia, surrounded by the Avengers who were not yet her friends. She had tried and she had failed, and then she had collapsed into tearing sobs in Clint's arms, the first one to reach her after the explosion of her desperate, recoiling magic from her dead brother's body slammed in waves across the bridge.

It did not work. There was nothing she could do.

Hazily, Wanda considered grabbing the Stone. Taking it from Vision's hand to do – to – but she could not bring herself to touch it. To slip her fingers around the rock that had been inside Vision's head, to wipe the grit off of it on her shirt. Her eyes burned with sudden ferocity and she willed herself to regain control.

She looked up, whirl of motion around her coming into sharp clarity. Thanos had not yet barreled down on her because he was fighting someone else. For a moment Wanda thought wildly it was Loki, but then she saw that whoever it was had a long red cloak and was wielding yellow disks of magic on his hands, sizzling green bands rimmed his arms. She did not know who he was – only that he was keeping Thanos at bay, barely dodging spears of power from the Gauntlet, flicking through the throne room through black, sparking gold-edged portals that erupted out of midair.

Then she saw Loki, still limp on the ground. She stood, knees trembling, and stumbled past the curious shards of ice that had leapt from the floor toward his body. She fell to her knees at Loki's side. He was lying on his back. She pressed a hand to his neck, wondering if beings from wherever it was he was from – had a pulse in the same place as humans, but she already felt thready movement under his cold flesh.

What now? Wanda's mind was not working the way it should have been. Her head and chest throbbed. Her thoughts were sluggish, senses muffled. She could not – she could not – all she could remember was Vision's eyes. Vision's eyes staring at her while he crushed the life out of her. Vision's eyes widening as he realized what he had done. Vision's eyes when she woke to find him staring at her, faint smile on his lips, playing with her hair –

*No. No. She could not fall to pieces. She – she –*

Loki was unconscious, but still alive, for the moment safe as Thanos' was engaged in battle. Wanda tried to stand again. A wave of dizziness took hold her and sent her tumbling back toward the ground. She caught herself. She pushed upward from the floor with a sputter of magic and managed to catch a foothold on the floor.

Her stomach twisted with horrible, terrifying pain. Wanda cried aloud and wrapped her arms around her middle, crashing back to her knees. *No,* she thought urgently. *No. No. No. Not this. Not this, too.*

Loki's eyes flew open at the sound of her gasp. Her alarm must have wakened him. The look of confusion on his face slowly morphed into comprehension and he reached toward her feebly with his
hand. He knew, Wanda realized. He knew. The final pocket of secrets she had kept from him in the cell now unraveled. She remembered how his fingers had turned blue as he shot ice up out of the floor and wondered what secrets he had still managed to keep hidden from her.

"I think it's about time you two were going, don't you?" said the man who was fighting Thanos, materializing out of a swirling black vortex right beside them. He spared Wanda and Loki not a glance before he backhanded the portal toward them on the ground.

"You will not take them, Sorcerer," Thanos growled, and a beam of purple light pummeled the man in the chest. His body crackled with bright green that seemed to shield him but he was thrown backward –

Wanda reacted on impulse, adrenaline surging through her weak, aching limbs and she lunged toward the man on the ground. Loki's hand tightened sharply around her wrist and tugged her so she fell on top of his chest. She tried to struggle free, but she was too weak, strength draining out of her like blood from a gaping wound. The black portal moved to swallow them out of the throne room.

"No!" Wanda yelled as the last thing she saw was the Sorcerer stand back to his feet, hands bathed in green light, and then they were slipping through the cavernous black hole that jumped through the dimensions of the universe, away, away, away – and, ear pressed to the frantic beating heart in the Loki's chest, Wanda fluttered into the darkness of oblivion.

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Just be back, dammit. Quickly. Stark's farewell throbbed in Stephen's head as he stepped into the gaping portal that would, if all went well, spit him out into Thanos' ship. He had never teleported himself through space before…but it really should work. There was nothing to be nervous about.

The Eye of Agamotto was restless. There was no other word for it. Stephen could feel it simmering against his chest, anxious to be used again after he wakened it power on the surface of Xandar. The Gauntlet's cry had risen to a bellow with the addition of both the Reality and Power Stones. Stephen felt honed to its signal with the Time Stone. It would effortlessly draw him through the dimension to the Gauntlet's incessant cry of longing.

The key – of course – would be to not get caught.

Stephen stepped out of the other side of the fiery ring and his surroundings solidified around him. He was standing in the center of a cavernous room. A throne hovered, abandoned by a sweeping viewport that revealed the darkness of space, flecked with pinprick stars. Stephen was not sure why it was the throne he noticed first – and not the million other, threatening things he should have noticed: Vision, choking Wanda Maximoff against the wall, spiked icicles jutting out of the floor, Thanos marching toward a slumped body on the ground that Stephen recognized numbly as Loki.

Right. Not getting caught. That was…going to be more difficult then he'd anticipated.

"I suggest you check your security measures," Stephen said dryly, and Thanos turned to face him in surprise even as Stephen unfurled a sparking yellow eldritch whip, slinging it toward Thanos and yanking the Titan away from his course toward the defeated god. Putting aside the matter of Loki's danger to earth, Stephen thought it was safe to assume allegiances had been shifted in the shadow of this larger threat.

Thanos grabbed hold of the whip in his gilded hand and clawed it away from where it had wrapped around his waist. He tugged it forward, toppling Stephen off his feet and Stephen released it at once in alarm. Thanos was grinning.
"You are more unwise than I thought you, Sorcerer," he spat. He lifted his Gauntlet and let loose a spiral of purple and red entwined power. Not good. Stephen ducked through a portal and reemerged on the other side of the throne room. Mandalas ringed his arms, he manipulated them, yanking the floor out from under Thanos' feet like it was a carpet.

Thanos' tottered forward, reeling backward to face Stephen with a growl of frustration. Antagonizing the Titan was perhaps not Stephen's best course of action, but he was rapidly running out of new tricks. He needed only to distract him long enough to get Maximoff and Loki into the same place. There was no use leaving without both of them now.

Stephen leapt through another portal, coming out again behind Thanos, but Thanos had anticipated the move and narrowly missed taking Stephen's head off with another blast of power from the Gauntlet. He had to trust Maximoff was strong enough to hold of Vision on her own. What he'd heard of her – her power was likely daunting. And Stephen had his hands full with Thanos.

Stephen tapped into the Gem's power humming against his chest. Trickles of green light ran down his arms and solidified into rimmed bracelets around his wrists and forearms. Stephen tugged backward on the cycle of time, reversing its flow, but Thanos was there – halting his ticking clock with a blast of red and purple fire.

"It is not so easy to fool me again!" Thanos leered.

Dammit, Stephen thought fleetingly, and rolled out of the way of a blast from the Gauntlet. He used his momentum to haul himself up the side of the wall, sprinting up the curled surface of reality, tossing a pulsating Tao Mandala toward Thanos' neck like a frisbee.

Stephen flipped off the ceiling and landed back on the ground, hands raised, Mandalas rotating like buzzsaws on his palms. "You know, really didn't think I'd have to fight you again so soon," he panted, sweat dripped down the side of his face.

He heard something behind him – a panting cry – and his stomach plummeted, feeling sure Vision had succeeded in squeezing the life out of Maximoff, but the noise had attracted Thanos' attention, as well, and his visage curdled in rage.

"No!" Thanos bellowed, launching himself toward Maximoff, who was crawling toward the crumpled body of Vision. Stephen caught sight of the dislodged Mind Stone pulsing in Vision's hand, and nausea tumbled through his stomach as he wondered if Maximoff had torn the Gem from her lover's head or if Vision had done it himself.

Stephen stepped through another portal. He did what he thought of first, which was to rematerialize directly in front of Thanos. He needed to unbalance the monster – surprise him in any way he had left – and he launched himself physically at the Titan.

Stephen was halfway surprised to feel his body collide with solid flesh. Thanos' skin was warm and scaly, ridged and twisted with terrible strength. The two of them toppled toward the ground, and then kept going as Stephen hurtled them through a hastily constructed portal, streaking through the rimmed pit, lights sparking around them until they crashed back into the throne room, sliding across the floor.

Stephen picked himself up first. Thanos' face was twisted in terrible rage – the face of certain death if Stephen didn't think of something soon.

Stephen risked a look over his shoulder and saw that Maximoff had left Vision and was now kneeling over Loki's body, clutching her stomach with a stricken look of pain twisting her face.
"I think it's about time you two were going, don't you?" Stephen yelled to both of them and sent a portal shuttling through the air toward them. He did not bother to look over his shoulder to see as his portal swallow both of them into the gullet of swirling yellow flame.

"You will not take them, Sorcerer," Thanos bellowed. A rocket of purple light flew toward Stephen’s chest and he blocked himself with crossed arms, bands of green sizzling on his wrists. Green and purple light met with a shower of sparks and Stephen was thrown off his feet.

He landed hard on his back, head cracking against the metal floor. Thanos roared, lumbering forward with brute strength as if he had forgotten the metal glove on his hand.

Stephen needed only to give Maximoff and Loki time enough to escape back to Stark. Without thinking, Stephen called upon the Time Stone. Green light spilled from Strange's fingers, tugging at the very threads of time that wove together reality, collapsing inward so that he and Thanos stood at the epicenter of a green hum of energy – outside the pulsing green walls the throne room buzzed with a whirl of activity, a cassette tape on fast-forward as Thanos' minions spilled into the hall.

"You fool. One Stone against two – I shall defeat you easily!" Thanos growled.

"Right," said Stephen, and tugged back the Time Stone's coiling power into the locket of the Eye. "I'd say that was my cue to leave."

He slung a portal in front of him and he leapt – unsure where he would land, knowing only he must get away before Thanos crushed him into dust, hoping he'd be able to pick his path through the cosmos on the fly – and Stephen plummeted through the nothingness that existed in the space between dimensions.

Chapter End Notes

Hey, I did warn you *dodges thrown tissue boxes*
Chapter 20

Steve nimbly crept through the darkness. The streets were still and silent except for the gaping mouths of alleys, which hid others who walked the streets at night: black market dealers and beggars with nowhere else to go. A prostitute beckoned to Steve from the shadows but backed away with a disappointed pout when Steve didn't even acknowledge her.

Steve tried to suppress the pang of sympathy that rose unbidden in his chest. Toy would have called him old fashioned – and maybe Steve was. He thought about the time Natasha had educated him about the modern perspective on impoverished sex workers. Steve couldn't help but remember what his mom said about the girls they sometimes saw in New York. Respect 'em, Steve. They're people, same as you or me.

But now he was thinking about Natasha, wondering if she was alright. He was certain she was. She was more than capable of taking care of herself and would scorn his concern for her. It was coming on almost two years since he'd last left her in Wakanda.

And then there was Tony – Steve had allowed Tony's voice to creep into his head without his permission. That's how Tony's voice always came to Steve, sneaking unexpectedly and casually out of his thoughts, such a familiar presence that it took several moments before Steve even realized he'd come. Dammit, Tony.

Steve shoved that all away with difficulty. He had a job to do tonight; he needed to concentrate. He'd caught wind of another abandoned Nazi garrison, this one with a tantalizing hint of secret scientific experimentation written all over it.

The majority of HYDRA activity had occurred in Europe over the war, of course, but there had been a surprising number of bases in Northern African, as well – drawn there, he imagined, by the allure of the Wakandan Vibranium mines. Steve was determined to hunt down each and every one of them, pick them apart for their secrets, and maybe – just maybe – he'd eventually find something, some jot of information that would lead him somewhere else, to research or answers, or something – something –

It was probably useless to hope by now, but Steve couldn't help it. He wouldn't rest until he found some way of getting Bucky back, healed and whole. T'Challa's people were doing all they could, but Steve hadn't been able to simply stand around and wait. He'd run through every damn country with a fine-toothed comb if it helped.

The base was in an unobtrusive structure – it had passed on its ownership from the Nazis to the English up through the cold war. Now it was entirely abandoned, a husk of toub, sun-dried mud, and sitting empty and dark in the night. Or at least it appeared to be.

Funny. He had never heard of a place this near the South Sudan and Wakandan boarder before. He'd been keeping a pretty close eye on Wakanda – he should have noticed it before. He wondered if he was somehow being set up and then immediately wondered why he should care if he was. The best thing to do when approaching a trap was spring it, and then worry about what to do next, now with a better idea of what was really going on. That's what Tony would advise, anyway –

Dammit, Tony.

Steve dashed across the street before he could think better of it and hoisted himself onto one of the high ledges of the empty windows. He wouldn't risk the door, not if someone might be waiting for
him inside.

He pulled himself through the window and dropped noiselessly to the ground on the other side, inside a tight hallway. He blinked, getting used to the dark. No one there. Yet.

Sometimes, but rarely, he stumbled on active sights. Little pockets of neo-Nazi fanaticism, sometimes backed by actually HYDRA power. Usually they were abandoned like this one appeared to be. Still, he'd have to be on his guard.

Man, he missed having someone there to watch his back. Sam had wanted to stick around, of course, but Steve had been torn between his desire for loyal company and needing some time by himself to work out all that had happened…and he'd eventually decided on the latter, with a promise to keep in touch that he only half-heartedly tried to keep.

It wasn't like him not to keep promises. Then again, he'd done a lot of things lately that weren't like him.

Steve slunk through the hallway; keeping to the shadows was not difficult, but he had to dodge desks and chairs placed haphazardly against the wall. He caught a hazy glimpse of what looked like an SIS seal on a crumpled, discarded document, and he wondered if this place had been a base for MI6 back in the day, after the Nazis had it. Or maybe it was all connected. MI6 must have had dealings with SHIELD, after all. Maybe HYDRA was the many-headed skeleton of all the intelligence services.

If HYDRA left anything behind, it wouldn't be sitting in plain sight. Steve made his way down the corridor, trying the doors he came to. He reached a door that wouldn't give way without a shove – and he forced it easily open with his shoulder. It led downward to some kind of cellar.

Steve knew by now that all the best skeletons weren't kept in the closet: they were buried under ground, and he carefully descended the creaking wooden stairs, holding his breath every time his foot landed on a loose board. The last thing he needed was for the whole thing to collapse. He'd probably end up bringing the building down on top of him; the place couldn't still be structurally sound.

He stopped at the bottom of the stairs and peered blankly into the pitch black. He didn't suppose there would still be a working light switch somewhere on the –

The hair on the back of Steve's neck stood on end. He knew that feeling well, the bizarre intuition he'd developed over the years, an unnatural instinct for danger, a foreboding sense that warned that he was not alone –

His muscles braced for a fight, adrenaline shuttled through his brain, even as a familiar voice spoke from the dark:

"I thought you'd come, Captain."

Steve came to a tense halt, whirling toward the corner the voice had issued from, grabbing for the shield that hung on his – his hand hit empty air. Force of habit. He had to stop doing that. It was a waste of a precious moment in a real fight.

Thankfully, this didn't seem like it would be a real fight. "Agent Hill," he said levelly, although he could see little more than her silhouette with his slowly adjusting eyesight. "Isn't it usually Fury who makes the house calls?"

"He was busy," said Maria Hill. She flicked a switch of an electric lantern and light crowded into the room, making the shadows flee to the corners of the basement. Steve blinked away the bright
splotch that tattooed itself onto his retinas. Hill was sitting in a chair, one leg over the other, poised, proper, and stone-faced. She surveyed him with her sharp eyes, dark hair slicked severely back from her face. She looked even more like a commander, stern and by-the-book, since he'd last seen her. "But I'm sure he would have liked to see you."

"So it was Fury who sent you?" Steve confirmed. "I wondered when he would be getting back in touch."

"Why don't you take a seat, Captain."

"Not Captain anymore, Maria," Steve corrected her with a shake of his head. It hurt to say it out loud, but she had to know. Besides, it hurt more to hear her say it. "I'm not Captain America and I never was. He was always a lie. A character I could play sometimes to pretend I was a hero. But I had to quit when I started doing things Captain America would never do."

"Then you're Steve Rogers," said Hill, too simply. "A good man and still a hero."

"No," Steve said simply. "Steve Rogers died in a test tube, under the hands of the US government more than seventy-five years ago. Steve Rogers is long dead and buried. I'm not anyone at all."

"The locals are calling you Nomad," said Hill

"Are they?" said Steve. He nearly smiled, but looked down to compose himself, and when he glanced back up his face was sobered, mind blanketed with more regret. "People like to believe in legends. But it turns out legends rarely live up to their name."

"Legends often disagree with truth," Hill answered quickly. Steve wondered if Fury gave his people a script, and then he concluded that he probably did. "But that doesn't mean we can't sometimes find something that agrees with both."

"You're sounding like Fury again," Steve looked hard into her face, wondering if she would back down. Agent Maria Hill looked as impassive as ever. Good old dependable, pragmatic Maria Hill. God, he'd missed her. He'd missed all of it.

But it didn't help, dwelling on the past.

"I've been accused of that a lot lately," Hill answered with a wry smile.

Steve crossed his arms over his chest. "With all due respect, ma'am —" maybe she was thinking, there's the Captain we all know and love, but maybe Steve was just thinking of Tony again, "but what the fuck are you doing in the middle of the Sahara Desert?"

"Looking for you," Hill answered with a cocked eyebrow. "I thought it would be obvious."

"Are you trying to pull me back into SHIELD?" said Steve. "Cuz I can save you a lot of time and effort. The answer is no."

"It's called STRENGTH now, actually," Hill said. "Complete overhaul of the system. Now a private organization so we don't have to deal with the Counsel anymore. Fury oversees every appointment now. Just the people he trusts onboard. We were hoping we could —"

Steve cut her off: "I'm flattered Fury still trusts me. It's nice to know someone does. But the answer's still no."

"We've got Barton back," Hill said rapidly, probably afraid he'd slip away if she didn't talk fast
"He'll be here tomorrow with Romanoff. I bet they'd be happy to see you."

"Sorry to hear you dragged Clint into it," Steve said, not raising to her bait. "He deserves some time alone with his family."

"You didn't have much of a problem asking him for help two years ago," said Hill, a rare show of aggression. Maybe she had changed, too.

"We don't have to talk about how much I regret from two years ago," said Steve. He'd never been very good at this wordplay stuff, tossing and throwing barbs back and forth like he was playing baseball. That was Tony's expertise. Steve preferred bald truth.

"I'm assuming you know what happened in New York three days ago," said Hill, jumping right to the heart of the matter. She had never been one to dodge the issue, either, never as big a fan of the game of manipulation as her boss was. "You know this isn't finished yet. We're heading toward events that will decide the survival of this planet, this universe. And we need your help."

"My help for what?" Steve shook his head. He didn't snap at her. He felt tired. Exhausted. Didn't she know? He'd heard all these recruitment speeches a thousand times over. He'd been there when they were written. Hell, he'd distributed them in pamphlets – dressed in tights on that godforsaken USO stage.

"You're a rallying point. If people see you, they will come –"

"I know about propaganda, Maria," Steve said, voice firmer this time. He wasn't opposed to being forceful if it meant getting her off his back. "It doesn't work in this day and age. People don't believe in things anymore."

"They'd believe in you," said Hill, and Steve wondered if she had any conviction in her words, or if they rang just as flat inside her own head as they did in Steve's. "We could make them believe in you again."

"Not if Stark has anything to –"

"Stark's gone," Hill interrupted him, eyes finding and catching Steve's across the distance.

Stark – Tony – Steve's chest ached. "What do you mean?" he said quickly, not wanting to betray the anxiety that had sprung readily into his stomach, but finding it difficult to contain it. He told the truth, it was a habit he hadn't been able to shake yet. He thought uneasily to the message he'd woken up to two mornings ago: You said anytime, anywhere, and…well, this might just be it.

Steve had seen footage of the New York attack. He had thought it had been dealt with. Just another one of Tony's overreactions –

"He's gone. Into outer space we think. But we don't know when – or if – he's coming back."

Steve frowned. "I think you owe me a few more explanations, Agent Hill."

Hill smiled wryly. Steve remembered having her at his side with her clipboard, a steady voice among the chaos of the New Avengers Initiative. Damn. It had all been so simple then. Steve didn't understand how it had all gone to shit so quickly.

Hill told him about a whole bunch of stuff that didn't make any sense. The world had gone mad, crazier than it was the last time Steve checked in with it. And he didn't know what she wanted him to do about it. She was looking for Captain America; Steve had already told her he didn't exist.
anymore. Steve – Steve couldn't help with this. He wasn't any match for power hungry alien warlords or magic stones.

"Where've you left Barnes, Steve?" Hill finished unexpectedly, almost throwing Steve off-balance – as any mention of Bucky was wont to do – but he collected himself resolutely. This was the final blow. Steve wasn't naïve enough not to realize Hill had been planning this from the start, hoping to reel him back in. He was grateful, at least, that she was finally talking about something he could actually understand.

"Why do you need to know?" Steve said sternly. He knew his eyebrows were doing the thing Tony referred to as 'Captain America's eyebrows of disapproval,' and that was enough to make him check his expression into something more neutral, struggling to ignore the dull throb in his gut. The only wit of comfort was the thought that, if Hill had come from Wakanda, then at least Steve could be sure T'Challa had kept his word and hadn't told anyone else about Bucky.

"We need every hand on deck," said Hill, still holding his gaze. Was she telling the truth? He'd never know Maria to lie to him but…it was getting hard to tell how far he could rely on past loyalties.

"You're sure you're not asking just so you can toss him into prison again?" said Steve.

"That wasn't us," said Hill. "Fury doesn't give a damn about where someone came from, just as long as they're fighting for us now. It's always been like that. Look at Romanoff or Maximoff – even Stark."

"So what is this?" said Steve. "Fury's pulling us back in? Making another goddamn team? I know that pep-talk about Phil's collectors' cards was faked, by the way."

Hill shrugged. "It worked."

"Not for long, it didn't." Steve sighed. So damn tired of all of it. "I'm not going to do it, Maria. You're wasting your time. And I'm not going to tell you where Bucky is just so you can try to sink your hook into him, too. You can't go after him just because you need him as a soldier. It's not fair to use him like that."

He'd rather Bucky never woke up from cryo if the alternative meant just being used as someone else's weapon, and then his gut wrenched because that was a goddamn awful thing to think, hoping his best friend never woke up, no matter his motives for thinking it.

"It's not my choice, Rogers," Hill answered levelly. Tony had always called her a cold-hearted bitch. Steve had never seen it, but maybe he could understand his point a little better now.

Tony. Dammit.

"Besides," Hill continued. "We wouldn't exploit HYDRA's triggers. I'm sure T'Challa can –"

"I've learned a thing or two about SHIELD, Maria," Steve interrupted her. "Or STRENGTH, or the US government, or HYDRA – and organizations like that use people, no matter how loudly they condemn the other side when they do the same thing."

"It's war, Cap – Steve," Hill corrected herself rapidly, but Steve still thought he might have caught the merest glimpse of uncertainty cross her face.

"That's always the excuse," said Steve. "And it always will be. But maybe if we stopped letting that be the case, maybe we'd stop having an excuse for war, too."
"Tell that to the enemy," said Hill.

"I just did."

Steve let himself smile this time, a stiff movement in the corner of his lips. He turned his back on her and walked back up the creaking stairs, gone in an instant, and she let him go, watching him coldly without another word. She'd come looking for the wrong man, Steve told himself firmly. If he couldn't make her understand that, then he wasn't going to waste time trying.

He left the building swiftly, lost in the shadows of the night and his own thoughts. Hill's words had stirred a faint unease in the pit of his stomach. It had been several months since he'd last went to see Bucky – enclosed in a white casket that might as well have been a tomb; perhaps it was about time he went for another visit. Just to make sure all was still right.

OOO

"King T'Challa," said Bruce, with a great deal more charity then Jane thought she could muster at the moment. "Thank you for meeting with us."

The king of Wakanda had agreed to meet with them in a small reception room, one of the many nooks in the labyrinthine palace. He was alone and addressed them with appropriate decorum, but not enough to ease the frustration and unease that had been building in Jane's chest all night and into the morning.

"What can I do for both of you?" said T'Challa smoothly. "You mentioned you had something important to tell me?"

"We'd like to discuss – ah," Bruce rummaged for the right words.

Jane beat him to it: "We'd like to discuss something with your scientific staff. Something we've discovered that we think is important."

T'Challa turned to look at her with raised eyebrows – with interest or patronization, Jane wondered. "Really? Can you tell me what it is? I will be able to relay –"

"We'd really rather we could talk to someone on your technical team, your highness," said Bruce apologetically. "It's a... puzzling development. We'd appreciate consulting with other who, ah..."

"You think I lack the knowledge to sufficiently understand?" T'Challa asked, but there was a slight grin inching at his lips.

"No, not at all –" said Bruce.

"– We would just like some contact with the people you promised would get in touch with us days ago," Jane finished flatly.

"Ah, of course," said T'Challa with a crisp nod. "I understand that the delay must be frustrating. But we are currently in the middle of very delicate political negotiations. I am sure, in only a few more days, Shuri will be able to –"

Jane was on her feet. Bruce made a small noise of protest below her but she ignored him. She was angry. She was tired. She was running on very little sleep and a rising level of confusion that was beginning to taste very like fear. "Your Highness, I understand you're busy. But it has already been days. Bruce only just got here. I have been here more than a week."
"Dr. Foster," T'Challa began in his damnably peaceable voice. A diplomat to the core. "I apologize for the inconvenience this has caused you. If I had known of your frustrations, I would have –"

"If you didn't want us here then why did you let us in?" said Jane heatedly. "I promise you, I'm not here to steal your tech. I'm here for science. Because I want to learn. And help, if at all possible."

"I appreciate –"

"No," Jane cut him off. She didn't know whether or not it was wise, to interrupt a king – but none of his Dora Milaje guards seemed to be around, and he didn't look like he was going to stop her, himself. "With all due respect, but you don't appreciate my situation at all. I don't have to be here. I don't have to share what Bruce and I think we've learned. I'm perfectly capable of walking away at any time. And I will, if Dr. Shuri continues to distrust us."

