Electric Veins

Summary

The vibranium shield was Steve’s pride and joy. It was a symbol of protection, of justice, and it could smash its way through Nazis and aliens alike.

As it turns out, it could also smash through several layers of gold-titanium, and the human sternum, ribcage, lungs, and heart beneath it.

Steve kills Tony in Siberia, and the world is woefully unprepared when Thanos arrives not long after. As a last insult to the defeated Avengers, Thanos resurrects their betrayed and murdered former comrade, but his creation turns on him and defeats him. What’s left of the world celebrates, but damage has been done that can never be undone and Tony is… changed. Rhodey is determined to prove that it doesn’t matter: what makes Tony Tony is still there, and they’ll work through anything else.

Notes

So this is… odd, I’m not going to lie. I don’t even know when the idea formed, but it just kept nagging at me until I had to turn it into a story. I mostly wanted a reason for Tony and Rhodey to be basically extremely close in the aftermath of some kind of disaster or trauma.
The first couple chapters are going to be from the (Ex) Avengers’ point of view, but after the Thanos stuff is done—which shouldn’t take more than a few chapters—they’ll be out of the way completely and almost never show up again. The focus is going to completely shift to Tony and Rhodey.

I’m going to be killing a lot of characters here. I mean a lot. I wanted it to be somewhat realistic in terms of the damage Thanos would do to a completely unprepared Earth, and I also needed most of them out of the way for plot reasons. I want to apologize in advance for the good characters I’m going to kill (not for any of the ExVengers. They can all rot in hell, particularly in this story).

As always, feel free to point out grammar/spelling/formatting errors.
**Murderer**

The vibranium shield was Steve’s pride and joy. It was a symbol of protection, of justice, and it could smash its way through Nazis and aliens alike.

As it turns out, it could also smash through several layers of gold-titanium, and the human sternum, ribcage, lungs, and heart beneath it.

Steve and his team have been in Wakanda three days when T’Challa storms in, followed by six members of the Dora Milaje, who station themselves around the room. Steve has the sudden, uncomfortable impression of the Dora as prison guards, and his trepidation only grows in the face of T’Challa’s stony expression.

“T’Challa, what’s—” is all he gets out before one of the Dora hisses, a hand at the blade on her side.

“You will address the King as ‘Your Highness,’” she says, but T’Challa waves a hand at her, more focused on Steve.

“Captain, would you care to explain?” He asks, and though his voice is even, Steve can sense the tension in him, and doesn’t like the inflection placed on his title. Before he can ask, T’Challa continues. “A… small disagreement, you said? He was ‘no longer fighting, but not badly injured.’ Those were your exact words, were they not?” And Steve’s heart sinks. He hasn’t told the others everything that happened in Siberia, only that Tony attacked Bucky and Steve and Bucky had to stop him—which was true, but if T’Challa insisted on pushing it, and the others found out about the Winter Soldier killing the Starks… They were already wary enough of Bucky, they didn’t need this additional reason to distrust him.

Steve tries to level a sincere and insistent look at T’Challa. “Yes, that’s true. Why do you ask?”

In answer, one of the Dora flips on the television behind the Avengers and turns it to an American news channel, which is showing—

“No,” he breathes when he realizes what they’re saying. Devastation is dropping his stomach, raising bile in his throat. Tony Stark, confirmed dead. He turns to T’Challa, throat working. “What happened?”

“I came to ask you that question, Mr. Rogers. They found his body in Siberia, in an abandoned HYDRA bunker, next to a metal arm and Captain America’s shield. His wounds and the damage to his suit matched the size and shape of the shield.”

Steve can barely comprehend T’Challa’s words. His vision seems to have tunneled to the King’s stony face, and he vaguely registers noises of outrage and disbelief from the others, which sound muffled, as though they are coming to him underwater. “No,” he says again, his voice weak. “I didn’t—”

“Are you saying someone else took your shield and used it to murder Tony Stark? Another person used that shield to destroy his suit, to crush his ribcage and shatter his sternum, puncture both of his lungs, shove pieces of the broken suit into his chest?”

Steve can’t say anything, can’t even think. He can’t have killed Tony. He’d just wanted to stop the fighting. Tony was going to kill Bucky—he couldn’t let Bucky die.

Apparently he’d sacrificed one friend for another.
He feels his legs go weak and drops hard to his knees, looking up at T’Challa, who looks unmoved by this show of grief. “I took Mr. Barnes in as a form of repayment for my having attacked an innocent man,” he says. “I extended that courtesy to you and your followers on the understanding that you would be under control here, where you could be watched. Other countries were already crying for your punishment, for what you had done before Siberia. Now, Captain, the world wants your head. And I am not going to deny them that.”

“What?” Steve croaks, chest feeling tight. “You said you’d help Bucky!”

“Fuck Bucky!” Someone cries, and it takes Steve a moment to remember that there are other people in the room. The voice was Scott, who looks pale and sick as he points a shaking finger at Steve. “You haven’t done shit for anyone but Bucky since I met you, and now this? You killed Tony Stark, for him? For your terrorist assassin buddy, and now that half the world wants to see our throats slit for everything, you still only care about him? Well fuck that, and fuck you, Steve!” He grips his hair with both hands and pulls, looking horrified.

“I would say ‘half the world’ is an understatement, Mr. Lang.” T’Challa looks just as unmoved by Scott’s emotional outburst as Steve’s. He turns his attention back to Steve. “I promised to protect Mr. Barnes, and I will not break that promise. He will remain in Wakanda in monitored cryogenic sleep. You, however, are no longer welcome here. Any of you,” he adds, looking around the room. “You have two hours to leave this palace and three days to vacate this country. If you are not gone by then, or if you step foot inside Wakanda again after that, you will be captured and turned over to the German government, which was the first to issue an arrest warrant for all of you. If you attempt to take any Wakandan property with you or if you threaten, endanger, or attack any citizen of this country, I will authorize the use of deadly force against you. I suggest you begin your departure, unless you intend to turn yourselves in, in which case I will gladly assist you.” He raises an eyebrow, waits a few seconds, then turns on his heel and strides out of the room, followed by the Dora, who give the Avengers threatening looks as they leave.

It’s silent in the room, and Steve finally climbs back to his feet and looks around to see the others all staring at him in various states of horror and disbelief—all except Wanda, who is glaring at the closed doors, red magic swirling around her hands.

Sam is the first one who speaks. His voice sounds rough, like he’s trying not to cry, or maybe to be sick. “Steve, man… what did you do? You told us Tony was fine. You told us T’Challa was on our side, that he took us in because he could see that we were right. Now he’s throwing us out because you killed Tony Stark?”

Something penetrates the fog Steve is in. T’Challa is kicking them out. They’re wanted fugitives, and they either have to leave their sanctuary or be handed over to the German government. He jerks into action, his voice hardening even while his mind is still reeling from the thought of Tony dead. Action always did help him keep emotions from becoming overwhelming.

“What?” It comes out steely, commanding. “We need to move if we want any time to plan before we’re out of the country.” Silence meets his statement and he narrows his eyes at the group.

Scott finally speaks up. “Plan what, man? You heard the King, we’re screwed. The entire world is going to be looking for us. How the hell are we supposed to hide from everyone?”

“We’ll figure something out. For now, we need to get moving, or we won’t even get the chance to try. We don’t want T’Challa turning us in.” Steve feels a moment of crippling fear over whether T’Challa will really keep his promise and keep Bucky safe, but there’s nothing he can do about it now. He knows Bucky is too well guarded to try to break him out of cryo and bring him with them, and the two hours that T’Challa gave them to vacate the palace isn’t enough time to create a plan to
get him out. He’ll just have to hope that the King keeps his word.

They pack the few things they own and set off on back roads for the Wakandan border, traversing the entire distance on foot after only one disastrous attempt to convince a local to let them hitch a ride. The Wakandans don’t seem too happy with their King’s decision to harbor fugitives.

Steve spends the time thinking about Bucky, trying not to think about Tony, and desperately trying to come up with a plan for the future. It’s looking pretty grim; none of them have reliable contacts in this part of the world, at least not any that would overlook their crimes to help them. Even if they did, they have almost no way of contacting anyone. Clint wisely suggested that they dump any electronics that could be used to trace them before they crossed the Wakandan border. Steve suspects it was partly out of spite, in the hopes that the authorities would trace their technology back to Wakanda and find out the King was harboring them, but it’s still a good idea.

Just over four days after crossing the border, they have the shaky outline of a plan for the foreseeable future. Despite Sam and Scott’s frosty attitudes toward him, Steve feels the first glimmer of hope in days, hope that they might be able to work something out, even get a chance to clear their names.

Thanos arrives that afternoon.
Chapter Notes

I feel I should mention, as always in my stories: I’ve only watched marvel movies, not read any of the comics (not even the tie-ins for the MCU). I know absolutely nothing about Thanos in the comics, his motivations or powers or what kinds of aliens his armies are made of, etc. Since he won’t be in this story for long I guess it doesn’t matter much, but I still feel I should warn people that characters from the comics might be totally off in my stories.

This chapter is very dark. There’s descriptions of brutal deaths. There’s also some brief suicidal thoughts from a character. If that’s not your thing, feel free to skip to the end of the chapter. I’ll put a summary of the plot and a list of main characters who died in the end notes. I’m going to be going over pretty much all of Thanos’s invasion very quickly, so sorry to anyone who wanted it drawn out, but the point of this story is to get to the Tony stuff :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Many of them go fast. At first it was horrifying, but eventually, Steve found himself grateful for the fast ones. At least then it was painless.

There’s still quite a few people alive, even a month into Thanos’s invasion. He’s still occupied with crushing any resistance, breaking the spirit of the masses. People are being hoarded into hastily set up camps, guarded by Thanos’s armies. Civilians who resist are usually killed instantly.

They tried to fight back, of course. Whole armies fell before Thanos in days. He blasted his way through them with no more effort than it took to swat insects. The world was very quickly willing to look past what the Ex-Avengers had done and beg them for help. After all, they’d repelled a sudden alien invasion once before.

Their confidence in the Avengers was short-lived. Steve still felt a pang whenever he thought of Tony’s insistence that the Chitaui was just the opening act, nothing compared to what was coming. He’d been right all along. But maybe… maybe it was kinder that he hadn’t lived to see his nightmares come true. He couldn’t have stopped Thanos.

T’Challa called them back the day Thanos arrived. He made it clear that he would not forget what Steve had done, but that they needed to put it aside for a time and work together in order to repel the invasion and protect the Earth.

How naïve they’d been.

The first portal opened over New York on day one, and that was where the flagship landed. The Vision, alone as an Avenger, managed to take two ships down before he was overcome. Thanos ripped the Infinity Stone out of his head, added it to his gauntlet, and disintegrated what was left of Vision’s body.

As the National Guard tried and failed to fight over the next two days, other superhumans, some that no one had even known existed, showed up to try to defend their world. Even known villains came
out of hiding to combat the invasion. Most of them were killed by groups of alien soldiers. The few that were powerful enough to make it to Thanos were killed by the Titan himself.

Over the next three days, thousands of ships carrying tens of millions of aliens surrounded the planet. New portals opened over major cities and brought in even more. Entire countries’ armies were overwhelmed, their leaders executed or enslaved as a show of power. The ships arrived in Wakanda on day four, and even with its incredible technology and advanced defenses, the country fell quickly. The palace was surrounded, and a desperate, draining, and ultimately hopeless battle commenced.

In just over an hour, they were all subdued. They hadn’t had time to wake Bucky up completely, and while he lay unconscious and helpless in the medical bay, the aliens slit his throat, then shot him several times for good measure. Steve took dozens down trying to defend him, but was ultimately overcome, and his distraction with Bucky allowed the others to be overwhelmed even faster. Any palace guards or members of the Dora who hadn’t died in the battle were taken away in chains; Steve heard, later, that they were deemed too much trouble after multiple escape attempts and physical pushbacks, and were all executed. T’Challa, as the Black Panther, decimated a great number of the aliens, but their retaliation was even more ferocious, and when he was eventually overtaken, they tore him apart.

The Avengers must have been recognized, because Thanos’s soldiers went to great lengths to capture as many of them as possible. Eventually Steve, Clint, Scott, and Wanda—an alien device on her head suppressing her powers—were led away in chains. Sam lay dead on the floor, and aliens stepped on his body as they ransacked the palace.

They were brought back to New York, where Thanos seemed to have made his base of operations—or maybe “throne” would be more accurate. They met Natasha there, who’d also been captured and dragged back to the city. It was wrong on a visceral level, seeing the Black Widow subdued, in chains. Thanos kept them alive, Steve soon realized, for no other reason than to taunt them, to wave their defeat in their faces and continue to demoralize anyone who thought they could resist.

The five remaining Avengers were strung up in a macabre sort of village square at the center of several prisoners’ camps, across from where Thanos sat and oversaw operations. Thanos’s soldiers delighted in hurting the fallen heroes, sometimes just a passing blow or cut, sometimes brutal torture that lasted hours and had the others cringing away from the sound of the screams. A week in, they backed off a bit, after Scott’s injuries killed him. A corpse was no fun. They left his body hanging with the living Avengers for four more days.

On the second day after Scott’s death, the former Avengers Tower caused a scene when the top fifteen floors, which were crawling with aliens, exploded without warning. From their position, the Avengers could just see the smoke rising, hearing the angry shouts around them. Even Thanos rose from his throne to face the commotion, and—

Steve’s heart leapt at the sight of the incoming armor. Gleaming red and gold, carrying the bodies of several aliens, which it used to dive bomb some of those around Thanos before coming in for a dramatic landing at his feet, it was unmistakably Iron Man. For a few moments Steve felt dizzy and disoriented. How could he be here? How could Tony, the man he’d killed, be back to save him?

If he’d been in his right mind, he’d have realized it sooner, but he wasn’t in his right mind. He didn’t realize until the end of the short, failed battle, until Thanos ripped the helmet off the suit and red hair came tumbling out, until Pepper’s dying scream echoed through the streets as Thanos crushed the suit with her inside it, that of course it wasn’t Tony coming back for him. Tony was dead. Crushed in his suit just like Pepper. Oh God, Pepper, what a strong, wonderful woman, and she was dead, dead after making her last stand in Tony’s suit, sticking with him to the end. Despite their situation, despite
all the death and destruction so far, it was at that moment that Steve began to feel truly hopeless.

Days later, all of them were physically and emotionally drained. Something the aliens were doing to them must have been giving them basic hydration and nutrition, otherwise Natasha and Clint couldn’t have lasted this long. But they were alive, hanging there bleeding and bruised and defeated. Every day, hundreds of people were marched past them on the way to having their fates decided. The old, very young, and unfit were slaughtered. The “passable” humans were taken onto ships to be enslaved elsewhere in the galaxy. As they walked past, some looked up to the fallen heroes, imploring or condemning. At first, Steve had tried to hold their gazes, to give them some comfort or hope. After a while, he looked away.

About a week after Pepper’s death, Wanda broke free of whatever device was suppressing her powers. She snapped her chains, let out an unearthly scream, and engulfed her immediate surroundings in a cloud of red magic. Dozens of alien guards were dead in seconds, and then she turned her attention to Thanos. Thanos seemed almost amused.

In the end, her rampage killed more nearby humans than aliens. Thanos burst apart her body like an overfilled balloon, and let the blood—and worse—spray down onto the three remaining Avengers. Her magic hadn’t even touched him.

Nothing but endless death has happened since then. It’s now been a month since Thanos arrived, and the Earth is defeated. Everyone knows it. Steve hangs there in his bonds, day after day, watching thousands go to their deaths or worse. He’s become too numb to even think about what’s being done to them. He barely even registers the cuts and burns that the aliens keep inflicting on him, though they love using his rapidly-healing body as a canvas for their cruelty. Despite how hard he fought in the first week or so, despite his muffled curses promising retribution, he’s now still in his bonds. He hasn’t even thought of escape in days, except maybe escape from this through death.

He’s too numb now to look away when the people look up at him. He just gazes blankly at them. They no longer look imploring. Their eyes hold nothing but hopelessness, and anger for the so-called “heroes” who failed to save them.

He knows Thanos is getting bored watching them. The amusement was in breaking them. Now that they’re broken, he’d might as well get rid of them. Sometimes, Steve welcomes it. The moment when he can finally let go and leave all of this, this nightmare of a world where he’s nothing but a failure who hangs there watching the people he couldn’t protect. His anger at Thanos has dulled from burning, righteous fury to little more than hatred of how long he is drawing this out. There are several dozen of these main camps around the world, and each is taking away or slaughtering around ten thousand a day. It’ll take years at this rate to even get through a fraction of the world’s population. Perhaps Thanos has something else planned after a while of this, or maybe this is just a distraction, and Thanos is after something else. Steve’s mind feels too fuzzy and numb to really ponder it.

It’s on a day they’re torturing Natasha that everything goes further south than Steve had thought possible. They’d been strong through it all at first, but eventually, they’d all screamed. Hearing it from Natasha was the most jarring of any of them. But after a while, she fell silent. Steve finds himself almost wishing to hear her scream again.

Natasha is making a low, practically inhuman sound, and Steve can see movement from Clint’s position, more movement than there’s been in weeks. He turns his head for the first time in days to look fully at his teammates. They look awful, beyond description, but Clint is actually raising his head, bunching his muscles in defiance, glaring at Thanos.

“What—what do you want?” He manages to get out. His voice is hoarse from screaming, and lack of
use. “You’re… never going to hear us beg. We won’t serve you. You can… torture us, kill us, but you can’t… really break us.” He’s gasping between words with the effort of spitting it all out at the Titan, but he manages.

Steve is suddenly ashamed of himself. He’d been thinking that they were broken, defeated, and that they’d spend the rest of their lives blankly watching the march of death in front of them. He’d been giving Thanos what he wants. No matter how hopeless the situation, Steve should be doing what he can. He never should have turned his head from the people looking up at him. If all he could do was offer them solidarity in their final moments, so be it. It meant they were still human, still had compassion, and that was something Thanos could never take away from them.

Steve straightens as best he can in his bonds. Thanos is actually looking at Clint for once, examining him with something like amusement. Steve refuses to be cowed. He will show Thanos that humanity will keep its emotional connections to the bitter end.

Thanos’s gaze shifts between Clint and Steve. Eventually, he actually rises from his throne, gesturing for the aliens flanking Natasha to leave the Avengers’ raised platform. Steve won’t give in to the fear of the approaching Titan.

“Ah,” Thanos says, “defiance. You humans, even in the face of your utter demise, cling to your emotions, to your compassion and love. You think love for one another makes you stronger.”

He stomps up onto the platform. His enormous form looms over them for a moment, before he crouches down to face Clint. “You think love for others makes you strong, Avenger?” The title is as mocking as Thanos’s sneer.

Clint twitches in his bonds, and Steve is sure he would spit in Thanos’s face if he had the moisture in his mouth. “It makes us stronger than you,” he says boldly. “Better than you.”

Thanos laughs, and the sound is ugly and twisted. It makes Steve’s skin crawl, and foreboding begins to constrict his chest. Thanos turns and walks back towards his throne. “Love for another, Avenger, is nothing more than a weakness to be exploited.”

He gestures to one of the guards, who turns and walks away to one of the prisoner camps. It’s silent and relatively calm again for quite a while, except for the dread settling in Steve’s stomach. Thanos won’t let this go without a demonstration, and Steve isn’t keen to watch some poor soul tortured in front of them as punishment for their defiance.

Eventually, the guard comes back, along with several others. They’re dragging multiple restrained people, and Steve’s heart sinks. He begins to wish they had remained numb and silent, perhaps spared these poor innocent people whatever fate now awaits them. It’s a woman, holding a baby, and two children as well. Not the children, not this family, please—

—oh, God. As they’re dragged fully into the clearing between Thanos’s throne and the Avengers’ platform, Steve recognizes them at the same time Clint starts screaming. This… this is so much worse than Steve had thought possible.

Clint is alternating between screaming his wife’s name and each of his children’s. He’s thrashing as much as he can in his bonds, screaming more desperately than he had through any of the brutal torture before now. After all, this is the worst kind of torment.

The aliens cut the family’s bonds, but they don’t bother trying to fight or run. Laura clutches her children close and gazes up, tears running down her face. Steve is suddenly overwhelmed by the realization of what’s going to happen, and that he can do nothing, absolutely nothing, to stop it. He
tries to meet her eyes, but she is looking straight at her husband and nothing else. Clint has devolved into unintelligible screaming and sobs, and whatever he’d thought an hour ago about not being broken, Steve was wrong. He’s broken, and Thanos was right. Love for others is bringing them nothing but more pain before they die.