"Alright, alright," said T'Challa, lifting his hands to shoulder-height in surrender, but – infuriatingly – he was smiling. "I shall contact – ah – Dr. Shuri right away and tell her to meet with you at her earliest convenience."

"No," said Jane. "Not at her earliest convenience. Now." Thor had always told her she looked like an angry kitten when she got upset, but something in her face must have intimidated the king, for he took a step back, no longer smiling.

"Right. Now," he echoed her. "If you'll excuse me…I'll only be a moment."

T'Challa took his leave. Jane glared at his back until he disappeared behind the doors swinging shut after him. When she finally looked away, it was to catch Bruce's eye, who looked vaguely impressed.

"You weren't kidding when you said you could deal with men," he said and Jane offered him a sheepish smile.

OOO

The children called him Ingcuka, White Wolf. Shuri examined Sergeant Barnes – Bucky, he said to call him – out of the corner of her eye. To her, it looked as if a wolf was a fitting moniker: fierce, but fiercely loyal. Furtive, but with a furtive wisdom. A pack animal who had lost his pack.

Shuri supposed she could understand Captain Rogers' inability to sit still in the palace, waiting helplessly for his friend to wake, but she could also not keep from faulting him for abandoning Bucky and going almost completely off-grid. The Dora Milaje, of course, had means of tracking him, but they also had too much on their plate at the moment to worry about one brooding white boy.

After all, they already had one of their own to deal with.

"It's…peaceful here," said Bucky after a beat of silence. He sounded like a man unaccustomed to peace. She could not blame him. Her brother hadn't let her read many of the Winter Soldier's HYDRA records, saying that was knowledge for the psychologists not the inventor, but Shuri had gleaned enough to give her nightmares of her own for several nights.

The bowl-shaped inlet, which bled into the narrow Lake Turkana as the very edge of their country, glistened in the sunlight. It was peaceful. Peaceful and beautiful. Shuri realized a quiet she had been missing ever since Baba's death had finally nestled itself back under her ribcage. A different quiet, something heavier and not-quite sad, but a quiet nonetheless.

She hated to shatter it.
"I understand if you don't want to see this yet," she said, and Bucky turned immediately to her, looking interested if a little cautious. Whatever she could say about him, he had good manners.

"That doesn't sound good," he said, attempting to smile.

She supposed it would be better just to show it to him.

"Here." She plucked a Kimoyo bead off her wrist and activated an archived hologram. The image morphed into existence in the palm of her hand, spinning out of shifting black splinters until they formed a prosthetic arm – her pet project over the months Bucky had spent in cryo. "I wanted to have it ready for you when you woke up."

Bucky's face betrayed momentary surprise at seeing the perfect, miniature replica materialize right before his eyes – so convincing it might as well have been solid. Shuri had to fight back a grin. It never got tiring, her blossoming satisfaction at the shock that crossed peoples' faces when they witnessed her technology for the first time. She'd been seeing it a lot more recently; it had been a little frustrating before, given that this type of thing had been taken for granted in Wakanda for years.

"It's Vibranium," said Shuri when it became apparent Bucky was not going to speak. He was a silent man; a strange contradiction to the stories she had been told by Captain Rogers when all he'd been doing was hovering at her elbow in her lab. "Much better than your old one." She couldn't help the small tone of pride from creeping into her voice as she spoke. "Nearly Indestructible. Lightweight. You should feel very little difference from your own arm. And you won't have to worry about corrosion in the joints or inner gears. I borrowed the tech from my brother's suit, so it absorbs kinetic energy. Useful in a fight."

Bucky's expression suddenly became closed. Shuri wondered how she'd managed to upset him.

"That's…good," he said stiffly, clearly trying to sound enthusiastic.

And then Shuri thought oh, and said – awkwardly, because she'd never been very good at being reassuring – "What my brother has done for you, it's free. You don't owe us anything, especially yourself. We don't expect you to fight for us. Or to fight at all if it's not what you want to do. The arm is yours. But it is also yours to take when you feel like you are ready."

Bucky nodded slowly. "Thank you," he said finally, after he took a long moment to digest her words. He turned to look at her. "It means a lot. All this." Bucky looked people in the eye when he spoke to them. Shuri wasn't used to that kind of frank openness, especially not in someone who had gone through as much as Sergeant Barnes, and who had been lied to by so many people.

She looked at the ground, smiling, and shrugged. She was saved from reply as a Kimoyo bead buzzed on her wrist, indicating an incoming transmission. She opened the message and the miniaturized bust of her brother appeared in the open air in front of her.

"Shuri, where are you –" T'Challa started but then spotted Bucky beside her. "Sergeant Barnes," he nodded gravely in greeting. "It's good to see you up."

"You're – Highness," Bucky stumbled a little over the title, evidently unaccustomed to talking to kings. Shuri had to smother another smile.

"What do you want, brother? Can't you see I'm busy?" said Shuri.

T'Challa rolled his eyes. "I have two very angry American scientists to deal with here, Shuri. I told you they were your responsibility."
"I didn't want them messing with all of my stuff," Shuri protested. "They will want to know how everything works, dissect it all and probably criticize me for something they do not understand. They could wait until I had time enough to deal with them."

"They are finished waiting," T'Challa answered sternly, a look on his face that told her she was no longer speaking to her irritating big brother, but the king of Wakanda.

Shuri bristled; she wasn't about to let him pull that kingly BS with her, but, then again, perhaps her brother had a point. She had been less than...hospital to her latest guests. "Fine," she huffed. "Tell them I shall be at the palace soon."

"How soon?" T'Challa said through gritted teeth. Shuri lifted her eyebrows. She was familiar with both Doctors Foster and Banner's work, had read their Wikipedia pages thoroughly, and neither had struck her as figures capable of giving her brother a hard enough time to make him crawl to his little sister for help.

"I'm leaving right now, Brother," said Shuri. "They'll only be there to intimidate you for another twenty-minutes, at least."

"Good," said T'Challa, and his face blinked away as the call ended.

"So, what do you say, Bucky?" said Shuri, looking back at him with a grin. "You could tag along with me, try your new arm on for size?"

Bucky mirrored her smile, but his eyes were thoughtful when he nodded. "Yeah. I think I'm ready."
"T'Challa," said Steve, smiling readily as the king emerged through the double doors into Steve's suite – the same he'd inhabited during his first few months in Wakanda, back when he'd hoped Bucky's reentrance into cryosleep would be a relatively short one. The room was elegantly ornamented – Wakanda's cultural trappings seamlessly blending with the modern technology that was more unfamiliar to Steve then the décor.

"Steve, my friend, it's good to see you." T'Challa stepped forward to clap Steve into a brisk embrace. The king was smiling but his eyes were creased with what looked like worry. "How are you?"

"I'm…fine," said Steve, still not entirely sure how to maneuver around T'Challa – a man who had been so generous, who called Steve his friend, but who felt inexorably distant from Steve with his title and responsibilities. Steve had never been comfortable hobnobbing with celebrities in the USO or, later, at Tony's lavish parties, and, although Thor had also been a king on some distant realm, T'Challa felt more like royalty than Thor ever had.

"Good, good," said T'Challa. He sounded distracted. Steve wondered if he had come at a bad time. He didn't intend to stay for long. "I have been meaning to contact you. This will come as something as a surprise, I'm afraid – I did not want to let you know before Shuri was certain…"

T'Challa was never one to fumble for words and it made Steve nervous. He braced himself for the worst – T'Challa's next words nearly bowled him over:

"Barnes is out of cryosleep. He has been recovering now in an outlying village for some weeks. Shuri's algorithm has proven itself successful. There is no trace of trigger words –"

"Bucky's okay?" Steve interrupted. A nob formed in his throat. He struggled to collect his emotions.

"Yes," T'Challa said. He visibly relaxed, obviously relieved by Steve's reaction. "Yes, he's fine. He needed time to recover. We were going to let you know as soon –"

"No, that's fine," Steve said rapidly. "That's completely fine. He needed his – needed his space. That's fine. I'm just – God." He was smiling, but his heart was pumping too quickly in his chest.

"God, that's great. You're sure he's fine?"

T'Challa was smiling now, as well. "Shuri says he is perfectly alright. He is rested, recovering in peace."

"Can I – I mean," Steve swallowed, forced himself to take a few deep breaths. It didn't feel like he was fully present; his mind spun rapidly out of reach with questions, hopes, doubts. What if it didn't stick? Swam to the forefront of his thoughts and he tried to quash it, but now that it was out in the open the thoughts spiraled rapidly downward: What if it was another bum steer, another false hope,
"At the palace, in fact," said T'Challa. "You have come at an opportune time. Shuri has brought him back to fit him with a new arm – she's quite proud of her design."

"He's here?" Steve said. Nothing was connecting, everything a bundle of thoughts and disjointed words. "Is it alright – do you think it would be fine –?"

T'Challa laid a hand on Steve's shoulder, silencing him. "I think he would be very glad to see you, my friend."

T'Challa's physical touch grounded Steve. The tense knot in Steve's chest that had formed ever since T'Challa's announcement immediately released. Bucky was alright. Bucky was awake. Bucky wanted to see Steve.

"He's in Shuri's lab. I have just sent her company, but I will send word to have Barnes brought somewhere quiet for your reunion."

"Thank you," said Steve, meaning it. The emotions flooding his heart were too heavy to put into words, and he was afraid they would bubble over if he attempted it. "I can't tell you how much this means to me. To both of us." He made way for the door, already wondering what he would tell Bucky, how he would react, what he –

"Steve," T'Challa called him back and Steve spun to answer him, slightly wildly. "I think I have waylaid your plans. I have told you why you should be here but you have not yet told me why you came."

Damn. "Right, sorry," said Steve, mustering a weak laugh to cover his embarrassment. He tried to fix his original purpose back into his mind. It had been months since Steve had last seen Bucky; he could wait a few moments longer, no matter how desperately Steve thought he couldn't wait another second.

T'Challa waited with the air of regal patience he possessed that always made Steve feel like he was nothing but a scrawny, gawking kid again.

"I wanted to let you know," Steve began. "I had a visit from an old friend, Agent Hill. In South Sudan. She was asking about Bucky, said she'd come from Wakanda –"

"Hill?" said T'Challa, eyebrows furrowed. "Maria Hill, political attaché for the UN delegation?"

"Agent Maria Hill, formerly of SHIELD, right-hand man to Nick Fury," Steve corrected him.

T'Challa frowned. "Nicholas Fury," he said slowly. "I know of the man, of course. Although I have never met him."

"He likes to keep his finger on the pulse just about everywhere," said Steve. "And it looks like he's back in the game, again. And he's pulled Natasha and Clint back in with him, too. Hill is probably working as their handler."

"Clint and Natasha?" T'Challa frowned. "I knew it was not wise to trust a spy, of course, but I assumed because I had provided them sanctuary…"

Steve winced. "If it's any consolation, what Natasha does is almost never personal."

T'Challa did not appear to be comforted. He pinched the bridge of his nose and sighed. Suddenly he
looked very weary. "Sorry," he said. "It has been a morning of trying meetings."

"I'm the one who should be sorry," said Steve. He felt it, too. T'Challa was a good guy with a lot on his plate. Steve hadn't meant to add to it. "I just assumed you knew she was here."

"I knew Barton and Romanoff were coming back," said T'Challa. "Here on a security detail, they said. What do you assume they are coming for?"

Steve shrugged. "Hill told me a bunch about some kind of magical space stones – Infinity Stones. I remember Thor talking about them. Same things inside the Tesseract and the scepter from years ago. Turns out that's what the aliens in New York were looking for."

"Yes," said T'Challa. "I have been briefed by your Secretary of State Ross –"

"Not my Secretary of State," Steve said quickly. T'Challa offered him a fleeting smile of sympathy. Those wounds were still raw. Liable to never fully heal. "It could spell the end of the world." Steve pushed forward: "If the wrong person decided to get all these Stones together. Fury wants a way to stop that from happening."

T'Challa pressed his lips into a tight line. "Vibranium," he said curtly.

"Sure looks like it," said Steve.

"Perhaps I was wrong to reveal my country to the world," T'Challa groaned. "Already the looting and backstabbing begins."

"People do strange things when they're afraid," said Steve sadly.

T'Challa shook his head in amazement. "You call it cynicism, Captain Rogers, but to me it still seems you cannot help but see the best in people."

Steve didn't know whether or not that was supposed to be a compliment – or if he wanted it to be – so he remained silent.

T'Challa added. "Did Hill mention any scientists? Dr. Foster and Dr. Banner?"

Dr. Banner? Steve blinked. "Dr. Banner? Bruce Banner?" he sputtered. First Bucky – now Bruce? Hill had not mentioned that, no. "He's – god, where's he been?"

"Yes, Bruce Banner," said T'Challa. "Of course. I had forgotten you knew each other. I do not know where Dr. Banner has been, just that he joined Dr. Foster two days ago. In fact, they are meeting with my sister as we speak. Discussing an important development in their research."

"Jane Foster?" Steve confirmed. Thor's Jane he almost said but stopped himself; that wouldn't be fair to her.

"Yes. You know her, as well?" T'Challa asked.

"Not personally," said Steve. "But she's had dealings with Fury in the past. I wouldn't be surprised if she was working for him now. Bruce, as well. If you didn't mind – I would be glad to talk to Bruce, myself. It's been a long time…"

"Of course," said T'Challa at once. He was frowning again, but not at Steve. "I thank you, Steve. You have given me much to consider."

"I'm sorry it couldn't have been news like you gave me," said Steve, smiling despite his best efforts
not to. Bucky awake – Bucky recovered – now that Steve had given T’Challa his information on Maria there was nothing standing in the way of his and Bucky's reunion. He only hoped to God it would be a smooth one.

"Do not be sorry," said T’Challa somberly. "What is the saying? Don’t shoot the messenger. And I am grateful to know."

Steve gave him a short nod, conscious that he had now been dismissed. It had been a while since he’d been on the receiving end of orders.

"I trust you know your way to the lab by now?" said T’Challa.

Steve recalled the numerous trips, day and night, he had taken to visit Bucky in his cryochamber, months of what Shuri had teasingly called pining. He smiled warmly to remember them now. "I do, thanks," he said, nodding again to T’Challa before he left the king behind, retracing a familiar path down the corridor outside his chamber, a gladder end waiting for him now than before.

OOO

Bruce and Jane waited in the small reception hall for forty-five minutes after T’Challa left to contact Dr. Shuri about a meeting, Jane tapping her foot in impatience the entire time. Bruce suspected T’Challa was making them wait on purpose. Jane looked on the verge of explosion when the door finally swung open, ushering in the intimidating figure of one of the Dora Milaje.

"Follow me," she commanded them regally, running her eyes up and down their figures and looking unimpressed. Jane hopped out of her chair at once, body tense with eagerness to finally be on the move. Bruce uneasily wondered if perhaps T’Challa had actually been offended by their demands and that this woman would be booting them out of the kingdom instead of bringing them to the leader of the Wakandan Design Group.

His fears proved baseless, however, for the Dora Milaje led them steadily through the bends and corridors of the palace. They were moving downward, Bruce realized, ever downward into the bowels of the palace. There was a noticeable change in temperature as they moved from the heat of the upper floors, battered by the sun, into the chill underground. Finally, they were walking along a wide, spiral staircase. Thoroughly lost by now, Bruce had no idea how they had gotten to this point in the palace, nor would he be able to find his way out again. The Other Guy rumbled in distant displeasure at the idea of his entrapment, but it was easy to ignore him by now.

The spiral staircase opened into a large lab-space. The very walls seemed carved out of stone. It was brightly illuminated by white light that emanated from transparent computer monitors spread across the room. The room was rimmed by windows that opened to darkness: definitely underground. Jane stared around her with wary curiosity. Bruce wanted to examine it all more closely, but there was a woman with her back to them, puttering with something electronic on a counter.

"Dr. Foster and Dr. Banner," the Dora Milaje announced to the woman – she must have been Dr. Shuri.

"Thanks, Xoliswa," said Dr. Shuri without turning around. Her voice sounded surprising young. Xoliswa left without another word and a glare shot to Jane and Bruce that warned them to be on their best behavior.

"Dr. Shuri –" said Bruce, starting forward. The woman turned and Bruce saw that she was, in fact, a teenage girl.
Her face immediately split into a smile. "Doctor Shuri?" She crowed. "Doctor Shuri! Yes, yes. I am Doctor Shuri. Please to meet you Doctor Foster, Doctor Banner. I am Doctor Shuri." She cackled in delight, eyes creasing in laughter so that she looked absurdly like a child.

Jane's face went blank with surprise, but then her expression softened from her previous irritation to a slight red-tinge of embarrassment. "Er – right. Sorry if we came across as…aggressive."

"You came across as aggressive," said Bruce before he took a step forward and reached out his hand to the girl. "You can call me Bruce."

Shuri's eyes were alight with good-natured mischief when she accepted Bruce's hand. Jane offered an apologetic, "And you can call me Jane," behind him.

"Jane, Bruce," said Shuri, still grinning widely. "Please to meet you. Welcome to my evil scientist lab."

"It's quite a setup," said Bruce, looking around in full now. The floor space was intermittently covered with screens, shelving units, and various mechanical articles that Shuri was evidently in the middle of designing. Bruce fought back the impulse to ask Shuri how old she was – after all, he'd known genius to spark in many young people – but, from what he'd seen so far, her designs seemed to rival even Tony's.

"Are we in the Vibranium mines?" said Jane, walking to a window to peer into the darkness beyond.

"Yes," said Shuri, slightly guardedly.

"It's –" Jane seemed at a loss for words. The fight was completely out of her by now. "Beautiful," she finally settled on.

Shuri raised an eyebrow, but Bruce could tell she wanted to smile again. "Thanks." She suddenly turned from Jane to call to someone beyond Bruce's shoulder: "What are you, some kind of ghost? Don't be rude. Come greet our guests."

Bruce turned in time to see a figure emerge from a small, half-moon shaped enclosure in the center of the room – some kind of work room, perhaps? Bruce thought he saw the toe of a low platform that looked like a bed and wondered if the interior room was, instead, a diagnostic space.

The man who stepped out of the shadows had long hair and a face dusted with whiskers. He was dressed in loose-fitting red robes, one shoulder draped in a blue scarf – Bruce realized in the same moment that, one, the man was missing an arm, and, two, the man was Sergeant James Buchanan Barnes – Bruce never forgot a face, and recognized Barnes from the history books, news coverage on the Winter Soldier, and the photo Steve kept on his bedside table.

"Sergeant Barnes," said Bruce, body tensing. Other Guy growling in warning, every bitter word Tony had to say about the man jumping back to the forefront of his mind. Jane whipped around at the window and her eyes darted from Bruce to Barnes, clearly uncertain whether or not she should be alarmed.

"Should I know you?" said Barnes, eyebrows creasing. He sounded genuinely curious. Brain-washed – something pinged in Bruce's memory from what Steve had told him. Amnesia.

"We've never met," Bruce said quickly, recognizing the oddness of the situation: reassuring a purported HYDRA master assassin. I have no idea where Rogers is. Or his friend, Tony had said – merely a handful of days ago, but it felt like weeks. Well, mystery solved. "I know – well – Steve told me about you," said Bruce.
"You know Steve?" said Barnes, eyes lighting up. Bruce wondered if Steve was here, too, and – if so – why he hadn't revealed himself before now. Unless T'Challa hadn't told him Bruce was there.

Or Steve didn't think he could trust Bruce. The thought hurt. Remembering what Tony had told him about the Avengers hurt – until now pushed behind the more imperative thought of impending alien invasion.

"I'm – yeah," said Bruce. "Used to be his teammate."

"Bruce Banner," said Barnes slowly, recognition dawning on his face. "Steve was worried about you – didn't know where you'd gone."

"Yeah, well," said Bruce, scrubbing the back of his neck with a hand. "It's a long story." He soothed the distant – still eerily disconnected rumbling of the Hulk, reminding himself that there were two sides to every story. He'd only heard Tony's so far.

"I'm – uh – not exactly sure…" Jane said, voice a squeak. She'd clearly realized who Barnes was, as well. "I saw you on the news. You're – supposed to be in prison."

Barnes looked almost apologetic when his eyes turned to Jane. "Yeah. I guess I am."

Jane gulped. "You're some kind of assassin –"

"Whoa, whoa, whoa," said Shuri, stepping forward, arms raised. "No one gets to insult my patient except me."

Barnes shot Shuri a feeble smile that was both fond and grateful.

"My brother said you had something important to tell me?" Shuri continued, wheeling back on Jane. Jane blinked. Bruce wondered if Shuri had invited Barnes into the conversation purely in an effort to unbalance them. If she was T'Challa's sister, than she was royalty, too. Clearly power moves ran in the family.

"We've – uh – we," Jane stumbled over her words, eyes still glued to Barnes. Barnes, to his credit, looked vaguely uncomfortable under Jane's gaze. Bruce didn't think a bona fide psychopath would look so quelled in this situation.

"I can go, if you'd like to talk," Barnes suggested softly.

"No," said Shuri firmly. "I need to finish fitting your arm, remember?" Bruce saw that the thing she'd been tinkering with when they'd first come into the room was, in fact, a disembodied mechanical arm, glinting silver and gold in the light.

Bruce's eyes fell from the arm on the counter to a stack of cases on the floor, chunks of familiar looking metallic red and gold armor revealed under an open lid. Bruce crossed the floor in several easy strides, ignoring Shuri's opened mouth of objection. He lifted the lid off the top case entirely and observed the disassembled, bulky modular suit. Dull recognition thumped in his stomach more akin to resignation than any kind of anger. The cases the bodyguards had been unloading after Bruce embarked from the plane made a lot more sense now. Hello, Veronica.

"Did Fury tell you to bring it along?" said Bruce, mustering a smile he was sure didn't reach his voice. Just once it would be nice to be invited somewhere with no safeguards. Barnes and Jane looked at him in confusion. Cleary neither of them had seen the Johannesburg footage of the Hulkbuster in action.
Shuri wrinkled her nose at the jumbled armor. "I didn't think they'd miss it if I brought it down here to reverse engineer, but turns out it's just more of Stark's garbage. He has a lot to catch up on." She pointed to another trinket on a counter, an instrument Bruce recognized as a very near to one of Tony's tracking cuffs. "I improved on his orbital tracking devise. Much more portable now."

Bruce looked at her, eyebrows furrowing. "You weren't planning on using it?"

"You've clearly never met him," said Bruce wryly.

"Why bother? It isn't like we don't have other ways of stopping a giant beast – if he even showed up."

"Er – about that," said Jane. She'd gotten her voice back but was still snatching nervous looks at Barnes in the corner. "Bruce and I have something rather…confusing to tell you about what we've been studying."

"About my Vibranium?" said Shuri. Bruce didn't miss the possessive. This stuff was clearly this girl's baby. Bruce didn't blame her. He could get pretty protective about his own scientific work.

"Yes," said Jane. "We've collected some readings – strange data correlations…"

"You're familiar with the artifact known as the Tesseract?" Bruce added. "And what was called the Mind Stone?"

"Sure," said Shuri. "Wakanda may be a stranger to the rest of the world, but – trust me – we haven't just been ignoring you for all these years. I watched the whole freak-out about aliens on the news, just the same as everyone else."

"Yes," said Jane. "But you wouldn't have had any physical contact with the actual artifacts."

"So?" said Shuri; did she sound slightly defensive?

"I had plenty of time studying both," said Bruce. "And the data you won't have had opportunity to collect is –"

A frantic beeping, like an alarm, interrupted Bruce's voice. Shuri spun in surprise and darted at once to one of the computer monitors. With a few clicks she'd opened a spreadsheet of complicated symbols Bruce could not read, small red warning light blinking in the corner of the screen. Shuri frowned. "Unauthorized visitor coming in from the entrance of the cave."

Barnes had been silent until now, clearly wanting to diminish his presence as much as possible, but at Shuri's words, he stepped forward. His body was a coiled mass of powerful muscle despite his missing arm. Bruce remembered that he'd spent years as a highly-trained killer. "A threat?" he asked darkly.

"I don't know," said Shuri uncertainly. "No one except Wakandans know about these mines. I have their heat-signature tracked." She plucked a coin-sized bead off a bracelet she wore on her wrist and activated her communication device – Bruce had seen T'Challa use one before when he'd first arrived in Wakanda, but the amazement at seeing the almost-solid hologram still hadn't worn off.

T'Challa's bust formed from the center of Shuri's palm. "Brother –" she began.
"I see it," said T'Challa, voice tight with concern. "Is Barnes with you?"

"Yes," said Shuri at once. "Surely you don't mean for him to be my bodyguard –"

T'Challa interrupted his younger sister. "I do not know who this trespasser is or how they got passed our defenses. It is best you escort our guests to safety. The Captain is on his way."

"You cannot tell me what to do," Shuri interrupted him, voice lilting rather than irritated. "Haven't you heard? I am Doctor Shuri now."

"Shuri," said T'Challa. "I am not joking. Get Foster and –"

"I see them," said Jane, voice hushed. She was facing the window, expression pale and uncertain. Bruce joined her. The view outside the lab was spectacular – all dark rock, bled through by blue-purple rivers of gem deposits. Train-like vehicles sped by on raised tracks, tunneled by some kind of magnetic field. Bruce's eyes were drawn immediately to an approaching figure on the ground, silhouetted by the light of the mouth of the cave in the distance.

The figure was carrying a scepter, and, for a fraction of a second, Bruce thought wildly of Loki before it registered that this figure was much too short – and, besides, somehow the Loki Bruce had met chained to a chair in Sakaar seemed now strangely at odds with the Loki who had dropped to earth intent on world domination six years ago.