As the guards approach with their tools in hand, Steve closes his eyes.

He feels weak and shameful for not looking, but what good would it do? Perhaps he’s giving the Bartons what little he can, not observing their torment. Or maybe he’s just a coward who doesn’t want to see a family murdered and his friend destroyed. But he can’t stop himself from hearing it. No matter how loud Clint screams before his voice breaks, he can’t drown out the sounds of what’s happening to his family. It’s less than a minute before he breaks his promise of an hour ago and begs. But it doesn’t make any difference, except maybe increasing Thanos’s amusement.

Belatedly, Steve realizes that those in the nearby camps must be able to hear, perhaps see, this spectacle. It makes him sick, but he can’t think of what to do about it. There’s no way he can appear strong through this, and even if he could, it wouldn’t help anyone.

After what feels like years, all of the sounds have nearly stopped except for Clint, who’s emitting a continuous dry, hoarse wail. Steve finally opens his eyes again, only to see the guards clearing away the… remains. He actually gags at the sight, dry heaves, which is incredibly painful against his overly stretched chest and arms. But it’s nothing compared to the pain of what just happened. The only thing he hopes for now is a quick death for all of them, particularly Clint. The sooner he dies, the less time he’ll have to spend in this world, having seen what just happened to his family. Maybe he’ll even be reunited with them. Steve hasn’t had a lot of time to really contemplate his faith in the last few years, but he’d always believed. Now… he’s starting to wonder if they’re actually already dead, and this is Hell. Maybe this is his punishment for killing Tony.

Once the cleanup is done, leaving nothing behind but a red stain, Thanos laughs again. In other circumstances, the sound would have goaded Steve into action, or at least speech. Instead he just sags in his bindings and lets warm tears roll down his face.

“You humans think your feelings give you strength, but they are nothing but weaknesses. You use them to destroy yourselves and each other.” Thanos leans forward in his seat, contemplating Steve. “But I think you know this already. After all, you reek of nothing but the guilt you burden yourself with. It would be fitting, I think, to finally end your minuscule existence using the guilt you’re already carrying. The anger with which you betray a friend. You humans put such weight on meaningless friendships and petty feuds. It brings so many emotions to the surface.”

Steve doesn’t know what he’s talking about, but at this point, he’ll welcome death. Nothing can be worse than what just happened, and he can make it through whatever Thanos is planning so long as at the end of it, he gets to let go.

“Well don’t we let the one you betrayed be the one to finally end the Avengers.” As he raises his arm, Infinity Stones glowing in the gauntlet, Steve is suddenly hit with the meaning of his words.

He was wrong; it could get worse. Maybe this was Hell after all.

Chapter End Notes

As much as I’m pissed at the ExVengers after Civil War, I don’t actually want
something this awful to happen to them. This was hard to write.

For those who didn’t want to read the chapter, it went through the month since Thanos invaded, leading up to present. Steve, Natasha, and Clint are essentially tied up and on display as trophies of Thanos’s victory, and Thanos has just announced that he’s going to have “the one they betrayed” be the one to kill them.

Also, part of the reason he’s taking so long to actually massacre Earth’s population is that he (or his minions on his behalf, mostly) is still searching for the Time Stone. There’ll be a bit more on that later.

Main characters who died: Vision, Bucky, T’Challa, Sam, Scott, Pepper (sorry), Wanda. I also killed Clint’s family, I’m so sorry.
Hey all, thank you so much for the interest in this story! Sorry for the long wait between chapters. Had an exam last week, spent my post-exam writing spree on a few chapters of Facing Reality, then got busy again, and we just had a death in the family. But I finally sat down and planned out this entire story, which was a challenge since I just wrote the first two chapters on impulse, and had never really thought out the whole thing before or planned to make it into an actual posted fic. But now, as long as I have time to write, I should be posting more regularly again!

A couple things to note about the story in general: I know the Soul Stone hasn’t actually shown up in the MCU (I don’t think?), but for completeness’ sake, I’m going to say Thanos found it as well, so he now has all but the Time Stone. I still haven’t actually seen Ragnarok but I know Bruce left sometime after AoU/CW, so for this story I’m saying he was already off-planet during Civil War. He won’t be appearing in this story so you can headcanon that he’s on another planet hiding out from Thanos’s rampage/being the Hulk, or that Thanos already came by and killed him, or whatever you’d like. Since they aren’t coming to help and Thanos has all of the Infinity Stones except Time (and I’ve moved up his invasion of Earth in the timeline), I’m going to say that he’s already attacked/destroyed Asgard in this. Since they’re also not in this, I suppose Thanos killed the Guardians as well (Thanos is my excuse for most missing characters ahaha). Also, in this fic I’m not integrating other Marvel franchises, so the X-Men don’t exist here.

This chapter is short, sorry, but I wanted to split this section into two parts. Since that makes each one somewhat short, I should be posting the next one very soon. There will be two more chapters from Steve’s point of view, and then it’ll switch to Rhodey’s for the remainder of the story.

Some of the guards disappear. They must have been gone for a while, but it hardly feels like any time at all to Steve. He can’t even think, just hangs there, numb from what’s happened and dreading what’s coming. The guards return with a body bag held between them, and lay it on the ground at Thanos’s feet. Steve is so tired, so beaten down and horrified, that he can’t understand at first where they got it. Tony died over a month ago. But then he realizes it had only been a few days between his death and the beginning of the invasion. Tony—Tony’s body—must have been at a hospital or a coroner the entire time. In cold storage maybe, or… if the power has been out for long, Steve doesn’t want to think about the state of the body.

Thanos’s twisted parody of a smile is horrifying, but not as horrifying as the prospect of what’s about to happen. In a moment of desperate self-pity, Steve wants to scream at Thanos, to demand to know what the point of this is. He’s taken the Earth, there’s no way anyone can fight back against him. He’s surely planning to kill or enslave them all. Demoralizing them further, making their deaths into a dramatic production, is pointless.

He thinks about the Infinity Stones in Thanos’s gauntlet and wonders if this is just an elaborate
punishment for denying him the Tessaract and the Mind Stone all those years ago. If so, Thanos plots extensive revenge for a being who claims to be above the petty emotions of humans.

He focuses back on the scene in front of him when the guards back away, leaving the space between the Avengers and Thanos clear except for the body bag. Thanos doesn’t do much, just reaches an arm out toward the bag. The stones within the gauntlet glow too brightly to watch, and the bag begins to disintegrate.

Steve wasn’t able to watch what happened to Clint’s family, but he can’t look away from this.

Tony’s body is remarkably unchanged from his memory, from the last time he’d seen him, except for the scars crossing his caved-in chest. Autopsy evidence, on top of what Steve had done to him, and Steve can’t even process that right now. Tony’s paler than any living person, and naked. It’s to be expected considering where they retrieved his body from, but for some reason Steve’s mind is stuck on that point. It just seems like such an invasion. Or maybe he’s just focusing in on anything but the recognition of what’s in front of him, the evidence of what he’s done.

Tony couldn’t have stopped this invasion, and in all likelihood he would have died at Thanos’s hands not long after he had actually died at Steve’s. But that was all the difference there. If things hadn’t gone the way they had in Siberia, Tony might have been right there along with him. Maybe it was selfish to wish Tony had been put through all of this with them, but at least then he wouldn’t have died at the hands of a friend. At least Steve’s last act as a free man wouldn’t have been the murder of an ally, a friend, a grieving son. A good man.

Because whatever their disagreements, whatever had happened between them, Tony was a good man. Steve will need to hang onto that, to the memories he had, in the face of whatever monstrosity Thanos is about to create in front of him.

The air around Tony’s body seems to… ripple for a moment. The bright lights of the Infinity Stones swirl around his body as though they’re alive, surrounding it and drawing it up into the air slowly. The body begins to glow from within, and Thanos laughs. Steve’s eyes water as he watches, the light around Tony almost too bright to stand.

Just as Steve is about to be forced to look away, something changes. The lights around Tony are… entering his body, and changing. The multiple colors are coalescing, converging into one bright, light shade. The body twitches, then the caved-in chest fills out again, the scars seem to just fade from existence.

Movement and a deep growl catch Steve’s attention. Thanos is no longer smiling or laughing. He looks disturbed, which can’t bode well for any of them, and he almost seems to be pulling back against the gauntlet and the flow of light from the stones to Tony’s body. Steve wonders for a brief moment if something is going wrong, and what that means for all of them. What will happen to Thanos, to Tony, to everyone, if Thanos really can’t control whatever he’s doing with the Infinity Stones.

He’s drawn back out of those thoughts by a convulsion from Tony’s body, and when he looks back at it he’s transfixed. The lights around Tony have completely disappeared. The entirety of his unearthly glow is now coming from within him. The light is a bright blue, the same glow that used to emanate from the arc reactor in Tony’s suits, or in his chest, back when they’d met. He’d always associated that color, that glow, with Tony. With his creative spirit and his miraculous inventions. Of course, the last time he’d seen it, he’d driven his shield into it, deliberately tried to destroy it. He hadn’t thought at the time about the parallels and the implications, that the reactor powering Tony’s suit used to be the one powering his heart. Of course, it turned out that getting it removed still couldn’t protect his heart, not from Steve.
For a moment, the glow fades from Tony’s body where it’s suspended in the air, but then his eyes snap open, and they’re bright, alien. Unsettling. In the next moment, there are thin lines, the same glowing blue, scrawling themselves across Tony’s skin. They start from a point on his chest and within a few seconds they’ve entirely covered his body. It makes him look like a cracked shell of a human with an arc reactor inside him, powering his lifeless body. It might be an apt description, because Thanos created this… thing, and no doubt Thanos controls it.

Whatever was happening to reanimate Tony must be done, because he floats gently back to the ground, and lands on his feet. He stands upright on two feet like a person, but something about the way he holds himself just isn’t right. His eyes glow so brightly that it’s difficult to tell what he’s looking at—if he can even see, maybe he’s only controlled by Thanos and doesn’t have any senses of his own.

Tony shifts a bit, seeming to test his limbs and his movement. After a moment, he takes a step, and the shivery feeling that Steve gets from looking at him intensifies. He walks like an alien inhabiting a human body for the first time. Not unsteady so much as unaccustomed. Steve wouldn’t revise his earlier thought that ending all of this would be worth whatever Thanos put him through, but this is beyond what he’d imagined. Maybe it’s what he deserves, but he can admit that he's terrified of this, of being killed by the glowing alien reincarnation of his greatest failure as a hero and as a friend.

Tony walks almost aimlessly, wandering, like he has no goal except to learn to walk or to explore the world around him. Despite the glow and the strange posture, there really is a lot of Tony there, and it breaks Steve’s heart to see. He's not even sure if this Tony will recognize him, but he can’t stay silent anymore.

“Tony.” It’s barely louder than a whisper, and Steve’s voice is still hoarse and scratchy, but Tony’s head whips up to face him. He was wrong, earlier, about not knowing what those glowing eyes are looking at. Now that the force of that disconcerting gaze is directed at him, it’s like he can feel it. It’s a presence of its own, something unholy made from the Infinity Stones and Thanos’s wrath that’s been condensed and directed into Tony’s body. This was what Thanos meant, what he wanted, for the Avengers to be killed by the rage of the man they’d betrayed. The reason they’d lost the faith of the world—and now they’d failed to protect them. Poetic vengeance.

Tony’s path is deliberate now. He approaches the raised platform that holds the bound Avengers with slow, careful steps, and as he climbs up onto it gracefully, Thanos speaks to Tony, voice booming across to the platform from his throne.

“Yes, see these insects who betrayed you, who killed you. They killed you in the name of protecting their tiny world, and then they let that world crumble in front of them. You were angry, so angry. Use that anger. Kill them like they killed you.”

Steve wants to say something, anything, to refute Thanos, but his voice seems to be stuck in his throat. Tony is just feet from him now, looking up at Steve but still making him feel small. Tony’s appearance and the power emanating from him combine to make him seem larger than life. It’s also something like damnation that Steve feels as Tony looks at him, like the blue glow of his eyes is the light of Heaven passing judgment on his soul by shining through the body of the man he killed in cold blood. He’s waxing poetic in his last moments.

Tony takes one more step forward. Steve can’t look away from those empty, inhuman eyes. He sees nothing friendly in them, but nothing explicitly angry, either. If he had to put an emotion to them, he’d call them sad. Tears drip down Steve’s face, but he doesn’t close his eyes. Whatever end this brings him, he will face it.
Sorry if everyone subscribed got a bunch of notifications all at once, I decided to name the chapters of this one and had to go back and edit the old chapters to add titles. I don't know if it sends a notification to subscribers when a chapter is edited, but if it does, sorry about that.
Chapter Notes

Hello-shellhead on tumblr does absolutely beautiful art and has given me permission to post a link to one of their amazing Tony pieces. I was just starting to think about actually writing this story when I saw it and thought holy crap, that looks like the resurrected Tony from my story. So if you’d like to see sort of how I picture Tony in this (but with that pattern being more extensive), check it out: http://hello-shellhead.tumblr.com/post/159387587651/

Because I keep referencing it and people picturing the middle of NYC might be confused, the “field” between the Avengers and Thanos is just a clear area of the city, the foundation of a destroyed building or a cleared area of Central Park, maybe.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Steve holds his breath as he stares into those luminous eyes. He finds himself wishing to see the familiar, friendly brown just one last time, even if they’re filled with nothing but anger. If this will be his last sight before he’s killed by the shell of the man he betrayed, he’d at least like to look into his real eyes before he dies. He doesn’t know if this Tony can even see him, or if he can, whether he can process that it’s Steve he’s looking at. But if he can, Steve would like him to know how sorry he is, for everything.

There’s a sense of quiet contemplation as Tony stares at him, like this alien form is examining an insect and wondering whether to crush it. Maybe that really is what’s happening. Thanos, apparently, is unhappy with the lack of activity, because he booms another command to kill them across to Tony.

Later, Steve will wonder what might have happened if Thanos hadn’t spoken at that moment. Maybe everything would have been the same, or maybe Tony would have killed the Avengers and spent the rest of his renewed existence as Thanos’s puppet. He’ll never really know, but the question will always be a part of the extensive list of things that haunt him.

Because as soon as Thanos speaks again, Tony’s head snaps to the side, turning back to look over his shoulder at the Titan’s throne. The movement is fast, inhuman. Steve doesn’t want to do anything to bring Tony’s attention back to him, but he can’t help the explosive breath he lets out. When that gaze shifts away from him, a crushing weight of guilt and fear that he hadn’t even realized was building up disappears.

Thanos frowns when Tony turns back to face him, like he’s irritated by this inconvenience. He’s silent as Tony walks back to the edge of the platform and stands facing him across the space between them. Tony’s head cocks slightly to the side and Thanos’s smile returns, dangerous and sneering.

“You think you can challenge me, boy?” Thanos stands from the throne and strides forward, covering half the distance to the platform in just a few steps. He raises the gauntlet and drops the smile. “I can destroy you as easily as I made you.”

Tony walks off the edge of the platform, but he doesn’t fall to the ground. He stands, suspended in midair, eye level with Thanos, who scowls and clenches his gauntleted fist. The stones within it glow, once again too bright to look at directly, and their light fills the space between them, extending
out with a life of its own to surround Tony.

But nothing happens. Tony stands there, surrounded by the light of the Infinity Stones, but his own light seems to be creating some sort of barrier around him. Thanos lets out a growl and the gauntlet pulses even brighter, making the air around Tony seem to bend and warp.

Tony starts to crumple down and Steve's heart sinks, seeing that he is succumbing to Thanos's power—but suddenly he realizes that Tony isn’t falling at all, but crouching down, readying himself. In the next moment, Tony launches himself at Thanos, leaving a streak of bright blue behind him as he flies forward with unnatural speed.

Thanos lets out a deafening roar and brings up a gigantic arm to swat at the incoming figure. Steve expects Tony to be flung back, but where they meet, there’s an explosion of light and power that shakes the ground all the way back to the Avengers’ platform. Steve feels trapped and more helpless than ever before, strung up and forced to watch this battle without any interference. There’s likely nothing he could do against this kind of power, but not being able to do anything is painful.

Tony may be tiny compared to Thanos, but he is maneuverable and fast, and his raw power appears to rival Thanos’s. Between the constant vibration of the ground shaking their platform and the bursts of bright light and warping air where Tony and Thanos are fighting, Steve can barely see them, and he has no way to really tell how the battle is going. The infinity gauntlet is whipping back and forth, releasing increasingly intense bursts at Tony, but Tony seems to be immune to its powers somehow.

The fight grows in intensity, and just as Steve starts to think they’re going to shake apart the ground itself, the air clears enough for him to see as Tony gets his hands on the infinity gauntlet.

Steve wouldn’t have thought the sound was possible, but Thanos screams. The arm jerks violently to the side and Steve is sure Tony will be thrown off, but it’s as if Tony is stuck to the gauntlet now that he’s touched it. Tony’s blue glow intensifies and surrounds himself and the gauntlet he’s holding onto. Thanos begins pulling back against Tony as if he’s trying to yank his arm out of the gauntlet, and a moment later, Steve realizes why.

Thanos’s arm is disintegrating, shredding apart at the wrist where it emerges from the gauntlet. The solidified light of Tony’s power seems to be attacking it. The arm seizes and jerks briefly back and forth, Thanos clearly desperate to dislodge Tony before his connection to the gauntlet is broken, but the movements are short and ineffective. Tony appears to hold on with no problem, and the destruction of the arm doesn’t slow.

Steve has to close his eyes for a moment when the arm is fully cut. There’s a burst of unbearably bright light that, even with his eyes closed, temporarily blinds him. When he has blinked the spots from his vision and looks back across the field in front of him, he actually gasps at what he sees. Thanos is on the ground a dozen yards from where they were fighting, clearly thrown back when Tony took possession of the gauntlet. The stump of his arm isn’t bleeding, but blackened and shriveled, and the destruction still appears to be creeping up the limb towards the shoulder of his armor.

Tony, on the other hand, is still floating thirty feet in the air, letting the dust that Steve assumes is the remnants of Thanos’s hand fall out of the gauntlet. He then contemplates it for a moment, with the same curious, almost naïve expression with which he’d looked at Steve earlier, back when Steve had been sure Tony was nothing but a puppet of Thanos, there to kill the Avengers. The entire world seems to stand still while Tony considers the gauntlet, then slowly, Tony puts his own arm inside it.

The massively climactic event that Steve is expecting actually doesn’t happen. The bright glow of the activated Infinity Stones, which had diminished when their connection to Thanos was cut, returns to
its previous intensity, but there’s no explosion of light or shaking of the ground. Instead, the swirling lights of the stones surround the gauntlet and begin climbing up Tony’s arm. It reminds Steve of how Tony’s attack on Thanos crept up his arm, and he doesn’t like it. He wants to shout at Tony to take the thing off, to get rid of it.

But Thanos is stirring on the ground, letting out an enraged roar and climbing to his feet. The blackening at his left arm stops, and the arm actually begins rebuilding itself as Steve watches. He’s reminded that Thanos was a powerful figure even before he began collecting the Infinity Stones.

Tony turns in the air to look down at Thanos, who now looks like the smaller figure, down on the ground and looking up at the creation that turned on him and ripped the gauntlet from his possession. Thanos makes a move like he’s planning to take to the air as well, but Tony raises the arm now sporting the gauntlet, and suddenly Thanos is writhing on the ground. The lights of the stones are now surrounding him the way they surrounded Tony a few minutes ago. However, unlike Tony, they seem to penetrate his body, and begin tearing him apart.

It doesn’t take long. The indescribable noise that Thanos makes rings in Steve’s ears for a while after the body is finished disintegrating, and he thinks his ears might actually be bleeding, but at least it’s over quickly. The silence in the wake of Thanos’s death is deafening, and once again the world seems to be standing still. There’s at least a full minute of nothing but silence as the swirling lights of the Infinity Stones fade away from the spot where the body was.

Then chaos breaks out. When they had brought down the first Leviathan in the original battle of New York years ago, the other Chitauri had sent out a rallying call, and intensified their attacks on the city and the Avengers. That doesn’t happen now. The aliens that make up Thanos’s guards and armies, high and low ranking alike, scatter in the wake of their leader’s death. Steve knows that none of them came close in power level to Thanos himself, and seeing him taken apart by the Infinity Stone-wielding Tony, they must have realized they wouldn’t stand a chance against him.

A cry goes up among the aliens, but it speaks of fear, not vengeance. There are human shouts and screams being interspersed in the alien cries. From his position, Steve can see across the clear space where Tony is to Thanos’s throne, but he can also see parts of several of the camps, and beyond a skyscraper standing behind the throne, the edge of the bulk of one of the alien flagships. It’s this ship and its surrounding smaller vessels that the aliens are now running for. They’re abandoning the camps, the groups of people they’re supervising, and making for their ships as quickly as possible.

As several of them begin running across the empty space below Tony, Steve sees groups of people chasing them down, tackling and beating at them. Humans carrying some of the aliens’ weapons run through the clearing and begin firing at the retreating guards. It’s complete chaos, and Steve yanks frantically at his bindings, wanting to be down in the crowd, fighting or at least attempting to protect some of the people who are in the way, pulling children out of the way of the stampeding mobs.

The screams suddenly increase in pitch and Steve sees several people pointing upwards. At first he thinks they’re pointing up at Tony, who’s still floating in the same place, gauntlet raised. But as he looks up farther, he sees what’s drawn everyone’s attention. The enormous portal over New York, the original one opened on the first day of the invasion, is fragmenting. The sparkling black center of the portal, opening into the far reaches of space, is fading in and out, then disappears completely as the solid edge of the circle cracks and breaks off entirely. The sounds of panic from the aliens increase in volume as their exit is destroyed.

The sound of engines can be heard even over all of the chaos on the ground, and the massive flagship begins rising into the air. He can see the tiny shapes of aliens in the distance leaping onto the outside hull of the flagship as their fellows take off without them, too focused on getting away from
As he watches the flagship rise and the engines power up for fast flight, he sees more movement from Tony, outlined against the shape of the ascending ship. Tony waves his gauntleted arm toward the ship, then jerks it backward in a fast, violent motion. A massive cracking sound echoes through the streets, and Steve gapes as he sees the enormous ship actually begin to split in half. The engines on either side are still going and are gaining power, which works against them as the ship falls apart. As the two halves of the ship pull away from each other, the active engines on each half drive them further apart, pulling the halves completely apart in a matter of seconds. One half of the ship dives to the ground immediately, disappearing behind a building as it falls. Steve hears the crash and feels the ground shake when it hits, and he sees flaming debris flung past the side of the nearby building a moment later. The other half of the ship manages to remain airborne for a few more moments, angled upward and continuing to rise, until the half-gone engines and ruined shape of the ship bring it down as well. The extra distance it had traveled pulls it completely out of Steve’s sight, but he still feels and hears the crash.

The remaining aliens are in a complete panic. It’s absolute pandemonium below the Avengers’ platform and, he imagines, everywhere now that people have realized that Thanos is dead and his armies are scattered and frightened. Crowds are overtaking the aliens, but people and aliens alike are being trampled in the chaos. Between the mixed vocalizations of humans and aliens, the whining of the remaining small ships’ engines as they take off, and the still echoing sound of the flagship halves crashing, Steve knows shouting for someone to come and free them would be pointless.

Despite everything going on on the ground, Steve finds his attention suddenly drawn upward to Tony. The glow of the Infinity Stones has almost completely surrounded his figure, and his own blue light barrier looks significantly smaller than it was during the fight with Thanos. The distorted air around him is visibly pulsing, waves of power pushing out around him. Steve isn’t sure if this is an effect of using the gauntlet or something else, but it worries him. Ignoring the chaos below completely, Tony slowly lowers the arm with the gauntlet to hold it out in front of him and looks down at it. He seems to be contemplating it again, like he did when he first put it on.

This time, however, the expansion of light is unexpected. Without any visible action, Tony is suddenly at the center of a sphere of clashing powers, his own appearing to be almost fighting against the stones’ power for space. Steve has no idea what exactly is happening, but he thinks Tony might be fighting the Infinity Stones themselves. He tries to track the light show happening around Tony, but there’s no way to tell what’s going on, whether Tony is winning.

Steve is aware, on some distant level, that whatever is happening with Tony above him has attracted the attention of some of the crowd below as well. An area in the field between the Avengers and the throne is clearing again, people moving back and away from the expanding sphere of light around Tony, which is now just feet from touching the ground at its very bottom. As Tony attracts more and more attention, some of the noise of the crowd dies down, and they back away further, clearing a larger area of the field. The sphere around Tony is still expanding.

Just as the light is about to touch the ground, it implodes completely. Tony’s figure, still suspended in
the air and holding out the gauntlet, is haloed in just his bright blue glow, and there is no trace of the
colored light of the stones anywhere but at their places in the gauntlet itself, from which they shine
like they had when Thanos wielded the gauntlet. Before Steve can do more than wonder if this
means Tony has taken control of them, the gauntlet and the stones shatter.

The explosion is instant. It seems to be made entirely of a bright, white light, but there’s power
behind it, too. Steve doesn’t even have time to slam his eyes closed before it’s blinded him, and less
than a second later, he feels the shockwave hit him. Background noise, the screams that must be
sounding at the sudden wave of power, all fade away behind the rushing in Steve’s ears—he can’t
tell if it’s his own ears rebelling against the force pushing against them, or if the light itself is
somehow making a sound.

The shockwave has already lasted at least ten seconds, and the force behind it just keeps growing.
Steve can feel the frame he’s tied to begin to pull up from its mooring on the platform, and then it
splinters and breaks, throwing him backward onto the floor of the platform. Still tied and unable to
break his fall, his head slams into the bottom of the platform, and he blacks out for a moment.

When he regains his senses, the force of the shockwave has abated, though his body still feels like it
weighs several tons. He blinks rapidly, but can’t see anything beyond the blur from the intense light.
He pulls at his arms and realizes that with the splintering of the frame, his bindings have loosened,
and he manages to work one arm free. His head is pounding and he still can’t see anything beyond
vague shapes and shadows even after a minute, but he works his one free arm up the length of the
other and manages to snap the weakened bonds on that one as well.

Pulling his arms down to his sides for the first time in nearly a month is an exercise in agony. He
bites back a scream as he tries to shake feeling back into his suddenly tingling hands. He can now
see the outline of his hands as he moves them in front of his face. When he plants them on the
ground and pushes himself up, all new pains in his head and back make themselves known, but he
pushes through and forces himself to sit up. After a few more moments of blinking, he is able to
focus enough to see the bindings on his legs, so he reaches his numb arms down and snaps those as
well. His ears still aren’t registering anything but a rushing sound, but he shakes his head and
staggers to his feet.

His vision is nearly cleared. He stumbles over to Natasha and Clint’s frames, which have also
splintered and fallen back. They are both unconscious—the serum must have pushed him through the
effects of the shockwave faster than them, and they had been worse off than him physically before
everything with Tony happened—but he removes their bindings as well and tries to arrange them
comfortably as quickly as he can, before turning back to face the field and the throne.

All of the people, as far as he can see, have been pushed to the ground as well. Many of them are
unconscious, but many, not as weakened by exhaustion and starvation and torture as Steve, are
already picking themselves up. There are a few scattered aliens; there’s no way to tell whether they’d
already been taken down by the crowd before the explosion, but none of them appear to be getting
up. Inevitably, everyone’s eyes are drawn upward.

Tony is still in the same place, suspended in the air and glowing brightly, but his eyes are closed and
there is no trace of the Infinity Stones or the gauntlet. His arms are spread gracefully out at his sides.
The ringing in Steve’s ears has died down, but there’s nothing to hear—the field is silent, almost
reverent as they all look up at the figure above them. Then, suddenly, it’s as though strings
suspending Tony have been cut. He drops. He doesn’t descend fast enough to be falling
uncontrolled, but a vision of another time, another Tony falling in New York after saving them all,
forces its way into Steve’s mind at the sight.
Steve moves to the edge of the platform and jumps off, landing heavily and clumsily on his still-weak limbs. A shock of pain goes up his legs and back, but he forces himself upright and staggers forward towards the clearing at the center of the field. He needs to get to Tony. Tony is slowing down as he gets closer to the ground, and Steve is still at least twenty yards away when Tony falls below his sight line above the heads of the crowd. Steve pushes his aching body forward even faster, determined to reach the center of the crowd. Losing sight of Tony somehow feels wrong, and he needs to see what becomes of him. He’s not entirely sure why, what he will see—what he expects, or even what he wants to see—but he just needs to be there. He pushes forward, relentless.

Chapter End Notes

This ended up being a bit longer than I thought, but I still finished it in a day!
It seems like an eternity before Steve manages to reach the center of the circle of onlookers, squeezing between shocked citizens and stumbling around still-prone bodies. He stops, panting, at the edge of the circle people have cleared around Tony and finally lays his eyes on him again. Tony is kneeling on the ground, hunched over where he landed. His back is to Steve and he isn’t moving, but the brightly glowing lines are still covering his entire body. Steve had thought maybe they would disappear with the destruction of the Infinity Stones. He’d also been worried that destroying the things that had brought Tony back would kill him again. Maybe that would have been for the best—was this resurrected, alien-looking thing inhabiting Tony’s body even him? If it was him, or whatever was left of him after his death, would he want to be alive, if he was aware? Steve himself knows he wouldn’t want this done to him. But he doesn’t think he could handle killing Tony (again), even if it was to preserve Tony’s own dignity. Even if it wasn’t really Tony.

He wonders, suddenly, if Tony’s even alive. He becomes aware that he can’t tell if Tony is breathing, or moving in any way, and he can’t just stand here any longer.

He pushes his aching body forward, infused with new strength borne of determination. He manages about five steps into the small clear space around Tony, moving around Tony’s still form so that he can be at his side. He plans to crouch down to Tony’s level, see if he’s awake, but he only gets halfway to Tony before hands are suddenly gripping his arms and pulling him back.

He should be stronger than them, but even after he recovers from the initial surprise of being touched and pulled back at all, he fails to fight them off. There are at least three people holding him back, away from Tony, and he is weak and still in pain. He turns to demand that they let him go, to say that someone needs to check on Tony, but stops short at the blazing fury in the eyes of the man who steps in front of him.
“You’ve done enough damage here. You won’t touch him again,” the man snarls, and Steve feels like he’s been punched. Tony’s death had been an accident, a fight gone horribly wrong, it wasn’t cold-blooded, purposeless murder (was it? He knew, if he thought about it enough—which he usually didn’t—that Tony hadn’t been trying his hardest in that fight. But Steve had been, God, Steve had fought to kill). After everything that had happened, after Tony had just saved them all, surely these people didn’t think that Steve would be a danger to Tony now?

He opens his mouth to defend himself, to assure them that he only wants to check on Tony, to say something—anything. But nothing comes out, and he closes it again, chest feeling tight. He glances between the faces of the people around him, those whose attention had been drawn by the movement and the man speaking. He sees nothing but suspicion, anger, and outright hatred. Even in his obviously weakened state, even after everything that had happened in the last month, these people still think he’s capable and willing to attack Tony. They still hate him.

A small, logical part of his mind can’t blame them. They’d gone through hell for the last month, failed by their so-called “protectors” and thinking that they would die any day, here or on some distant planet as slaves. Then, miraculously, they’d been saved by Tony reincarnated. Tony’s death had spared him from responsibility for protecting the Earth from Thanos in the initial invasion, from becoming the disappointment that the other Avengers were when they failed to save the planet. And then he’d managed to defeat Thanos anyway. Now Steve, the man who’d killed him, the man who, if not for Thanos’s intervention, had ended the world’s last hope, was trying to come near him again. He could understand people’s anger, but it hurts.

While he’s standing there, trying to process these revelations and come up with something to say that will convince people to let him go, the spell over the circle seems to break. People start moving around, some creeping cautiously toward Tony’s form. As they come closer, Steve becomes too preoccupied with watching them to even try to be released himself.

A man crouches down in front of Tony, mirroring his position, and another woman does the same. The two exchange glances, then the man cautiously says, “uh… Mr. Stark? –Tony?” Steve is looking at Tony from the side instead of the back now, but with his head bowed as it is, he can’t see if Tony’s eyes are even open. Whether they are or not, there’s no response.

The woman tries his name again, tentatively reaching her hand out like she’s going to put it on his shoulder, but then withdrawing it instead. They’re afraid to touch him. Just as she and the man are looking helplessly at each other again, Tony finally moves.

Tony’s head lifts, and Steve can see even from the side that his eyes are glowing as brightly as before, when he approached Steve on the platform. Steve wonders if the man crouched in front of Tony can feel the same awful weight of that alien gaze that Steve could, but Tony doesn’t seem to be looking at anything in particular. Still, Steve feels some sharp emotion—he’s not sure exactly what, but it feels like a mix between relief and apprehension—at the confirmation that Tony is, in some way at least, still alive.

The man in front of Tony doesn’t seem to know what to do or say. After opening and closing his mouth a few times, he asks, “Are you—are you okay?” then immediately grimaces, as if realizing what a ridiculous question that was.

Tony’s head doesn’t turn, but from the way the man suddenly looks a bit shell-shocked, Steve can guess that Tony’s looking directly at him now. “I—can we do anything for you?” The man asks, but once again, he doesn’t get an answer.

Tony’s head moves, turning toward the ground for a moment and back up, then back and forth slightly, as if he’s assessing his surroundings. The people closest to him all exchange worried looks,
and Steve can tell they don’t know what to do. Steve isn’t sure either. Should they be worried that Tony isn’t speaking to them? Can Tony even speak? Even if he can, is he capable of communicating what he wants or needs? There are a million questions running through Steve’s mind about this thing that Thanos resurrected, and no answers seem forthcoming.

A different man walks up beside the first and bends down on one knee. “You saved us. You saved us all,” he says, tears in his eyes. From what Steve can see, Tony just stares at him, but it seems to galvanize the others. There are suddenly soft murmurs of thanks coming from all around the circle, and Steve notices that new people are coming up, joining the crowd around Tony. Some of them come forward as the new man retreats, bending down and offering their own teary or joyful gratitude. Tony is silent and staring through all of it, though he looks back and forth at each person who addresses him. The people don’t seem to mind. They appear to have accepted that Tony won’t speak to them, and are content to just offer their thanks for what he’s done.

Someone approaches from the back, holding out a large gray blanket, which they tentatively wrap around Tony’s shoulders. The action suddenly reminds Steve that Tony is still unclothed; his strange appearance has almost made Steve forget about it, and his markings practically look like clothing of a sort. Everyone holds their breath when the person with the blanket touches Tony with it, and they all seem to collectively breathe a sigh of mixed relief and disappointment when nothing happens. Even from the side, Steve can see Tony’s eyebrows furrow slightly and his hand rise up to lightly touch the edge of the blanket, as though he’s not sure what it is.

The crowd starts to get a little louder around them. There are still people coming up to offer their thanks to Tony and to try to ask whether they can do anything for him, but he is still silent, and the circle is closing in on him. However, when Tony shifts and starts to stand, those closest immediately back up to give him space, and a hush falls over the crowd again. Tony holds the edges of the blanket to him with one hand and rises to his feet smoothly, then turns and looks around like he’s scanning the crowd.

Steve is suddenly seized by a need to make himself known. He doesn’t know whether Tony will look his way and really see him, whether Steve’s height or mere presence will be enough to catch his attention, smothered as he is between several other people. Steve can’t take that chance. Even if Tony isn’t talking, he needs to say something to him, to get him out of the open and somewhere more private, to try to help him. Maybe it’s atonement for what he did to Tony, or for failing to protect the Earth against Thanos, that he feels he needs to protect Tony now. Whatever the reason, he takes a deep breath and opens his mouth, preparing to get Tony’s attention, shout if necessary. He doesn’t get the chance. He’d underestimated the amount of attention the people closest to him were paying him. As soon as he opens his mouth, eyes on Tony and his intent to shout out clear, someone’s hand slaps over it. Once again, he’s surprised enough by the action that he doesn’t really fight it, even though he probably could have just yanked his head away from the hand and shouted anyway. He just stands there, dumbstruck, staring at the woman whose hand is now covering his mouth and the others holding onto his arms with renewed grips, glaring intensely at him.

The man who’d first spoken to him gestures sharply and the people holding Steve begin to drag him backwards, away from the circle and Tony. Steve twists and digs in his heels, but as they slow, the man steps toward him to hiss into his ear. “Don’t you dare get any closer to him, don’t talk to him, he does not need to see you right now, you understand me?” the man says, and it stings Steve enough that he stops struggling. There’s truth to that and it hurts. If Tony really is aware, if he knows who Steve is and what he did, would he want to see Steve?

But Steve needs to explain, or at least to just talk to Tony, to see him plainly for a while. He won’t get the chance, however, because there are even more people pulling on him than before now, and in
his shocked and weakened state, he can’t fight them off. He’s being herded backwards, away from the circle around Tony.

He can still see Tony through the crowd, but just barely. Tony has started walking, not in any particular direction that Steve can tell, just wandering. As he moves, the crowd in front of him parts easily, falling away silently and clearing a path for Tony to go wherever he likes.

Steve, on the other hand, is being pulled God knows where by these people, away from Tony, and he can’t stop it. He is hit by the sudden, intense conviction that he might never see Tony again, but it paralyzes him rather than giving him strength. He killed the man, and now he could have a chance to rectify that, but that would require being with Tony, and he’s being taken away. His breath hitches as he loses sight of Tony, and what could be his last chance slips through his fingers.
This entire chapter is a sort of flashback/recap, covering the invasion up to present for Rhodey, so it’ll be in past tense (sorry for all the switching, but this should be the last chapter to do that).

I’m not sure if it was specified in Civil War, but in this story Rhodey was in an American hospital after his injury. It’s most likely that he would have gone straight to the nearest German hospital right after the fall, but after he was stabilized he was transferred to a hospital in Manhattan somewhat near the Tower—at least that’s what I’m going with here.

After some back and forth in another story, I’ve decided to just call him “Rhodey” for this entire story. I know Rhodey probably thinks of himself as Jim or James, but I claim the right to just call him Rhodey since it’s in third person, and also because I don’t want to write “Jim” for the whole story. I just don’t like it.

Rhodey might not ever remember much of the days between the fight at the airport and the beginning of the invasion, but he’ll always remember falling very clearly. He’d felt fear before on missions, realized that things were going south and that he could very well die. But being in the suit, it was different, somehow. Of course nothing, even Tony’s suits, was completely infallible, but he’d just felt so… free in the suit. Tony was always by his side and he spent more of his time worrying about his best friend than himself.

But being hit, and falling in the dead suit, that was terrifying, more than any mission he’d ever been on. That moment, where he was going to crash and could do absolutely nothing about it, where he realized that his beloved suit was about to become his coffin, had seemed to stretch on forever.

Waking up paralyzed was certainly no fun, but he knew the deal. He always went into every fight understanding the potential consequences, the ways it could go wrong. He fought because he needed to, because he believed in what he was doing. The fight at the airport was no different. The Avengers gone rogue needed to be stopped, and he was willing to risk life and limb to stop them. It didn’t make the actual injury suck any less, but at least it was for something important.

One of the most disorienting aspects of waking and learning about his new reality was the conspicuous absence of Tony. He knew Tony would have put almost anything aside to be at his side through that, and Vision confirmed that Tony had already been to see him, learned something about his injury before leaving to try and confront the captured Rogues about Rogers and Barnes’s whereabouts.

Vision said they hadn’t heard from him since, he’d cut communication shortly after his visit to the Raft. They speculated on a mission to track Rogers that would require radio silence to be kept from Ross, but Rhodey was worried, and he could tell Vision was too. When Ross’s deadline for capture came and went, Vision went to FRIDAY to try to track down Tony’s last known location. He departed for Siberia with the promise to return soon with news of Tony.

He brought back a body.
Rhodey hardly heard Vision’s explanation of finding Tony, his assessment of the situation—until he caught on one thing. Rogers. Rogers had done this. Rhodey had practically flung himself from his bed at the news, intent on tracking Rogers down himself and making him suffer.

He’d ended up under guard at the hospital, after multiple attempts to get out. He wasn’t even sure exactly what he was planning to do once he got out, but he just felt an overwhelming need to do something. He knew it was his helplessness and anger coming out. When Tony had been missing in Afghanistan, at least Rhodey could plan, search, and hope. But knowing Tony was dead, having confirmation, and knowing that he’d been lying in a hospital bed while his best friend was murdered by a former teammate… he wasn’t handling it well.

Pepper got into contact with him two days after Vision brought Tony back to the States. That eased a bit of his restlessness, but it wasn’t pleasant. Rhodey’s grief came out as anger and frustration, and Pepper’s came out as anxiety and sadness. She could barely stop crying, and he was on edge. It didn’t work well for either of them, but he was able to force himself to calm down in order to help her. He didn’t want to shout at her, to ruin one of the friendships he still had.