"Get out now!" T'Challa yelled, as if he'd had some kind of premonition, for just then the figure raised their scepter to shoulder height: forked points glinting in the distant promise of sunlight behind them.

The wave of energy that left the tip was a braid of purple and scarlet light. It shuttled through the air, passing the distance in a blink of an eye, streaming directly toward the lab that hung suspended in the dead center of the mine.

Shuri gulped back a scream and T'Challa's transmission disappeared when the communications bead dropped from her hand. Barnes moved in a flash. He engulfed Jane in a full-body tackle, forcing her out of the way of the careening streak of energy. Bruce had enough presence of mind to dive for cover under one of the counters. Shuri had the same idea. He grabbed her by the shoulders and pressed her into the floor, doing his best to shield her head with his upper body. He would definitely not be welcomed back into the country if he allowed anything to happen to the king's little sister.

The energy shattered through the rock walls and glass like they were flimsy children's blocks. Shards and debris were tossed into the air. Bruce felt a wave heat fly overhead, taking hold of the countertop above them and tearing it from its base on the floor. Shuri was yelling something underneath him; Bruce had a feeling it had to do with the fact all her work was being decimated in one fell swoop.

Bruce's ears rang from the reverberated explosion. Alarms keened. Shuri struggled out from under Bruce. She was breathless, eyes gleaming with something close to excitement. "You going to turn into that big green monster now?" she asked.

Now really would be a good time for it, but the Other Guy was stubbornly grumbling at Bruce, unresponsive and liable to stay that way.

"I don't think so," Bruce said.

"What was that?" Jane said shakily from the floor.

Barnes climbed back to his feet, peering over the edge of platform for signs of their attacker.
"Doesn't matter," he said in a clipped voice. "Get out of here. I'll handle this."

"No way," Shuri said indignantly. "You're missing an arm." She crawled over to a pile of semi-melted rubble, rummaging carefully in its depths. "Here, use this instead," she said, emerging with a pair of still intact metal gages.

She tossed one to Barnes. He caught it with his one hand and looked at it incomprehensively. Shuri was already fitting the second of the pair over her left hand. Barnes spotted her and immediately shook his head. "No way –"

"Oh, shut up," Shuri said. "You're worse than my brother." Barnes didn't say anything, just grimaced and slipped the cannon into place around his right forearm. "Bruce and Jane," said Shuri. "Tell my brother we're under attack and to send backup. Sergeant Barnes and I will not be able to hold them off for long."

Barnes moved toward the edge of the platform, scouting below him for the best angle for a counterattack. Their attacker seemed to have disappeared, evidently under the impression their blast had been enough to take them out of commission.

"I used to have sisters, you know," Barnes paused on the edge of the platform to look back at Shuri. "It's too bad they never got to meet you." He vaulted over the edge. A rapid smile split Shuri's face before she tossed another pointed look at Bruce and Jane, wordlessly telling them to get their asses out of there, then she followed Barnes over the edge, agilely clambering over a rough wall of rock.

"Come on," said Jane. She was pale but entirely steady. "Let's get help."

"You go," said Bruce. He'd already caught sight of what he needed on the floor of the lab and went over to pick up Shuri's newly improved tracking cuff for the Hulkbuster. He clipped it around his wrist. "They're going to need reinforcements."

"Bruce –" Jane began.

"I'll be okay," said Bruce. "If the Other Guy won't oblige, I guess I'll have to." He could already hear crashes and booming explosions below him. The floor shook. The attacker had evidently been engaged by Barnes and Shuri.

Jane nodded crisply. "Okay. Just don't – don't get killed or anything."

Bruce grinned. He pressed the receiver button on the cuff and the scattered debris on the floor rattled as bits and pieces of Tony's suit flew out of the rubble in response, collecting around Bruce's form as if they were magnets attracted to metal. His voice was muffled when the helmet flew forward to fit over his face: "Thanks for the vote of confidence."
Loki woke to a haze of nausea, and was immediately aware that his body was entirely gone. Where his body should have been there was instead a complete void, utter nonexistence, and panic flared at the idea that the paralysis in his legs had somehow spread to the rest of his body.

The panic built in staccato bursts as he realized he did not know where he was or how he had arrived there. He sought his seidr, hoping to cast it out from him like a fishing net, to collect data about his surroundings, scan for energy levels, and –

It was not there. He could feel his magic whirling inside him, taunting him, but he could not grab hold. His fingers touched only empty air as it skittered out of his reach. Terror tightened in icy jaws around his heart. He could not move. He could not reach his magic. He was lying on his back, utterly without defenses. He did not know where he was. He could not remember what had happened. He could not – he could not –

He had been muzzled again. The thought shuddered rapidly through his mind as he recognized the soft pressure of something over his mouth and nose.

That meant he was still there. Again in – in the cell – unable to scream – but – but –

He tried to calm his breathing, but soothing words evaded him. Thoughts slurred without meaning through his head, heavy and stuffed with cotton. His eyes darted across the metal hull that stretched above him. He was in some sort of spaceship. His effort to exert his seidr had left him only more drained, feeble, pitiful, waiting to be picked off at a moment's notice.

Somewhere, muffled with distance, he could hear voices. Low, menacing voices, debating how to dispose of him. He could not discern what they were saying.

With difficulty, he managed to roll his head to the side. He was lying flat on his back on some sort of narrow cot. He was covered to his shoulders by a thin microfiber blanket. His right arm lay uncovered by his side. There was a bandage on the crook of his elbow, under which a thin tube ran, dangling from a liquid-filled bag from a hook above his head. Loki's stomach squirmed as he noted the steady drip of liquid through the tube. Poison? He wondered. A sedative to keep him under control?

Perhaps it was this drug that was so befuddling his thoughts, making it so difficult to understand what had happened, to concentrate on what to do next. Panic simmered in his mind but now he had a task to focus on, something to do, a plan of action – first, unplug himself from the poison, then he would be better prepared to face his captors.

Loki clumsily untangled his left arm from under the blanket. Relief sprung into his chest as feeling slowly returned to his upper body. He still could not feel anything below his waist but he had become, if not accustomed to the lack of sensation, then at least slightly less alarmed by the absence.

Loki peeled back the bandage holding the tube to his skin and revealed a plastic port stuck into a vein in his arm. They were fools to think such a silly contraption could keep him out of commission for long. Loki yanked the catheter from his arm and a spring of blood bubbled up from his skin, just as the voices in the distance sharply solidified and a figure appeared overhead.

"Whoa there, Bambi, not so fast," said a man, putting a hand on Loki's shoulder and Loki flinched, ready to pounce. But his body failed to rise to his command and the concept of attack was swiftly
replaced by confused horror.

He knew this man. How did Loki know him? He opened his mouth to speak, but no words rose up his throat. Because of the muzzle, he realized distantly. The muzzle was blocking his voice. Blocking his air.

"You just unplugged all the good drugs," said the man – and suddenly all Loki could see in his face was enemy although he still couldn't remember where he'd seen the man before, and then Loki realized how utterly vulnerable he was – sprawled on his back, under the command of their drugs, gagged like an animal.

His heart galloped in his ears. He was assaulted by a million little details of the room: too-bright lights, beads of sweat on the man's forehead, creeping pain in Loki's core. He could not concentrate. He could not speak. He could not breathe.

Loki swatted his hand clumsily toward the man's chest, eliciting an oof of surprise from the stranger. He grabbed at the muzzle over his mouth and pulled desperately, expecting more resistance, but it came away almost immediately, merely flimsy plastic in his hand. Surprised, he released it and it slapped back into place with a snap of elastic.


Loki clawed at the man's fingers, scraping his nails into flesh and the man hissed in pain.


Heat. No, not heat. Cold. Searing ice. A grunt of pain. The other being recoiled. Loki's body thumped against the cot as the magic cracked through the air like a whip. Loki gasped as agony seared through his sternum.

He – hadn't meant to do that. He – hadn't – couldn't – control –

The other was on him again in a second. They were too strong for him and pinned him down with hands digging into his shoulders. Loki was too weak to fight back. And now would come the pain. Punishment. They were going to keep hurting him. Keep hurting him and it was never going to stop, strap him to a board, lash him with metal binds, nail him to a wall –

"Loki, cut it out!" It was a woman. He knew her. This time he was less certain about whether or not she was an enemy. Hazily he thought Sif, but then he remembered Sif was likely dead and the thought sunk leadenly into his breast. Strength drained from his arms. His head thudded back against the pillow, unable to hold himself up anymore.

"Wait – wait, Princess," said the man urgently from somewhere out of the Loki's sight. "Let him go."

"He's going to hurt himself!" the woman snarled, breath hot on Loki's face. "Or one of us!"

"You're freaking him out!" the man snapped. His footsteps clattered on the floor as he once again approached. Too close. They were too close. Suffocating. Closing in. Crushing him. "Just let him up. He's fine. Trust me."

"Why should I trust you, Stark?" But the hands loosened on Loki's shoulders and the woman backed
up, one less encroaching shadow, but the pressure on Loki's chest lessened very little.

"Just – I get this, I do," said the man, taking another step forward to replace the woman directly overhead. Loki tried not to look at the man, tried not to look at him, because it was always worse when he looked, always worse when they spat at him not to stare in impudence, not to do anything but cower and grovel and – and –

"Loki, hey," the man was speaking again, voice almost soothing. "Hey, you're okay. See? She's letting you go. Just...you're okay. Better? I bet that already feels better."

It must have been some kind of trap. Lure Loki into a sense of false security, counterfeit comfort with their illusions –

"Deep breaths. You're okay."

The imbecile, could he not see that Loki could not breathe at all?

"I know it hurts. I know it feels like your lungs have collapsed. But you're okay, Reindeer Games. You're doing just fine," the man's voice was an annoying drone clogging Loki's head, but he felt himself inescapably drawn to it, latching onto it in an effort to pull himself back from the terrifying, crushing black hole sucking him into its depths.

"Breathe on my count. One. Two – okay, okay, try it again. Can you feel that? I'm just touching you shoulder."

Loki cringed. The faint contact of a hand on his shoulder drew away immediately.

"Or not. That's okay, too. That's okay. Just listen to my voice. If you want to, you can try to focus on my eyes. I'm right here. Right here."

Out of sheer surprise Loki's eyes found the man's face above him. He stared at his eyes, widened, sincere – it was a – a convincing ploy.


The trembling breath Loki had managed to suck into his lungs released from his mouth in a gush. His chest deflated. He was empty and drained. Trembling like a scared child.


Loki did not understand. He shut his eyes, if only to erase the image of the damnedly gentle face that hovered overhead. Go away. Go away. Go away. Loki did not understand. He did not understand what Stark was doing there, how Loki had been transported to this place. Or perhaps he was back on Midgard, crushed into the floor by the beast, miserably defeated by his petty mortal foes.

Again. Again. Again. Loki was imprisoned in recycled time, forced to relive his nightmares over and again and again and again. And Thanos was waiting. Thanos would be waiting again. Thanos would be –

Something choked him in his throat and burst through his lips before he could stop it. Loki felt the hot tears well behind his closed lids and he realized with disgust that he was sobbing. It hurt. Every convolution rattled through his aching body. He wanted to curl in on himself, make it go away, but he couldn't move and that only made it worse.
"Loki, my man," said Stark nervously. "You know, right about now is when Pepper would kiss me on the forehead but I assume that would be awkward for both of us, so I won't."

"Do not come near me," Loki sputtered through his tight throat, voice muffled because of the mask.

Oxygen, Stark had said. Helping. Not hurting. But Loki wanted it off. He wanted it gone. All of it gone. He was so tired. Exhausted and angry. He hated it, and an uneven mixture of rage and despair formed a sticky knot in his esophagus so it was hard to breathe again.

"Loki?"

Wanda. The voice sent a thrill of terror through his body. He had thought she had escaped – had she not escaped? Loki could not remember what had happened. The events of the past were confused and unaligned. He was landing on the floor of the SHIELD facility, scepter in hand; a metal rod was being pounded through his chest by Glaive; he was flung through the air as Sif's unsteady hold on the Reality Gem exploded outward; blue arms as ice spilled from his fingers like blood; Thanos was laughing; Loki was screaming; Thor was yelling and charging forward –

Loki. The voice was inside his head and Loki squeezed his eyes shut tighter.


He didn't want this now. He couldn't have someone in his head now. Not now when she had deposited him on the threshold of his enemies, betrayed him when she had promised –

Hush. They are trying to help you. Be calm. You are alright. Wanda's soft, warm hand was on Loki's forehead, and he could feel her gentle touch inside his mind, muffling his renewed panic, easing pain, spilling comfort through his body and she had promised – she had promised she would not tamper with his head –

He lashed out with unexpected, welling anger – the echo of an anger that had made him turn the power of the Bifrost on an unsuspecting world so long ago. His unpracticed hand toppled through Wanda's mind. It felt like it had with the Valkyrie, rending thought like it was physical flesh, tearing through memories with abandon and very little control. He wondered if this was what it felt like to be Thanos, playing with Loki's mind like pulling the strings of a puppet.

Loki found a tendril of thought particularly raw and he yanked on it. You didn't see that coming? Wanda had been curiously still under his assault until now. She fidgeted, just barely and Loki's eyes flew open, only to find her standing over him, eyes filled with tears.

Loki realized he had been pulling on the memory of her brother's death and released her sharply, shoving her away in horror at what he had done.

He had not meant –

But Loki very rarely meant to wreak destruction.

Wanda turned away from Loki. Her mind withdrew from his as if a warm blanket had been tugged off his body, leaving him cold and trembling beneath.

Loki slumped against the bed, head hanging limp. Let Stark do what he wanted to him. He didn't care. His mind felt raw and vulnerable without Wanda's comforting presence and Loki didn't know how to call her back to tell her sorry – or how, indeed, to apologize at all.

"Okay, yeah," said Stark, exhaling loudly. "So, I'm not even going to pretend I know what the hell that was about. Got a hold on yourself now, Prongs?" Stark ran a shaking hand through his hair as
"Now don't you fall apart," the other woman said roughly. Loki's eyes found her standing next to Stark. Valkyrie. It was too much. Too much that Loki simply could not wrap his head around. Valkyrie pointed a finger at Wanda, "And you're not allowed to be out of bed, yet."

"I'm fine," said Wanda with a tired smile, but she fell into a chair like her legs couldn't support her any longer. She wasn't looking at Loki. She wasn't fine. Loki had hurt her. He could feel the turmoil of her thoughts as she tried to collect herself after Loki's brutal attack.

It was all coming back now, leaving a sour taste in Loki's mouth. Writhing on the floor under the shredding of his seidr by the Power Stone, Wanda erupting into the room, Thanos dropping Loki, approaching Wanda, ice spurting out of the ground.

His hands had turned blue. Icy, ugly blue. Loki had not meant for that to happen, but the magical reserves of his true race had risen, swollen out of him with no hint of seidr to hold them back, and he simply had not thought – only reacted with Wanda merely seconds away from death or worse under Thanos' hand.

Loki began to shiver. He tried to stop it. The unsteady feeling that had made him…lose control a moment before began to creep back into the corner of his mind. Stark must have noticed something on his face, because he stepped forward again, hands held where Loki could see them.

"Hey, it's cool. Can I plug you back in, maybe? If you leave off morphine for much longer it's not going to be pleasant."

Loki didn't want Stark to touch him. He wanted it all to go away.

"Get it off," Loki snapped. He tried to tug the mask off his face but it was strapped around his head and he couldn't pull it free without raising his head and – and he couldn't raise his –

For a moment it looked like Stark was going to try to stop him, but he quickly thought better of it. "Okay, sure, no problem. Whatever you say."

Stark's hands were surprisingly gentle as one cupped the back of Loki's head and the other lifted the mask away. Loki gritted his teeth, tolerating his enemy's touch to relieve the bigger discomfort. Stark stepped away, eyeing him wearing, like he expected Loki to strike him down with a snap of his fingers.

Maybe Loki would have. If he – if his –

Loki gulped down the rising dread. He tried to focus on one problem at a time. He couldn't afford to fall to pieces again. He was painfully aware of the tear tracks that stripped his cheeks, aware that everyone was watching him and there was no where he could go.

"Let me up," he ordered, trying to reconstruct his shattered dignity.

"You're such an asshole," said Valkyrie, rolling her eyes. "Can't you see we're trying to help you? You were half-dead a minute ago. Not sure that isn't still the case."

Didn't know you cared, Loki wanted to spit at her, but his voice was too slow coming up his throat. Stark shrugged and punched a button in the wall.

The mechanical whirl took Loki by surprise and he didn't know whether to be alarmed as the bed lifted him into a sitting position of its own volition or relieved that he at least did not have to be
manhandled again.

He thought sitting up might help breath rise more easily from his chest, but it didn't. The movement made his head spin. Pain was returning swiftly to the rest of his body. He wondered what Stark had meant when he mentioned morphine, but he wasn't willing to be plugged back into their drugs.

"You're temperature is reading 92.4, which means you should be way into hypothermia now, but instead you've got all the symptoms of a low-grade fever. So congrats on being a medical marvel," said Stark dryly. "Is that usual for aliens like you and Thor? Princess, want to weigh in?"

Valkyrie shrugged. She looked disinterested and irritated. "How should I know? Not normal for me." She addressed Loki, "You're not Asgardian." It wasn't a question. Loki felt like her words had peeled back his clothes and left him naked.

"Thor didn't tell you?" Loki snarled, and his stomach jolted at the thought of Thor. He wasn't here, although Loki could not erase the nagging impression that he should have been. Thor and Valkyrie had somehow become separated. And now Valkyrie had somehow joined forces with Stark. It did not make any sense. Then again, Stark always had the irritating propensity for being where he wasn't supposed to be.

"He's a…Frost Giant," said Wanda weakly from her chair, looking up apologetically. What was she sorry for? Loki thought viciously. Sorry for spilling Loki's secrets? "That was…the ice on the ship?"

Loki looked away. Frost Giant. She knew the term because she had been inside his head. Funny that she did not speak it with the same disgust with which he had cocooned it in his thoughts.

"Frost Giant, right," said Stark, looking from Wanda in surprise back to Loki. "So adopted meant different species? Guess that means low heat signature?"

Loki didn't answer. The mortal could figure out Loki's irregularities for himself.

"So…" Stark said into the silence. The man was clearly unable to restrain his tedious rambling for more than a second. "Anyone care to explain what the shit is going on? I mean, I'm just curious cuz up until a minute ago Wanda was curled into a ball whimpering and you were out cold –" he gestured to Loki, "not that you were supposed to be here at all. Strange went in for Vision, not our good friend the goth-kid megalomaniac, and where the hell is Strange BTW because last time I checked he was supposed to be here four hours ago when the two of you were vomited out of one of his portals onto my nice clean quinjet floor –"

"Vision's dead," said Wanda woodenly and Stark's mouth snapped closed.

Valkyrie looked unaffected. Did she know who Vision was? Loki only knew because he had picked the details from Wanda's head, but his emotions roiled as he once again remembered the scream that had rent his mind when Vision crumpled, own fist clutching his life source. He felt sure that the grief he felt now was secondhand.

"And the Mind Gem?" Valkyrie demanded. "Vision was the being who possessed it, wasn't he?"

"Thanos is one step closer to fulfilling the gauntlet," Loki replied, voice pathetically faint, when it became apparent Wanda would not, or could not, answer.

"I should have taken it," Wanda whispered. "I had the chance. I'm sorry."

"You were wise not to," said Loki, sharper than he'd meant to. Heads turned to him and it took another deep breath to gather strength enough to work his voice. "Mortals cannot hold the Gems
with bare flesh. It would have killed you."

"Wanda, I – Vision. I'm sorry." Discomfort was evident on Stark's face.

"Don't trouble yourself, Stark." Wanda's voice was surprisingly vicious. "A weapon of mass destruction requires little sympathy."

Loki probed her mind curiously for her feelings toward Stark, certainly not expecting antagonism toward a fellow Mightiest Hero, but Wanda blocked him as easily as brushing aside a flying insect. She was stronger than him Loki realized numbly, especially in his weakened condition, and his body tensed with something akin to fear.

Stark's face clouded with anger at the rebuke – and an emotion Loki thought looked suspiciously like hurt. "Hey, wait a minute, that isn't fair –"

"Isn't it?" Wanda said, and rose partially from her chair. Her face was red. "You seemed lacking in sympathy when Ross locked me aboard the Raft – powers stifled under his shock collar. I do not understand why you came for us at all. I thought it would be better for Thanos to kill us, solve the problem of our unchecked power."

Valkyrie met Loki's eyes briefly, uncertain about whether to interceded in the argument that had erupted between the two mortals.

"But I'm here, aren't I?" Stark yelled. "Doesn't that count for anything, dammit! What the hell does a guy have to do around here to –"

Wanda fell back into her chair, clutching her stomach, breathing hard. Stark balked, concern flashing across his features as though it had been his blow to topple her. He stepped forward, hesitant, frightened –

Loki's thoughts still swarmed with his intersection with Wanda's mind, damaged scars entwining despite mere physical distance. Loki remembered as the piece of the puzzle slipped into place in Thanos' throne room: the multiplicity of Wanda's consciousness, what he had taken to merely be the draw of other minds to the Stone's incessant call, in fact belonged to two stuttering, quivering beings yet unformed within her body.

"She's pregnant," Loki said, hatefully relishing the chance to reveal her secrets as she had done to him.

Stark whipped around to stare at Loki. Wanda lifted her head and her gaze was laced with angry betrayal.

"What the hell do you mean –" said Stark.

"What do you think I mean, Stark?" Loki sneered because he was too busy shoving back his guilt and needed someone else to lash out at. "She carries a child within her. Vision's child, although I do not understand how. Twins, in fact, if I am not mistaken."

"Is that true?" Valkyrie asked Wanda. Wanda bit her lip and looked away, silence confirming Loki's claim.

"Damn," Stark hissed under his breath. He threaded his hands behind his neck and turned on his heel. He paced several steps but a wall blocked him. The ship was too small, Loki knew. And suddenly all he could think was that they were floating in a portable coffin. His chest constricted.
Breathe, he reminded himself, and for some reason the voice was Stark's.

"Okay, then you definitely shouldn't be out of bed yet," said Valkyrie to Wanda. She looked concerned and awkward – Loki would have been amused if he wasn't too busy fighting down another wave of pain and nausea. Whatever Thanos had done to him with the Power Gem had not left any physical wounds, but his body was clearly badly damaged.

"I'm fine," Wanda spat.

"No!" Stark snapped. "You're not fine. You're fucking going to have a baby. A baby with my android. And we just rescued you from an intergalactic warlord. Nothing about this is fine! We are floating in the middle of goddam space and our only hope of getting out of here has apparently been sucked into the spaces between dimensions and can't get out – if he's not dead already! And we're well on our way to following him!"

"Calm down, dammit, Stark!" Valkyrie yelled, looking hardly calm herself.

"Can it, Bruno!" Stark rounded on her, face read, fingers shaking.

Bruno? The idea that Loki did not know the Valkyrie's real name was suddenly blatantly apparent to him. He should have realized before. Valkyrie was a title, after all, not a name. He had been inside her head and still did not know it. Strangely, he knew the name of the golden-haired warrior who had saved her from Hela's blade. Gunborg. Loki's stomach stirred with the same recycled grief he had summoned from Wanda's mind only a moment before.

"Just shut up! All of you just shut up! You have no idea –" Stark's voice caught in his throat. He gulped. "No idea – and Peter's going to – probably going to – without Strange and now we can't even get back to Earth, dammit, so all of you just shut up about –"

Stark's hand flew from his side in a hopeless gesture and Loki followed it with his eyes. There was another cot pulled from the wall, a companion to the one Loki lay on and Wanda had abandoned. Loki had not noticed it before, so silent and still was its occupant, hooked to a tube similar to the one Loki had pulled from his arm, covered in a sheet: a thin body, a tuft of dark hair, a pale, young face.

"He's only a child," said Loki, without thinking. Even Asgardians did not hold with the practice of child soldiers.

Stark's expression went flat. His lips paled. "You are one fucking lucky son of a bitch," he hissed, entire body shaking with pent-up rage, "you trumped up God of Saying the Wrong Thing at the Wrong Time, because if you weren't laid flat on your back already I would plow my fist right into your goddamn face."

Stark turned around and stalked to the head of the ship. He collapsed into a chair in front of the control panel. He laid his face into his hands and Loki saw his shoulders move as he struggled to regain control of his breathing.

Stark's sudden absence left a ragged hole of silence in their midst.

Valkyrie turned on Loki, lip curled. She said in a vicious whisper, "Can't you hold your tongue for one damn minute can you, Lackey?"

Loki shifted his eyes away from her face. He didn't know her name. And there was a child dying on a cot across the floor. And Wanda was shivering in her chair, arms crossed over her chest.

And it somehow felt like it was all Loki's fault. It all traveled beyond this moment, to a distant past,
far unreachable by now. But somehow it was all Loki's fault. Tears pricked anew at the corners of his eyes and he hated himself. He was loathsome and pitiful.

A monster.

Valkyrie issued a noise of disgust from the back of her throat and stalked away from him. She yanked a blanket off Wanda's deserted cot and draped it over the girl's shaking shoulders. Wanda accepted the small kindness without a note of thanks. She was drained from physical exhaustion and sorrow, and Loki had not helped any of it.

Loki shut his eyes and tried to still the trembling in his limbs. His body thumbed with a deep ache throughout. His head spun and he remembered what Stark had said about a fever. The ship was very silent. The silence of waiting. Perhaps the silence of a grave.

OOO

"Tony?" the voice was small. Tony scrubbed his eyes dry before looking up from where he'd been tinkering with his suit. Whatever that alien bastard had shot him with appeared to have completely fried the mechanics. Wanda was standing behind his chair, swathed in a blanket, cradling a cup of something that steamed, pale and drawn, looking like a wraith.