A day after they’d begun planning for arrangements, the news got out. They’d known it was inevitable, but it was still a shock—a painful one—to turn on the tv the next morning and see Tony’s picture on every channel, hear these people who hadn’t known him talking about his death and making it into a production.

People weren’t stupid. They all knew about the split between the Avengers, and that Rogers and Tony had been on opposite sides. There was speculation immediately about the cause of Tony’s death. It was the few hardcore Captain America fans suggesting that Tony had “turned evil” and had to be put down that made them release an official statement earlier than planned. Red-eyed but composed, Pepper went before the media that afternoon to tell them that in his attempt to arrest the fugitives Steve Rogers and James Barnes for their numerous crimes, Tony Stark had been killed by the criminals. The evidence from Germany and Romania, the continued outcry from Lagos, and the families of all of the Avengers’ victims were more than enough to back them and condemn Rogers and his group for life.

People were calling out for the ex-Avengers’ blood, and the one person who would have considered helping them was dead by their hands. Pepper, Rhodey, and Vision did nothing to stop the tidal wave of anger and hatred for the former Avengers. They focused their efforts on making arrangements for Tony’s body and funeral.

Not that it mattered. Thanos arrived the day before Tony’s body was scheduled to be moved to a funeral home for embalming. For the next month, Rhodey tried not to think about what had happened to the body, too focused on keeping himself alive.

They were overwhelmed laughably fast. The military was out in force, but they were falling to the incoming armies like they were made of paper. They contacted Rhodey less than three hours into the invasion, asking about War Machine, but Rhodey had nothing to tell them. He was in no condition to fly, his only suit had been practically destroyed at the airport, and it was only coded to him, anyway. Tony had multiple suits on backup, but even if they were available, they were only coded to Tony, any besides, it’s not like any old soldier could hop in one and hope to do anything with it. It took serious skill to pilot one of them. It didn’t matter either way, because they all would have been locked down permanently on confirmation of Tony’s death, and eventually destroyed. Tony wouldn’t have taken the chance that someone would misuse his most powerful technology upon his death.

There would be a back door left in, he knew. Tony always had backup plans for his backup plans.
There would be a way for Rhodey, maybe Peter or Harley, possibly even Pepper, to get in at one of his suits if they needed to after he died. But Rhodey was useless, Pepper had no experience piloting the suits, and there was no way Rhodey would involve the kids. One Iron Man suit couldn’t repel this invasion anyway, and he wouldn’t want to risk that the aliens could take it over, bypass Tony’s safeguards and use his technology in the worst way possible. That was exactly what Tony had been trying to prevent by ensuring the destruction of his suits after his death.

For the same reason, he knew FRIDAY was gone once the invasion started. She’d stuck around to help with the arrangements for Tony after his body had been brought back, but any fully self-sufficient AI that Tony created was too valuable and too potentially dangerous to be left alone if he died. FRIDAY would have destroyed her own code after she’d fulfilled her last duty to her creator; the invasion had cut that short, so Rhodey knew she was gone by now. In the old days—the JARVIS days—Tony would never have even entertained the thought of letting his child, for all intents and purposes, kill itself after he was gone, but… well, things had changed after Ultron. Tony had become withdrawn and frightened of his own potential. He’d limited FRIDAY in ways he never would have done with JARVIS at first, and when he’d eventually freed her to live up to her full potential, he’d introduced the idea of destruction at his death and other safeguards. FRIDAY had readily agreed—JARVIS would have too—but the fact that Tony had proposed it at all proved how beaten down he’d become in his last few years. The thought made Rhodey ache.

Vision was with him in the hospital when the invasion began, and when it became obvious that the military was quickly losing, he left to face Thanos alone, the only Avenger left. He said it was his duty, and Rhodey hadn’t disagreed, but some part of them both knew that he was going to his death. This wasn’t anything like the Chitauri invasion years ago, where there had been hope permeating the destruction and giving life to the fighters. This was despair come to life.

Superheroes and villains alike banded together all over the globe, some coming out of the woodwork for the first time, but they were all struck down. King T’Challa of Wakanda announced his intention to work with the Rogue Avengers to repel the invasion, and people were terrified enough to accept it for the time being. Rhodey’s fury at the evidence that T’Challa had taken in the murderers had to be put aside for the need for any help in the invasion, however much it made him sting to admit it. At least the bastards would die trying to protect people. They lost contact with Wakanda—with everywhere else—by day three, when the incoming armies finished subduing New York, and Rhodey could only assume that everyone there had been killed.

Rhodey could only sit, helpless, as New York, and soon the rest of the country, eventually the rest of the world, was overtaken. Over the first three days of the invasion, the hospital and the surrounding area took some heavy blows, walls and floors shaking, people screaming in the halls. The power flickered occasionally despite their backup generators. Rhodey sat grimly through it all, just waiting to see what would happen, because there was nothing else he could do. The internet and the phone lines were congested, and eventually blocked by some kind of interference, probably from the massive flagship that Rhodey could see descending onto the city from his window. He had no way of contacting Pepper, anyone in the military, or any of his friends or family. He felt a few moments of shuddering despair for the fact that his mother was most likely going to die alone, afraid, never having heard from him again. He hadn’t spoken to her in weeks.

On day four, the city (and probably the rest of the country, though he had no way of knowing) had been completely overtaken and essentially surrendered, and the aliens began rounding people up. The hospital and other heavily populated buildings were cleared early. Guards came in and herded everyone out, cleared each floor methodically. The people too sick to move were left behind to die. Rhodey, at least, was able to wheel out with the rest of them.

People from all over the city were being gathered into makeshift camps, each containing thousands
of people. In his brief time outside, he could see the enormous portal over the city, through which there was a constant flow of ships going both in and out. There were obvious signs of battle in the city, but for the most part, the infrastructure was actually intact—it seemed this invasion was focused on containment and capture of the people, rather than straight destruction like the Chitauri. Masses of people were marching in various directions, probably to their own camps. It was a grim picture of hopelessness.

Rhodey’s camp turned out to be the bottom floors and outer courtyards of an industrial complex. There were guards at all entrances and exits and scattered among the areas, but other than herding all of the people into the camp and threatening or killing anyone who appeared to have any kind of weapon or tried to attack them, they left everyone alone.

Chaos reigned anyway. People were afraid they were being herded into gas chambers, they’d been separated from their friends and family, they were terrified of the aliens. Everyone was running back and forth in mobs, trampling each other and getting into fistfights, sometimes brawls with many people involved. Rhodey thought he might go deaf from all of the constant screaming. He ended up in a corner of a relatively small open room, just trying to keep out of the way of the pandemonium. It was only made worse when a man pulled a gun from his waistband and tried to shoot one of the guards. The bullet ricocheted off the alien’s armor and hit another man, who went down. The guard immediately shot the man with its own weapon, and the man seemed to disintegrate, which only furthered the panic of everyone in the immediate area. Completely ignoring the people once the threat had been dealt with, the guard turned its back to them, but people were still shoving and screaming, hitting each other and trying to push their way as far from the guards as possible.

There were families clutching each other, backing into Rhodey’s corner to try and protect themselves from the mob. Several other people joined them, some with injuries from getting caught in the chaos. Something needed to be done, but Rhodey had no way of getting anyone’s attention.

Thankfully, two of the others near him seemed to come to the same conclusion. They were holding onto one another, yelling in each other’s ears to be heard over the cacophony, and one turned to bend down to Rhodey’s level, seeing him scanning the crowd calmly instead of screaming and panicking.

“We need to do something!” He yelled, gesturing to the crowd.

“If you can get their attention, I can help organize. But I can’t do anything from here,” Rhodey shouted back, indicating his chair.

The man eyed the nearest guard. “You think they’ll let us organize everyone?”

“I think as long as we don’t attack them, they don’t give a shit what we do.”

The man nodded and turned to converse with his friend for a minute. They recruited a few more people through shouted conversation, then everyone broke off and moved to surround the room. Half of them found boxes or equipment to climb on, hoisting themselves up above the crowd, while the other half moved through the throng, trying to direct people’s attention to them. It took a long time and Rhodey was beginning to think it wouldn’t work, but eventually, the noise started to die down. People were turning to look at those standing up on boxes, who could now be heard above the crowd, shouting for silence.

When it had reached a tolerable level—there was some background whispering and sobbing still flitting through the crowd, they weren’t going to get rid of that—the climbers started directing attention towards their leader, the man who’d spoken to Rhodey, who was now standing up on an overturned crate next to him.
Rhodey kept an eye on the nearest guard, who was watching the action keenly. It hadn’t raised its weapon, so Rhodey counted it as a win for now, and hoped their attempts to organize wouldn’t be taken as some sort of rebellion.

The man next to Rhodey cleared his throat and addressed the crowd. “Hey everyone, I know you’re freaked out, but we need to be rational about this. Screaming and trampling each other isn’t going to help. We need to calm down and figure things out.”

Some heads in the crowd nodded. People were looking up to the man hopefully, and for all his bravado in quieting the mob, he seemed a bit lost in the face of being looked at as their leader. He glanced nervously down to Rhodey.

Rhodey did another quick scan of the people he could see. A few had packs or purses with them. “Okay,” he said, looking up to the man next to him, “I need anyone who has any kind of supplies or bags with them to bring them over here.”

The man nodded, looking relieved, and started relaying Rhodey’s orders to the other climbers, who began organizing the shuffling of people over to Rhodey’s corner. “Form a line, people, let’s keep this organized.”

Rhodey wheeled forward a bit to create some space in the corner beside him, where he indicated for people to drop off their supplies. Some readily stepped forward and dropped what they had, but many people clutched their belongings, reluctant to part with them. “Keep your wallets and personal items, we’re looking for water, food, first aid kits, anyone bring blankets?”

It took a while, but they managed to avoid any incidents and gather what meager supplies they had. Rhodey relayed some instructions to the climbers, then looked over what they had while the crowd dispersed a bit and shuffled into smaller groups, finding places to claim as their own. There were maybe 60 people in the room in total, and between all of them, they had two blankets and a travel neck pillow, a single first aid kit which was barely stocked, one flashlight with no extra batteries, several basic toiletries, maybe two pounds of granola bars and other snack foods, and a couple gallons of water total. He sighed and beckoned down the man on the crate next to him.

“What’s your name, kid?”

“Matt,” he said, holding a hand out to Rhodey to shake. “NYU student. I think a lot of us who were on campus ended up in this area, but I only see a few people I know here. You’re War Machine, aren’t you?” He had the good sense to keep his voice down, both to avoid drawing the attention of the guards and the crowd. Despite being in a wheelchair and clearly not in any shape to be fighting, if the guards knew he was an Avenger they might kill him on the spot. And if the crowd knew who he was, they could create a panic, either demanding that he do something impossible or trying to throw him out to save themselves from the aliens’ wrath.

Rhodey grimaced. “Not so much anymore, but yeah. Thanks for helping quiet everyone down. I couldn’t have gotten control of the room without you.”

Matt shook his head. “I just didn’t want to get trampled. You’re the one who knows what to do, I had no idea what to say to them.”

Before Rhodey could dispute the statement, another man approached them, clearly having listened in. “I got something you’ll be interested in,” he said in a low voice, hand folded behind his back, underneath his shirt at his waistband. Rhodey knew exactly what he meant, but Matt clearly didn’t.

“What is it?” Matt asked.
“Glock 19, full magazine. More than enough for every one of the bastards in this room.”

Matt jerked back and glanced nervously at the guards, clearly freaked out and at a loss for what to do. “Are you crazy?” he whispered.

The man rolled his eyes, and Rhody narrowed his eyes at him. “You interested in living another day?”

“Hell yeah,” the man whispered back, grinning, clearly misinterpreting Rhody’s look.

“Then get that thing the fuck out of here,” Rhody said firmly, and the man’s smile fell. “Keep it hidden somewhere no one will ever see it, dump it in a trash can, or go put it down at their feet and make it clear you’re not a threat. You can’t fight them with one gun, moron, and even if you managed to hit one, you’d just get yourself disintegrated, and put the rest of us in danger. Now, unless you want to have a real problem here, I suggest you go, and don’t ever let me see it.”

The man’s jaw clenched. “So you’re not even gonna try and fight? Just gonna sit there like a damn coward?”

Rhody leveled a serious look at him. “You want to find out all the ways I can kick your ass from this chair, son, go ahead. But yeah, I’m interested in staying alive, not getting myself killed like an idiot. So get the fuck out of here.”

The man growled and straightened. He looked at Matt and Rhody, muttered “cowards” one last time, and stomped away, through the inner doorway past a guard who watched him leave, and into another room, away from their quieted group. As soon as the door closed behind him, Matt let out a shaky breath. “Jesus Christ. Thanks, man, I had no idea what to say to him.”

“Nah, you did good,” Rhody said with a small smile, considering the kid. “You want to be my right hand man in this?”

Matt didn’t answer right away. He looked out over the crowd for a minute, eyes going unfocused. Rhody knew the look, and he was going to be seeing a lot of it now. “Who was it?” he said quietly.

Matt glanced over to him, then pulled out his phone, handing it to Rhody. Rhody looked briefly along the top, seeing the expected lack of signal and dying battery, then focused on the background picture, Matt with his arm around a young woman. “Faith,” Matt said, “we started dating in high school. She carried a taser, for self-defense on the campus, you know? When they came to the school and starting herding people out, she tried to hit one of them with it, and they shot her with one of those guns. She—disintegrated.” His voice broke on the last word, and Rhody handed the phone back to him.

“I’m so sorry.” It wasn’t enough, of course, and Matt was far from the only one to lose a loved one in the last few days. But she’d still mattered, and he was still suffering. And there was nothing any of them could do about it.

Matt nodded and put a hand on Rhody’s shoulder. “I’m sorry too,” and when Rhody gave him an inquiring look, “about Stark. I know you two were friends.”

Rhody’s throat tightened. He’d avoided thinking about Tony for the most part since the invasion began, too busy with figuring out what was happening to everyone who was still alive. But now, in the face of inevitable death, the reminder of his best friend, his brother, burned. He had to push it aside. He couldn’t afford to think about Tony, because if he did, the despair could overwhelm him. If he spent too long thinking about Tony, he’d find himself wishing for the peace of death along with
him instead of fighting to stay alive as long as possible. He swallowed past the feelings and managed
to croak out a weak “Thanks.”

Matt, to his credit, pretended to be looking at his phone for another minute, to give Rhodey a
moment to compose himself in relative privacy. After a minute, he crouched down to be at Rhodey’s
level and looked out at the room. People were settling down, finding their own spaces as instructed,
introducing one another and finding partners to keep track of in a sort of “buddy system” Rhodey
had suggested. Matt took a deep breath and let it out. “I want to work with you. It’d be an honor. But
I just… can I ask? What’s the goal here? I mean, what are we trying to accomplish?”

Rhodey turned to look him straight in the eye. “Survival. That’s the goal. I’m sorry I can’t do better
than that, but for now, that’s all we can do. We can’t fight this.” Rhodey shook his head. “If I’ve
learned one thing in life, it’s that unexpected, ridiculous shit happens, and you can never rule it out. If
you’re dead, you won’t be here for it. But it’s not a guarantee, and I wouldn’t expect it. I understand
why this might seem pointless. Maybe we fight hard, struggle to survive as long as we can, and we
live a week instead of a day. But let me ask you this: you’ve already helped people here. You’re
making a difference, whatever happens later. So even if the end result is the same, wouldn’t you
rather have that week?”

Matt looked at him, and he could see the intensity in the kid’s gaze. He was a fighter. “Yeah,” Matt
finally said, “I would.”

Rhodey nodded and managed a small smile. “Good. Let’s get to work, then.”

The next few hours were exhausting, but productive. They managed to make a list of everyone in the
room, and make sure everyone had a buddy to keep track of. Matt gathered four other people to be
leaders, tasked with making sure larger groups were safe, that their areas were clean, organizing trips
to the bathroom—thankfully, their room was directly connected to a working one, and the water
would stay on even if the power went out—and reporting any problems or needs to Matt and
Rhodey.

They had problem after problem, of course. There were five kids in the room, one of whom had been
in the city with his babysitter, who’d been separated from him during the move to the camps. The
Browns, another family with children, thankfully took him in with them, but he was freaked out and
there wasn’t much they could do about it. There was a diabetic woman in the group who’d been
separated from her insulin supply, and several other people also missing their meds; some anxiety,
depression, and the usual amalgamation of older people’s medications for blood pressure, cholesterol,
heart conditions, and others. And of course, everyone there was hungry and tired and uncomfortable.

After two days, things had only gotten worse. Thankfully, people were cooperating, helping each
other rather than devolving into fights again, but there was only so much any of them could do. They
had a constant water supply, thank god, but they’d given what little food they had to the kids and
their caretakers, the older people, and the people who hadn’t eaten in the longest time, and now it
was gone. The blankets and pillow had gone to the families as well, and everyone else was using
their own jackets, shirts, and shoes as bedding.

Rhodey didn’t want to risk Matt and the others, but they were all going to die pretty quickly if they
couldn’t get some kind of supplies there, and Rhodey wasn’t as physically capable as the others of
going out. He wanted someone by his side to help keep things under control there—Rabia, a lawyer
who’d stepped up as one of the group leaders, stayed for that, and they decided to send three of the
other leaders out. Matt, his assigned “buddy” Damon, who was a nurse, and Alex, an NYU grad
student from Michigan, volunteered to try and venture out for supplies.

Rhodey held his breath as they approached the double doors leading to the outside. The two guards
there watched their approach, looking bored as far as Rhodey could read alien body language, but they didn’t raise their weapons, which Rhodey counted as a win.

They all exchanged nervous glances, but despite their obvious anxiety, when Alex spoke, her voice was steady. “We need supplies. If you expect us to stay here and stay alive, we need food and other things. We can go out to some stores close by and get it.”

The guards just stared at them for a while, and they began to shift nervously, but eventually one of the guards made a clicking sound and gestured with its gun for them to go out the doors. Either the aliens could understand them, or they’d just condemned themselves to death for stepping out of line. Rhodey could do nothing but watch as the three of them left. He saw several more aliens approach them just as the doors shut.

He forced himself to look calm when he saw the unsure looks he was getting from some of the people (his people, now, he’d taken up the role of their leader and now he was responsible for them). He hoped he hadn’t just sent three people to their deaths, but they needed supplies, or they’d all be dead sooner rather than later.

Rhodey wasn’t wearing a watch and didn’t have his phone on him when he left the hospital, and most people’s batteries were dead by now, but Rabia had a working watch. He tried not to ask the time too often, but Rabia occasionally reported it, letting Rhodey know that they’d been gone for hours. He was just starting to consider what he’d say to the group if they didn’t return when there was a bang and some kind of alien sound on the outer doors. Several people jumped and gasped at the unexpected noise, but then the doors opened, and Matt, Alex, and Damon came in, flanked by aliens and pushing or pulling eight heavily laden shopping carts and industrial bins between them.

There were cries of excitement from the group, and Rabia jumped up from Rhodey’s side to join Li, the last leader, to help the others bring in the supplies and to make sure everyone stayed in their places. While they were gone, Rhodey had discussed what to do when they returned, and made sure everyone understood that no matter how excited they were to see what was procured, there couldn’t be a free-for-all.

Matt, Alex, and Damon were smiling at the crowd as people clapped for them and shouted thanks, but there was a stunned look to them that Rhodey didn’t like. Before they left, they’d created a space in an open area down a small hallway behind some heavy equipment that could be used for storage and sorting, and Rhodey wheeled over as they pulled the supplies through and around a bend. He turned to smile at the closest of the group, who were watching the bins move out of sight with hunger and hope. “Give us a few minutes to sort everything and catalog, and we’ll get it out as soon as we can, okay?” He said, and they nodded and smiled.

When he rounded the corner, all five of the leaders were facing him, clearly waiting for his opinion and instruction. The three who’d gone out had dropped the smiles and just looked haunted now, but Rhodey decided that the group’s needs were most important. “First thing’s first,” he said, “we need to make a list of everything we’ve got.”

Damon dug in one of the carts and produced a plain notepad and pen, which he handed to Rabia. Rhodey nodded his approval as they all started moving to unpack the carts and bins, one at a time, listing out the supplies as they went so Rabia could make a record.

“Where’d you go?” Rhodey asked as they began counting out packs of canned food.

“Couple diners, a grocery store, two or three offices, a few drugstores, and a clinic,” Matt listed off. “We got lucky. Some of the places had been looted, during the initial invasion, I think, but most of them were intact, and I think we were some of the earliest to get the idea to go out for stuff. We met a
few others while we were in the stores, but not many, and everywhere was mostly still full of stuff.”

“We tried not to take excessively,” Alex said, “once we realized there were other people being let out. Seems like you were right, they don’t seem to care what we do as long as we don’t have weapons and we’re under guard when we go out. We talked to the other people we saw, and the guards looked like they were listening in but they didn’t stop us.”

“Guess it’s easier for them if we go and get our own stuff and all they have to do is watch us to make sure we’re not trying anything,” Damon added.

Rhodey nodded and looked at all of the things they’d gathered. “This is amazing, everyone, thank you so much. You did a great job, really incredible.” He returned their weak smiles and they spent the next few minutes in silence except for the continued list of supplies.

They really had done incredibly well, covering a ton of areas. There was enough food for everyone in the group for at least a week—that was without any kind of rationing—and they’d gone for easy things, prepackaged and nonperishable, that didn’t require prep of any kind, but there was still a decent variety. There were bottles of sports drinks that could be distributed, drunk, and then reused for water for everyone. They’d gathered enough toiletries for everyone as well, everything from toothbrushes and deodorant to disposable razors and tampons. There were extra clothes in every size, a few pillows and sleeping bags, and several giant packages of toilet paper. The clinic and drugstores had mostly been looted, but they’d managed to get their hands on some minor medications, including some of the things group members were missing, as well as over the counter supplements, pain meds, and first aid supplies. There were extra flashlights and batteries in case the power went out, packages of plastic and paper bags, string and duct tape and other multi-use items that they might need for any number of things, and even a few magazines and books thrown into the bottom of one of the bins. Damon pulled out a few packages of adult diapers from one of the bins and handed them to Rhodey silently, who forced himself not to react beyond nodding his thanks.

Once they’d made a list of everything, they sat down to begin assembling initial packages for everyone. Some of the things they’d distribute as needed or over time, but for now, everyone was at least getting some toiletries and food. As they settled in to work on assembly, Rhodey finally decided to broach the subject.

“So, what happened out there?” When Matt, Alex, and Damon just looked up at him with confused expressions, Rhodey sighed. “I’m sorry that you had to be the ones to go out, to see whatever you did that’s got you looking so spooked. But I’d like to know.”

Matt took a shaky breath and Damon looked back at the floor, so Alex was once again the one to speak up. “They’ve got everyone in camps like this now, I think,” she said, and her voice was slightly choked. “Some of them are outside, we could see them as we walked by. There were bodies outside a lot of them. The guards’ guns disintegrate people, so I think they killed each other, and had to put the bodies somewhere. We got lucky that we were able to settle everyone down so fast, and that our group is small. There were areas that had to have thousands in one place. Some of them didn’t even have room to sit down.”

Damon took a shaky breath and forced the next words out, still staring at the floor. “They’ve got a setup at one of the big intersections a few blocks away. Ships coming and going all the time, and a line…” He cut off suddenly with a half-muffled sob.

Alex continued for him. “They’re emptying the camps. A big line of people going by into the main intersection. On one side, some of them go into the ships. We saw one of the ships take off with them, and go up through the portal. I don’t know where they’re taking them. On the other side, they go into a big open area, and they’ve got some sort of giant ray or something set up, and they’re
killing them. They’re just killing them all, hundreds at a time. I don’t know how long it’ll take them to get here, but eventually they’ll send us there too.”

There were tears running down her face, but she was blinking through them, looking up at Rhodey, stronger than anyone should have to be. He looked around and saw that Rabia and Li were watching them with horrified expressions. They’d stopped their packing. Rhodey put as much strength into his voice as he could. “Well, until that happens, we stay here, and we take care of each other. Because that’s what we can do, and that’s what makes us human.”

These people had stepped up to be leaders for a reason. They were resilient. He could see that they weren’t exactly convinced, but they pushed through to keep helping others. He came to a quick decision. “Listen, I don’t think everyone out there needs to hear this. I know I’m asking a lot, but I think that information should stay among us only. But we all need to agree on that. I’m not your dictator. If you think you should tell them, let me know.”

Matt shook his head. “You’re right. Telling everyone will just make them panic. We finally got them calmed down, and now we have supplies. I mean, I don’t think anyone thinks there’s going to be some magical solution to this, but it’s better not to let them know exactly what we’ve seen happening.”

All the others murmured their agreements and they went back to sorting. It was quiet for a few minutes before Matt spoke up, addressing Rhodey. “When we were in the stores talking to people, we heard some things about the rest of the city. I guess the leader or king or whatever he is, Thando?”

“Thanos,” Rhodey said, fighting the sudden urge to smile at the mispronunciation. Thanos was nothing to smile about.

“Well, they said he’s got an area cleared not too far from here, up a ways, and he sits on this gigantic throne all day, watching the camps, and the Avengers.”

Rhodey’s head snapped up. “The Avengers?”

Matt nodded. “I guess they captured them, at least some of them. This guy at one of the pharmacies, he said they’ve got them strung up on this big platform, like they’re advertising that we lost.” He swallowed visibly.

“Alive?”

“Yeah, though maybe not for long. I guess they look pretty bad.”

Rhodey ground his teeth. Before he’d lost contact with everyone, he got confirmation that Vision had been killed, which meant the only “Avengers” out there were the bastards that had betrayed them all and killed Tony. In the face of so much death and destruction, Rhodey really shouldn’t have any more anger left for them, but he did. Even in this situation, even though they were probably being tortured out there, Rhodey still felt an urge to track them down and punish them himself. Another, less vengeful part of him hoped that they’d be dead soon, just so they could escape whatever misery they were enduring now.

“All of them, do you know?”

Matt thought for a moment, then shrugged. “Not really sure, but I don’t think so. Guy said there were only five of them. Maybe some of them got killed in the fight.”

Rhodey didn’t really know what to do with that information, and no one said anything more about it.
He decided to put it out of his mind. It was likely he’d never even get the chance to see the remaining ex-Avengers before he was marched to his own death, and dwelling on them would only distract him from what he needed to do now to take care of his people.

There were tears of joy when they distributed the packages. They got meds out to those who needed them, and organized systems for sharing bedding and extra clothes. There was soap now, and though there wasn’t a shower, they still had running water and an industrial-sized sink, so they sent people in pairs to the bathroom with the newly acquired soap to wash up for the first time in nearly a week. Despite the grim circumstances, the mood was practically elated, and the happiness made even the leaders, burdened with the knowledge of what was going on outside their walls, smile as they passed out supplies.

The upbeat mood didn’t last for long, with no new successes coming in, but at least they weren’t fighting or killing each other. They all settled in as days turned into weeks, and weeks turned into a month.

They were supporting each other as best as they could, but there wasn’t much more to be done. They’d begun rationing from the beginning, but their food supplies dwindled alarmingly fast anyway. In the second week, Matt and Alex went out again to look for more supplies, but returned empty-handed and grim-faced with the news that everywhere they’d looked had been thoroughly stripped of supplies. The guards wouldn’t let them out again after that.

Matt had also pulled Rhodey aside to tell him what he’d heard from his one interaction with another camp’s leader outside their room. Rhodey stayed in the back for a while, alone, to process.

So Pepper had found her way in. She must have hid from the aliens in the Tower during the move to the camps, of course there were ways to do it, even with FRIDAY offline. Tony had indeed left her a back door into one of his suits, and she’d used it to make a last stand. He couldn’t blame her, no matter how pointless it had obviously been. They were all going to die anyway, and though he was proud of what he was doing here, taking care of these people, if he had the chance to get back in his suit one more time he’d absolutely take it, even if it meant dying a painful death by alien hands.

But knowing she was gone was still a blow. And thoughts of her, of what must have been going through her mind in her last moments, inevitably brought him to Tony again. He’d done a good job of not thinking about Tony for the past two weeks, but now, as things were as settled as they were likely to be, he sat alone and let himself cry for a while. When he’d let out the emotions he needed to, he pulled himself back together, ready to face his doomed leadership.

Things were degenerating, it was inevitable. Every day Rhodey was relieved that their camp wasn’t being emptied and taken to their deaths, but death was coming at them from multiple angles. They were running out of food, down to rationing quarter meals each day. The power had been intermittently off and now seemed to be off for good, and though the guards had light sources of their own, they didn’t care to light the bathroom or the corners where the group stored their supplies. Their flashlight batteries were running out.

Their small supply of medications had run out, and there were worries among them about what would happen when people who needed them started suffering because of it. Rhodey himself had felt guilty for taking some of the pain meds, but he’d eventually admitted that he needed them.

They’d been managing his pain in the hospital, and the adrenaline of the first few days of the invasion had kept him from really feeling it. But as the days passed and he spent them sitting in a wheelchair instead of a bed, not taking any medications or eating enough, under constant physical and mental stress, his body was not taking it well. He was in a constant low level of pain that had been growing by the day, and he was struggling with certain tasks. Damon, an experienced nurse,
had been happy to help him with certain personal tasks, but he couldn’t do anything about the pain. Rhodey put on a fake smile and didn’t tell anyone else exactly how bad it had gotten, because they were depending on him. But it was getting harder by the day.

A month in, and their food was just about gone. From the extreme rationing, they were all already hungry and irritated. At least, having had the opportunity to build trust and work with each other in the beginning, the people still trusted the leaders and each other, which made everything smoother. But there were more and more petty squabbles breaking out, and they were taking longer to break up or calm down. People were frightened, knowing they were running out of food and not sure what would happen when they did. The leaders were losing hope, worn out by the stress of keeping everyone together and knowing that any day could be the day their camp was chosen to go.

People were spending more and more of their time huddled together, crying or praying. Rhodey had run out of words of comfort. Things were coming to an end, one way or another.

He was giving the very last of their food to the kids when everything changed.
Rhodey is giving the very last of the food to the kids when a tremor passes through the ground beneath them. They've felt the vibrations of the largest ships landing and taking off before, but nothing like this. He has just a moment to wonder whether it's the arrival of some new death machine when the sound begins.

At first he thinks it's a scream from someone in the room, but after a moment, he realizes that it's not a human sound. It's a cry echoing among the guards, and though he can never tell whether he's interpreting alien sounds correctly, it seems alarmed. The guards are all looking up and around, speaking in their clicking languages to each other through communicators. One of them flings the doors open, and Rhodey hears the sound of screams, both human and alien, outside.

In the space of a few seconds, all of the guards have left, pushed their way through the people and out the doors with no hesitation. There's a moment of shock as Rhodey and the leaders look back and forth, and then Matt rushes over to the doors to see what's happening. He sticks his head out the doors for a minute, then pulls it back in and shouts into the room, “They're leaving! All of them!”

Now there's shouting among the humans, as everyone tries to rush for the doors at once. Rhodey stays back and out of the way, not wanting to be pushed out of his chair, and follows the tail end of the group as they all burst outside.

It's incredibly bright; that's the only thing he registers at first. There are a few windows high on the walls of the factory floor they've been living in for the last month, but it wasn't the same as being outside. Despite whatever's happening around them, Rhodey sees that many of the group are just standing there blinking, taking in the feeling of standing in the sunlight for the first time in a month.

The sound of engines pulls him from the moment. The aliens are completely ignoring the humans, calling to each other and sprinting for their ships, small and large alike. The ships are taking off, lifting into the air and moving faster than Rhodey had thought was possible. He can't fathom what's causing them all to abandon their posts and leave, and he can't feel any relief, not when it might mean that something even worse is coming.

There are other people around them now, more than he's seen in a long time. They're emerging from their own camps, realizing that the guards have left. A few people are running in various directions, some pounding after the lagging guards and trying to take them down, others taking off for abandoned buildings, probably just trying to get away and hide. But most of them are just standing in the sun like Rhodey's group, too stunned by the sudden change to do much more.

There's an increase in the yelling suddenly, and Rhodey begins looking around for the source, some new alien horror, or maybe an unexpected savior driving away the invaders. He can't find anything, but he realizes that several people are pointing up at the sky at the same time that Matt, next to him, says “holy shit.”

He looks up, and can't look away. The massive portal through which the invading army arrived is flickering like an old movie reel, one second showing the black depths of space and the next the clear blue sky behind it. They watch it go in and out for a moment before the edge of the physical circle splinters off, and the entire thing falls apart.

A cheer goes up around them, but it's quickly drowned out by the roar of enormous engines. From a few blocks away, he sees one of the giant ships rise from what must have been the kill site that the leaders described after their supply run. He thinks at first that that ship is the entire source of the
noise, but it’s not. From across the tops of buildings, he sees the bulk of the main flagship ascending into the sky.

“Where are they going?” Rhodey wonders aloud.

Li, who’s standing just next to him, shouts “What?” over the sound.

“Where are they going to go?” Rhodey yells back, fighting to be heard over the combined sound of all the ships’ engines. Now that the portal is gone, are they planning to just fly off into space? He wonders whether the unexpected breakdown of the portal is what caused this panic, but he has a feeling it’s something else. If Thanos is here and still in control, surely he could fix the portal.

He doesn’t need to wonder for long. A sudden, new noise reverberates even over the engines’ whines, sounding like the air itself is breaking apart. People shout and duck down with their arms over their heads instinctually at the sound, but Rhodey’s eye is caught by the flagship.

It cracks in half, splits apart at the seams like a cheaply made toy. There’s a moment or two where it’s still rising, falling apart while it does, and then the halves of it separate. One half falls to the ground immediately, impacting with an Earth-shattering crash that sets some people around him stumbling. The other remains airborne for a few more seconds, then begins to fall as well. By the time it hits the ground, it’s even closer to them than the first half, and the crash from this one actually causes some people to fall to their knees.

The sound of the crash and the whines of the retreating ships echo through the streets for a long time, and Rhodey’s ears are ringing in the aftermath. There are a few moments of stunned silence in which no one moves, and then the yelling resumes. There are mixed shouts of joy and confusion and terror. Something is driving the aliens to run away, but no one can tell what, and Rhodey can tell that he’s not the only one worried about what it means. What if something worse is coming?

The chaos continues, and Rhodey is just about to suggest to Li that they round up the group and consider going back inside for safety when he’s blinded.

A shockwave of powerful light comes out of nowhere. Rhodey can’t see or hear anything, his senses completely overtaken with a bright light and a roaring sound. It feels like he’s suddenly hundreds of feet underwater, like a massive pressure is pushing on him, constricting his chest and weakening his limbs.

He can feel his chair being pushed backwards, tipping, and then falling. He tries to throw his arms out to catch himself, but it’s like moving through molasses. He’s reminded of extreme G-force training exercises in the Air Force, of how hard it is to make even the simplest motions in the middle of a tight loop in the air, the feeling of experiencing it for the first time, feeling his sight go dim and blacking out. He can feel it coming now, rushing up on him, and there’s nothing he can do to stop it.

When he comes to, he can’t see or hear. That bright light and the pressure on his ears have ruined his senses for a few minutes—at least, he hopes it’s temporary. He doesn’t know what the light was, or what it means for their immediate future, but he’s sure it was connected to whatever destroyed the portal and the flagship. Hopefully that means it’s on the humans’ side, whatever it is.

He can feel that he’s lying on his side, and when he reaches back he discovers his overturned chair behind him. There’s not much he can do about the situation, not blind and deaf and without any help. If his senses don’t start coming back he’ll have to figure something out, but he allows himself a few moments to just lie there and try to breathe normally again.

The roaring in his ears does start to die down eventually, and after a hell of a lot of blinking, he
realizes that he can see some shapes again, outlines of buildings and people. He closes his eyes for another minute, trying to let them readjust, and when he opens them again his vision is almost back to normal.

He looks around and sees that everyone else is in a similar state. Every person in sight is on the ground, though a few are waving their hands in front of their faces or pushing themselves up and rubbing their ears, no doubt trying to regain their senses like Rhodey had.

As a few people start climbing shakily to their feet, Rhodey turns to survey his own group. Matt and Damon are already up as well, and when Matt spots him, he climbs carefully over the prone bodies of others to right Rhodey’s wheelchair and then haul him up into it.

“Thanks,” Rhodey pants when he’s done, winded from the pressure of the shockwave and the move up into the chair. He’s pleased that he can hear his own voice pretty much normally.

“No problem. What the hell was that?” Matt asks, and Rhodey shakes his head. He has no idea. Now that he knows he can hear again, he realizes that it’s eerily silent all around. It seems like everyone was knocked out by the mysterious shockwave, and he can’t hear any more ships’ engines. He’s not sure how long they were out for, but he doesn’t think it was long. He wonders if all of the ships crashed, or were destroyed by the force of the shockwave. It seems unlikely that they escaped; who could pilot a ship through that light?

More and more people are picking themselves up now, asking after one another and looking around, stunned by the turn of events. It’s still quiet: the shockwave seems to have silenced the urge to scream and panic, at least for now. For several minutes, Rhodey busies himself with checking on the group, helping to pull people up and exchanging remarks of surprise and wonder about the light.

As people recover, however, they begin moving again. The relative silence of their area is broken when someone comes running in to report that the rest of the ships that were nearby have crashed. This inspires a few cheers and some more movement, as people conclude that they’re free from the guards and start running off, looking for loved ones. Then someone comes sprinting through the street, yelling “Thanos is dead! We’re free!” and all hell breaks loose.

A deafening cheer is echoing through the streets. Some people are dropping to their knees and openly sobbing; others are screaming the names of their friends and family, abandoning the relative safety of the area near their camps and taking off to look for those they’d lost. There are people running in every direction now, paying no mind to others except to push past them. Rhodey tries to move forward, to find someone in his group to talk to or just to get off the road he’s in the middle of, and someone crashes into him from behind. He’s almost thrown from his chair as it tips dangerously. Thankfully, it lands back upright again, and he takes a moment to just sit there and breathe. If he’d fallen, he could have been trampled. Though the mood is joyous rather than terrified, it’s as chaotic as the day they were taken to the camps.

He’s lost sight of most of his group, and he knows he won’t see most of them again. Maybe someday in passing, when the trauma is long behind them, some of them will pass by each other in the streets and recognize one another. Extreme circumstances have a way of bringing people together and forming strong bonds. But in their case, those bonds were forged from their captivity, and that’s over now. He wouldn’t blame a single one of them for never wanting to see him again, no matter what he’s done for them in the last month. Many of them had their own families and friends to look for, and though there was a good chance they wouldn’t find them alive, they still had to look.

Rhodey doesn’t have many people left to look for. When things calm down, he’ll try to contact his mother, of course, but for now, that would be pointless. She lives in Georgia, she’s probably just getting out of her own camp (assuming that this was happening all over the world, he can’t think of
why it wouldn’t, but god, the thought of Thanos’s armies just killing everyone in other states is an icy band around his heart), and he doesn’t have any method of transportation.

Tony, Pepper, and Vision are dead. Most of his other friends were in the Air Force, and he knows better than to think any of them are still alive. They’d all been fit and healthy, still active duty, and they would have been called on to fight in the initial invasion. Despite the fact that Thanos and his armies had left the infrastructure mostly intact and rounded up most of the population rather than killing them outright, the one thing they’d decimated without mercy was the world’s militaries. Anyone wearing a uniform or wielding a weapon of any kind was taken out with no hesitation.

Still, Rhody is alive, and so are all of the people currently running through the streets. This was what he’d fought for, even though he couldn’t have predicted it, to live to see this. He’ll push through and smile because he’s alive, because the alternative—contemplating how alone he might very well be and a future with no friends or family—would overwhelm him. He’ll find something to focus on, and then something else, and keep going until the inevitable breakdown. Tony didn’t have the monopoly on repression.

Two areas of focus demand his immediate attention. The first is helping to organize this chaos. It would be both harder and easier than it had been in the camps. There were far more people here now, they moved more freely, and there were no guards or terror to keep them relatively subdued. On the other hand, happier people were easier to help and they now had their world back, free reign to go where they needed, get people into shelter and find food and other supplies, and work on getting the city back online.

The second immediate focus is the more difficult, but possibly the more important one. Rhody needs to find out what the hell happened. He hadn’t been lying when he’d told Matt that ridiculous, insane, unpredictable things happen in the world and sometimes they’re good, but he hadn’t really believed they’d be saved, and he was skeptical of anything that seemed too good to be true. That Thanos just dropped dead and the aliens fled seems unlikely. And what had destroyed the portal and the flagship? What was the light wave that had knocked them all out?

Maybe something had gone wrong with the Infinity Stones, some sort of backlash on Thanos. From what he’s heard and seen of the stones, they certainly held the kind of power capable of destroying that portal and creating that shockwave. But this seemed too… controlled for that. Everyone with any personal experience with the stones described them as chaotic, raw, uncontrolled power. It just seems too unlikely that, even in the event of some sort of backlash against Thanos, the stones would have somehow spared the humans, only destroyed the invading armies.