"Jesus, you definitely shouldn't be on your feet," said Tony, half-way rising from his chair but Wanda had already dropped into the copilot seat, looking impossibly small and young. He wondered how Wanda had gotten passed Brunnhilde the hospital warden, but the warrior princess was scowling at the back of the Quinjet, otherwise occupied by sharpening her sword and brooding threateningly after she'd failed at getting Loki to eat something. Loki appeared to have drifted back into unconsciousness, a slumbering threat that Tony really didn't want to think too hard about now.

Thor had mentioned something about Loki possibly-maybe attacking earth not totally of his own decision, and the guy certainly looked like he'd been put through the wringer by Thanos – not to mention he'd just watched him go through a full-fledged panic attack and there wasn't something that hit home quite like that, nor something he'd ever expected to witness of his past enemy - but Tony wasn't sure he was ready to pick up the enemy-of-my-enemy-is-my-friend schtick yet when it came to earth's would-be conqueror.

"I'm okay," Wanda said and smiled wanly. Damn, she looked so sad. Had she always looked like that? Or was her whole sadness-of-the-ages air a recent development? The lump, which was never too far away, rose readily back into Tony's throat. He was really sick of this blood on his hands thing. He couldn't help glancing his eyes over Peter's still body behind them. Kid basically comatose and who knew how long even that would last. His aunt was going to fucking kill him.

Dammit.

Dammit. He couldn't afford to fall to pieces now. Now when it appeared as though Strange wasn't coming back and the only thing keeping Brunnhilde from diving back into a bottle of alcohol was the fact that they didn't have any on board. They were all going to fucking die and there wasn't a goddam thing Tony could do about any of it.

"I wanted to," Wanda paused to take a deep breath. She was staring at the mug in her hands. "I wanted to apologize. It was unfair of me to say those things after you just rescued me. I was…” she swallowed. And maybe she was also holding back tears. Tony didn't know. He couldn't handle someone else's grief now, too, when he couldn't even handle his own. "I was upset. I wasn't thinking."
"I mean," said Tony, mouth running quickly to make up for the blank buzzing in his head. "All's said and done I think you deserve to let yourself lash out a little. And maybe I deserved it. You really did get the short hand of the stick."

Tony wanted her to smile, but when she looked up her face was solemn. "You didn't deserve it, Tony," she said earnestly. Her eyes were completely dry. Could she even cry? Tony wondered. He hadn't seen her cry once ever since she'd dissolved into hysterics and exploding magic when she tried to pump life back into her brother's corps after that shit show with Ultron.

Which had been Tony's fault too, case in point.

"You did what you thought was right," Wanda continued and Tony didn't know where to look to escape her heavy gaze. "You only ever do what you think is right. Just as any of us do. And I cannot fault you for that. Nor should you fault yourself."

"Er – right, thanks," said Tony. He smiled, but his lips were stiff. His stomach was hollow. He wished she'd go back to sulking on her cot. Away from him. "You know," he didn't know why he couldn't stop himself from talking, dammit. "You shouldn't blame yourself, either, for the – you know – red freaky stuff. Not your fault. And you've only ever tried to help people with it – except for the time you, like, conjured up all our worst nightmares and stuff but –"

His voice closed off as if his throat had been physically constricted and all he could suddenly see and hear was Steve's voice, face covered in blood: You could have saved us.

Unconsciously, his hand flew to the phone in his pocket, completely out of signal range on the other side of the galaxy, but...still.

Wanda noticed. She looked stricken. "I'm sorry," she whispered again. Tony hadn't wanted her to apologize. He wanted to crack a joke, brush it off like none of this mattered, but his voice was lost somewhere in the emotions swimming inside his gut, all of them out of reach and too complicated to dissect. Goddam he hated this feelings thing.

"So you're – um – eating for two now – three?" He grappled at straws. Hadn't Loki mentioned twins? Wanda's face fell. Tony just kept scoring points. Probably this topic of conversation was a smidge too close to Vision, whose absence Tony was dead-set on skirting unless Wanda brought it up first. "Congratulations?"

"I didn't want it to be like this."

"Did he know?" So much for not talking about Vision. Dammit.

"Yes," Wanda's voice was sucked dry of emotion. She was numb, Tony realized, and suddenly he was twenty-one again and Jarvis had just dropped the news about the crash. Numb. Tony knew that feeling. Sometimes he felt like he never got over that feeling.

He wanted to just shove it all back down his gullet. It was so much easier just to shut down. And apparently super unhealthy, as his therapist told him. It had been a caveat of Pepper's – see a doctor or 'taking a break' was going to become their default setting. It hadn't done much good.

"I'm – uh – sorry." Tony restrained himself from saying everything else he wanted to. All the questions bundled into his head, how at the forefront. Had they planned it – did Vision stockpile from a sperm bank? Or was the Mind Stone really that damn powerful? And this train of thought really was leading Tony down avenues he didn't need to go.

"We thought we were safe," Wanda continued as if from rote memorization. The words were leaving
her lips but they were just mindlessly rehearsed. "I convinced him it was a good idea. I wanted a –"

Family.

Her voice stopped working, but Tony knew that's what she wanted to say. A family after Tony's bombs blew up hers in Sokovia, after the last of her family was shot to death by Tony's rampant AI. After Tony threatened the small, pitiful collection of a freak-show family with his damned Accords.

I'm sorry couldn't possibly even begin to cover it.

Wanda's head shot upward, a moment of abrupt alertness that preceded a heavy thump of something falling behind them.

"Loki –" said Wanda, like she already knew, and Tony swiveled in his chair to see the greasy-haired god sprawled across the floor. He'd apparently fallen out of bed somehow. Brunnhilde stood, sword still in hand.

"Mr. Stark!" That was Peter's voice, frantic and surprised, and Tony gasped in pain like he'd been gutted with a knife.

"Peter!" Tony leapt out of his chair. Peter was sitting up in his cot, bandages eschew across his forehead, legs dangling over the edge and confused eyes stuck on Loki on the floor. There was a trail of blood trickling from Loki's nose.

"There's a random dead guy on the floor!"

"Peter, lay down. You shouldn't be up –" Tony reached for Peter's shoulders to ease him back into the bed, wondering if the kid was delirious. Brunnhilde knelt at Loki's side, cursing under her breath.

"No, I'm okay," said Peter, resisting Tony's touch. "I mean – really. My head doesn't even hurt at all anymore. I woke up feeling totally fine and then there was this guy on the floor – maybe you should check him out instead."

"Just – just – you need to get back into bed," Tony sputtered. He could barely breathe. His heart thudded in his stomach and made him feel ill.

"I'm fine," Peter blew out a frustrated breath. "Check me for a concussion. I'm completely fine."

Tony grabbed hold of Peter's shoulders and glared into his eyes, searching his face for any outward sign of injury. He searched Peter's eyes for the scary reduction in pupil size, the purple bruising across his forehead that had been there only a moment before. His skin was flushed once again with healthy color. Peter was right – he appeared to be completely fine.

"I was having this dream – like someone touched my forehead and something poured through me, like warm water or something, and then I woke up and nothing hurt anymore and I could see everything fine again. And then this guy was on the floor and I called you. Is he okay?"

"He's a damn fool," Brunnhilde grunted. Wanda hovered uncertainly behind Tony, propped up with a hand on the back of a chair.

"He healed him," Wanda whispered. "I…felt it. I'm sorry. I should have known sooner."

"Never mind that," said Tony, note of hysteria in his voice. He couldn't let go of Peter's shoulders, although he tried. "Peter, you're okay? You're sure you're okay?"
"He's so stupid," said Brunnhilde, and hauled Loki half-way off the floor. "He can't afford to use that kind of magic in his state. He could have killed himself."

"Is he going to be okay?" Peter's eyes widened. "I mean – who is he anyway? Where are we? How'd you get here?" He pointed to Wanda, who answered him with a weak smile.

"Help me get him back into the damn bed, Stark," said Brunnhilde, although she appeared more than capable of handling Loki's limp body on her own.

"You stay put," Tony pointed sternly to Peter, struggling to keep his voice steady. He detached his hand from Peter's arms with difficulty before kneeling to grab hold of Loki's legs as Brunnhilde lifted him at the shoulders.

Under Loki's pant leg a strange, penetrating cold unfurled itself. Ice seared through the fabric. Tony yelped and let go, skin burning with cold.

"Stark –" Brunnhilde berated him before her voice was cut off by a hiss of pain. She released Loki's shoulders and his body hit the floor with a faint thump. Before Tony's very eyes, vibrant blue spread across Loki's skin. Symmetrical scar-like ridges rose on his cheeks. Tony could feel the cold coming from his flesh even from more than a foot away. Apparently, a Frost Giant was literally a giant made of frost. Okay. Noted.

"Damn Jotun skin!" Brunnhilde hissed, breathing on her fingers that had been burned from the cold contact with Loki's blue skin. Tony massaged his own hands, trying to work tingling warmth back into his flesh.

"Uh – what just happened?" said Peter.

"He's completely drained himself," Brunnhilde said in a growl. "Fool," she said again, and there was a strange look of fierce concern on her face.

"Let me help get him back on the cot," Wanda offered. She nudged past Tony, already moving her hands in front of her chest. Tony had a feeling she would ignore him if he objected to her using any more of her waning strength, so he for once kept his mouth shut.

Wanda lifted Loki off the floor and back into his vacated bed with her magic. Even unexpectedly blue – was that supposed to be the face of a fierce monster? – Tony couldn't help but notice how pathetic Loki looked: limp, utterly spent.

An unidentified feeling swam into existence inside Tony's stomach. He half wanted to shout at Peter, and half wanted to yank the kid into a hug, never let go, and start sobbing. And Loki. This was something else Tony didn't know how to feel about. Why? Why would a crazed mass-murderer risk further injury to himself in order to heal some kid he'd never even met before?

He's only a child, Loki had said, and maybe he hadn't been trying to be an asshole. Tony swallowed past the lump twisting painfully in his esophagus. Loki was still breathing, but his chest moved so slightly under Tony's gaze that he might as well not have.

"Alright, princess," Tony said, forcing his voice to remain level. He could hear Peter fidgeting on the cot behind him, anxious to get down, relieve some of the pent-up teenage energy. "You deal with your boyfriend from here on out."

Brunnhilde's face twisted in disgust, "He's not my damn boyfriend, Stark –"

Brunnhilde's voice was cut off by a small gasp from Wanda and Tony turned sharply around,
swearing to god if she was about to collapse or go into labor or something Tony was going to lose what was left of his rapidly fraying mind.

"What the –?" said Peter. Both he and Wanda were staring at the center of the floor, where a yellow ring of rotating sparks had sputtered to life. The portal yawned into a gaping black pit, spewed embers into the air, and then widened to cough up the lanky body of Dr. Strange onto the floor. The portal squeezed shut. Strange was tangled in his red cloak, which fought for a minute on its own to free itself from Strange's limbs.

Strange's head came up, he was panting, face covered in sweat, hair mussed. For a moment he didn't seem to know where he was, but then his eyes fell on Tony.

Tony was going to explode. His voice welled in his throat until he was no longer certain if it was a scream or tears. "For someone who commands the damn Time Stone," he pointed at Strange with a trembling finger, "you sure are lousy at not showing up when you're supposed to."
Chapter 23

Chapter Notes

Several readers are curious, so I figured I'd give a quick outline as to update plans before Infinity War drops and ruins my all my headcanons. There will be updates twice a week (Mondays and Thursdays) until April 26, by which time I'll reach the 28th chapter. That's not the end of the story, but it is the climax of what I'd consider the largest what-the-shit moment of the plot. Not entirely sure how many chapters will remain after that, but the end will be in sight. And, not to worry, although Infinity War will render this fic entirely AU, I'm determined it won't affect the general outcome of this fic or the characters therein. I know how this bitch is ending and I'm not going to let a little thing like canon get in my way.

Steve was half-way down the flight of stairs that led to Shuri's lab when he heard the alarm. He kicked into a sprint immediately – maybe his unease was stimulated by his urgency to get to Bucky, but neither could he deny that he was well practiced by now at sensing danger. His fears were proven when a muffled explosion ripped through the floor below him. The stairs trembled underfoot. Steve didn't slow his descent, only wished fleetingly again that he had his shield strapped to his back and rounded a bend at full-speed.

He nearly crashed headlong into another running figure but deftly spun out of the way, hands raised to strike a blow if it was necessary.

"Oh my God!" Dr. Jane Foster shrieked, clutching her chest and reeling backward. Steve recognized her immediately from the Facebook profile picture Thor had once proudly displayed. That was at least four years ago, but Foster hadn't changed.

She almost toppled back down the stairs but steadied herself against the wall. "Captain – America –" she panted in alarm.

"Sorry, ma'am," said Steve curtly, hearing how his voice instinctively took on the tone of command and not knowing whether to be disgusted with himself or relieved that he hadn't lost his edge. "What happened?"

"I don't know," Foster said in a rush. "Someone's breached the mines. Bruce and Shuri and – Barnes – stayed behind. I have to tell T'Challa –"

"Go," Steve ordered her, stomach clenching at the mention of Bucky, completely capable of taking care of himself but, still...Steve wasn't taking any chances of losing him now on the brink of truly getting him back again. "We'll hold them off – whoever it is."

"Right," Foster nodded once, voice steady, and started back up the stairs. Steve admired her resolve – smart, pretty, and brave – Thor was a fool to let her go.

Steve turned back around as another explosion sounded from below. The stairs shook; their frame suddenly appeared very flimsy. Steve emerged into Shuri's lab at the base of the stairs to find the place in ruins. Glass, stone, and her equipment littered the floor. Steve caught sight of one of the Dora Milaje spears that Shuri must have been tinkering with and he dislodged it from the rubble –
"Bucky – watch out!" Steve recognized Shuri's voice from below, followed by another explosion.

Steve took off for the edge of the platform at a run, sticking the spear to the floor and using his momentum to poll-vault himself off the edge. He flew through the air and landed in a tight roll on the ground, coming to a stop on his knee.

The mine was shrouded in darkness. White light from some kind of firearm illuminated the shadows in the distance. There was a purple flash of light and a deep rumble through the air. Someone grunted in pain – who it was Steve could not yet tell.

"Banner, aim for the scepter!" That was definitely Bucky's voice. Steve pushed himself harder toward the fight, ducking a piece of metal that had once been a pillar holding up one of the Vibranium tracks.

"What do you think I've been trying to do?" said Bruce. Steve caught sight of a mass of gold and scarlet metal and his chest panged – the Hulkbuster – Tony – all of it so fresh and raw… but it must have been Bruce. Whatever had happened to the Hulk was an answer that would have to wait.

Bruce, hidden in the bulky suit, raised an arm and a rocket repulsor flared toward a stocky figure holding a long, double-pointed scepter that was surrounded by the others. The figure, rather than try to run from the repulsor fire, slammed the end of its scepter into the ground: an orb of scarlet light flared outward, a bubble that deflected Bruce's shot easily, rebounding in a powerful surge of energy that sent Bruce tumbling backward. Shuri shrieked. Bucky grunted.

Steve launched his spear through the air. It streaked in a perfect arch toward the figure's chest. His aim had always been good after a childhood of baseball played in back alleys with Bucky and had been perfected after years of practice with the shield – but the figure reacted with seamless reflexes, snatching Steve's spear out of the air with barely a flinch.

"Steve!" Bucky's eyes found Steve in the darkness and Steve's breath caught to see him on his feet again, awake, alive, aware – "Watch out!"

The figure – a humanoid with gray skin, pointed fangs, and something vaguely female about its body – leered at Steve and snapped his spear in two with a mere clench of her fist upon the shaft, and in the same motion raised its scepter, pointed it toward Steve, and released a flood of red and purple light from its point.

Steve dived out of the way, hitting rock hard. Bruce flew back into battle, jets in his boots sputtering with effort – whatever was in that scepter had done a number on Tony's design.

The stream of light hit a wall of rock behind Steve and caused chunks of Vibranium-laced bolder to rain down on his head. He covered his head and ducked out of the way. A particular large piece was blasted out of the air by cannon fire. Steve looked up to find Shuri's arm cannon smoking.

"Captain," she said. "Good to see you again."

"What are you doing here?" Steve yelled over the sound of collapsing stone.

"Oh, shut up," Shuri growled. "This bitch just wrecked my lab – you expect me just to sit around and watch?"

Steve could tell there would be no arguing with her. Bucky had most likely already tried – he'd had sisters of his own, after all, and there was no way he'd let Shuri stick around if she hadn't first
shouted him down.

"Fools!" the woman cried, voice deep and grating. "You cannot hope to stop me! I wield the power of the Gauntlet—"

Shuri and Bucky didn't wait for her to finish, but simultaneously raised their matching arm cannons and released a blast at the woman. She was cut off mid-monologue, rolling out of the way of the twin jets. She came up swinging her scepter, beating the Hulkbuster back with another punt of purple energy. Bruce lumbered backward, collapsing in a heap against another beam that held up a track above them – they were going to tear the entire place down if they weren't careful.

Steve sprinted toward the woman at an angle as she was distracted by another shot from Bucky's cannon. He launched himself toward her arm carrying the scepter – but she saw him coming and reacted too swiftly. He ducked as she lashed toward him, but the scepter clipped his shoulder, one of the points slicing effortlessly through his suit and flesh.

Steve hissed in pain but didn't let it stop him. He used his falling momentum to propel himself in a kick toward her legs, hoping to catch her off balance.

His boot hit her shin. She cried aloud and for a moment looked like she would topple, but she caught herself on the hilt of her scepter. She aimed for him again with an angry snarl and Steve realized he was much too close to her: a point-blank hit from whatever that thing was would almost certainly kill him.

The woman raised the scepter – its point glowed scarlet – the woman shrieked in pain and arched backwards as a blast from Bucky's cannon hit her squarely in the spine.

"Steve, move!" Bucky bellowed. Steve rolled across the rocky ground. When he looked up the woman had turned on Bucky and Shuri, both bearing toward her, weapons raised.

The woman rapidly looked to her attackers, behind her to Steve, and to the raising Bruce; she clearly realized she was outnumbered, for she shouted in frustration and raised the scepter high overhead. Steve did not have time to wonder what she was going to do before she lunged the scepter toward ground – its shaft hit with a resounding thud. The wave of scarlet and purple energy that rose from the point of impact seemed to move in slow motion. It billowed outward in a sweeping circle.

Steve pressed himself flat against the ground, arms shielding his head. He could here Bucky and Shuri yelling, hear the grating of Bruce's suit as he dove for cover, hear a high peel of laughter as the woman cackled in delight. Then the wave it.

It did not matter that Steve had taken cover. The strange force took hold of him like he was a grain of sand washed away by a violent tide. He was picked up into the air. The power clawed at his body. For a fraction of a moment he seemed to be floating, and then the impact came as he slammed back into the ground, breath knocked from his lungs. The wave swept by, shattering beams that held the Vibranium tracks aloft. All around him was chaos: trains plummeting, rocks crumbling away from the walls and ceiling. It was a wonder Steve had survived its force – a wonder that –

Bucky. Shuri. Bruce. Steve picked himself off the ground with effort, entire body aching. He limped forward. The cavern was dark and smoking. Wreckage littered the ground. Steve could see no sign of any bodies, either friend or foe.

Something moved nearer the mouth of the cave.

"Bucky?" Steve whispered, voice hoarse, chest twinging with every breath. It was likely he'd bruised
his ribs. They would heal quickly – Steve's enhanced body made sure of that. Now was not the time to worry about his own injuries.

Again there was movement. Steve saw a glint of blue light, a flash of gold armor: Bruce emerged from the rubble, suit still intact, though scuffed and visibly dented.

"Bruce, where's —" Steve started but Bruce cut him off: "Don't worry. I've got them both."

Shuri's muffled voice sounded from below the human shield Bruce had made with the Hulkbuster, "Get up. Your crushing us!"

Steve hurried forward. Bruce stepped backward, suit creaking in protest having taken one too many hits, and revealed Bucky and Shuri below him. The wave of relief in Steve's gut was so intense he felt for a moment like he was going to be ill. He sternly fought back the impulse.

"Don't look so worried, Steve," Bucky said, grinning as he helped Shuri stand. "I wasn't going anywhere before I even got the chance to say hello again."

Steve wanted to smile; he really did, but instead tears rose to choke him in his throat and, before Bucky got a chance to see, he yanked his old friend into a firm embrace, clutching Bucky's body to his as if a drowning man to a life preserver.

If Bucky was surprised he didn't show it, only gripped Steve equally as powerfully with his one arm. It had been so long since Steve had simply held Bucky, felt his solid body beside his, touched him –

"Get yourself a room, geez," said Shuri, eye-roll apparent in her voice.

Steve only stepped back from Bucky when he heard Bruce's suit shift and the tell-tale sound of rockets firing up. "Where are you going?" he demanded of Bruce, voice slightly husky.

"She can't have gotten far," said Bruce. "Now's our only chance of catching up with her."

"Bruce, you can't," Steve said quickly. "She almost destroyed us with that thing."

It was so strange to see the Hulkbuster's helmet, to be reminded so forcefully of Tony, and to hear Bruce's mild, reasonable voice usher from within. "I won't engage. I promise. Just see where she's run off to. I have a feeling King T'Challa isn't going to be too pleased to know she's still on his property."

This willingness to rush into a possibly dangerous situation was a side to Bruce that Steve hadn't seen yet – a lot could change in two years, after all. Steve felt lost at sea, no longer in control of what fragmented members of his original team still existed. There was clearly no use in trying to exert any kind of authority anymore. He resigned himself to the inevitable: "Just...be careful," he said.

"Will do, Captain," said Bruce, and launched himself into the air, suit barely wobbling as it fought against the strain of battle, shuttling toward the entrance of the mines at full speed.

OOO

"Like old times," said Clint in the pilot's seat, not turning from his view out the windscreen as the Quinjet zoomed overhead the Wakandan landscape, no longer shielded from the world. Grassy planes spilled below them. Natasha spotted a crash of rhinos grazing by a muddy waterhole. The city spiers of Birnin Zana approached rapidly in the distance, nestled in the shallow valley of the Wakandan border mountains.
"Sure," Natasha obliged, even though few things were farther from the truth. Things would likely never feel like old times again. Returning to Wakanda just made old wounds feel fresh again.

"So, T'Challa's cool with us showing up again, right?" said Clint, voice casual, but Natasha immediately picked up the slight edge that meant he was fishing for an answer that he already suspected and likely dreaded. "I mean, I just want to make sure I don't manage any faux pas, you know?"

"You'll commit them all regardless," said Natasha lightly.

It swiftly became apparent that Natasha wasn't fooling Clint with her shoddy attempt at dodging his question. He persisted, "It's just that – if I was a sovereign ruler and had just recently opened my country to the rest of the world and I found out my two secret agent acquaintances on the CIA's ten-most-wanted list were coming in for a long weekend, I'd be – you know – slightly concerned."

"Don't flatter yourself," said Natasha quickly. "You definitely haven't made the top ten."

Clint groaned. His grip on the controls tightened. "He doesn't know we're even coming, does he?"

"He knows we're coming," Natasha said rapidly. "Otherwise he would have had us shot out of the sky by now. He just doesn't know entirely why we're coming."

"Which is to make weapons out of his Vibranium," said Clint flatly. "Dammit. We are swell at international relations, aren't we?"

Natasha shrugged. "Desperate times call for desperate measures. Fury and Maria didn't think T'Challa would immediately take to the idea of his Vibranium wrested away by foreign hands, even if we told him it was for a theoretical good cause. We had to be subtler than that."

"You know," Clint said grumpily, "when I signed up for this gig I didn't know I would be playing spy on the threshold of a reasonably intimidating ally."

"It won't be for long," said Natasha. "Anyway, Bruce and Dr. Foster will be doing the heavy lifting. We're here for…diplomacy?" She ignored Clint's snort at the word. "Friendly faces to offer an answer to T'Challa's question about Vibranium when trouble strikes. He's going to need weapons. We'll present him with the designs. See? Back in his good graces already."

"You don't think I'd honestly believe that, do you?" Clint shook his head.

"Same lines Fury fed me," said Natasha, but she readily wilted under the doubtful look Clint shot her over his shoulder. She shrugged. "Fine. Honestly, I think his orders were closer to just brace yourself for when shit hits the fan. Wakanda is a player we can't afford not to have involved in this game. And Fury wanted people on the inside. So we're it."

"Why are we always it?" Clint said in exasperation, but his voice was marginally less weighted. He still wasn't happy about the situation, but at least he wasn't fighting her anymore on it. She could tell he was still largely here because of his concern for Wanda – a situation that was beginning to feel hopelessly bleak. The cosmos was a large place, earth a mere pinprick within it; there wasn't much they could hope to do to get her back. Stark had already been gone for four days.

"Because T'Challa probably won't have us executed once he finds out the truth? Benefit of being old friends?" Natasha offered with a grin.

Clint sighed again. "Why couldn't you just have said 'because he'd never send anyone but his best'?"
"You're the cocky one here, Clint," said Natasha. It felt good, this back and forth, familiar teasing before a mission. Just like old times, Clint had said. But those times were long gone. Although they both made a show that nothing had changed after that business with the Accords, it was impossible to deny the faint stiffness in the way they moved around each other now – both painfully aware of just how hard the other could hit. Just how much those hits hurt. But it still felt good; the seamless comradery and shit-talking. Natasha had missed it. She'd missed him.

The quinjet made its steady approach toward the city. The sun hung in the middle of the sky, glaring across the ground in the bright of mid-morning. It had been a long flight; Natasha was looking forward to disembarking and stretching her legs and doing everything possible not to bump into Bruce yet. She wasn't ready for that confrontation…inevitable as it would be.

"Erm –" said Clint suddenly, straining in his seat to look over the dashboard. "Are you seeing what I'm seeing?" The answer was most likely no, considering Clint's uncanny hawk-like gaze, but Natasha craned her neck to look out the window. "Or does that not look like Hulkbuster making double time across the field?"