If he wants to find out what happened, he’ll have to start where Thanos died. From what he heard thirdhand from Matt and the others, Thanos’s “throne” had been set up not too far from where Rhody is now, almost directly underneath the portal, close to the Tower. The witnesses to the actual event might already be scattered, but he has a better chance of finding one there than here.

He’s preparing himself to start wheeling over there—it might take him hours to get there, but hopefully the roads are fairly clear of debris, and after all, he has all the time in the world now—when a hand lands on his shoulder. He looks up to see Rabia and a dozen other people, all loosely holding megaphones and notepads.

He raises his eyebrows at the efficiency of their organization, but then realizes he has no idea how long he’s been sitting here contemplating his next moves. As he tunes back into his surroundings, he can hear that the noise has changed. It’s still as loud as before, but there are fewer desperate screams and more confused yelling. It reminds him of the crowd exiting the stadium after a football game, except that no one made plans for where to meet and nobody knows how to contact each other.
There are too many people in the streets for anyone to hope to find a specific person, and even the most desperate of runners seem to have realized that.

“This is insane,” Rhodey observes.

Rabia indicates herself and the others. “We’re going to try to start some kind of system. Create lines, have everyone sign in on a list so we know who’s in the city, send them all somewhere to stay and keep track of it, so people can ask about their friends and family, and know where to find them.”

Rhodey nods. It’s a great idea. Rabia was excellent with organization in the camp, always on top of things, but he’s surprised that she hadn’t gone running off like everyone else. The emotional release of suddenly being free after all that time and the need to finally find out what happened to loved ones are powerful motivators. He realizes that he’d never heard her talk about her family in the camp. She was always so pragmatically focused on the present and the future.

He quirks an eyebrow at her. “You didn’t have any family to go running to find?”

She gives him a half-smile. “My only family is my sister, she lives in France. If I want any hope of contacting her, we need to figure out the phones and the internet here, and hope they do the same there. But we’ve got a lot to do before we get to that. This is my home, my city. I want to help them before I focus on myself.”

Rhodey smiles back. “You’re an amazingly selfless person, Rabia, and the city is lucky to have you.”

“Thank you. Would you like to help? We need to recruit some more people, for various jobs, food, power, injuries, but the first thing we need for the lists is people to run back and forth and tell us which buildings are suitable for people to shelter in for the time. Hotels, offices, things like that.” She indicates the megaphones they’re holding. “We found these, for getting people’s attention and helping to direct them, but we’re going to need everyone we’ve got here to even start making lists of people. We need more help.”

Rhodey nods. “I can do that, once you’ve got them quieted down a bit. Ask anyone who’d like to volunteer to come to me, I can hang out near you guys and assign jobs.”

“Perfect. Thank you so much, for all you’ve done.” Rabia hands him a notebook and pen, which he takes with a smile.

It takes surprisingly little time to get things going, and soon they’re starting to come together into some semblance of organization. By the time Rabia and the megaphone-holders climb up onto abandoned cars and dusty trash bins to start getting people’s attention, people are more than willing to listen. The vast majority of people have figured out that there’s no way they can find their lost friends and family in this chaos without some kind of order, and people tend to listen to a person with a megaphone.

It takes a while to get the lines of people under control and get a system going, but soon they have signups running smoothly. Rhodey takes, records, and gives jobs to new volunteers for over an hour before they finally decide that they’ve got enough people covering the immediately important jobs, and Rabia tells Rhodey to go and search for answers about what happened.

During a break in the initial recording, he’d confessed his worries about how they’d been saved to Rabia, and his desire to go and try to find out for himself. She’d agreed with his assessment. They’d tried to see if there was any useful information among all of the people now being recorded, but they weren’t getting much. Within minutes of the news of Thanos’s death, there were already at least two
dozen different rumors circulating about how it had happened, everything from some cosmic event to an alien heart attack to the Avengers coming back to life and killing him. Some people were very insistent about their version of events, but so far, none of them seemed to be actual witnesses to it, and so Rhodey had told Rabia that he wanted to go and check it out for himself.

Now, Rabia hands him an extra water bottle from the supply someone had brought out, bends down to hug him and thank him again for everything, and tells him to go and find out what happened. He returns the hug and the thanks warmly, aware that in the chaos of organizing everything, and with the size of the city, this might be the last time he ever sees her.

He begins wheeling away, moving with the crowds up towards where he knows Thanos’s throne was. The people are heading to their assigned shelters, but Rhodey’s plan is to go and try to find answers about their sudden freedom, then pick a shelter of his own nearby at random. Rabia has his name on one of her lists, but there’s no need to confirm where he’s staying. No one will be looking for him.

He stops two intersections over to help instruct some people on where to go. The news is spreading about their attempts at organization—the runners Rhodey had recruited to go and direct people to Rabia helped significantly with that—but there are still people pouring in from every direction. He’s sure similar organizational efforts are being made in other parts of the city, but the challenge of integrating all of them could be dealt with later. For now, as long as they got everyone’s name down somewhere and found shelter, food, and water for everyone, they’d be okay for at least a day or two. Having some kind of direction helped calm people down too, even those who were desperate to find their loved ones.

Rhodey takes a short break to drink some of his water, eat one of the packets of crackers he’d been given before leaving. He observes the more controlled crowd now, as people walk by instead of running and talk instead of shouting. Though some of them are undoubtedly haunted by death and destruction and other horrors, every face he sees shows relief.

He’s been sitting there a few minutes when he becomes acutely aware that the noise has died down on one side of him. For a second he thinks he’s having a sudden problem hearing out of that ear. But when he turns to that side, the silence is now in front of him. He can still hear the chattering of the crowds behind him, but a hush is falling over the people in front of him unnaturally fast.

Those he can see have stopped in their tracks. Some are looking around for the reason for the silence, falling quiet themselves as they try to figure out what’s happened. Whatever the cause is, it seems to be moving towards where Rhodey is sitting, because the eerie silence is moving past him, starting to affect the people immediately behind him as well. The people in front of him all seem to be turned inward, facing something that’s caught their attention. It’s apparently directly in Rhodey’s path, but he can’t see what it is, stuck in the chair and behind a dense crowd of people.

Very suddenly, there’s movement in front of him. The crowd in his view seems to melt away, people moving seamlessly back and out of the way of whatever it is that’s attracting their attention, creating a path for it; a path Rhodey is directly in the middle of. He’s preparing himself to move out of the way as well when he catches sight of it. At first, all he interprets is a bright blue glow in a vaguely human shape, but as it moves towards him and his eyes take in more details, it solidifies into something very familiar, and his breath stops in his chest.

Tony.
Rhodey is dead.

Dead or dreaming, or some combination of both, maybe he’s dying and this is the last hallucination his brain is coming up with to ease him into oblivion. That’s the only explanation for this. Maybe he’s dead and this is Heaven. Rhodey’s never been very religious, not like his mother, but he still remembers some things from church as a kid. Maybe he died during Thanos’s attack, or at the airport, and the last month was actually Purgatory. His soul was being purified through hardship, and now he was moving on to Heaven, greeted by Tony at its gates.

Except he doesn’t actually believe in any of that, and he’s still hungry and tired and in pain. He knows this is reality, he’s just having a hard time processing it.

Tony walks toward him, and Rhodey takes him in. The light around him seems to be coming from within him, shining out through the marks on his skin. The bright lines are scrawled across every inch of him that Rhodey can see, as though the blood in his veins has turned to light and is glowing through his skin. His eyes are glowing as brightly as the rest of him. He’s barefoot, and looks to be wrapped in a blanket and nothing more.

It might be difficult for some people, but Rhodey has no trouble telling that this is Tony. The obvious changes are startling, sure, but those are just on the surface. His shape, the way he holds himself, hell, even his gait, those are all familiar to Rhodey.

Except Tony’s dead. Rhodey was there when Vision brought back his body. He can’t possibly be here now, even looking different like this, alien involvement or not. This is a hallucination, maybe induced by hunger or lack of sleep. But even as he thinks it, he’s aware of his complete memory, his sharp senses, everything that’s telling him that this is all real.

Maybe this is one of those incredible, ridiculous, amazing things, maybe everything about Tony seems familiar, but some part of Rhodey just can’t accept it, can’t believe it. He thinks it’s the part of him that wouldn’t think about Tony’s death, the part that’s trying to save him from irrevocable hurt. As much as most of him wants to throw himself at Tony, to rejoice that his best friend is somehow alive, that small, protective part of him knows that if he does that, only to find out that this isn’t really Tony, he won’t be able to recover. He’s been through too much for that kind of blow not to ruin him now.

Still, he can’t stop the tears from forming as he watches Tony walk towards him. He’s speechless, and the crowd is silent as well. It feels like the world is holding still as Tony approaches him.

Tony stops just out of reach of Rhodey. They spend a long moment just looking at each other. Rhodey takes in the familiar face, with new marks and glowing blue eyes, yes, but still the same face he knows, down to the last line. Tony’s expression is complicated. Rhodey thinks part of it is confusion, but he couldn’t say what about; maybe the circumstances, the environment, Rhodey
himself. Maybe something in him recognizes Rhodey, but he isn’t quite aware enough to know who he is. Rhodey could speculate a million different ways. Tony also looks… sad, unbearably sad, and that’s an expression Rhodey doesn’t have trouble deciphering on Tony’s face. But this, this is beyond even what he’s seen in Tony before. It’s somehow beyond description, and it hurts Rhodey to see.

Their moment of still contemplation ends when Tony shifts again. He slowly moves to kneel in front of Rhodey, now looking up at him instead of down. Time seems to slow down as Tony reaches a hand out and opens his mouth.

“Rhodey.”

It’s the only thing he says, but it’s the breaking point for Rhodey. Whatever reservations he’d still held are shattered. He’s not even sure he could pinpoint exactly what it is; the voice, the tone, or something else, but he’s absolutely positive. This is Tony, his Tony, without a doubt. He manages to croak out a weak, hoarse “Tony” in return, and the tears welling in his eyes finally fall as he reaches out to take Tony’s outstretched hand.

The moment he makes contact with Tony, it’s like something lifts in him. The trauma of the last month doesn’t seem as immediate, as crushing. He doesn’t feel so hungry or tired anymore, and he barely feels the pain. None of that matters in the face of having Tony here again.

He pulls the slightest bit on Tony’s hand, and Tony obligingly moves closer so that Rhodey can lean forward and pull him into a tight hug. Tony is warm, and almost lax in Rhodey’s grip, as though he doesn’t know what’s happening or how to respond to the hug. But he leans his head into Rhodey’s shoulder and seems content to stay there, and Rhodey spends a long minute just holding onto him and feeling him breathe, letting his world narrow down to just the sound and the feeling of it.

It’s surreal, for reasons beyond the obvious. In the space of a few minutes, Rhodey’s gone from avoiding thinking about his lack of a future to holding someone important to him and to the world, his own family that he thought he’d lost forever. He’s gone from being one of the people who’d lost everything to one of the lucky few who’d found the person he’d lost. His mind still hasn’t entirely caught up, and might not for a while. He knows without having to think about it that Tony is the one who killed Thanos and saved all of them. He’s been resurrected and obviously been changed in serious ways, he’s powerful and glowing and who knows what else. But here, in Rhodey’s arms again, he’s just Tony, the same kid from MIT turned world-weary man that Rhodey’s known and loved for years. The dichotomy might be difficult to reconcile, but he’ll do it. For Tony, he’ll do almost anything. He’d lost Tony once and been unable to do anything about it; he won’t ever take Tony’s presence in his life for granted again.

Finally, he pulls Tony back, scrubs briefly at his own tears to clear his vision, and pulls in a deep, hitching breath to calm himself. His eyes meet Tony’s, and he still sees that horribly sad look, with a hint of confusion. Despite the color change and the glow to them, he still recognizes his friend in there—a little lost, maybe, but there. He looks Tony up and down, and finally has to ask.

“Tony.” He nearly chokes on the word, emotion clogging his throat at the fact that he’d never thought he would speak that name to its owner again. He pushes it down to ask the important question. “What happened?”

It’s general and vague, partly on purpose. Though he’s really asking about Thanos and how Tony was resurrected, Tony can answer it any way he wants. But Tony’s face scrunches up, the sad expression still present but now hidden behind deep confusion. “I don’t know,” he finally says. His eyebrows draw down like he’s unhappy with the admission.
Rhodey puts one hand on Tony’s shoulder and brushes the other through his hair in what he hopes is a familiar, comforting gesture. “Okay,” he says, trying to sound soothing, to assure Tony that he doesn’t need an answer right now, it’s okay that Tony isn’t sure. “That’s okay. We’ll figure it out.” He gives Tony a teary smile, and Tony looks up at him, still just looking lost.

Rhodey takes in more of him then, the lines on his face and the tired slump of his shoulders, the drooping of his eyes. He looks exhausted, and just as Rhodey opens his mouth to comment on it, he sways slightly where he’s kneeling, and his eyes seem to go unfocused. Rhodey needs to get him out of here, somewhere where he can rest and figure everything out.

He looks up and is almost startled by the silent, watchful crowd. In the emotional storm of seeing Tony again and realizing that he’s real, he’d almost forgotten that they were in the middle of the street, surrounded on all sides by observers. The people look at Tony, and now Rhodey as well, with respect and awe, and all Rhodey can think is that he’s grateful that they’ll surely be willing to help.

He looks around at the crowd. “Do you know the nearest working shelter?” he asks. Some of them look startled, like they’d been so caught up in watching the scene between Rhodey and Tony that they’d forgotten they were actually standing there.

A few people nod. “There’s an office building just down the road they’re using,” a woman says, pointing down the street to their left.

Rhodey nods and opens his mouth to thank her, but a man standing next to her shakes his head. “Fancy hotel not far past that is taking people in,” he says. He looks at Rhodey when he says it, but then his eyes shift back to Tony. There’s something shocked and reverent in his expression. “You… you should stay somewhere comfortable.”

There are murmurs of agreement among the crowd, and Rhodey can’t bring himself to disagree. If it were him alone, he’d never bypass a close shelter for something more luxurious, but he wants Tony somewhere comfortable, relaxing, private. Whatever they’ve all been through in the last month, it can’t be anything compared to whatever has happened to Tony. After all of that, after being resurrected and saving them all, Tony deserves to be able to lie down in a real bed, at the very least.

So Rhodey nods and thanks them, and then focuses back in on Tony. Tony’s eyes are tired, unfocused, staring vaguely in the direction of Rhodey’s legs. He doesn’t look like he was listening to the conversation. Rhodey puts a hand back on his upper arm and leans in. “Hey,” he says, and Tony’s gaze moves to him, exhausted but questioning. He puts the slightest bit of pressure on Tony’s arm, pulling upwards. “You think you can walk with me?”

Tony seems to contemplate that for a long moment before nodding and climbing to his feet. He moves gracefully, his glowing patterns seeming to shift as he moves around. It’s an almost ethereal sight, and Rhodey can see why the crowds part for Tony, give him room to walk wherever he pleases, stand silent and reverent as he passes. It’s not just that he saved them all, it’s the way he moves, the aura around him, like he’s simultaneously a god among men and made of glass that might shatter the moment someone touches him.

He wants to reach for Tony’s hand, but he needs both arms to roll his chair down the uneven street. He starts moving a bit and looks back, worried that Tony is too tired or unsure or confused to follow him, but there’s no cause for hesitation. Tony follows Rhodey instantly, and when Rhodey turns again and begins moving down the street at a reasonable pace, Tony falls into step beside him.

The journey is silent, contemplative. He has no idea what Tony might be thinking about, but he has a million thoughts running through his own mind, mostly to do with Tony. He wants to get Tony somewhere private, quiet, and comfortable, but he’s not entirely sure what he’ll do once he gets
there. He wants to just let Tony get some rest, but there’s things they have to talk about. He needs to know more about Tony’s power, how he defeated Thanos and whether it’s something to be concerned about for Tony’s sake (or the sake of bystanders, but Christ, Rhodey can’t think about that conversation, about what he’ll do if it turns out Tony is some sort of a ticking bomb that might go off any moment and vaporize the city). But if Tony can’t or doesn’t want to talk about it, Rhodey doesn’t want to push him.

He’ll have to figure things out as he learns them, just take it one problem at a time. He doesn’t know what happened and can’t possibly imagine it, so he pushes away that train of thought for the rest of the journey to the hotel. They’ll deal with whatever comes up. What Rhodey really wants—what he needs—is to settle Tony in somewhere safe, and to get some food, water, and rest himself. However much adrenaline is flowing through him now, whatever great feelings the reunion with Tony brought out in him, there’s no denying that he’s also exhausted. If he doesn’t get settled with Tony soon, he’ll collapse, and he can’t do that while Tony isn’t safe. He won’t leave him alone.

When they get to the hotel, there’s an orderly line of people out the door, waiting to go in and be helped. They part like water for Tony and Rhodey, as quietly awed as everyone else has been so far. Rhodey feels a slight stab of guilt for getting ahead of so many people, just going in rather than waiting like everyone else, but it’s overshadowed by his concern for Tony. Despite his exhaustion, Tony is looking around, taking in his surroundings, though he still follows Rhodey unerringly wherever he goes.

They get inside the lobby, which is opulently decorated. This is a high-end hotel. The organizers inside have gotten a good system going. It’s almost like seeing a normal hotel working, except that the workers aren’t wearing any kind of uniform and the patrons all look a bit haggard and dirty for this class of hotel. Where the line is coming in, names are being recorded again, both for their own records and to compare later to the lists made outside, to make sure no one got lost in transit to their assigned shelter. As people are recorded, they’re put into groups of five or ten and given keycards to rooms. Some small groups are together, people who’ve already found each other or maybe who were together in the camps, but it’s mostly strangers being assigned to the same rooms. Until everything settles down more and they have records of everyone, they’ll need to share and conserve space. Before they move to their rooms, they pass by a station where people are handing out supplies, mostly extra food and water, but also small toiletries from large boxes of complimentary hotel items.

The same hush that’s followed them everywhere so far falls in the lobby, and it becomes nearly silent as most people turn to watch them pass. As soon as they cross the threshold, people are moving back and away from the desk, giving them room to go up to it. Rhodey once again feels like he’s taking advantage of their willingness to help Tony, but he doesn’t get the chance to insist that anyone who was already at the desk is served before them.

The man assigning rooms gapes at the sight of them for a moment, then bends down and clicks quickly at the hotel computer he’s using. In the back of Rhodey’s mind, he registers that they’re using the hotel’s electronic systems and starts wondering about whether cell phone signals and the internet are working again, but that’s something to be dealt with later. He’s still focused on just getting them somewhere safe.

The man quickly codes a card and walks solemnly over to them, gesturing towards the end of the lobby, near the elevators. Rhodey wheels over and Tony follows him. They stop in the space between all the elevators, where there’s relatively more privacy than out in the middle of the lobby. He hands the card to Rhodey. “Top floor, room 14. We’ll keep the rest of the floor clear. Power’s still on to this block and we’ve got generators too, so you’ll be fine on the elevators and everything should work in the room. We’ll send someone up in a minute with some supplies for you.”
Rhodey takes the card, but frowns. “You don’t have to do that. We can share the floor.”

The man gives him and Tony a small smile. “People will be knocking on your door all night if we do that. It’s really no trouble, there’s a lot of room here, and we’re not the only working building in the area.”

Rhodey knows arguing with him will just be pointless and seem ungrateful, and he does have a point. He wanted Tony somewhere restful, and it’s being offered. So he just smiles, thanks the man, and hits the button for the elevator. When they get on the elevator, he turns and looks fully at Tony again, for the first time since they’d started walking to the hotel. He’s sagging even more now, hunching in on himself like just the weight of his body is too much to bear. It would be alarming if Rhodey hadn’t seen the exact look on Tony plenty of times before, after three-day engineering binges and PTSD-riddled sleepless nights. It’s still worrying, but isn’t some alien problem that Rhodey has no idea how to even begin to deal with. It’s just Tony.

The room, when they get inside, is gorgeous. After calling his makeshift corner “nest” of extra sweaters on a dirty floor home for the last month, seeing the pristinely clean room, with all its extra space and crisp, expensive furniture, is odd. It’s like he’s experiencing these things for the first time, instead of just having taken a month-long break from being around a billionaire who lived like this all the time.

The room is actually a suite, spacious and beautiful. They’ve walked into a sitting room, off of which there’s a kitchenette. An enormous television adorns one wall, and there’s tasteful artwork scattered on the rest. Plenty of places to sit, and no awkward steps for Rhodey to try to traverse in his wheelchair. He moves into the bedroom, Tony trailing after him. There’s another tv in here, an open door showing a peek into a magnificent bathroom, and floor-to-ceiling windows on one wall revealing a spectacular view of the city below, but Rhodey barely notices any of it. His attention is occupied by the king-sized bed, sitting there and looking almost indecent in its luxurious comfort. In his military career, Rhodey’s spent long periods of time away from any of the comforts of home. He’s developed the ability to sleep almost anywhere, and he was never very picky about it. It was always nice to return home and get to sleep in his own bed, but he didn’t spend his time away dreaming of it or anything. But now, after the perpetual stress of the last month, with Tony miraculously by his side again, the bed in front of him, the first he’s seen in a month, looks like salvation. He wants nothing more than to climb into it and sleep for a month.

He isn’t quite sure what Tony’s resurrection and changes will mean for his ability to sleep, but as exhausted as he looks, Rhodey can’t imagine he won’t want to at least lie down and try to relax. Rhodey turns to ask what he thinks of the room, maybe try to coax him into the bathroom to get cleaned up for bed, but stops when he sees him. Tony’s eyes are unfocused, and he’s leaning back against the wall next to the bedroom doorway. The slump to his shoulders is more pronounced than ever. Before Rhodey can say anything, Tony closes his eyes and slides down the wall to the floor.
Hmm, this actually didn’t end up being as long a chapter as I thought. Oops.

Just a note, I was originally unsure whether I wanted this to turn into a Rhodey/Tony story or not, but with everything happening with Tony emotionally, I decided to just keep it gen. I want to write some Tony/Rhodey stuff in the future, because it’s a wonderful and underwritten pairing, but for this story, everything between them is meant to just be platonic, though still a very close and intimate friendship. (Though if you want to read it as sort of low-key Rhodey/Tony, go ahead :) )

The way Tony slides to the floor is the least graceful Rhodey’s seen him yet. He wheels over to Tony’s side and reaches down to grab his shoulder, trying to get a better look at his face. Tony’s head has fallen to his knees, but at Rhodey’s touch, he raises it again and pries his eyes open. Tony’s expression still just looks sad and slightly confused, and it’s hard to tell whether this collapse is simply because he’s exhausted, or something more. “Hey,” Rhodey says softly, “what’s wrong?”

Tony opens his mouth, but nothing comes out for a moment. Rhodey waits patiently for him to work out whatever he needs to; he can’t imagine what kind of things Tony’s having to work through right now. Eventually, Tony takes a breath and speaks. “I’m…” he says, and then pauses again. His face moves through a variety of unhappy expressions and his jaw twitches a few times as though he’s trying to speak but can’t. Just as Rhodey is thinking he won’t say anything else, he finishes with “…tired.”

Tired doesn’t even begin to cover it, Rhodey thinks. Between being killed and resurrected, whatever happened with Thanos, and apparently walking several miles to find Rhodey after it was over, he must be beyond tired, physically and emotionally. The sad expression is more intense than before now. He looks like he wants to cry, but Rhodey’s not even sure if he can.

“Okay,” Rhodey says, rubbing his shoulder lightly. “We can do something about that. You think you can get up on the bed?” He’s hoping Tony at least has that much energy left in him. Rhodey can’t lift him like he used to be able to, can’t do much to help him physically. Tony’s gaze slowly moves up to Rhodey’s face, and he blinks like he’s processing the words. Then, slowly, he nods and climbs to his feet. He looks steady, thankfully, though Rhodey still holds a hand out next to him, ready to at least try to catch him if he starts to sway.

But Tony moves over to the bed and sinks onto it with no problem. He sits at the edge, facing Rhodey. “You want to lie down?” Rhodey asks, but Tony shakes his head slowly. His expression says he’s not really sure what he wants to do, and he looks at Rhodey like Rhodey has all the answers for him. Maybe it should be a lot of pressure, but this is familiar to Rhodey and something in him softens at the sight. Rich and independent genius though he is, Tony has always looked up to Rhodey, and Rhodey’s played the role of older brother more times than he can count. Even if Tony doesn’t always listen to him, he still feels a kind of comfort in taking care of him.

Now that they’re away from the street and prying eyes and Tony seems focused on him and reluctant to try to sleep yet, Rhodey feels comfortable enough asking again. “What happened, Tony?”
Tony’s mouth pulls down in a frown again, but he looks like he’s thinking, parsing things out. “I… remember dying,” is what he leads with, and Jesus, Rhodey thinks, this conversation is already awful. “And then… nothing, until I was just… there again, but not just me.”

There’s a long pause. Tony might be remembering it, and Rhodey doesn’t want to push. He’ll talk as he’s ready. “The Infinity Stones,” Tony finally says, “they were… part of me. Thanos used them to bring me back, and I was linked to their power.” He’s speaking slowly, hesitating every few words, but gaining confidence as he talks. “I could feel Thanos through them. It’s like we were both linked through them, but… Thanos wasn’t in control, not really. The stones are so much more powerful than him. He was using their power, but he was enslaved to them. With the connection, I was able to follow it back and take control myself. He’d used so much power to bring me back that I had a stronger connection to them than him. I took them for myself and I killed him.”

He still looks devastated, and Rhodey hopes it isn’t at the thought of killing Thanos. Thanos needed to die, deserved it more than anyone, and Tony had done it for the Earth, for everyone’s survival. He’s thinking about saying something to that effect, but a sudden thought distracts him. All of the destruction Thanos had caused, he’d done it all with the stones. “You have control of the stones… their power, could it be used to fix any of this?” he starts, but before he even finishes speaking, Tony is shaking his head.

“They’re gone. I destroyed them. Their power… it was so strong, the way it took Thanos over and he didn’t even know it. I’m not any stronger than he was. If I’d held them for any longer they’d have done the same to me. Even though my connection to the stones was stronger than Thanos’s, they hadn’t had long enough to corrupt me. I was independent enough to recognize that they only… they only cause destruction. I wasn’t—I’m not strong enough to control them, not for long. They’re conscious, in a way, and all they want is chaos. I destroyed the portal, and one of the ships, I think?” Rhodey nods, remembering the enormous flagship cracking in half. “And even that was pushing it. They were trying to take me over too. I had just enough control left to turn their power against each other and destroy them. I had to.”

He sounds almost pleading by the end, like he thinks he has to justify it to Rhodey. Rhodey reaches out and takes his hands, giving them a reassuring squeeze. “It’s okay, Tony. That’s good. I’m glad you could destroy them. They were dangerous and you saved us all doing it. That was the best possible outcome.” Tony just blinks at him, so Rhodey continues. “Was that all of them?”

Tony shakes his head. “No. Thanos had all but one, the Time Stone. He was searching for it.”

“It’s here?”

“Yeah. When I was connected to the stones, I could just barely feel it, somewhere on the planet. That’s why Thanos was here the entire time, and delaying for so long. If he’d had them all, he would have just destroyed the planet. But he didn’t know where it was, and he couldn’t risk it being lost. If they gathered all the people and funneled them through checkpoints, they could look for it.”

Before Rhodey can ask anything else, there’s a knock on the door. Tony’s staring into space again, probably thinking about Thanos and the Infinity Stones. Rhodey doesn’t want to try to get him up, so he rolls over to the door himself and opens it. A man is standing there, holding a large box. Right, the man at the desk said they’d send someone up with supplies for them. Rhodey moves back to let him in the room, and he steps inside to set the box on the floor. Rhodey sees his eyes scan the sitting room for Tony, but he doesn’t look for long, and quickly turns his full attention to Rhodey.

“Thanks,” Rhodey says, holding a hand out.

The man grasps it firmly. “There’s extra clothes in there, a few sizes in case we got it wrong. Some
more food and water for you, towels, soap and stuff for showering, toothbrushes and toothpaste, things like that. Please let us know if there’s anything else we can get you, anything. The phone in the room should work if you need to call down to the desk.”

Rhodey nods. “You know if the internet and cell phones are back up? I would think whatever they had jamming them should be gone.”

The man nods. “Yeah, there’s problems obviously with so many people trying to use their phones at once, and internet service is clogged up and slow as hell, but they’re technically working. People are already talking about trying to fix it up, organize a system or something so that we can actually get it to work. Internet would be great for finding lost people but right now nothing’s working fast enough to be of any help.”

Rhodey nods. That isn’t surprising. “Any chance someone could get me a phone or a laptop? Lost mine during the invasion.” He feels a little bad for asking, but he’s planning to help in the restoration efforts once he’s got things with Tony figured out and gotten some rest, and he’ll need the connection. Paralyzed or not, he was an Avenger (still is, really, even though it’s just him and Tony now, and maybe not even Tony), and he’s going to be needed in the coming days.

“Of course, we’ll find you something right away.”

“Thanks.” Rhodey grimaces a little. “Also, uh, I hate to ask you to bother someone, but you think you can find somebody to send up for a few minutes? I’m going to need some help, with—” he cuts off, but gestures to his chair and the man gets it immediately, nodding seriously.

“Yeah, of course, no problem. Is there—anything else you need?”

Rhodey shakes his head and thanks the man again. The man offers more thanks in return and leaves, promising to have someone sent up soon to help Rhodey out. Rhodey takes a moment to dig through the box, looking at what they’ve got, then puts it in his lap and wheels back into the bedroom.

Tony’s sitting exactly where he left him, still staring into the distance, but his eyes move to Rhodey when he comes back in the room. Rhodey sets the box down next to the bed and puts a hand on Tony’s knee. “Hey, you want to try going to sleep now?”

Tony frowns like he’s puzzling over that. Eventually, he nods hesitantly, and Rhodey reaches down for the box. He and Tony are slightly different in size, but they’ve always shared clothes with little problem—Tony stealing his, mostly, but Rhodey’s never minded—and it looks like whoever put the box together did a good job of sizing them. He pulls out a soft t-shirt and loose pants and manages to coax Tony into them, draping the blanket Tony had wrapped around his shoulders over the end of the bed. Tony’s markings shine through the shirt just the tiniest bit where it lays flat against his skin. He seems pretty clean overall despite his fight with Thanos and journey through the streets, and with how tired he looks, Rhodey doesn’t want to bother trying to get him into the shower.

Rhodey exchanges his own shirt for one in the box; he’d been switching back and forth between two shirts in the camps, but no one had wasted precious soap on cleaning clothes, and both were pretty disgusting by the end of the month. He pulls out some clean pants as well and puts them in the pack on the back of his chair, where he’s been keeping his own personal items, just as there’s another tentative knock on the door.

This time it’s the promised aide, a kind-faced woman in her late fifties who introduces herself as Karen. She’s carrying both a phone and a tablet for Rhodey, which she sets on the table in the sitting room. They move through the bedroom and into the bathroom. Tony, still sitting silently on the bed, watches them go with furrowed brows. Karen gives him one awed glance, but focuses back in on
Rhodey quickly. “Be right back,” Rhodey tells Tony before he follows her into the bathroom and shuts the door.

Karen is quick and professional about helping Rhodey clean up. Actually showering would be an ordeal, but she helps to give him a makeshift sponge bath and to change into the pants he’s brought. After a trip to the toilet made even faster by her help, she tells him her room number and makes him promise to call down there for her when he needs more assistance. She leaves, sneaking one more quick look at Tony. Tony watches her progress with a frown, then turns to Rhodey once she’s left the room.

“I could have done that,” he says quietly, and something in Rhodey’s heart leaps at the thought that even with whatever’s going on with him, Tony wants to help.

Rhodey gives him a soft, fond smile and pats his arm, then reaches down to pull the bed covers back a bit, smoothing a hand over the sheets underneath. “You’re way too tired, Tony, it’s fine. Now why don’t you come lay down here, and we can try to get some sleep, huh?”

Tony nods and slowly scoots over to where Rhodey’s pulled the covers back, slipping beneath them, but still sitting upright to look at Rhodey. Rhodey moves around the suite, turning off the lights and pulling the curtains closed over the expansive windows, and from the bed, Tony tracks his movements. He looks down before pulling the curtains shut all the way and sees that the line into the hotel and the crowds in the streets have mostly disappeared; people have been efficiently moved into shelters for the night. It’s been a long day, a lot happening, and dusk is starting to fall, comfortably darkening the room. Still, Rhodey pulls the blackout curtains. They could easily sleep well into tomorrow and he wants to let that happen, not be woken up by bright daylight.

There’s just one lamp still lighting the room that Rhodey can turn off from the bed, so he makes his way over to the side opposite Tony and hauls himself out of the chair and into the bed. It’s as soft and relaxing as he’d been imagining, and he lets out a happy sigh as he sinks into it. After arranging his uncooperative legs under the covers, he finally reaches to turn off the last light.

As soon as the light is out, the whole room is softly lit by Tony’s glow, even though just his arms and face are exposed now. Rhodey looks over at him. He looks even more ethereal and celestial in the darkened room, between his glowing eyes and the patterns across his face and arms and showing through his shirt. Bright as he is, his glow is still gentle in a way, and Rhodey knows it won’t keep him from sleeping.

Rhodey settles down in the bed facing Tony and Tony finally lies down, mirroring Rhodey on the other side. There’s something turbulent in his eyes and Rhodey’s worried whatever’s bothering him will keep him from sleeping. “How are you feeling?” he asks softly.

Tony pulls in a deep breath and Rhodey suddenly gets the feeling that he’s opened a floodgate. “I’m only—” Tony whispers, stops to breathe, and continues in a soft voice. “I only feel two things, Rhodey. Sadness, and grief. That’s all. That’s all I’ve felt since I was—back.”

Rhodey sucks in a sharp breath. That would certainly explain the constant, unbearably sad look in his eyes, the slump to him that seems like more than just exhaustion, why he doesn’t seem to talk more than necessary. Rhodey just looks at him, not sure what to say. He has no idea what this means, how to fix it, or even how it happened.

Tony continues, sparing him from having to come up with something to say for the moment. “That’s what went wrong with Thanos,” he says, shutting his eyes for a second. “Thanos used the power of Infinity Stones to resurrect me, using the emotions I felt at the moment I died as a basis for it. He wanted to punish the Avengers and the world, he wanted a puppet he could use to hurt them, to kill
them. But he got it wrong. He thought it would be anger. That’s easy to control, for him and the stones, because anger is chaotic and undirected and easy to manipulate.”

“But you weren’t angry,” Rhodey whispers.

“No. I was sad, I was grieving, horribly. For my parents, for the friendship I thought I had with Steve, for being betrayed like that. Even when he was about to kill me, I was just… sad.” Rhodey feels a spark of helpless rage himself at the words, knowing that Tony died grieving, that even as he was murdered by a supposed friend, he wasn’t angry but sad. A moment later it’s overcome by confusion, as he registers the mention of Tony’s parents. What did they have to do with Rogers? But Tony continues before he can ask, or follow that train of thought further.

“Grief is a much more powerful and complex emotion than anger. It depends on positive emotion to exist; you have to have loved someone or something to grieve for its loss. That was more than Thanos was prepared for when he used to stones to fuel my resurrection. It drew more power from them than he was expecting, and it severed his direct control over me. It gave me enough power to think independently, a sort of protective power of my own, even from the stones themselves, even though it had come from them. That’s what let me take control and keep it long enough to kill Thanos and destroy the stones.”

“God,” Rhodey breathes, reaching to take Tony’s hand across the bed. He’s overwhelmed for a minute by the thought of how much random luck was necessary for this to happen, how many ways it could have gone wrong. The thought of Tony as some sort of puppet of Thanos used to kill his enemies is enough to make him feel sick. He’s so grateful to have Tony here, whatever that means, that he aches for Tony. He doesn’t know what to do about this, how to console him or help him.

Tony’s breath hitches. “I only feel sad, nothing else. I don’t know if I can ever feel anything else again. If I’m stuck like this forever, what does that make me?”

His eyes are imploring, his expression devastated, and for a moment Rhodey is lost, overcome by this responsibility. He truly has no idea what to say to Tony. He would never want to condemn Tony to a life of feeling nothing but sadness, but if Tony doesn’t know whether things will ever change, Rhodey certainly can’t know. He won’t make empty promises, but he doesn’t want to seem hopeless. Whatever the problems that have come along with it, he has Tony back now, and he doesn’t want to ruin that. But he doesn’t have the perfect phrase to say here, or even an imperfect one. He’s at a loss.

He squeezes Tony’s hand, trying to come up with something to say, when a thought hits him that could change everything. “Tony,” he says, propping himself up on an elbow to look Tony fully in the face. “how did you find me?”

Tony looks confused for a moment at the change of subject, but he answers nonetheless. “When I was in control of the stones, I could feel… a lot. I had memories of you, of others too, but you were the first person I thought of. I knew you were still alive, and the stones let me see where you were, sort of. Once I destroyed them, I just kind of… headed in that direction. I was moving on instinct, not really looking, but I guess I went right to you.”

The spark in Rhodey’s chest grows, igniting hope in him. He’s pleased that Tony thought of him, of course, but it’s more than that. This could be his answer for Tony. “Why did you come to me?” he asks, leaning down and further into Tony’s space.

Tony looks at him for a long moment, contemplating, before answering. “I don’t feel anything, but I can still remember it. It’s… disconnected, like I’m watching someone else’s life, but I still have the
memories.” He pauses, thinking again, and then his mouth opens a little, like he’s figured out Rhodey’s point. “I came to you because you’re… safe. I remember that, at least. I—when I look at you now, I don’t feel anything, but I remember feeling. I remember you.”

His hand tightens around Rhodey’s and he raises his head more to look Rhodey straight in the eyes, expression still sad but blazing and intense. “I came to you because I know you love me… and even though I don’t feel it now, I know I love you too.”

Rhodey’s vision blurs with tears, and he leans down to pull Tony into another tight hug. This time, though Tony relaxes in his arms, he wraps his own arms around Rhodey and returns the hug. Once again, Rhodey spends a long minute just holding Tony, soaking in his warmth and letting a few grateful tears fall. “Don’t you ever doubt it,” he whispers fiercely into Tony’s shoulder.

Eventually, he sinks back into the bed fully, pulling Tony with him and shifting his upper body around as best he can to get comfortable. He ends up on his back with Tony on his side and curled around him, head resting on his shoulder and arm across his chest, hand loosely gripping Rhodey’s shirt. Rhodey moves the arm that’s resting around Tony’s shoulders up into his hair, threading through it, and uses it to tilt Tony’s head up to look at him. “If you can remember that, Tony, then you can get it back, all those feelings. You remember them and that’s all that matters. We’ll figure everything else out, alright? I promise, we’ll deal with all of it. No matter what.”

Tony nods and closes his eyes, settling down against Rhodey. Rhodey turns his face into Tony’s hair, breathing in the clean, soft scent of him. He lets one arm fall around Tony’s waist and the other come up to lightly rest on Tony’s arm, and finally, safely intertwined, they sleep.

Chapter End Notes

I didn’t mean to get super cliché with the whole “power of love” stuff about how Tony defeated Thanos, it just sort of happened.
Hey all, so sorry for the long wait for this chapter, got things going on and then I wrote a few chapters for Facing Reality because that had gone a while without an update. But at least I didn’t leave you all on a cliffhanger or anything :)

Thank you all so much for your interest in this story! For something that came from a random few thoughts that wouldn’t leave me alone, it’s now turned into a major project with all the chapters planned out. I know it’s a bit of an odd concept, so I’m glad to see so many people interested in it.

When Rhodey wakes up, he makes it halfway through his daily mental checklist of tasks and people to look out for before his half-asleep brain registers that something’s different. He’s lying on something ridiculously soft and comfortable, nothing like the hard floor with a couple extra jackets as bedding that he’s been using for the past month. His arms are wrapped around something large and warm that he registers as a body, even though he always sleeps alone in the camp. Higher thought processes haven’t quite returned yet, and he spends a minute just basking in the relaxing feeling, enjoying the moment before he has to wake up fully and face another harrowing day.

He turns his face further into the person next to him and is met with a familiar scent, and all at once, the previous day comes flooding back. He barely manages not to bolt upright and disturb Tony, but he can’t keep from instinctively tightening his arms just a bit or pulling in a sharp breath at the memory of yesterday and the realization that all of it really happened, it wasn’t a dream or a hallucination.

His eyes snap open and he’s met with the bright light of Tony next to him, sleeping peacefully and still pressed into Rhodey’s side, though his head has moved up to the pillows rather than remaining on Rhodey’s shoulder and the grip he had on Rhodey’s shirt when they went to sleep has fallen away. His face has smoothed out in sleep, the devastated expression no longer present, and Rhodey hopes it means he’s not having any sort of nightmares. He’s under no delusions that Tony will wake up suddenly cured of his traumatic experiences and his strange emotional deficit, but for now, at least, Rhodey hopes he’s at peace.