Natasha's eyes fell immediately on the point Clint indicated. Her sight narrowed on the figure in the distance that did, in fact, look like Stark's Hulkbuster suit. A chill ran up Natasha's spine, remembering the last time she had seen the suit deployed, not to mention the resulting fallout.

"He's chasing someone," said Bruce.

Natasha scanned the landscape below, but her eyes were immediately drawn instead to billowing black smoke behind the Hulkbuster. It was coming from what would have been the back entrance to the Vibranium mines, hidden by the plateaued cliff above it.

"I think we'd better check it out," said Natasha, throat tight. If it was the Hulkbuster – but Stark couldn't have gotten into Wakanda without T'Challa's permission, and Natasha would have liked to think Stark wouldn't have tried…not to mention Stark wasn't even on the same damn planet right now.

"Try to get T'Challa on the coms," Clint ordered, wheeling the quinjet around so he approached the Hulkbuster and the figure it pursued – whether either one was an enemy or an ally, Natasha wasn't sure yet.

Natasha reacted immediately, trying to reach T'Challa through the quinjet's much more primitive communication devise than Wakanda was used to.

"Not responding," Natasha said urgently after a moment of trying. The quinjet was in its descent. She could see the Hulkbuster more clearly now and the figure it was trading potshots with: a lithe body, largely obscured in the distance, grasping a spear.

"It looks like –" said Clint and Natasha didn't need him to finish with Loki for her gut to twist in awful recognition at the pointed scepter, even as she recognized the slight curves of the body and realized it was actually a woman. "Incoming!" Clint yelped, jerking the control in evasive maneuvers so Natasha jolted in her seat as a beam of some kind of energy emerged from the tip of the scepter directly toward the belly of the quinjet.

The quinjet shuddered on impact. Alarms blared. Sparks fizzed across the dashboard. Clint swore loudly and colorfully – language Laura wouldn't allow within 100 yards of the house – and then the quinjet was headed in a tight tailspin toward the ground, dry grass rising rapidly to meet them through the windscreen.
Clint yanked desperately upward on the controls. The ship squealed in protest, Natasha's stomach dropped into her ankles, but Clint succeeded in pulling the jet out of its dive by a hair's breadth. Instead they skidded violently across the ground, rocks and dirt kicked up into the viewport.

They pitched to an uneasy stop, smoke already rising off their wings.

"What the hell was that?" Clint demanded, knuckles white on the controls.

"I don't know," said Natasha, already rising from her seat, pushing back the steady screaming inside her skull, gripping her Glock at her side. "Definitely not a friendly."

She could see through windscreen as the figure darted toward them, scepter raised to finish them off, dodging blasts from the Hulkbuster behind it. Clint was on her heels as Natasha lowered the ramp, weapon raised and already firing at the approaching figure.

A transparent, bubble-like shield emerged from the scepter to deflect the bullets from the figure. The woman growled and pointed her scepter toward them. A blast from the Hulkbuster behind her to her shield shattered the film and sent the woman rolling across the ground.

"You do not learn!" the woman growled, again on her feet, turning to face the Hulkbuster and cutting her scepter through the air in a violent upward slash. A stream of energy spilled forth, slicing through the arm of the Hulkbuster, cleanly severing its hand. The detached hunk of metal toppled to the ground. The repulsor simmered and faded in the severed hand, leaving the suit with only one left.

Natasha aimed her Glock again. Clint let fly an arrow. The woman spun her scepter through the air and, instead of wasting time on a shield, merely deflected the arrow with her shaft. It rebounded, harmless, on the grass.

"Who the hell are you?" Clint yelled in frustration. Nothing quite pissed him off more than having his arrows rendered ineffective.

"I am Proxima Midnight, Daughter of the Great Titan, Dark Lord –"

"Yeah," said Clint, knocking another arrow and letting fly, "that was a rhetorical question." His arrow flew in a clean arch toward the woman who called herself Proxima Midnight. Proxima raised her scepter again, this time the entire spear, from its double points to the bottom of its shaft, glowed a deep purple. Clint's arrow again made contact and Natasha realized it was one of his exploding tips a second before the point blinked white in the detonation and a ball of flame leapt outward.

The purple coating around the scepter bled outward, engulfing the exploding arrow. Proxima hurled the explosion, contained in a mass of purple netting, overhead toward the quinjet behind Clint and Natasha. Natasha didn't have time to think about what would happen once flame met the fuel tanks. She reacted on impulse, diving for what poor cover the ground would afford her, feeling Clint's arms wrap around her from behind.

"Clint, Natasha, watch out!" The person inside the Hulkbuster yelled. The voice was muffled but familiar and definitely not Stark's.

The explosion ripped through the air. A wave of heat buffeted Natasha on the ground. Something flew past her and landed on the ground beside her head. She heard Clint grunt in pain. She squeezed her eyes shut, ground rumbling beneath her.

Flames roared in her ears. Clint's arms tightened around her waist until she could barely breathe. The explosion reverberated in her head long after the last of its aftershocks faded away. She opened her eyes and blinked past the smoke clouding her vision.
Proxima was gone. The Hulkbuster clunked forward, single hand raised to removed its mask. It tugged off its helmet and let it fall away to reveal the absurdly tiny head of Bruce Banner sitting atop the heap of metal casing.

"Natasha, are you okay? Clint?" he asked, worry creasing his forehead.

Well. Shit.

"Where the fuck did she go?" said Clint, voice pained as he rolled off Natasha and rose unsteadily to his feet. He gingerly stretched his shoulders.

"Let her go," said Bruce, shaking his head. "It's the second time today. I don't think we can take her."

Clint winced when he moved his arm too quickly. He reached up to touch the back of his head, where Natasha could see his hair was charred. "You good?" he asked her gruffly when he spotted she hadn't yet risen from the ground.

"Fine," Natasha grunted. She climbed back to her feet, unharmed thanks to Clint's human shield. It wasn't the first time he'd come between her and danger. She never stopped being grateful. "You?"

"I'll live," said Clint, smiling ruefully.

"What are you guys doing here?" Bruce demanded, looking ridiculously dwarfed inside the massive suit.

"Just here for a visit," said Clint. "Lousy welcoming committee. Who the fuck was that?"


"Didn't know Thanos had any kids," said Clint.

"I wonder if there's much family resemblance?" said Bruce, smiling weakly. He slowly began disassembling the suit by hand. Natasha wondered if the automatic function had been damaged in the fight.

He looked – he looked fine. Weary. Maybe slightly grayer. More than two years, Natasha reminded herself. So much could change in two years. Was he trying to avoid her eyes or was it just her imagination? She didn't blame him.

All Natasha could think about was the last time she saw him, when she pressed her lips to his lips and her hands to his shoulders and sent him plummeting off the side of the cliff; she'd lost her chance as soon as she decided to use him as a weapon. It was something she was sure he'd never forgive her for.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

"We'd better get back to the palace," said Bruce, stepping out of the last of the suit and stretching his limbs. "I have a feeling King T'Challa is going to want to hear about this."

"Erm – guys?" said Clint. He turned away from them to face the city, palace towers reaching into the sky along with gleaming skyscrapers. "I'm pretty sure that wasn't there a second ago." He pointed to the sky above the city.

Natasha followed the tip of his finger to a large, metal ring hanging suspended above the city. For
now it was utterly stagnant – but Natasha recognized it well from the footage from New York. Bruce stepped forward so that he was standing abreast with her, mouth falling open in shock.

"I think Proxima what's-her-face just became the least of our problems," said Clint dazedly.

OOO

Pepper swam groggily back from the recesses of deep sleep, prompted by the lights in her room that mimicked the natural ascent of daylight. Her eyes finally flickered fully open, vague feeling of unease tumbling in her stomach, and she realized she was alone in her bed. Tony's warmth was harshly missed under the covers.

Pepper tried to push herself out of the bed but stopped with a groan when her head thudded in pain.

Last night Pepper had drawn herself a bubble bath in the jacuzzi, downed an entire bottle of pink champagne and masturbated while she thought of Tony. It was a move more befitting Tony – Pepper didn't pine, dammit – but she figured she was allowed a small lapse in judgement – but she was regretting it now. Her head and eyes ached and stomach swam with nausea.

"Friday," she said and buried her head back in her pillow. Tony's cologne. All she could smell was Tony's cologne, scent soaked into the bedsheets. "Dim the lights, will you?"

"Right away, Ms. Potts," Friday answered in her friendly, clipped Irish accent. She only ever gave Tony sass. For Pepper it was always prim civility. Pepper wondered if she should be jealous.

Pepper could see the lights go down in the room even with her face hidden. She groped for her cellphone on the nightstand and squinted at the screen. She had two missed calls, and she wondered if that had been what woke her – she didn't usually sleep through that kind of thing.

She saw that both of the calls were from Rhodey, and her heart skipped a beat, thoughts of Tony lying in the wreckage of some intergalactic rocket crash immediately jumping to the forefront of her mind.

Just as she was about to press her thumb to the callback button, her phone buzzed with another incoming call. She picked it up immediately.

"Rhodey?" Casual, she told herself. Be casual. There wasn't anything to worry about yet.

"Pepper?" said Rhodey, and his voice was taught – that familiar 'brace-yourself' tone of his that was always a prelude to bad news. "Are you seeing this?"

"What?" said Pepper, sitting up in bed and sternly ignoring the wave of dizziness that flooded her head. She wouldn't let a mere hangover keep her down.

"You're going to want to turn on the news," said Rhodey, voice curiously guarded.

"Friday," Pepper ordered at once, "TV on, please. Get me the BBC." She'd given up on American media long ago. If it was as bad as Rhodey's voice suggested it was, then it would have reached international news desks.

"Right away, Ms. Potts," said Friday – and the mechanical oak-paneled door that hid the television slid open as the news flickered onto the screen.

Pictures flashed across the screen that Pepper took a moment to discern: overhead footage, cellphone video, and ground views of several major world cities.
One anchor was saying: "– these seven other artifacts bear a striking resemblance to the one that appeared over New York city four days ago. As we know, that object resulted in the transportation of a fleet of alien vessels that was overpowered by Iron Man and several other companions, notably the social media sensation known as Spider-Man. This event mirrored the Avengers' battle of New York from six years ago."

Pepper noted with a sharp gasp – it took a moment for the detail to traverse her sluggish brain – that the footage was not just of generic cityscapes, but all focused on similar, enormous metal rings that dangled midair over the skyscrapers.

"For those of you just tuning in," the other anchor spoke. "Seven unidentified objects have appeared simultaneously overhead Beijing, Delhi, London, Moscow, São Paulo, Birnin Zana, and Berlin, joining a counterpart above New York to bring the total to eight. National military units have been deployed and the United Nations has issued an immediate council meeting –"

"Pepper?" said Rhodey's voice in her ear and Pepper jumped. She forgot she'd left him hanging on the phone.

"Thanks, Rhodey, I've got it," Pepper said tautly.

"You need me to come out there?" said Rhodey. "I'm only two hours away."

"No," said Pepper quickly. "I'll be fine. Really. Thanks for asking, though. And – be careful, okay?"

"Thanks, Pepper," said Rhodey. "You too, alright? Everything's going to be okay."

Rhodey hung up and Pepper let her phone drop onto the bed. Her eyes were trained on the television, showing the same harrowing footage on a loop, anchors recycling information until they could replace it with something new.

Rhodey's voice rung in her head. Everything's going to be okay. The last time she'd heard such an obvious lie Tony had been sprawled on the bathroom floor and told her he'd only had one drink.

No. Everything wasn't going to be alright. Tony had made Pepper watch this science fiction B movie more than once, and she knew exactly what this meant:

Invasion.
"I'm fine," Shuri protested as Okoye made a grab for her chin to examine the minor scuff on her cheek, the only visible remnant from the battle in the mines.

"Fine," Okoye scoffed. "Fine. Foolish child. Take part in one battle and you think you can survive anything. Next time you're faced with an enemy you come get me, eh?"

Shuri didn't say anything else, just rolled her eyes and permitted Okoye to examine the cut on her face.

T'Challa watched with a tight chest, fighting his twin impulses to either join Okoye in her scolding or yank his little sister into a hug. Both, T'Challa realized, would elicit a less-than enthusiastic response from Shuri. And she did look fine. Really. Even though whatever weapon that woman had been carrying had sliced through Vibranium like a knife through butter. T'Challa swallowed past the hard lump in his throat.

"To be fair," said Barnes from the other side of room, seated while Steve continued to stand, one hand on the back of Barnes' chair when he clearly wanted to lay it on his old friend's shoulder. "She held her own."

"Thank you," said Shuri pointedly to Okoye, who ignored her and glared at Barnes.

"Did I ask you?" she snapped. Barnes looked appropriately quelled and fell silent. T'Challa didn't blame him. He had been on the end of one of Okoye's death-stares one too many times.

In the spacious conference room, it was just he, Okoye, Shuri, Barnes, Rogers, and Dr. Foster – now silent in the corner, looking like she very much wished she was elsewhere, a stark contrast from the show of bravado she'd put on earlier that morning.

He'd asked the others in his guard to wait outside while his mother finagled the Taifa Ngao. Many of the Dora Milaje pilots he'd stationed at the hanger in case the alien portal showed any similar activity to its fellow in New York. He'd sent Ross to pacify the UN delegation. He admired Ross, even liked to consider the man a friend, but neither could he deny that inviting him into the same room as Rogers and Barnes was apt to cause a slight disturbance. Anyway, he was a little peeved at the man; there was no way Ross couldn't have known that UN attaché Maria Hill was more than she appeared. Nakia would arrive in a moment, Dr. Banner in toe along with Barton and Romanoff who had arrived in the quinjet in time to intercept their strange foe.

It was too many people. What T'Challa really needed right now was some time alone to try to sort out what the hell had happened. It was sometimes thoroughly terrible to be the one in charge.

The alien metal ring hung outside the window, casting a shadow like a dark cloud. An ever-present threat that was not going to lie dormant for long. It, along with six fellows, had appeared simultaneously above other major world cities, joining the one that had sprung into existence above New York.

Nakia always accused him of being slow on the uptake, but, for this, T'Challa thought he had a pretty good picture: they were in for one helluva shitstorm if they didn't make some kind of move, and quickly.
"Whatever that woman was," said Rogers, "she was looking for something. That's for certain. It doesn't make any sense to launch a one-person attack a second before setting off an invasion."

"This is true," said T'Challa. It took a moment before he could drag his gaze away from Shuri, still fussing noiselessly as Okoye fitted a bandage across her cheek, and toward Rogers. "She was certainly driven to the mines by a purpose."

"Bruce and I were trying to tell you," Foster began. T'Challa swiveled on his heel to address her. She was still pale, voice still tremulous, but a look of determination was fixed on her face. T'Challa admired her ability to pull herself back to the matter at hand, no matter the circumstances. "We've collected strange readings from your Vibranium. Things we can't explain. There's a possibility that whatever that is, this woman was after it."

"The Vibranium or something it hides?" said Shuri curiously, swatting at Okoye's hand, who swatted right back.

"I don't know," Foster shrugged, looking weary. "You haven't exactly been forthcoming about how many secrets Wakanda harbors."

"Neither have you been perfectly truthful with us, Dr. Foster," T'Challa cut her off gravely. He could understand her frustration, but he would not tolerate hypocrisy. "I know now you have been sent here by Nicholas Fury, former director of the organization called SHIELD. What exactly was it he brought you here to accomplish?"

The effect of his words were instantaneous: Foster's face flushed red. She looked at her hands in her lap, thoroughly embarrassed. "My foremost purpose is science," she admitted in a small voice. "It has always been science. But, yes, Fury sent me."

"That is not what the king has asked you," Okoye snapped.

Foster blinked in alarm. She finished rapidly, "Weapons. Fury needed to know how to make Vibranium into weapons strong enough to destroy whatever – well, whatever came at us in New York. In case they try anything again. Which they clearly have," she said, gesturing helplessly toward the window, out of which the metal ring could be seen hanging ominously overhead the city.

"You have been here for a week," said Shuri – although she was clearly trying to hide it, T'Challa could hear the note of triumph in her voice: relishing the fact that she had been right to mistrust the scientists from the start. T'Challa smothered a sigh, wondering for how long she would hold that over his head.

Foster's discomfiture only grew. "Fury said Wakanda had been out of the game for too long. And Thor, before he…left, Thor said there was a chance that – things were brewing in the cosmos, he said. Powers that had been dormant for too long were beginning to waken again. I thought – I remembered what he said and what Fury was arguing for made sense. But, I swear, Your Highness, I never would have –"

"It matters little what you belatedly swear –" Okoye began angrily but T'Challa stilled her with a raised hand.

"Indeed, it does not, Okoye," he said sadly. "For I fear what Dr. Foster dreaded has come to pass already." The shadow of the metal ring in the sky fell heavily upon all of their heads.

The moment of silence was permeated by a low creak of the conference room's door swinging open. Nakia was the first to enter, somehow able to keep one eye ahead of her and one eye trained behind
her on her three companions: Banner, Barton, and Romanoff.

"Bruce," said Steve immediately.

Banner stopped short as the large door closed behind him. "Steve," his smile was genuine, even if a heaviness hung around his eyes. "It's good to see you."

"Gotta agree with Bruce," said Barton, also grinning, although he walked with a slight limp and most of his hair was seared black. He and Romanoff had apparently been through quite an ordeal.

Romanoff did not pause to exchange pleasantries, but her eyes fixed with razor-precision upon Barnes across the room. She stalked briskly forward and squared her shoulders in front of Barnes. Her stance was so clearly threatening that T'Challa did not blame Barnes for tensing – nor Okoye for tightening her grip upon her spear. Romanoff rattled off in rapid-fire Russian: "Zhelaniye. Rzhavyy. Semnadtsat. Rassvet. Pech'. Devyat'. Dobroserdechnyy. Yozvrashcheniye na rodinu. Odin. Gruzovoy vagon."

Barnes flinched as though he had been stabbed. His face lost all color. Steve gripped Barnes' shoulder as Barnes tipped forward – for a moment T'Challa thought the man would collapse – but Barnes collected himself with a trembling gasp. He blinked for a moment in white-faced horror, but his eyes swiftly cleared, leaving his face stark and vulnerable, but unchanged.

"What the hell was that?" The look of blank shock on Steve's face quickly transformed to flushed anger.

Romanoff simply shrugged, but stepped back with a nod of satisfaction. "I needed to make sure."

"I do good work," said Shuri indignantly, but T'Challa could tell from the look of muted rage on his sister's face that she was not angry on her own behalf, but Barnes'.

"The fuck, Nat," said Barton with marginally more good-will then the others.

"It's fine," said Barnes, breathless. "I'm fine." He lifted his one hand to ease Steve's fingers off his shoulder. He looked relieved, even oddly grateful. "I'm fine."

"If we could all..." T'Challa struggled to find the right words, feeling himself strangely unsettled, as well. Eyes turned from all directions to fix on him in the center of the room. "Settle down?" he finished, and thankfully very little of the doubt he currently felt made itself known in his voice – although Nakia's knowing gaze softened in support. "I think we have much to discuss."

"Shit, you think so?" Barton snorted.

Before Okoye had a chance to turn her disapproving gaze on Barton, Banner piped up apologetically. "I mean no disrespect, Your Highness," he said. "But you only saw on the news what these things did in New York." He tossed a hand toward the window, although no one had any doubts that he was referencing the alien portal. "But I was there. And Natasha, Clint, Steve, and I were all there six years ago when they attacked the first time. And now I'm being told that seven more of these things are stationed around the globe. Now doesn't seem like it's the right time to talk."

T'Challa could see Okoye's indignation rising, but he pondered Banner's earnest words. Nakia stayed silent, although he could tell she was also anxious to share her input. Eyes were back on T'Challa. Waiting patiently for the final decision of their king, all of them now under his jurisdiction, facing this unknown enemy.

T'Challa turned to stare out the window, back to the penetrating eyes behind him. What was he
supposed to do? How was he supposed to protect his people from this threat – so much larger than the inner turmoil Erik had stirred up months ago? How was he supposed to make the correct decision in the face of so much uncertainty?

He quieted the sigh that rose readily in his chest. He could not show them how uncertain he was, but that did not mean he could not accept help. He'd learned very quickly that it was only very poor kings who tried to do everything themselves. For good or ill, the borders were open. This was his council now.

"Dr. Banner is correct," he said at length, eyes glued to the metal ring in the sky which had, as yet, not begun to rotate, glow, or give any indication it was about to spew a fleet of enemy vessels into the sky. "This is bigger than just Wakanda. We don't fight for one life; we fight for all of them. We must evacuate the city and muster our forces in the jungle. Our first act must be in the safety of our citizens, and then we must protect our technology for the aid of the rest of the world. Shuri," he turned to face his sister, and hid his grin when she lifted her chin, so eager to be called on directly, "get Sergeant Barnes his arm. And –" he pointed to Steve, who grimaced as though he could sense what T'Challa was about to say, but it was about time they all started confronting their destinies, even the exiled captain, "get this man a shield."

OOO

"Maybe your friend Stark should have thought twice before he jettisoned himself through that son of a bitch," Secretary of State Ross said, edge of snide victory in his voice utterly incongruent for the current situation that hung over the heads of the many lines of tanks and infantry that crowded the eerily silent New York streets. "Can't imagine these shits gave him a very warm welcome."

"Stark has never been one for thinking ahead, sir," said Rhodey through gritted teeth, mustering every ounce of his self-control to keep himself from sinking his fist into his superior officer's self-righteous mug.

Given the situation, he supposed he should at least give Ross credit for showing up to the party – the General didn't exactly give Rhodey the impression of someone who'd willingly put themselves in harm's way when they could just order someone else to do it for them. But Rhodey still thought it would be infinitely more satisfying if he could simply take Ross into his arms, fly up to meet the portal, and offer the general as a possible sacrifice. One shithead for the planet; seemed like a fair trade.

Rhodey sighed; Tony had rubbed off on him more than he'd thought.

Rhodey adjusted his helmet ever-so-slightly where it sat atop his shoulder, fastened over his face. Technically, the suit didn't need any manual adjustments; Tony had made it so it fit like a glove, but Rhodey couldn't help his compulsion to double check that everything was exactly the way he wanted it. He always liked to fix things with his hands.

He had plenty of time to prepare for this. The portals had arrived above the other seven locations early this morning. It was now mid-afternoon. They were expecting a world-wide attack, thoroughly prepared for it by deploying every military battalion that could get there in time, but still Rhodey was uneasy.

It felt like a trap.

Probably because it was a trap. He couldn't help but think of just a few days ago, when the Chitauri had arrived as a diversion to abduct Vision. This felt the same way. A world-wide diversion for... something. What, Rhodey didn't know. But it couldn't be good, whatever it was.
Still. They were prepared. As prepared as they could possibly be.

But he somehow still managed to be taken off-guard when the metal portal suddenly flared to life, glossing over with blue.

"Here she comes, men," Ross barked.

Rhodey's repulsors were already rumbling as he shot into the air, determined to be the first line of defense to meet the bastards, as the portal rippled and a stream of enemy vessels belched forth into the air above the city. Canon-fire was already blazing.

In a second the streets had transformed into war zone. A larger ship spilled forth, something Rhodey suspected was a ground-troop transport, and headed toward the street to land and expel its cargo.

Rhodey rocketed into action, firing left and right, aiming for the cockpits of speeding ships. Most of the ships were medium-sized, single-pilot, with major fire power. Walls of buildings were torn apart by gunfire. Rhodey dodged an explosion, heat so intense it penetrated his suit.

"Come on, man. I'm gone five minutes and everything goes to shit?"

Rhodey knew that voice, and he knew that set of silver wings – he was even too surprised to remember why he'd been so angry. "Sam!" he cried.

"On your left, man," said Sam Wilson, zooming into battle, unloading two Steyr SPP machine pistols into the nearby torso of a four-armed alien that had leaned out of the cockpit of one of the ships to aim some sort of laser gun toward Rhodey's head. The alien toppled out of the ship with a squeal.

"What are you doing here?" said Rhodey, letting go a rocket toward a shuttling enemy ship. It exploded into a satisfactory fireball but Rhodey didn't spend any time admiring his handiwork but turned immediately toward the next ship. There were so many of them. The sky was black with their shadows and billowing smoke. Thank God they'd managed to clear most of the civilian population.

"Came as soon as I saw the news," said Sam. "No way was I sitting this one out."

"Preciate it," said Rhodey, taking out an alien on the ground that was approaching an injured sergeant.

"Nothing like a good old alien invasion to bring us back together, am I right?" said Sam.

"You're telling me," said a voice in Rhodey's ear and he nearly jumped out of his skin.

"The fuck?" He yelped just as a small figure emerged from a crack in Rhodey's armor, crawling onto his hand and perching there like some goddamn, self-satisfied insect.

"Howdy, Colonel," said Scott Lang, and even though Rhodey couldn't see the man's face behind his stupid bug-mask, besides, he was way too tiny, Rhodey knew Lang was smirking. "Have to say – it's a relief to see you back on your feet. Or – er – in the air." Rhodey was saved from reply as Lang took a flying leap off Rhodey's fingers, shouting "Geronimo!" as he plummeted through the air, expanding exponentially as he approached ground until he sprouted to the familiar giant-sized figure Rhodey hadn't seen since the Leipzig airport.

Lang caught an enemy ship midair and chucked it like a football so it collided with another ship, both tumbling toward the ground to make twin explosions on the street below.
"Hell yeah, Tic Tac," Sam crowed, occupied with his own alien on a speeder bike very like the one the Chitauri had arrived in.

But these things definitely weren't Chitauri. They were four-armed, naked-skinned bastards, with snouts just like the creatures from the ill-fated Alien franchise. They were far more muscular than the skeletal, reptilian-like Chitauri, and – apparently – as Rhodey shot another round of rocket-fire into a still-moving carcass on the ground below – much harder to kill.

He wondered if similar forces had erupted from the portals above the other seven cities. He thought it was probably likely. Sick unease stirred in his stomach at the thought of the other, less-defended cities. At least Birnin Zana was guarded by Wakandan technology, but Beijing, Delhi, London, Moscow, São Paulo, and Berlin would be entirely on their own – and swiftly decimated if Rhodey couldn't somehow get New York under control – and, even if he did, he thought gravely, there wasn't any possible way he could get to the other places in time to do much good.

Avenging didn't mean shit if too much of the world was being threatened at the same time.

A blast from behind hit Rhodey squarely in the back. He was sent tumbling toward the ground – for a horrible blink of an eye he was back above Leipzig, the last few seconds when he could feel his legs – but his suit kicked back into gear a moment before impact and he caught himself in lurching stop on the ground, still on his feet but disoriented.

One of the four-armed aliens spotted him through the smoke, growled, and launched himself like a beast through the air. Rhodey aimed his rocket launcher toward the alien's dribbling jaw, but the alien was suddenly punted out of the air by a swing like a baseball bat from a familiar, yet absurdly displaced figure.

Rhodey blinked in surprise behind the viewscreen in his mask. It was that odd, friendly guy from the Asgardian wreck in Oklahoma – the giant made out of pebbles – he lumbered out of the wreckage. He might have been grinning, but Rhodey couldn't tell with his jaw made out of rock. "Hey, man," he said, shouldering a large gun that looked like it doubled as a club, "heard there was a rumble happening."

Rhodey didn't consider himself a man who was often at a loss for words, but now he stammered worse then he had when he'd asked his first girlfriend to junior prom: "What – the hell, man? I mean, welcome aboard."

"Pleasure to be here," said the rock monster. "I'm Korg, by the way. Lovely to be fighting with you side by side this afternoon."

Rhodey recognized more strange figures on the ground now, people he hadn't noticed from his position in the sky: it appeared as though the Asgardian refugees had noticed the earthling's troubles and decided to pitch in.

Through the chaos, Rhodey spotted Heimdall, the de facto leader of Asgard after Thor went AWOL. Rhodey had spent a little time with him at the sight of the crash, the only one left to keep an eye on the Asgardian mess after Vision was captured and Tony decided to be a hero. He was a good man, from what Rhodey could tell – slightly disturbing, all-seeing eyes aside – someone Rhodey didn't mind at all having on his side in a battle.

Rhodey dropped into a roll to avoid a blast from one of the alien's guns and came up back-to-back with Heimdall. Heimdall was wielding an absurdly large sword for a weapon and Rhodey made a mental note not to get taken out on the backswing, but Heimdall seemed more than competent at keeping his weapon only trained on the enemy.
"Good to see you, Gatekeeper," Rhodey shouted to be heard over the din of the battle.

Heimdall sliced an alien head cleanly off its neck with his sword. "I saw you were in need of aid," he said with his deep, somber voice.

"I'm glad as hell you don't hold a grudge," said Rhody back. "Can't say we've been entirely hospitable to your people."

Heimdall chuckled dryly. "It seems a multitude of sins can be forgiven in the face of a greater enemy, Son of Rhodes."

"Please," said Rhody, ducking as an alien fired for his head and shooting the sucker in the chest with his rocket. He and Heimdall moved as one, switching places so Rhody could get a shot at another alien in the distance. "Call me Rhody."

"You Midgardians are so informal," Heimdall shook his head, backhanding an alien with his sword without even turning around. Son of a gun sure knew how to fight – but that was likely because he could already see everything that was happening. Moving seamlessly with Rhody at his side was probably a piece of cake. "But, so be it, you may call me Heimdall, friend Rhody."

OOO

Thanos' words rung in Thor's ears: *I will destroy his mind and body painfully and thoroughly if you do not fetch me the Space Gem…do so and I will let you and him live…excused from the vengeance I enact on the galaxy.*

Lies.

Thor knew they were lies.

Still. Still he had caved to Thanos' demands. Still he had done it so easily, so readily, so weak, so willing to do anything – even abandon the universe – if it meant saving his brother.

Thor bowed his head. He was on his hands on knees on the cracked pavement where Thanos and Loki had disappeared somewhere into the unreachable cosmos. Loki… Thor's heart bled. He had as good as damned his brother to cruel death. There was no saving him now. And – even – even if Thor could –

He could not.

He was disgusted by himself. Disgusted by the words that had flown from his lips. *I yield. I will – I will do as you ask. The Tesseract for my brother's life.* He had given up the universe – billions of souls, helpless beings, his friends, his people, entire worlds, all that Thor would have given up. He did not even think of it.

He knew now how Loki might have caved under Thanos' workings after he plummeted through the void – knew now how he might have cracked under the pressure of an already fractured mind assaulted by such terrible power.

Loki…

"Thor!"

Footsteps clattered on the pavement. Thor did not need to raise his head to realize it was Gamora, and the heavier tread beside her the man, Star-Lord. Thor heard the clatter of Star-Lord's gun and the
shrill scrape of Gamora's blade as she drew it from her sheath.

"What the hell happened?" Star-Lord cried. "We saw flashes and weird lights and – you okay, man?"

Thor's heart thudded in his skull. "He was here," he croaked.

Gamora stopped short, boots grating on the chunks of broken street that Thanos had left in his wake. "Thanos?" she whispered in horror, as if she could read Thor's mind.

"My brother," Thor gasped. He struggled to control his voice. He would not allow himself to crumble under the gaze of these almost-strangers, even if he'd fought with them by now, formed bonds between warriors.

"Wait what –" Star-Lord fumbled.

"My brother," Thor explained roughly. "Dragged here by Thanos to –" Tempt me. Defeat me. He succeeded.

"What? How did he get here? Where did he go?" Star-Lord's rambles were cut off by an elbow to his side from Gamora.

"The Reality Gem," Gamora said woodenly. "There's no telling what else he can do with even a half-filled Gauntlet. We're running out of time."

"Why was he here?" said Star-Lord, obviously as incapable of keeping his mouth shut as Tony Stark. Thor winced. Tony. Steve. Bruce. All these friends, too, he would have willingly sacrificed – and the miniscule remains of his people back on earth. What kind of a king was he? How could he dare bestow upon himself the moniker of god?

"The Space Stone," Thor remembered to speak. He forced himself to stand. His legs trembled. He was badly shaken. "He tried to lure it away from me."

"By using your brother as bait," said Gamora, tight-lipped. "He always knew exactly how to hurt people."

Gamora spoke with the heavy burden of one who had seen and been through too much. Now that Thor had actually faced him, knew truly the terrible threat of Thanos…perhaps he could no longer blame Gamora for her part she played in all of this, either.

"I was wrong," Thor said slowly, "to say the things I said to you, Lady Gamora."

Star-Lord looked alarmed, obviously unsure how Gamora would respond to being called 'Lady,' but Gamora blinked in surprise. She furrowed her brow as if she was uncertain whether she had heard Thor properly. Finally, she spoke, "I – thank you. I regret much that I did under Thanos' thumb. The entire time I knew him, he only ever had one goal: conquering whatever part of the universe he could and destroying all that remained. If he gets his hands on all the Infinity Stones… He can do it with the snap of his fingers. Just like that."

Midgard, Sif had said. Thanos' next target would undoubtedly be Midgard, although Thor knew not what drew him there. He was not aware of another Gem on earth.

Thor felt guilt boil in his gut. He was wrong – he should never have left his people. Doomed them to a dire fate, the same fate he had undoubtedly just watched his brother whisked away to.
Thor had done so much that was wrong. Made so many mistakes. He did not know now how to even begin to correct them, but he had to try. It was not yet too late. It could not be too late for –

Loki. Loki. Loki.

But, no. Thor could not – that prize had already been dangled in front of Thor's face. Thor had already bowed to Thanos' wishes. He could not afford –

But Loki –

Thor forced away the thought. He shut his one good eye and cried fiercely inside his head, unsure whether the message would carry without the aid of the Bifrost:

Heimdall, show me my people. Tell me, how is home? Please, answer me, Gatekeeper. I know not what to do.

The answer was dim, static with distance, but still present: My King. It was just Heimdall's voice, none of the murky images Heimdall had managed to conjure when Thor had called him from Sakaar.

My King, if you are able, now is the time to come. The people of earth face a great threat. Your people need their king. I fear –

Heimdall's voice fizzled into blaring silence. Thor was drawn abruptly back to the silent street of Xandar, watched with matching looks of confusion from Star-Lord and Gamora.

"Ah, Thor, buddy…" said Star-Lord uncertainly. "You cool? You just, like, drifted away for a minute."

Thor shook his head. Heimdall's voice, echoing in his thoughts, provided him with some semblance of clarity, no matter how small, something to hold onto in the midst of the unstoppable turning of the universe.

"Midgard," said Thor, marveling at his ability to speak so firmly when all he was faced with was his own doubt. Loki's screams still rattled with painful clarity inside his head. "They require our aid. We must go to earth at once."

Chapter End Notes

I didn't know I needed Rhodey/Heimdall interaction until I wrote this chapter.
Chapter 25

It was the past. It was the future. It was everything in between. It was space untouched by time. It was space condensed within time. Stephen Strange tumbled through a vortex of liminal space, space between spaces, time between times and within times, caught in the intersections of planes within the celestial sphere. Spheres. There had always been more than one, and he was in all of them at once and, at the same time, none of them at all.

His body was left behind. He shuttled through the kaleidoscope world he had only ever experienced once before, when the Ancient One thrust his mind from his body, tore his soul from the foundation of his physical form and –

He did not exist. He existed in everything. He was spread thin. He was condensed to a pinhead point of being in the folds of vast cosmic realms. There was no longer any him. Just being. Just everything and all that had ever been, was to come, would never end.

Colors. Sounds. All of the essence of life.

Ruin. At the heart of it all: ruin.


"You think you can stop me, Sorcerer?" the voice was everywhere and nowhere, surrounding Stephen and issuing inside his own head. "You think you can stop me?" the voice cackled.

"I see you, Sorcerer."

"You lay in the palm of my hand."

"All I need do is close my fist upon your tiny, fragile body and crush the life from your simple flesh."

Ruin. All was ruin. Stephen saw the skyscrapers of New York collapse. He heard screams. He saw jungles aflame, oceans boiling, the earth torn asunder as the fiery-depths of its core bubbled out of great fissures in its surface, engulfing rock, grass, sand, and trees in molten lava. Death. An infinity of death and destruction.

"I offer balance to the universe," said the voice and Stephen knew it was Thanos. Thanos, here with him, watching him, gazing from afar, within his very being. "I will right the wrongs of a broken world, join together what was once torn apart. I will be your destroyer. I will be your creator. Your beloved conqueror. Your savior. Your God."

Stephen was flung through a swirl of darkness and light in a perennial freefall. He had been lost for years. He had been lost for no time at all. Never had the person Dr. Stephen Strange existed. There had only ever been this terrible pin-wheeling through nothingness and all.

"Soon you will know what it's like to lose," Thanos whispered in Stephen's ear in the gentle caress of a lover. "To feel so desperately that you're right. Yet to fail all the same."

"Dread it," Thanos bellowed and the air trembled with the echoes of his wrath. "Run from it."

"Destiny still arrives," said Thanos using Stephen's voice, using Stephen's lips. The words penetrated deep into Stephen's stomach, burrowing there like a knife.
Stephen gasped for breath, and in that moment remembered he had lungs, yet there was no breath to fill them. Terror erupted through his mind. The Time Stone pulsed in its locket against his chest, white-hot and angry. Yearning…anxious to answer the call of its master.

Stephen yanked it back. His body screamed in agony. He caught sight of a door, a handle between the folds of the universe. He reached for it – fading, transparent fingers slipping on the fabric of the cosmos, refusing to catch hold.

His hand brushed something solid. He closed his fist and yanked –

Stephen tumbled out of a yawning vortex and collapsed in a heap on a cold, metal surface. He could hear the hum of an engine below his ear. The world stopped spinning, tugged to an abrupt halt that felt like a physical blow.

He was clutching the Eye of Agamotto with its chain around his neck. His palm was seared as though he'd touched hot metal but the locket was strangely cool. His body ached. It took him a moment to remember how to breathe. When he was finally able to lift his head, it was to find four pairs of shocked eyes trained on his body on the floor.

He fixed his gaze on Tony Stark, relief blossoming so violently in his chest that he thought he might be ill: he'd made it back. He was in the quinjet. And there was Wanda Maximoff. She had gotten there safely, too.

Stark's face was a blotched mess of red and white rage. He blurted out of a tight throat, "For someone who commands the damn Time Stone, you sure are lousy at not showing up when you're supposed to."

Stephen was still gasping for breath. He lifted a trembling hand to his forehead and found his skin damp with sweat. "How –" he croaked, voice dry from disuse. "How long have I been gone?"

"Bout five hours," said Brunnhilde with a shrug. "We thought you were dead."

Five hours. He didn't know whether to be relieved it had not been five years or horrified that he had been missing for so long. Dull dread thudded in Strange's stomach and he urged himself to his feet. Stephen managed to stand, keeping himself steady by holding onto the back of one of the many revolving chairs that rimmed the quinjet's deck. "Peter, is he –" his eyes immediately fell on the grinning boy, swinging his legs off the side of his cot. "You're supposed to be in bed."

Peter's bandage had been removed from his head. He looked completely healthy. "Nah, I'm good," he said.

"Loki healed him," said Maximoff, looking the most unsteady on her feet barring, perhaps, Stephen himself.

Loki – mass-murdering despot who'd wrecked upper Manhattan six years ago? Stephen saw a motionless form on the pull-out cot across from Peter's. The only thing Stephen could think to say was a stupid, "Why is he blue?"

"It's his Jotun form," said Brunnhilde.

"Which is something you would have known if you hadn't been gone for five fucking hours," Stark snapped, never one to be ignored for too long.

Stephen's mind was rushing too quickly to keep up. He fumbled for something to defend himself with as guilt swam to the forefront of his emotions. "I couldn't – I had no choice. I couldn't get
"So maybe you should never have gone in the first place, huh?" Stark demanded, taking a step forward and sounding dangerously near shouting. "Like what I told you in the first place."

"If he had not come," said Maximoff. Her voice was entirely steady, even if her trembling knees were not. "Then he could not have rescued me. Or Loki. And Peter would likely be dead."

"I mean," said Peter apologetically, "she kind of has a –"

Peter was cut off by Stark saying, "Not helping here, kid," simultaneously as Brunnhilde stepped forward and took firm hold of Maximoff's elbow.

"You're the one who should be in bed," she said gruffly.

Maximoff allowed herself to be helped by Brunnhilde onto a third retractable cot. The quinjet now resembled a hospital ward more than anything else. Stephen furrowed his eyebrows, "Are you hurt? What about…" it felt strange to be concerned for a war criminal, but apparently Loki had saved Peter's life, Stephen was at least partially willing to let bygones be bygones. "Loki? Is he –?"

"His skin is too cold to touch," Brunnhilde answered. "It'll burn you if you try. We can only watch and hope he doesn't die, I guess."

"And Wanda's pregnant," said Stark testily. "Another revelation you missed. With Vision's twins. Which is, I'm not gonna lie, just a little freaky."

Maximoff shot Stark an exasperated look. Stephen frowned. It was another complication they had not foreseen, something they did not have time to deal with. Something Stephen couldn't deal with now. Not when –

Ruin. All that lay before them was ruin. Stephen bowed his head, breathing hard. But what future had he seen? Was it what was to be or merely a possibility? Or had it already occurred? The idea that they, the six of them, in their tiny metal hull were the last living remains of the universe was suddenly a horrifying possibility, one Stephen refused to let himself dwell upon.

"Fuck, not another one," said Brunnhilde.

Stephen shook his head and raised a hand. "I'm fine. I'm alright."

"You sure as hell better be," Stark growled. "You're the one who has to get this bird back to earth. We've got what we came for. We need to get back before Thanos decides earth is the best next place to wipe out."

"He already has," said Stephen, unable to stop the words from leaving his mouth. "I saw –" He did not know how to explain what he had seen. "I saw him go to earth. I saw him destroy it. I saw the wreckage of the universe. We – Stark, we can't go back."

That was not the right thing to say. Stark's face clouded with anger. "Are you out of your fucking skull?" he demanded. "Not go back?"

All they had aboard was a seventeen-year-old child recovering from severe head trauma, a pregnant witch, an alcoholic warrior princess, a half-dead god, and a genius egomaniac likely suffering from post-traumatic stress. It was not a promising hand.

Stephen struggled to keep a check on his voice. "Now is not a good time to go running into battle,
"What are we supposed to do? Just abandon earth to this – this madman who you just say lay waste to the universe –"

Stephen's efforts not to yell were suddenly eclipsed. He knew not what triggered it: "I bear the Time Stone, Stark! Thanos knows this! Returning the to earth would be as good as offering the Stone to Thanos!"

"Er, guys," said Peter meekly from his perch atop his cot. "I don't know whether –"

Stark ignored Peter, taking another step toward Stephen, spit flying from his lips. "You selfish piece of shit! I'm not letting you – no way are you just going to overrule me again and do whatever the hell you want to do! You have no right to waylay this mission again, not when the first time could have resulted in Peter's death –" Stark's voice might have cracked, Stephen didn't care.

He was angry now, too, and motivated by a shuttling terror deep in his bones that he couldn't shake – not since he'd seen the death and destruction that waited for them on earth, revealed to him in the cracks between time and space.

"This is bigger than us, Stark!" Stephen shouted. "I told you on Xandar – this has always been bigger than us! I thought you understood that. Now I've seen what Thanos can do –"

Stark rushed forward, but Strange took a step back, unwilling to resort to violence yet. Stephen let Stark back him against the wall even though everything in him was urging him to backhand the man across the face.

"Alright boys," Brunnhilde was suddenly there, shouldering her way between them. Stephen felt himself hoisted off his feet by the collar of his shirt. Stark was as well, sputtering in rage and shock. Stephen had forgotten for a moment that the woman was an Asgardian, and, as such, would have physical strength similar to Thor's. "Nough's enough. I didn't come here to tend children."

Brunnhilde set them both back on the ground. Stephen's face flushed with heat, embarrassment quickly overtaking his anger. Stark stumbled away and collapsed into a chair. Turning so he faced the wall and no one could see his face. He might have been sulking, but at least he was silent.

Brunnhilde let the moment of silence linger for a moment. "Executive decision," she said finally, "the only way around this is taking a vote. God knows why I decided to step up, but we can't have one person running this show, anymore. So everyone gets a say. I'll go first."

Brunnhilde glared at those around her, daring someone to interject. Peter was looking at her with wide-eyes, obviously impressed that she'd had the nerve to put both Stephen and Stark so resolutely in their places. Maximoff was sitting up on her elbows, pale, maybe too weak to bother saying anything. Stark still had his back to the room. Stephen sure as hell didn't want to be punted through the hull of the ship into the vacuum of space, so he stayed silent, too.

Brunnhilde took a deep breath and began, "I have to say, I agree with Strange in that it's probably a lousy idea to go to earth when that's probably where Thanos is heading, anyway. But if earth's going to be the place of our last stand, I'd rather I fight alongside what's left of my people rather than find myself choking on my own blood on some no-name system after Thanos finally catches up with us. I took a long time off from being a hero. But I guess once you start again it's hard to stop. So, no, I can't see myself staying out here when we might be at least some help back there. Spider-kid, what about you?"
"It's – uh – Spider-man," said Peter, clearing his throat. He scrubbed the back of his neck with a hand. "I mean…I don't know. I guess I agree with – uh – Ms. Brunnhilde." Brunnhilde's lip quirked slightly at Peter's moniker. "If I'm going to have to fight, I'd rather fight for home."

Stark turned marginally in his chair, Stephen knew it was to flash Peter a grateful smile. Peter said rapidly, "And that's not – you know, because I know Tony better than I know you, Dr. Strange. It's just…what I really feel."

"Great," said Brunnhilde, "Maximoff?"

Maximoff was silent for a heart-beat, chewing on her bottom lip. When she finally spoke, her voice was faint and her eyes fixed themselves directly on Stephen. Stephen's chest clenched, wondering if this was going to be another apology speech.

"For a moment in the throne room," she said, "I penetrated Thanos' mind with my own. I saw the destruction he hopes to enact upon the universe and all we know of life – and all we do not know. I have – I have lost much. I have seen my home demolished once before. Since then, I do not think I ever have felt at home anywhere else. I have always been…a drifter. And – and if there is but the slimmest chance of keeping this Stone away from –" Wanda choked. She closed her lips, shut her eyes. On her exhale, she whispered, "I agree with Dr. Strange. I – but I do not want to abandon earth. Please do not think I –"

"We don't," said Stark unexpectedly. His voice was almost understanding. Stephen wouldn't have thought the man capable of such a complicated emotion. "Wanda, we don't."

Maximoff looked at her lap and nodded. "I don't want to abandon earth," she whispered again.

Stark finally turned back around, pushing his heals off the floor to propel his chair as if he was little boy playing in his father's office. "We already know my vote, I think." His voice held the note of victory.

Stephen could count, too. Even if Maximoff had agree with Stephen, it was still three to two.

"What about Loki?" Did Stephen sound vicious? He hadn't meant to. He could take loss gracefully. Besides, this should be about more than just bruising his ego.

"Loki's unconscious and abstains the vote. He's coming with us," said Brunnhilde firmly. "Besides, Thor would be pissed if I let his little brother out of my sight. Even if he's an asshole."

Stephen nodded, even if he wanted to shake his head, to offer more protests. He and Maximoff had both seen Thanos' plans. As such, their votes should carry more weight.

"Okay, Strange?" Brunnhilde interrupted Stephen's thoughts, the fierceness of her expression telling Stephen that she would have something to say – or do – about it if he was anything but okay. "You heard the vote. It's still up to you to get us there. We certainly can't cross that much space by ourselves if we hope to get there sometimes before it's just me left because the rest of you have died of old age."

All eyes were back on Stephen. He swallowed past the dry lump in his throat, the terrible pulsating knowledge that they were running headlong into a foolish decision, and said, "Alright."

OOO

All the children, and the men and women untrained as warriors, took shelter in the mountains of J'Abariland. T'Challa and his mother made Shuri leave only by force after she'd remained
unpersuaded by the argument that, if they were to entertain any thought of actually winning this fight, they needed the leader of the Wakandan Design Group unscathed so she could make repairs on any equipment and oversee medical procedures of any injuries. T'Challa allowed himself to smile at her stubbornness now that she was safely out of the way; his sister had the heart of a warrior, but he would not allow her to take part in any more battles, not until she at least came of age and he couldn't stop her anymore.

His people armed themselves, readied for a fight among the undergrowth of the jungle. The portal sputtered above Birnin Zana, issuing forth a fleet of enemy vessels. Wakandan unmanned fighter drones zoomed into battle, controlled by remote from an outpost in the mountains. They did not have to worry about the air. It was the ground that worried T'Challa, and the moment the aliens realized they were being faced by jets unmanned by human pilots.

But they would be ready. T'Challa had to believe his people would be strong enough to face this.

"My King." It was Okoye, hitting aside branches and leaves with her spear as she strode forward, face tight, obviously carrying ill news. T'Challa braced himself for impact.

"It is W'Kabi, my King," said Okoye, distaste evident on her face as she spoke the name of her old lover. "And his Border Tribe come with their rhinos," she spat the word as if it was a curse but T'Challa could barely contain his smile – tactfully, he did, for he doubted Okoye would appreciate much if he laughed in this moment.

"I see," said T'Challa. "He has come to fight with us?"

"Yes," said Okoye gravely. "He has come to fight. And begs an audience with you, if you will stomach his presence. I told him it was likely you would not."

"Thank you, Okoye," said T'Challa, clearing his throat to make sure no hint of levity carried through. "I will see him."

"My King," Okoye disappeared with a salute of her arms to her chest, disappearing into the jungle. She returned swiftly once again, making no great effort to make sure W'Kabi, trailing behind her, was able to keep up.

When W'Kabi came before T'Challa, he immediately dropped to his knee. He spoke to the ground, "My King, you have been merciful to my tribe. You have been merciful to me in the wake of my great betrayal. You have bore us no ill-will. For this, I am deeply grateful. I offer you now the hearts of my people – my heart – for your servitude. To fight by your side as I once did, to repay your great kindness, in the face of this great enemy. I humbly ask for your mercy once more. Your forgiveness of my transgressions, your permission to join ranks with the warriors of Wakanda once again."

Many emotions churned in T'Challa's chest. His city was being torn apart by aliens only a mile away, yet here was T'Challa's friend – his companion since childhood. A brother. T'Challa could not distinguish between the tears and joy that clogged his throat.

"W'Kabi," he said, stepping forward, "although the circumstances are less than ideal –" He was laughing now, he could not help it. W'Kabi looked up in surprise and T'Challa extended his arms, drawing W'Kabi back to his feet, "I am glad indeed that you have finally broken your silence." He clasped W'Kabi on the shoulders with both his hands. "My friend," he said, meaning it, despite past hurts. "I relish the chance to fight side by side with you again."

W'Kabi nodded once, briskly. When he spoke his voice was husky: "Thank you, my King. My life is yours. Lead me as you will. I was wrong for ever thinking otherwise."
"It took you long enough, you fool," Okoye spat behind him. Her voice was tight and T'Challa was 
shocked to see there were tears in her eyes, as well.

W'Kabi was evidently also taken aback, for he exchanged a frightened, disbelieving glance with 
T'Challa. "You have certainly called me such often enough," W'Kabi said to Okoye, merest wisp of 
a hopeful smile on his lips. "I should have learned long ago."

"That you should," said Okoye fiercely. W'Kabi's smile dissolved. Okoye shook her head, "But, if 
you and I live another day, perhaps you will hear me call you fool once again."

T'Challa chuckled. "Okoye, show W'Kabi back to his people. Let them defend the mountain pass. 
Our enemies must not reach J'Abariland."

"They will not," W'Kabi promised gravely, and Okoye led him away.

T'Challa walked through the undergrowth of the jungle. He spotted Steve Rogers and Sergeant 
Barnes atop a slight incline, tall enough to peer through the thick trees toward the city. Steve did so 
through a pair of binoculars. T'Challa preferred not to watch the ongoing destruction himself.

"How can you stand it?" Steve marveled, putting down his binoculars when he became aware of 
T'Challa's presence. "Watching your city be destroyed. Just waiting."

T'Challa shook his head. "Things can be repaired," he said simply. "My people's lives are more 
important."

"I guess that's why you're the king," said Barnes. He took the binoculars from Steve. When he 
peered through them he gave a low whistle.

T'Challa felt like he'd been punched in the stomach but forced himself not to react; clearly Barnes 
had not meant to be tactless.

"How does your new arm suit you, Sergeant?" T'Challa knew Shuri called Barnes Bucky, at his 
request, but Barnes had not yet asked T'Challa to do so. T'Challa suspected it was because Barnes 
was not yet certain what kind of relationship was between them – the harbored assassin and the 
would-be revenger. T'Challa hoped that, by the time this was all over, he and Barnes might be able 
to call themselves friends, as well.

"It's good," said Barnes thoughtfully, rotating his newly repaired shoulder. "Very light. It feels…like 
an arm."

"Shuri will be able to replace the socket," said T'Challa, "if you so desire, once this is over. She says 
she has an improved version from the one HYDRA forced upon you. It will be entirely painless but 
will take some time to recover from."

"Yes," said Barnes. His voice was so gentle for one who had been through so much. His eyes 
crinkled fleetingly with pleasure at the mention of Shuri and T'Challa was glad his sister had become 
at least one friend for Barnes in this unfamiliar world. "She mentioned it to me. She said she could 
make it so the arm is detachable. That might be," he thought for a moment, "nice. Being able to take 
it off."

Steve looked at Barnes, eyebrows furrowed in sympathy. T'Challa hoped both men, these two 
warriors out of time, might be able to find some sort of peace after all this was…over. One this was 
over: the seemingly unsurmountable caveat to all their future plans.

"You are not with your other teammates, Steve?" said T'Challa. Steve had given him the lecture
about Captain America long ago when he first showed up to Wakanda with Barnes.

Steve hesitated, "I don't think we're really too much of a team, anymore."

"Maybe not," said T'Challa, "but I think that may be fixed again with the aid of your leadership."

Steve's smile was tired and sad. He flexed his right wrist, where his new shield could spiral outward at will. T'Challa hadn't asked him how it suited him like he had with Barnes' new arm; the man was already too sensitive about taking it in the first place. "Maybe we could be a team. But I don't think I could ever be a leader. Besides, like Bucky said, you're the king. That's more than enough."

"You may not be a king," T'Challa insisted, "nevertheless, are a leader. They would not follow you now because you are Captain America. They would follow you because they trust you."

"Maybe he'll be able to get through that thick skull of yours, huh?" said Barnes, binoculars back up to his eyes. His smile suddenly faded and when he spoke again his voice was urgent, "You Highness, Steve, something's appearing in the field. It's – damn – another alien ship. It's different than the others."

"Hostile?" Steve demanded.

Barnes put down his binoculars. His brow was furrowed, already reaching for the rifle strapped to his back. "Are there any other kind?"

OOO

"This sure as hell ain't any earth I recognize," said Star-Lord as soon as the wispy field of the Tesseract's energy faded from view. The Milano touched ground in the center of a wide, yellow field. It was not any earth Thor recognized, either, but a land he had never been to before. Behind them rose the tower spires of a golden city – Thor's first, wild thought was of the golden towers of Asgard, but then he recognized the city was under attack by a fleet of vessels, just as the Nova Corps Headquarters had been.

"Uh," said Rocket, "I hate to break it to you, but they sure as hell ain't friendly." Rocket was pointing not toward the city, but toward a jungle at the edge of the field, out of which several flat, hover-crafts had emerged. They looked to be some kind of troop transports, what with the multitude of people that stood upon their decks – all with shouldered weapons and zipping straight toward the Milano with every apparent intention of attack.

"I thought you said that thing would bring us to your friends!" Nebula shouted.

Thor still clung to the glass carrier of the Tesseract. Truthfully, he had thought the Tesseract would bring them back to New York, to Tony's tower where he had first taken off. He did not understand why it had brought them to this strange place.

Gamora wasted no time in speaking, but dashed over to the ramp controls, releasing the hatch to allow a wave of dry heat into the Milano's interior. "Those are Thanos' ships attacking that city – I'm pretty sure these people will be willing to accept help if we can just get them to listen to us."

"And if they do not listen, then they will not be very difficult to kill," said Drax simply.

"No," said Star-Lord urgently, on Gamora's heels as she raced down the descending ramp. "No killing. At least not until Gamora or I say so."

"Until I say so!" Gamora shouted after her.
"Until she says so," Star-Lord remedied with a shrug.

Thor lumbered after Gamora and Star-Lord, bringing the Tesseract with him in case these people required some kind of proof of his identity – surely, they would have heard of the Avengers, no matter what country he had landed himself in. Some of the warriors aboard the hover-crafts were carrying spears. Thor tried to think what people of earth still fought with spears yet were technologically advanced enough for hovercrafts but could not call anything to mind. Jane had tried to teach him Midgardian geography, but he'd never been a very attentive student.

"We mean no harm," Gamora shouted to the oncoming vessels, hands raised in surrender even though Thor knew she must desperately have wished to draw her sword from her side.

"Well, let 'em know we could maybe cause a little harm," said Rocket, emerging from the Milano at Thor's side, firing up his laser cannon.

"Rocket, dude!" Star-Lord exclaimed. "Put the gun away! We're going for nonthreatening here."

"Maybe a little threatening," said Nebula, who had also drawn her twin shock rods.

"You know, you're not too bad," said Rocket to Nebula, and Thor spotted the briefest of smiles cross her lips before she succeeded in hiding it.

"Please," said Thor, running to catch up with Gamora, "let me do the talking. They will recognize who I am –"

Thor was cut off by a sharp voice from the front hovercraft, still a throwing-distance away but well within the range of a projectile weapons. The speaker was a fierce looking woman with a shaved head, stern eyes, and raised spear. "Who are you?" she demanded. "And what are you here for? Answer swiftly. I shall not ask again."

"My Lady –" Thor stepped forward.

"I am no man's Lady," the woman scoffed. She raised her spear higher.

Thor amended rapidly, stumbling over his words. "Noble warrior! We mean you no harm. I am Thor of Asgard, one of the Avengers, Earth's mightiest –"

"Thor?" demanded someone and Thor was shocked to spot a familiar face among the strangers. Her hair had somehow turned white, but it was indeed Natasha Romanoff who faced him, also with a drawn weapon, but she lowered her gun marginally as recognition spread across her face. "What the hell are you doing here? How did you get –"

She was interrupted as the Tesseract sputtered at Thor's side. The glass casing around it shattered to the hilt Thor gripped in his hand. Thor yelped in surprise as the Tesseract dropped free of its tubular case. It hit the Milano's ramp and clattered off the edge, landing in the soft, withered grass below.

Every eye was trained on the icy blue cube as it pulsed and flared. The fabric of space tore with the sound of ripping cloth. A blue-edged portal emerged from thin-air. A large leg reached through, followed by the bulky form of an armored being Thor had become all-too familiar with since that morning.

"No!" Gamora and Nebula shrieked as one.

Thanos grinned and stepped fully onto the grass, very much present and not the mere semi-illusion Thor had faced on Xandar.
"Thor, son of Odin," Thanos growled, "I have come to collect on our bargain. The Tesseract for your brother's life."
Heimdall's Sight was a blessing and a curse. Through the ages he had seen worlds born and seen worlds fade. Trillions of souls within his sight but out of his reach, he had witnessed all of them suffer and rejoice, loose and gain, live and die.

Certain beings he grew to know and love better than others – a child on a distant realm who watched the skies at night, a young woman who learned the marvel of life by tending her garden, an old man who had lived and done too much for his mere mortal years. Heimdall cultivated a care for these beings unbidden. These were ignorant creatures. They had never seen or heard of Heimdall, nor were they ever going to. They were simply individual souls plucked out of the multitudes, drawn to Heimdall's heart in strange and unpredictable ways.

Others he came to know by necessity and proximity: the Asgard princes, his Valkyrie sister of old who lost herself on Sakaar, the besieged warriors of Midgard. These he watched wherever they went, treasuring each moment he could allow his eyes to linger – even for a moment – upon them, hoping for peace to smooth their hurts, for what did they know of eternity? Of the terrible weight of seeing the worlds spin incessantly by, assailed by each soul, gazing upon them from a distance too great to traverse even in times of trouble.

The worst part about the Sight was the fact that that was all it was. He could not bring aid. The destruction of the Bifrost had rendered him doubly ineffective, for even if he had once been able to entertain thoughts of help, now he could not even attempt it.

Heimdall could only watch. Watch from afar. Seeing all, even when he wished he could shut his eyes.

Thor and his Guardian companions arrived on Midgard at Heimdall's request. Perhaps it was Heimdall to be blamed for what happened next, but he had only ever been able to respond to the present – the future was as dark to him as it was to anyone else.

Gamora and Nebula, broken sisters, cried aloud as their father erupted from the spaces between dimensions. Thanos had planned this, manipulated the Tesseract with the Gauntlet so that it landed him in the center of the Wakandan battle – there to enact cruel revenge upon the daughters who had betrayed him, the Asgardian King who had broken his promises.

Nebula raised her electric batons over her head and charged forward with a battle cry, heeding not the gasp of warning from her sister.

Thanos held out his hand to stop her and a swirling ball of energy emerged from the Gauntlet's fingers. It formed a bubble in the air that rushed forward to meet Nebula and engulfed her entirely.

The father who had made and unmade his daughter unceasingly since childhood disassembled his
creation once last time. Nebula screamed in agony as the energy field around her picked her body apart, tearing nerves and wires as her legs dropped from her torso, the metal plating in her face melted away, leaving raw flesh beneath to experience the heat of the sun after years of being cased in the metallic prison of her own body.

The bubble of energy dissipated and Nebula dropped, lifeless and bleeding, even as Gamora forgot herself in her rage and grief, running forward to skewer her father with her sword.

"Gamora! No!" the shout was torn from Peter Quill's throat, but he was turning to attack, as well.

"You killed my family and now my friend," Drax the Destroyer bellowed, emerging from the belly of the Milano, swinging his dual blades. "I will kill you!"

Thanos aimed his open palm toward Drax and blasted the giant backward. Drax was lifted off his feet – smacked directly in the chest by a stream of energy issuing from the palm of the Gauntlet. Drax clattered back into the interior of the Milano and did not emerge again.

Thanos turned back in time to meet his once-favorite daughter's assault. He grabbed her sword with his gloved hand and crushed the blade to dust with his fingers. Gamora aimed a kick for his chest. Thanos grabbed her leg out of mid-air and slammed her body to the ground.

Thor, the God of Thunder – Heimdall had seen him grow and change since infancy – erupted into a crackling mass of blue lighting. He and Peter launched themselves toward Thanos as one. Peter fired at Thanos with his gun as he sprinted toward him, but a shield sprung outward from the Gauntlet, thrusting both the human and the god backward through the air until they crashed into the ground, skidding through divots of torn earth and grass.

The gunfire from the hovercrafts that had been zooming toward the Milano pinged ineffectively against Thanos' bronze breastplate and helmet. He lifted his arm and shoved a wave of energy toward the hovercrafts, ripping through the ground as it went, tossing Thor and Peter backward again as it rushed toward the crafts, upending them through the air.

Bruce Banner, watching from behind the fringes of the jungle, needed not coax the beast within any longer, for the Hulk emerged readily, smashing through the artificial armor that crusted its rapidly expanding body – eyes zeroed on the flying body of Natasha Romanoff as Thanos blasted the hovercrafts backward with a lazy wave of his gilded hand.

The Hulk bound through the jungle, roaring, too far to reach the Milano in time to intervene.

Thanos stooped to haul Gamora up off the ground. Her eyes were bleary, but she focused on his face before her, fear striking out the irrational bravery she had displayed a moment before when she'd tried to face him alone. "Foolish, treasured daughter," Thanos whispered, "You have failed me for the last time."

"Father, no –" she gurgled but Thanos did not have time to listen to her beg. He had given her chances enough to return to him.

He gripped her around the neck with the Gauntlet. It was so easy to squeeze the life from her, watch her eyes bug in pain, her lips grapple for lack of air until her head lolled backward against his fist and he let her drop.

"Bastard!" Rocket shrieked, leaping down the ramp.

"I am Groot!" growled his companion.
A snap of Thanos' fingers and Groot erupted into flame, screaming and writhing as he crashed to his spindly knees.

"Groot!" Rocket yelled, skidding to a stop half-way down the Milano's ramp, caught between his enflamed friend and attacking his enemy. Rocket scampered back up toward Groot, falling to his knees, "No, no, no, no!" he muttered, hitting the flames with his bare paws, singing fur.

"I – am – Groot –" Groot sputtered, shoving away Rocket's arms. From Groot's limbs, charred black, shoots of green sprung outward. The vines churned violently through the air, speeding toward Thanos, wrapping around his legs, climbing up his body, catching his arms to his torso and squeezing, but Thanos shouted in anger and spread his arms – cracking through Groot's

Groot whimpered in pain – the sound of wind creaking through tree-branches – and shuddered before he went limp in Rocket's arms. Rocket looked up from his friend's still body, fur wet around his eyes, letting go a blast from his laser cannon.

Thanos caught the blast with his gloved hand and threw it back toward Rocket. It slammed the creature in the chest, tossing him against the side of the ship where he slid to the grass and did not get up again.

Thanos smiled. "Is this all you can throw at me? You who call yourself the Guardians? After our first encounter I had hoped for more!"

"You ask for more!" Thor leapt from his place among the wreckage of the hovercraft, arching through the air at the head of a tail of lightning, "I shall give you more!"

Thanos laughed aloud as he lifted the Gauntlet. "Foolish god," he crowed, "When your brother finds your broken body among the ruins I shall have my final revenge!"

The explosion of energy from the Gauntlet intercepted Thor mid-air. It took hold of his lightning and turned his power against himself, tangling him in strands of fire. Thor screamed in pain as his line of projectile broke and he free-fell from his point in the sky. He smashed into the ground, face first, body smoking, and did not rise.

Heimdall saw. He saw and forced himself not to yell in furious grief as his King fell in battle, the golden son of Asgard, just one more to be counted among the ruined peoples' fallen.


Thanos turned from the burning wreckage of the hovercrafts. He narrowed his eyes at Mantis lying on the ramp, smile evaporating from his lips. He walked forward, footsteps rumbling through the ground.

"You wish to make me feel, Child?" he asked her. She peered up at him with her large, black eyes, no fear left inside her, only hollow sadness. "Silly creature," he whispered and took her chin within his hand. She did not resist. "You should know better than to think there is anything left within me with which to feel."

He shoved his gloved hand toward her body, force of energy crushing her against the metal ramp beneath it until she went limp, issuing not a single sound.

Thanos straightened and turned back around. He could see the pathetic number of human troops emerge from the jungle, led by the rampaging green beast, clanking of their armor and battle cries
crossing the distance. Thanos shook his head at their foolishness – did they really think they stood a chance against him?

"Proxima, my daughter," he spoke through the connection that existed between his Gauntlet and her scepter – a fresh invention after the little god, the one who thought himself so clever, lost his first gift after his failed invasion. "Let them come now. I go to collect my prize."

The city swarmed with the distant, black forms of the four-armed Outriders, emerging from the abandoned city to meet the mortal army rushing from the other side of the field.

Thanos took hold of the Tesseract, lying still in the grass, and crumbled its casing in his bare fist. He plucked the small, oval Gem from his palm with the tips of his fingers and easily slipped it into the empty socket beside the scarlet Reality Gem. He closed the Gauntlet into a fist and ushered forth another portal. He stepped through the blue-fringed tear just as the army behind him thought themselves close enough to begin pummeling him with their petty projectiles. He swam back through the hollow between dimensions, drawn by the incessant cry of the Soul Gem that emanated from the very ground of this disappointing, withered land.

Heimdall saw.

He saw the Wakandan army collide headlong into the Outriders, four-armed beasts tearing viciously through the troops.

He saw Thanos emerge from the Space Stone's portal into the bowels of the city, the blue-lit Vibranium mines. Thanos grinned. The humans had abandoned their city so quickly, given him clear access to what he desired.

Not that they ever could have entertained the hope of stopping him.

Thanos slammed his fist down toward the ground, smashing through the Vibranium surface, burrowing the Gauntlet up to its knuckles in rock. The mines trembled. The land outside the city quaked. The ceiling caved inward, large chunks of rock raining down on Thanos' head, and Thanos only laughed.

He drew forth the essence of the Soul Gem from the land itself, infused within what the humans called Vibranium, just dull rock if not for the power of the Soul Gem that gave it is marvelous properties.

He sucked the Vibranium dry. The Soul Gem had fallen to earth hundreds of years before, spread thin in a meteorite so that the impact tossed it across the land, created the crater in which the humans had built their so-called Golden City.

The Soul Gem collected toward the Gauntlet, rushing away from rock, from the metal the humans had used to build their city so that buildings swayed and cracked under their supports made fragile without their mysterious strength.

Heimdall saw the moment of confusion as the Captain raised his new shield in battle to deflect gunfire from an Outrider's weapon only to have the shield shatter under impact. Sergeant Barnes, fighting back to back with his old friend, saw the Captain in trouble and lunged forward to stop the Outrider striding forward, claws raised.

"Bucky!"

The grip of Barnes' hand slackened on the creature's arm, and the alien twisted free of his unexpectedly weakened arm. The Outrider snarled and hit Barnes to his knees and lunged for his
"Steve, no!" Barnes cried as the Captain jumped forward to take the blow instead.

"I could do this all –" The Captain's voice was cut short with a gurgling gasp as the Outrider plunged its claws into his stomach. The Captain doubled over. Barnes tackled his friend to the ground, shielding him from further harm, descended on once again by the beast.

The Wakandan fighter drones dropped from the sky, exploding far on the ground below, giving way to the Outrider's vessels. The Wakandan King toppled under a blast from an Outrider's gun. The king's loyal guard, Okoye, cried in distress, charging forward to defend her king from the coming deathblow only to find her spear snapped cleanly in two, strength gone from its shaft.

Thanos' body was trembling, muscles straining under the pull of the Soul Gem dragged from the earth. Wisps of orange light collected around his wrist, bleeding into the Gauntlet half-buried in the rock. The ground cracked across the battleground, opening jagged fissures across the field, swallowing humans and Outriders alike. Tremors ran through the dirt and stone, uprooting trees, collapsing buildings.

Thanos roared in triumph and wrenched the Gauntlet back from the ground. The last trails of the Soul Gem solidified into an oval gem, larger than the rest, fitted snugly into the back of the Gauntlet's fist. Thanos flexed his gilded fingers, admiring the new shining Stone.

There was but one socket left now, one place left for the Time Gem. Soon nothing could stand in Thanos' way. He only need catch up with the frail sorcerer and pry the Gem from around his neck. Thanos would be unstoppable.

Thanos moved through space, pried open for him with the Space Gem, until he landed on the cliffside that overlooked the swarming field and burning city below him. His daughter Proxima and son Ebony were waiting for him. Ebony stood in haughty silence, watching the battle below him with interest.

Proxima turned to Thanos at once, eyes aglow with desire to see the orange Gem upon Thanos' fist.

"What now, Father?" she said. She licked her lips, grip tightening upon her scepter.

"Now I shall return to my Sanctuary," said Thanos, "where I can admire this destruction from a distance. It will only be a matter of time before the sorcerer attempts to use his stone again. I will be ready for him. That is what I shall do. But for you, my daughter and son, I have another task to fulfill."

"Anything, Father," Proxima said at once.

"Of course, Father," said Ebony, with a flicker of distaste directed toward his sister.

Thanos was pleased to see the eagerness of his children. Yet loyalty could only be useful for so long.

"Give me your scepter, Proxima."

She did not doubt his words, trusting girl, but handed him her scepter immediately. Thanos took hold of the stick in his hand. The Gauntlet roiled in anger at the touch of this bastardization of its power, constructed by Thanos as a faux-bond so that he could grant his power to Proxima across the cosmos. It, too, had served its purpose.

"You have been loyal, my children. For that I grant you the greatest reward." Ebony realized what Thanos was going to do before his sister did – he had always been the most astute of Thanos' children, one to watch out for if Thanos had ever given him opportunity to betray his trust. But Thanos always planned ahead for inconveniences.
Ebony tensed – as if he believed he could ever take Thanos in battle – but before he could respond otherwise, Thanos punted the scepter's twin blades through Ebony's breastplate, withdrawing it to allow Ebony to crumble to the ground, blood gurgling to his lips, still open in surprise.

"Father, no –" Proxima gasped, sparing no sympathy for her brother, Thanos knew, but only fear for herself and what she knew what was coming next. Thanos gave her no opportunity to speak further before the scepter found its place in her heart, as well.

She collapsed to her knees and then to her face in the dirt.

Thanos snapped the scepter in two with the Gauntlet. Its power that it had been leaching from the Gauntlet fizzled and flared for but a moment before it fled back to the Gauntlet.

Soon. Soon his mission would be complete. Soon balance would be returned to the universe. One true God crowned above all else, the earth destroyed entirely for its sins against him. It would be his first mission before turning to other realms to wipe out all these troublesome humans, just flies to be batted away with his hand once he had a completed Gauntlet at his command.

Soon. Soon and all would be well as it never truly had been well before the very beginning of time.

Heimdall saw all. He saw before his very eyes at the skyscrapers of New York collapsed into heaps around him. He saw the Kronan, Korg, lumber forward, smack through the heads of two aliens with a single swing of his club, only to turn toward an onrushing enemy vessel. "Hey man –" he protested and the alien ship collided directly into him, shattering his body into an explosion of pebbles.

Sam Wilson was shot out of the sky and he pinwheeled toward the ground, one wing smoking, the other blown clear off.

Heimdall saw the other cities, Beijing, Delhi, London, Moscow, São Paulo, and Berlin, disappear under billowing smoke and flame.

Heimdall saw and he knew that this was a battle they would not win.

An animal pounced on Heimdall's back, forcing him to his knees. He elbowed the creature in the face and tried to get back to his feet, but two more creatures enclosed around him, tearing at his armor with their terrible, heavy claws, gnashing their teeth against his flesh.

Heimdall shut his eyes. He did not want to see anymore.

Loki, he called the younger Asgardian prince, speaking across the folds of the universe just as he had done to bring Thor into this doomed battle. I know you have often closed your ears to my voice. But if you can hear me now, I beg you to listen. Flee. Do not return to Midgard. Take your companions and run for your lives. We cannot be saved.

OOO

We cannot be saved. Loki shuddered awake, gasping for breath that would not fill his lungs, and flung himself out of bed, reaching for his knives that he kept within a small pocket of reality at his sides – easy to conjure at a moment's notice –

He doubled-over with a violent, cramping sensation in his abdomen and he hazily realized several people were all crowded around him, all shouting at once.

"Easy! Easy there, Rudolf!"
"I can't touch him!"

"Loki. Loki, it's okay. You're okay."

Pain thudded through his body. He sunk to his knees, hands coming up instinctively to ward off any blows. His hands were blue. Why were his hands blue?

Realization, like nausea, boiled in his stomach. They'd made him shift. Whatever abuse they had put his body through had made him shift into his Jotun form. He waited for more pain to come, but no blows fell.

"You're okay," said Wanda again, dimly from overhead, and Loki remembered. Sickness redoubled in his stomach. He'd swapped one prison for another, now caught in Stark's trapping, being brought back to earth as an animal in chains –

*Do not return to Midgard. Flee. Run for your lives.*

Panic twisted in Loki's gut like a knife. He struggled to lower his arms from his face, knowing he looked like a trembling child in the face of his enemies. His throat was dry. He could barely speak.

"Where are we?"

"In the quinjet, on our way back home."

"Do you need help getting back into bed?" said Wanda gently, peering at him from her perch on another cot across the floor.

"No!" the word was out of Loki's mouth before he could stop it. He forced himself to his feet. "We – we cannot. If we go to earth we will all die."

The Valkyrie was looking at him like he was out of his skull. Loki supposed he must sound it. He did not know whose voice it had been to reach his mind across the distance of the cosmos, but he knew that it had been no idle dream.

"You're bringing us to our ruin," Loki appealed directly to Stark.

Stark didn't even flinch. "Sorry, you lost your chance to vote while you were unconscious."

"Too bad we didn't wait," said another man at Stark's elbow. It was the Sorcerer Strange, the one who had rescued Loki and Wanda from Thanos' throne room. Loki did not know when Strange had arrived. It must have been while he was unconscious.

How long had it been? How much more had Loki missed? A constant ebb and flow of panic kept Loki company deep inside his core. *Take your companions and run for your lives. We cannot be saved.*

Loki gripped the edge of his cot, knees shaking.

He could – Loki could stand. The thought punted through Loki's head and he nearly gasped aloud. This was a dream. It had to be a dream. His head spun and he swayed, almost collapsing to the ground again. The Valkyrie lunged to steady him but stopped half-way as she remembered she could not touch his flesh unless she wanted to be burned by his skin.

His ugly, horrifying skin. Loki was trembling, at once too cold and too hot, and he wondered if this was what it felt to be a Jotun in the midst of a fever. Loki shut his eyes. He wanted them all to stop
"We cannot return to earth," he repeated, less sure of himself now, trusting only his deep, resonating panic. "Thanos will be waiting for us. He'll know. He can –"

"No," Wanda interrupted him firmly. "He won't. I promise you, Loki. With me here he can't read you."

The others looked to Wanda in confusion, but Loki looked away. He was still unable to escape the penetrating gaze of her inner eye inside his head. He had never before felt so exposed, standing here before his enemies with his true skin revealed to all.

He had only woken in this body twice before. The first time it was to cold rock and cruel pain after a span of timeless drifting through the void. The second time had been on Svartalfheim when he found, to his disappointment, that Jotun internal organs were apparently different enough from the Aesir that shifting had granted him enough time to not die from the Kursed's blade.

Apparently, he could now say the same for the injury he'd received from Glaive in the belly of the Sanctuary II.

His broken, faded seidr pulsed distantly inside him. Still there, but too far to reach. He thought he might be able to muster enough to shift back but…what if his Aesir form could still no longer support the weight of his body? What if his legs crumbled again beneath him?

"No offense, Loki, my man," said Stark, "but you're making me nervous. Like you're going to land flat on your face any minute."

Loki ignored Stark. His head was muddled too much to bother refuting him. "When will we reach earth?"

It was again Strange who answered him, watching him with tight lips, and Loki wondered – perhaps – if he had not been the first to protest the plan of returning to earth. "We've already entered the atmosphere. Breaking cloud-cover any moment. We're homing in on Captain Rogers using Stark's cellphone."

"Super old cellphone," the Midgardian child snorted, the one who, in a fit of madness, Loki had managed to waste his last dregs of seidr on. "Hey, I'm Peter by the way," he turned to Loki. "I guess I should probably thank you for saving my life. So…thanks, even though you did, like, half-destroy my home six years ago. They cancelled school for two weeks, you know."

Loki blinked at the youth's disarmingly open expression, unsure whether he was supposed to accept his gratitude or offer an apology. How strange it was to be standing amongst them in this skin. The mortals of Midgard, Loki recalled, knew nothing of the Frost Wars of centuries before. They had no reason to think his true form was the guise of a monster. How foolish they all were. The only one of them who had any reason to be disgusted by his form was the Valkyrie, but she appeared to remain as unphased as ever she was.

Loki shuddered again and couldn't stop himself from putting more of his weight on the cot behind him. The feeling may have returned to his lower body, but he was still weak and ill from his latest ordeal under the Thanos' hand.

"Just sit down, Norns, Lackey," said the Valkyrie, rolling her eyes.

Loki shot her an ugly look and remained on his feet, purely strengthened by spite now. "I will tell you once again," he said, struggling to keep his voice level. He needed to sound sane for this if he
was to have any effect on the mortals at all. He doubted he would be able to force them to do anything in his condition, not with the Valkyrie standing guard. "It is folly to return to earth."

"Yeah, we heard you the first time," Stark snapped. "But majority rules. Even if you had been awake, the rest of us outweigh you and Strange four-to-two."

The panic was still there, dwelling at a constant drone in Loki's chest, but it was easier to ignore now that he had a target toward which to direct his anger. "I always knew you were a fool, Stark —" he began, but was cut off abruptly by Strange.

"Point's moot now, anyway," said Strange curtly. "We're through. Captain Rogers has led us right above Africa. Any idea what he's doing in Wakanda, Stark?"

"Wakanda…" said Stark, face darkening. "Well, I guess I shouldn't be surprised that Rogers somehow got on T'Challa's good side. It's a handy place to stow our mutual friend the Sergeant, I'll give him that."

"Wakanda?" Peter said brightly. "Cool. I've wanted to go ever since, you know, turned out they were super teched-up and stuff. Wait until I get to tell Ned." He hopped off his cot and darted over to the quinjet's cockpit, peering out of the glass viewport at the steadily approaching surface of the earth. They were above a large stretch of land, still too distant to pick out any particular landmarks.

A strange, musical ping sounded through the hull of the jet. Loki nearly jumped. His nerves were more frayed then he had realized, if he could be startled at such an unassuming sound.

Stark snatched at his back pocket, eyebrows rocketing upward in surprise, and withdrew a small, oblong piece of metal that he flipped open to reveal some kind of primitive communications device. "Looks like I just got a voice mail with some serious intergalactic lag." His tone was light, but Loki did not miss the tightness of his jaw as he pressed his thumb to several buttons on the device.

Another voice broke into the silence of the quinjet. Loki recognized it immediately as belonging to the one who called himself Captain America. He sounded grim, voice blanketed by crackling static: "Tony. I don't expect you'll get this. Hill told me you went running after some aliens. Can't say I'm surprised. You were always one to jump without looking. But maybe I'm not one to talk. Anyway. Looks like we're in for a big one here. If – you know – things go south and somehow you manage to actually get this message…just know that I'm sorry. For everything. But especially for the fact that I didn't get to go out swinging with you at my side."

Roger's voice cut out with the muffled click. Stark was looking at the device in his palm as if a ghost had just emerged from within it.

No one said anything, although Loki could see that the Valkyrie was just as confused as he was. Wanda looked at Stark with sympathy. "Tony…" she began.

"Um, guys," Peter's voice went up by an octave. He looked back to them over his shoulder, eyes wide, face pale. "This isn't…exactly the Wakanda I had in mind."
Chapter 27

Chapter Notes

First: I wanted to apologize for missing my scheduled update on Monday. I’ve entered the last two weeks of undergrad, and to say things have been busy would be a major understatement. Plus, recently began a relationship, so free-time priorities have shifted just a midge. But I'm back! Note also, however, that I haven't been able to complete the chapter that comes after this…and likely won't be able to post for a couple weeks (but I will. I will. I promise) because of finals, term papers, graduation, etc.

I so appreciate your understanding, patience, and continued support of this fic.

Second: I will not see Infinity War until Tuesday, May 1. PLEASE DO NOT SPOIL anything in comments of this fic. I will be broken-hearted if I'm spoiled before I get to see this film, and let's extend that courtesy to the rest of my readers, as well, who may not see Infinity War right away. Thank you – you all are the best readers I ever could have imagined. Keep on being awesome!

Warning: a bit more gore, heavy duty angst

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The Valkyrie maneuvered the quinjet out of autopilot and prepared to land. The quinjet glided toward the earth amidst the silence of its occupants. The landing jets stirred the grit on the uneven, upturned ground, throwing dust into the viewport.

Valkyrie was the first to break the silence, "What the hell happened here?"

"It looks like a battleground," said Peter, face pressed to the glass.

"It looks like a graveyard," Wanda corrected him. She climbed gingerly out of her cot and joined Peter and the Valkyrie in the cockpit, bracing herself against the back of Peter's chair.

Too late. It was too late, a voice insisted inside Loki's skull. He tried to push it away. There was no chance of turning back now.

"Anyone with a suit, suit up," said Stark, already climbing in his disassembled metal suit. Loki wondered why Stark didn't just allow the suit to form around him like he'd been so fond of showing off six years before. Perhaps the metal casing had been damaged somehow. After all, Loki hadn't thought to ask just what Stark and the rest of them had been through before they found him on Thanos' ship.

"Sure thing," said Peter. He scrambled out of the cockpit and toward a folded pile of red and blue cloth on a shelf below his vacated cot.

Finally satisfied that the quinjet was not going to tip over on the uneven terrain, Valkyrie flicked a switch on the control panel and the low growl of the engine cut off.

Strange and Stark moved toward the exit hatch at the same time. For a moment Loki wondered if the two men were going to fight about who got to open the door, but Strange stepped back with hands
raised as if to say this was your idea.

"Spiderling," said Stark before releasing the hatch and Peter joined Stark at the head of the party.

"Yeah?"

Stark tapped each of Peter's shoulders quickly with his hand. "I dub thee an Avenger. Just don't get hurt again, alright?"

Peter was grinning. "Wouldn't think of it."

Stark looked over his shoulder, "Guard the ship, Wanda, Mr. Blue." Loki scowled at him. He could probably muster up an icicle to send through Stark's throat if he tried hard enough.

"Hell no," said Wanda.

"We don't know what's out there," Strange pointed out.

"And you're going to need every hand you've got," Wanda jutted out her chin in defiance. Funny, Loki had not realized quite how young she was before now. Strength in someone so young was admirable.

"I agree with the witch," he added and Wanda flashed him a brief smile.

"Let's just go," Valkyrie growled.

"Your funeral," Stark said with a shrug and released the hatch to the outside world. Hot hair and dust swirled into the body of the quinjet. The heat slid uncomfortably over Loki's skin, made for much cooler climates. Sweat broke out almost immediately at his hairline. His chest tightened. This body would take some getting used to, but he couldn't risk not being able to walk if he shifted back now, not when they might be heading toward some kind of ambush.

Wanda must have seen him hesitate, for she offered another smile. She wasn't speaking inside his head anymore, but he could still feel her presence. Loki didn't know whether to be grateful or disappointed that she didn't attempt any words of encouragement.

They moved in a procession down the descending ramp, Stark and Peter at the head, Strange behind them, Wanda and Loki after, and Valkyrie bringing up the rear as their most battle-ready member and probably – Loki thought bitterly – in case one of the invalids wavered.

Loki's legs were steadier now that he was forced to walk without support, but he could still likely have been toppled at the merest blow, let alone expect to hold his own in a battle. But it didn't look as if they'd exactly stepped into the midst of a battle. Wanda was right: the scene was nearer a graveyard than anything else.

Dust and smoke drifted through the air, making it difficult to see more than five feet in front of him. There were shapes on the ground. At first Loki thought they were ruins of twisted metal, but then he realized they were, in fact, hundreds of carcasses. He spotted a human hand among the carnage and knew the corpses belonged both to Midgardians and another alien race Loki had not seen before, certainly no creature native to Midgard and clearly, like the Chitauri had been, another pawn of Thanos.

"What the hell, what the hell," Peter muttered under his breath, sounding vaguely hysterical. He'd seen the corpses as well.
"Steady," Strange warned. His arms were rimmed already with orange mandalas, ready to strike at the merest provocation.

Too late. Too late. The voice inside Loki's head chanted to the racing beat of his heart. Whatever had happened here, he and the others had arrived too late to help.

Something moved in the dust and smoke. Loki heard the low growl of some kind of animal and he caught sight of a black mass of multi-limbed anthropoid – a live one of the many alien bodies that littered the ground. Loki's felt bile rise in his throat when he saw that the creature was hunched over another being sprawled across the ground, crouched above with its snout buried in the entrails of something Loki felt sure had once been a human.

The Valkyrie caught sight of the creature at the same time as Loki and shouted in anger and disgust, charging forward at once with her blade raised. The creature saw her approach, scuttled backward, jaws dripping red, and snarled, but the Valkyrie's sword sliced cleanly through its neck, dispatching it with merely one more gurgling squeal of pain.

"Holy shit," said Peter, voice trembling hard, hands raised in his suit, eyes darting toward every noise.

"Keep –" Stark gulped for breath, voice dim behind his golden mask. "Keep your eyes peeled. There are probably more of them around."

Loki's skin felt like it was blistering in the heavy heat. The dust in the air stuck to his limbs, coated in a sheen of sweat. He forced himself onward, head spinning.

Loki spotted a bulk of twisted metal in front of him. Another ship? Something about the shape was oddly familiar. Loki stepped out of line, pushing himself toward the ship in the distance.

"Yo, Jolly Blue Giant –" Stark protested, but Loki firmly ignored him. It was taking all his strength just to put one foot in front of the other and to shove past his rapidly blurring vision.

Valkyrie jogged to catch up with Loki. "Look familiar?" she asked him.

"I don't know," said Loki. He thought he'd seen a vessel like that on Xandar, in the midst of the chaos of the battle that was raging on their way to the archive building. It hadn't been one of either the Nova Corps' or Thanos' fleet. What was it doing here?

The rest of them joined Loki and Valkyrie. The ship appeared abandoned. They were approaching from the back, and Loki moved toward the front.

"Anybody home?" Stark called. His voice landed flatly in the empty air. Nothing answered his call, either friend or foe.

"Tony," said Peter. The youth sounded like he was just barely holding himself together.

Loki rounded the back of the ship to see the ramp descended from the belly of the vessel. There was a fury lump by the side of the hull that was some kind of dead animal. Loki didn't stop to examine it but spotted a particular shade of blue that drew him toward the base of the ramp.

He stopped short, stomach heaving. He swallowed bile. It was Nebula. Loki could no longer recognize the wreckage of her body, torn apart, coated in brown dried blood and dust, but Loki felt sure that it was Nebula.

"You knew her?" Wanda asked softly, coming up behind Loki.
"It doesn't matter," Loki said at once. He did not have time now to examine the crowded emotions inside his chest. She had tortured him once. She had rescued him once. Her eyes had followed Loki into Maw's ship as they dragged him back to his hellish prison. So, she had survived the attack in the Xandarian vaults only to die such a gruesome death amidst the ruins of Midgard.

"Oh my God," Stark whispered.

There were other bodies. Loki felt another stab of recognition when he saw the green-skinned, dark-haired body of Gamora, lying very near her sister.

How? Loki wondered. How had they come here? Why?

"No!" Valkyrie's rough growl of surprise made something snap inside Loki's core, some dreadful understanding, a kind of foresight that he could not possibly explain. Valkyrie was staring at something in the distance, already turning to run toward it, sword clanking at her side. "Loki, stay back!" she ordered.

Did she hope to protect him?

Loki turned. He saw the tell-tale scarlet cape, coated in dust.

Loki could not run. His legs were too weak. He saw Wanda reach for him but pull away at the last second. She merely kept pace with him, walking a step behind him. All the rest of the company – save Valkyrie – walked behind Loki, as if they wished to allow him enough space to – to –

Loki was stumbling by the time he got to Thor's side. The decision to shift back into his Aesir form, blue melting swiftly from his skin, was unconscious. His legs collapsed below him as the nerves in his spine were once again severed. The wound felt fresh; pain spiked across his lower back. He landed beside Thor. He didn't want to burn his brother with the cold of Frost Giant skin – burn him – when – what did it matter? What did it matter if Loki hurt Thor now?

Thor was –

Loki's body was trembling, strange considering the heat that still pressed upon it.

Thor was –

Loki stretched out his hand. He did not want to touch Thor, feel how stiff his flesh must be, how – lifeless was a word that refused to solidify inside Loki's head. Thor's palm was open at his side. Loki's fingers inched toward Thor's hand on the ground until he brushed just the tips, hard and gritty with dirt. Cold.

How long had he been lying here? Long enough for all the warmth to bleed out of him.

Thor was –

"You bastard," Valkyrie breathed. "You bastard." Was she crying? Loki could not tell if the rough breaths forced from her throat were sobs or not. Of course, she would be angry. Her grief ran hot. Charged and violent. He'd felt it before in her memories. But Loki did not care about her grief, not now, not except to envy her for it, envy her for such a swift release.

Anything would be better than Loki's terrible disbelief. The dreamscape aura Loki had stumbled into where impossible things could happen that could never be true in real life. Where Thor could be –

Too late. Too late.
"Loki," Wanda choked, not on her own emotions, Loki knew, but from the rush of desperate feelings fleeing Loki's mind because he could not bear – he could not bear it.

It was another of Thanos' visions, Loki thought desperately. This was not true, just another cruel trick of the Mad Titan. Thor could not possibly be –

"We should…we should spread out, see if we can find survivors," said Strange faintly, but no one moved to leave.

Loki's eyes fixed themselves on his brother's still, pale face, asleep save for the unearthly, waxy tint to his skin. Was this what Thor had felt, Loki wondered, cradling Loki's body on Svartalfheim?

I'm here. I'm here, brother. I'm here. But Thor was no longer there to see it.

"Something's coming!" Peter's voice failed to snap through Loki's numb incomprehension. Dimly he was aware of movement around him, Strange striking a fight pose, Stark raising one of his rocket-powered arms, even the Valkyrie lifting her head, gripping her sword at the ready. Wanda stepped in front of Loki, prepared to defend him – silly, sentimental girl – from the shadow that lumbered forward out of the dust.

"Who is there?" a voice rumbled and made the hair on the back of Loki's head stand on end. He tore himself away from Thor's face. "You hurt my friends. I smash you."

"Banner?" Stark said disbelievingly and lowered his arm. "Shit, Banner. It's us."

"Hulk!" the beast said furiously, emerging in full, green face screwed up in anger and confusion, looking about a second away from charging at them. "No Banner!"

Recognition dawned on Valkyrie's face. She was on her feet in a second, sword stowed away, approaching the beast with raised hands. "Big Guy, it's okay. It's me."

"Angry Girl?" The Hulk said, and the creases in his face melted away, although he still remained confused. "How did Angry Girl get here? Angry Girl come with friend Tony?"

"Hey Green Guy," Stark said hoarsely.

"And Puny God?" The beast had caught sight of Loki. Maybe the Hulk would slam Loki into the ground like a ragdoll again. Maybe he would leave his broken body among the rubble of the ruined earth. Maybe – "Puny God hurt friend Thor?" The beast growled.

Loki laughed. It caught in his throat and came out more like a sob. Wanda's hand landed on his shoulder.

"No," surprisingly it was Stark who protested. "No, Big Guy. Loki didn't hurt Thor."

Loki was looking at Thor again. He looked like Frigga. Loki could see hints of Odin, too, in the forehead, but it was primarily Frigga who hid behind his brother's face – in the softness around his eyes, the gentleness of his lips, even his hands, not delicate, but nimble in the way hers had always been.

Frigga was dead. It was easier to grasp then what lay on the ground before Loki's knees now. So was Odin. And Thor was – Loki was the last one left. What was Loki now? What could he possibly be now? What was a shadow without the light that cast it?

Loki curled his fingers into Thor's palm, nestling his fist there, kneading warm back into the stiff
"What are you doing here?" Stark rattled on in the background of Loki's mind, behind the voice in his head that protesting no no no no no and slowly devolving to a persistent drone very like screaming. "Are there others?"

"Hulk is finding friends," the beast said somberly. "Hulk kill more aliens, too. Hulk kill five already."

"Finding…" Stark began but his voice faded into horrified comprehension. "Where are they? Banner – Hulk – which others?"

"Hulk bring you," said the beast. He lumbered forward. Loki felt the ground shake as he approached, casting a shadow across Loki and Thor. "Hulk bring Thor."

The beast bent down from the waist. Loki realized what he was about to do just before his broad, green hand cupped the back of Thor's head.

"No –" Loki didn't want to him to take him away. Loki didn't want to be without Thor, not when he finally got to see him again, finally got to – too late. Too late. Too late.

"Loki, it's okay," said Wanda softly and squeezed Loki's shoulder. She reassured him like he was a child, a damaged child, incapable of accepting that Thor was –

The beast lifted Thor with shocking gentleness. Loki bit back his shout to be careful, you brute, you'll hurt him because it didn't matter. It didn't matter because Thor was –

"Hulk show you," said the Hulk again. His voice, too, was strangely husky. Loki wondered if something was clogging his ears or if the beast really was capable of sorrow.

The Valkyrie moved to follow the Hulk at once, trailed immediately by Peter, who likely felt safer in the company of the two formidable warriors. Loki watched them leave. His legs were once again useless and he did not think he had the strength to shift deliberately. Without the use of his seidr he was as good as helpless.

Maybe they would just leave him there. Loki wanted to be left behind. There wasn't a point anymore. No point now that Thor was –

"Come on, Rudolf," said Stark gruffly.

It occurred to Loki that they didn't know about his spine yet. The quinjet hardly had the proper diagnostic capabilities. They'd only seen him stand and walk in his Jotun form.

He expected that admitting it would make his stomach burn in shame, but it didn't. This, too, didn't matter now: "I can't walk." He cleared his throat. "My legs – I can't walk."

"Oh," said Stark stupidly. "Right. Okay. Don't usually do this on the first date, but…" Stark leaned over, armor creaking, and scooped Loki into his arms and straightened. He clunked after the disappearing figure of Hulk. Wanda and Strange fell into step behind him.

Loki wanted to protest but he didn't. Loki just gritted his teeth and waited for it to be over. It was surprising easy because Thor was –

They walked deeper into the graveyard. Bodies and wreckage lay to every side. The earth had been torn apart by some great force, and chunks of rock were raised above others, carving deep fissures
into the ground.

A woman’s voice called out to meet them, note of warning in her voice, "Banner? Is that you?"

"Hulk," the beast corrected her.

"Who’s with you?" the woman demanded.

"More friends," the Hulk answered. "Hulk find friend Thor. I put my friend with the others." Hulk continued on his mission.

Stark's lips were pressed into a tight line above Loki, obviously afraid of what the Hulk would lead him to. Strange lingered behind to speak to the woman, a fierce looking warrior with short, tightly curled hair and eyes red from the dust or tears, Loki could not tell.

"I am Dr. Strange. We just arrived here. Can you tell us what happened?"

"I am Nakia," the woman answered, voice heavy with sorrow. "I am afraid you have arrived too late."

Too late. Too late. Arrived too late.

"I'm Tony Stark –"

"I know who you are, Tony Stark," said the woman. She smiled faintly, as if recalling some fleeting memory.

"What happened?"

"An attack," said Nakia. "Not only here, but New York, Berlin, all across the world."

"Tony –" said Peter urgently. His face was open, hurt and frightened. "New York – what about May?"

Stark didn’t answer. A flash of pain crossed his face.

"Go to your friends," said Nakia softly.

Stark set off again, Loki barely jostled in the strength of his metal arms. The recovered dead were laid in rows. Loki saw one man being tended by two women, one older, one a child about Peter's age. The woman was chanting beneath her breath something that might have been a prayer. The girl rocked backward and forward on her heels, sobbing "brother, brother, brother" in an incessant rhythm.

The Hulk walked carefully among the bodies and bent to lay Thor gently back to the ground. Stark walked forward, as well, and set Loki down with surprising tact back next to his brother.

Wanda still followed them. Her hand darted out and gripped Stark’s forearm. "Tony," she hissed. "Tony, look –"

"All Hulk's friends," said the beast sadly.

"No," said Stark, voice strangled. Loki's eyes drifted again away from Thor. He did not want to look at his brother. He never wanted to look away from his brother.

Stark tripped forward. There was another familiar body on the ground. It was Captain America. Loki
recognized his face behind the beard and bloody gash along his cheek. There was another man kneeling at the Captain's side, he had long hair and a metal arm. He pressed a kiss to the Captain's forehead just as Stark stumbled forward.

"Steve, no," said Stark.

The other man looked up, confusion behind the rough grief on his face. "Stark…?"

Stark ignored the other man but crashed to the ground at the Captain's side.

Strange was silent, as was Peter and the Valkyrie.


Her grief exploding inside Loki's body so that for a minute he could not see for the blaze of pain inside his chest.

The Hulk fell to the ground, sending vibrations through the earth, and sat beside a woman's body. He tangled his large fingers in her light blond hair, silent tears trickling down his green cheeks. "All Hulk's friends," he said again.

The Captain. The Widow. Loki's Hawk. Earth's mightiest heroes scattered on the ground, mighty no longer, and Thor among them because Thor was –

Dead.

Thor was dead.

Thor was dead and Loki was too late. There had not been enough time. There had never been enough time –

"Strange," the word was out of Loki's mouth before he could stop it. The man turned to look at him – was it a flash of understanding already sparking inside the other man's eyes? "Strange, so help me –" Loki was shaking uncontrollably. He could feel anger and grief building in equal measures inside his chest and he fought hard to ensure anger would win out. "I swear, Strange – if you do not – if you do not then I will kill you. I will tear the thing from your throat and do so myself –"

"Loki," the Valkyrie warned, stepping forward. Strange reflexively gripped the locket that hung around his neck, eyes wide and glued to Loki, face drained of color.

Thor was dead. Dead. Dead. Dead. Now acknowledged, it beat in Loki's head like a mantra. Thor was dead and he didn't have to be – didn't have to be if Strange only – if Strange –

Loki was crying. He felt the hot tears slipping down his face. He could not see for the blur in his eyes. "Do it. I swear. Do it, or I'll kill you. I swear I'll – please."

"You son of a bitch," said Stark. He was back on his feet, standing in front of Strange, voice leveled with a cold, deadly calm. He lifted his arm as if it was the most natural thing in the world and pointed the repulsor directly at Strange's face. "If it wasn't for you we would have gotten here sooner."

"Tony…" said Strange slowly.

Stark was going to blast Strange's head right off his neck. Something tore inside Loki's gut. Icicles sharpened to spearpoints thrust out of the ground, speeding toward Stark's chest. Stark staggered
back; his repulsor blast shuddered through the ice, scattering shards into the air.

A shout tore itself from Loki's lips, "Strange – Now!"

And the world rolled backward.

Chapter End Notes

The End.

No, I'm kidding. I'm kidding. Stay tuned. Shit ain't done getting real.

Note on 2/19/19

Hey all. I'm not sure how many of my dedicated readers will see this, but I wanted to give you some kind of explanation for why an update has been so long in coming. So here are some things I'd like to say:

One: grad school is a lot, and any time I haven't been writing papers or reading academic journal articles has been spent freelance editing or trying to salvage my social life.

Two: depression sucks y'all. I hate, hate, hate that my mental health issues get in the way of things I love. It makes me sad to see how far I progressed in this story, to see the rest of the plot outlined in my word-doc, to see how many of you were invested (and maybe still are), and to feel completely incapable of putting words on paper. I'm working on bringing my brain to a better place, but I'm not sure, yet, where Avengers fanfiction fits into my "getting better" plan. Please understand that I want to finish this story; I'm just not in a spot right now where writing is an easy thing to do, and I have to invest what mental energy I have into school and work.

Third: I wanted to thank you from the bottom of my heart for all the comments, follows, kudos, and personal messages. I wish I could thank you all individually. I'm so touched that so many of you have found "atonement" even the tiniest bit compelling. I hope someday I'll be able to give all you incredibly patient readers a conclusion...but I don't know when that will be. I'm sorry for making you wait. But thank you for waiting. It means the world to this fellow MCU fanatic <3

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!