As his eyes adjust beyond Tony, he sees the shapes of the walls and other furniture in the room, dimly lit by Tony’s glow. He’s not sure what time it is—the only clock on the bedside table had been blinking and hours off of the real time from multiple power outages, and he’d just unplugged it before going to bed—but he can see strips of bright sunlight peeking around the edges of the curtains. With how exhausted he’d been, it could easily be the afternoon already.

He prepares himself to get up and contemplates waking Tony as well, but decides against it after a short internal debate. Being resurrected, fighting Thanos, taking control of and destroying the Infinity Stones, and finding his way to Rhodey must have taken more out of him than Rhodey can even imagine, and since his sleep seems to be peaceful, Rhodey decides to leave him to it for at least a little longer.

He gently levers himself upright, sliding away from Tony, who sleeps on without reacting to the movement. Rhodey pauses for a moment to watch the gentle rise and fall of his chest, then carefully
maneuvers himself into his chair. He digs quietly through the box of supplies from last night and finds himself some fresh clothes for the day, then wheels out into the sitting room. He checks the phone he was given last night and sees that it’s just before noon—so he hadn’t slept quite as long as he’d feared, there was still plenty of time left in the day to get downstairs and look into helping with whatever he can.

He finds a hotel phone in the entryway and follows the instructions to call the room number Karen gave him last night. As it starts to ring, he wonders whether she’ll even be there, having possibly been up for hours, but it picks up on the first ring.

“Hello?” It’s a man’s voice, and it throws Rhody off for a moment, before he remembers that Karen must be sharing the room, with strangers if not with her own family.

“Hello, is Karen there?” He thinks about introducing himself or saying their room number, but decides against it after recalling the warning from last night about their room being mobbed by people were they on the lower levels with everyone else.

“Karen?” he hears the voice call into the room, muffled like the man’s holding his hand over the phone. A moment later he hears Karen’s voice in the background, then there’s some shuffling and she answers the phone.

“Hello?”

“Karen, it’s Jim, from last night.”

“Oh, it’s good to hear from you! You need some help up there?”

“If you’re available, ma’am, I’d really appreciate it. I’m the only one up right now.” He also doesn’t want to bother Tony, despite his comment yesterday that he could have helped. Rhody hesitates for a moment, feeling bad about asking for her assistance, but she had said to call any time.

“Of course, I’ll be right there. See you in a minute,” she says, and hangs up. He appreciates her discretion, not mentioning his name or room number out loud in her room. He hangs the phone up and waits by the door, and true to her word, less than a minute later there’s a quiet knock. He pulls open the door and she comes inside with a smile and a firm handshake.

“I appreciate you coming up, really. I’m sorry to pull you away from your room,” he says, but she waves a hand.

“It’s not a bother at all, I promise. I’m always happy to be helping someone else out. And to be frank, I know who you are, and it seems to me I’m just returning the favor.”

Rhody gives her a smile, but doesn’t quite know what to say to that. He’d never gotten into the superhero business to be thanked or admired, never even really done it to be a hero—he’d joined the Air Force to serve his country and help people on a grander scale, of course, but the Avengers and War Machine had always really been about watching Tony’s back. Much as they might have quipped back and forth about him not being just Tony’s sidekick, he was more than happy to remain in the background and let Tony be the one the public adored, the one who got the thanks and praise and attention. Of course, that came with all the negative aspects as well, but he always did his best to be there for Tony when they affected him personally.

“Was that a ‘roommate’ of yours on the phone?” he settles for asking instead of responding.

“Yes, Mr. Leiman, part of a lovely family that got assigned to the same room as me. Father and three kids, all managed to stay together through the whole thing, though the poor things lost their mother,
they’re pretty sure. She worked downtown, in a building that pretty much got destroyed on day one.”

Rhodey grimaces at the reminder of the tragedy affecting so many lives around them. They can look at everything with a cold, clinical eye and say that there’s surprisingly little damage to the infrastructure, or celebrate how many people survived, but the truth is that there’s likely no one left who hasn’t lost someone or something.

“Do you have anyone to be looking for?” he asks her, feeling slightly ashamed for not asking last night.

She smiles and shakes her head. “My parents passed a few years ago, and I was an only child. I’ve got an ex husband, but we were only together for three years before he cheated on me. That was thirty years ago, and I haven’t spoken to him since. Don’t even know where he lives these days. I would never wish him dead, of course, but finding out if he survived isn’t exactly a priority, you know what I mean?” She chuckles and Rhodey nods.

“I’ve got quite a few close friends, I dare say,” she continues, “and I’d sure like to find out what happened to them, but they’ve got their own families to be worried about. In all this mess, I don’t want to tie up communication lines. If they’re alive, then there’s no hurry, they’ll still be there for me to find once we’re all settled back down. And if they’re dead, well…” she pauses for a moment, and though her voice remains strong, he can see the slight shine of tears in her eyes. “If they’re dead, I suppose there’s no hurry then either. They’re with God, and I’ll find out when I find out.”

She pauses again to bow her head for a second, and Rhodey stays silent, giving her the moment. While he doesn’t share her faith, he admires her for keeping it through all of this. He has a moment to wonder what exactly she thinks of aliens, Thanos, Infinity Stones, and Tony, before she’s raising her head again to address him. “What about you, dear?”

He shakes his head with a sad smile. “My mother’s in Georgia, it’ll be a while before I can try to contact her. If you know who I am, you know what happened to most of the others. Most of my other friends were military, they’re dead now.” He glances into the bedroom and Karen’s eyes follow the direction of his gaze. “Tony’s really the only one I’ve got left at this point, and I’m sure as hell not going to let him go.”

He glances up and sees the same intense, slightly awestruck look on her face as he sees in most of the people around Tony now. “Thank you,” she says suddenly, “for taking care of him. He saved us all, he’s the reason we’re free again. I’m glad he has you.”

Rhodey nods, thoughts far away for a moment, but then snaps back to the present. “So, do you happen to know anything about how we’re organizing? I just got up.”

“They took everyone’s names last night when they assigned rooms, and this morning they sent someone around to all the rooms to do a count and get everyone’s home address. They said they’re trying to move people back to their homes as fast as possible, and also help to bring families back together. When they came around they asked everyone if there was anyone they were looking for and went down the list of everyone in the hotel to see if they were in the same building. I don’t know anything more than that, they brought a little food by and asked us all to stay in our rooms until we heard more. Except they know I came up here for you last night and might again today,” she adds, before Rhodey can say anything about her not being in her room now because of him.

“They must be organizing transportation and talking to the other shelters. I wonder if they’ve made progress with the internet yet,” he muses out loud, then shifts back to turn his chair toward the bedroom. “Well, if you don’t mind, I’d like to get cleaned up, get dressed and head down, try to help with what I can.”
“Of course. After you,” she gestures into the bedroom.

“Be careful, I think he’s still sleeping,” Rhodey warns, and they move through the bedroom and into the bathroom. Tony is indeed still asleep, shifted over a few inches into the warm space Rhodey left but still looking peaceful. Rhodey figures he’ll let him sleep for as long as he can, and if he’s still sleeping when Rhodey’s done getting ready, he’ll wake him and see if he wants to go down. If he doesn’t, Rhodey will probably stay in the room with him, desire to see how the organization is going be damned. He might have a problem with letting Tony very far from him for a while yet.

Karen helps him through the full shower that he skipped last night, then to change into the clothes he’d picked out earlier. By the time they come out again, Tony is up, sitting up in bed and looking blearily in their direction. The way his hair sticks up and the sleep-soft look of him make a sharp contrast to the elegant, heavenly look to his eyes and skin, and Rhodey has to fight the urge to chuckle at the sight, instead just giving him a fond smile. “Hey, you’re up.”

Tony just blinks at him for a second. Now that he’s awake, the sad look is back in his eyes, but maybe a little less intense than last night, no longer weighed down further by exhaustion. Hopefully the sleep did him some good. “Yeah,” Tony says eventually, then his gaze moves up to Karen, standing behind Rhodey. “Hello.”

“Hello,” Karen says from behind him, sounding more breathless than she had a moment ago. Rhodey isn’t surprised, but he’s glad she doesn’t say anything else or try to move forward to shake Tony’s hand, or anything like that. He’s not sure what Tony would do, but he doesn’t want anyone invading his space right after he’s woken.

There’s another moment of silence before Karen steps around Rhodey’s chair to shake his hand, promising to be available again if Rhodey needs her. In return, he promises to report anything new that he learns today, and she leaves with a smile and a goodbye to both of them.

When he hears the main door in the sitting room click shut, he turns back to Tony, who’s staring at the doorway where Karen disappeared. “She was here last night,” Tony says, and Rhodey smiles cautiously.

“Yeah, she came up to help me last night too. You were pretty tired, I wasn’t sure you were even really looking.”

Tony looks at him and doesn’t say anything else, so after a pause, Rhodey tilts his head toward the bathroom. “You want to get cleaned up and dressed?”

Tony turns to look at the bathroom like he’s thinking about it, then says “sure,” and climbs off the bed. Rhodey follows him into the bathroom to make sure he doesn’t need help, gets him to brush his teeth and then get into the shower. While he showers, Rhodey goes back out and finds some more clothes for Tony from their box, long pants and a light jacket over a sleeveless shirt. He thinks maybe being more covered up for a bit could help with some of the staring, but he doesn’t want Tony to think he’s trying to hide him away. Maybe he’s putting way too much thought into clothing choices, but it’s not the worst thing to obsess over. He opens the bathroom door for a second to slide the clothes up onto the counter for Tony, then goes back to the supply box to sort the rest of it out into drawers and onto tables in the bedroom.

He hears the shower shut off and some movement from the bathroom. A minute later, the toilet flushes. That answers one of Rhodey’s questions. Just as Tony comes out, Rhodey’s stomach growls loudly, and he realizes that he’s starving. He’d been severely rationed for the last week in the camp, and then he ate just a few extra granola bars and crackers yesterday between Thanos’s death and finding Tony.
Tony glances down at the noise and his brow furrows. “You’re hungry.”

“Yeah, haven’t eaten a lot lately. Are you?” Rhodey tries.

Tony makes that same scrunched up face again, like he’s having trouble finding an answer and is frustrated about it. “Don’t really feel hungry,” he finally says, “but I guess I should eat. I could, maybe. I don’t know. Sorry.”

The words get progressively quieter and Tony looks down at the floor at the end. Rhodey thinks about his confession last night, what he said about feeling nothing but grief and sadness, and wonders if he’s going to be hearing a lot of unnecessary apologies now.

“Hey, it’s fine, we can get some food and see if you feel like eating. It’s not a problem.”

Tony nods and looks back up at him, so Rhodey continues. “I was going to go downstairs and see what’s happening, try to help with some organization stuff if I can. Do you want to go down? We can see if they’ve got food down there. You don’t have to, we can eat up here if you want. It’s up to you.” He does want to go downstairs, but he doesn’t want to pressure Tony into it. At the same time, he hopes he’s not overwhelming Tony at all, constantly going back and forth with his choices. Things still feel shaky with him, particularly considering his emotional state. Rhodey doesn’t quite know how to deal with him yet, besides just treating him like he always has on Tony’s bad days, after nightmares or bad missions.

Tony thinks for a minute, then says “okay,” and sounds sure enough, so they move through the sitting room, and Rhodey snags the keycard for the room and the phone and tablet off the table before they leave the room and head to the elevators to go down to the lobby.

There’s a small crowd in the lobby, but nothing like last night. Things seem to be well organized, and someone spots them almost immediately and heads over. When Rhodey inquires, the man tells them they’ve got everything set up down the hall, the center of the volunteering efforts and food for the people working, too. He tells them to head over and help themselves.

People stop to stare at them—mostly Tony, but both of them, really—with the same dazed look as usual, but at least whole rooms don’t fall silent when they enter. People keep working. They have dozens of desks set up in one of the ballrooms, with people all around working at both sides of them. A few are on computers, but most are doing work by hand in notebooks and on whiteboards and loose paper.

A woman who’s clearly in charge comes over, introduces herself as Jackie, and points them to the back, where they have food set up. It’s all instant meals and packaged food, but Rhodey’s been living on scraps for a while and he’ll take it. He gets himself a normal portion of food for the first time in a week and has plans to relish it.

Tony stares at the food with a vaguely sick look, so Rhodey offers him a packet of dried fruit to start with, thinking starting small might help. Tony takes it with a quiet thanks and actually eats it, so Rhodey counts it as a win.

When they’re done, Rhodey tracks Jackie down again. She’s bent over one of the computers, holding a phone to her ear with one shoulder and typing with both hands. She looks to be finishing a conversation, and hangs up just as they approach.

She turns and gives Rhodey a strained smile. “It’s been a hell of a job, trying to communicate with other stations. We’ve still got old-fashioned runners taking stuff back and forth, but we’re trying to get other methods up and running. Internet’s still shot, administrators and whatever else is needed to
run it have been gone for a month—I admit I don’t know much about how it works—and everyone on the planet who still has their phone or laptop or whatever is trying to use it now. Site traffic is insane, any and all kinds of messaging are too slow to even be of use.”

Rhodey gestures at the phone she’s set down. “Phones up?”

She nods. “Yeah, locally. Two-way conversations aren’t the best but they’re the best we’ve got right now. We got phone numbers back and forth to every one of the nearby shelters. There were people up all night working on it, then shifted off to us when we got up. We’re sticking with just Manhattan for now, trying to organize beyond that is way too much at once. There were nine different centers set up yesterday, places where they were trying to organize. Nearly everyone had the same basic ideas, so just about everyone on the island is on a list and in a shelter somewhere now, but they’re scattered all over. We need the internet up to make any sort of comprehensive list that we can do much of anything with.”

“You took everyone’s addresses?” Rhodey asks, remembering what Karen told him that morning.

“Yeah, we figured we should start trying to get them home as soon as possible, to help lift the burden on some of the shelters. We’re not too bad off here, a hotel is at least meant for people to live in and we’ve got facilities built in for food, laundry, things like that. But there are offices and factories being used, that’s not sustainable. So we want to get them home, keep the shelters for the people who need it the most.”

“Kids? People who lost families?”

Jackie nods. “Among other things. There’s not a ton of structural damage, but certainly some. There are whole apartment buildings in the city that got leveled. Parts of buildings are destroyed. Plus, in some areas the power and even water went off early. We need to be sure places can support everyone before we start sending them home. But for those that are ready and working, some people live close by in the city and we’ve already got buses and trucks that can start taking them home. People who live farther away are going to have to wait a little longer, so we’ll keep them in the more sustainable shelters, like hotels.”

“For a while, I’d imagine, for some of them,” Rhodey says. With just a few buses running back and forth, even getting people to other parts of the city will take a while, never mind out in the country or even out of state.

“Yeah. It’s going to be a problem no matter how we look at it. There are people in the city who were on vacation or visiting from other countries, from other continents. I have no idea how the airports are looking, but I don’t imagine we’ll be getting planes up any time real soon. We can probably get some people on ships eventually, but for now, they’ll just have to get comfortable here.”

Rhodey glances up at Tony, who’s watching them attentively but hasn’t said anything. “Can I help?” Rhodey asks Jackie. He figures Tony will stick close to him, he might be able to recruit his help for something. Jackie nods and turns back to her desk to shuffle through some papers.

“I can do something,” Tony says quietly. “I… it takes a minute to think things through, but I can help.”

Jackie turns back to them and gives Tony a smile, making an effort but not quite succeeding in disguising the wonderstruck look in her eyes. She hands a few notebooks and a stack of paper each to Tony and Rhodey. “What we’ve got most people doing now is organizing addresses for eventual transport. We went around this morning and took everyone’s here, and we’ve got books coming in from other shelters now. We’re planning to organize transport for the surrounding blocks from here,
since we’ll have people who need to stay long-term come here too. We’ve got the map on the wall there,” she gestures to one wall where they’ve got a giant map of the city, with different areas outlined in different colors, and next to it, baskets with matching colored tags full of papers, “and the baskets for organized addresses. Go through the notebooks, find everyone’s address on a map, here—” she reaches back and grabs a smaller map to hand to Rhodey. “Put everyone in the same colored block on the same sheet and include their name and room number or shelter name, and put it in the basket for that area. The brown one is for people who live in New York but not in the city, the black is for people who live in the US but not New York, and the white is for people who live out of the country. When you’ve gotten through a notebook completely, write out “done” on the first page and stick it in the big cart.”

“Thanks,” Rhodey says, shuffling his armful of papers around. Tony reaches down and takes them to give him his hands back for working his chair. He smiles up at Tony for the gesture.

“There’s a desk over there you can work at, they just brought it in. Take a break or quit whenever you need, we’re not punching time cards.” She tries to smile, but the humor is undercut by the tension in her. He doesn’t envy the job she’s trying to do, but he’s grateful that she’s stepped up. They need people like her.

“Thank you for leading everything. You’re making a big difference.”

Jackie’s strained smile melts a little into a more genuine one. She reaches down to shake Rhodey’s hand, and nods at Tony, since his arms are now full. “No, thank you, both of you, for—everything. Everything you’ve done.” Her eyes flick back and forth between them for a second, and then the phone behind her rings and she whirls around to grab it.

Tony follows Rhodey over to the small desk Jackie indicated and they spread their things out and get to work. It’s repetitive and slightly tedious, but it makes him feel good to be doing something. Tony works a little slower than him at first, but eventually gets into a rhythm. People nearby keep glancing up at them and every once in a while, someone walking by on the way to get more water or put papers into the bins stops to say something to them, usually thanks, occasionally offers for food or water. Tony’s pace always slows for a minute after someone talks to them, but he doesn’t seem too thrown off by the conversations. He says a few words in return to other people now, which is at least an improvement over yesterday.

Runners occasionally come in and out, bringing in stacks of papers, electronics, more supplies, and news for Jackie. Sometimes they bring additional volunteers, sometimes they leave with people. They’ve been working for a few hours and Rhodey is over at the wall, dropping a few completed lists into their respective bins, when he sees one of the runners heading his way.

“Colonel Rhodes,” the runner says politely, reaching out to shake Rhodey’s hand. “I’ve got something you and Mr. Stark,” he glances over to the desk where Tony is working—it’s not hard to pick him out in the room, even with half his skin covered now—and back to Rhodey, “might want to hear.”

Rhodey looks back at Tony as well. He’s immersed in his work for the moment, and Rhodey doesn’t want to bother him. Despite that he responds to people now, he doesn’t look entirely comfortable doing it, and seems a little tense when anyone but Rhodey addresses him. “I’ll tell him,” Rhodey says, turning back to face the runner.

If the man’s disappointed at all about not getting closer to Tony, he doesn’t show it. “Steve Rogers, Natasha Romanoff, and Clint Barton survived the invasion and Thanos’s death.”

Blood rushes to Rhodey’s head for a second. Rogers. And the others, morons who betrayed Tony
and the world and followed Rogers for no good reason, but it’s mostly Rogers, that son of a bitch, that murderer. Of course the luck of the universe would have it that, with millions of dead civilians, with Vision and Pepper sacrificing their lives, Rogers still survived.

Another thought comes to him in the next split second and paralyzes him. They must have had to go somewhere. They can’t be here, ever. He can’t, won’t, let them anywhere near Tony. “Where are they?” he says, and his voice comes out hard and unforgiving.

“Got word this morning that they got out to one of the rural areas last night.”

Rhodey relaxes incrementally. At least they’re not close. “Rural areas?”

The man nods. “There’s work to be done out in the farmlands, though thankfully not too much. Since they’re not that populated, they were the last places to be cleared out, so they’re still doing okay for the most part. Apparently in some parts of the country, they only came and rounded them up in the last few days, at least that’s what people are saying. We need more food going out ASAP, so we’ve got people going out to help with the land.”

“And they volunteered for that?”

The man snorts just a little and glances back at Tony again, and Rhodey gets the feeling he’s not alone in the sentiment of not wanting them anywhere near Tony. “They didn’t have a choice. It was tough enough getting them out of the city. They were right there where Thanos was, there was a huge crowd. As soon as things started to calm down yesterday, the mob turned on them. People wanted them dead, for failing the world, for killing Mr. Stark. He saved us all and they were the ones that killed him. People were ready to get vengeance for him right then and there.”

Privately, Rhodey can’t help but agree with them, but he doesn’t express that out loud. He’s not judge, jury, and executioner, and he can’t take this personally, not if he wants to take any sort of leadership role in the reconstruction efforts. He needs to be more professional, not just be Tony’s friend. “So what happens to them now?”

“For now, they’re working out in the rural areas, away from most everyone else. When things have settled down and we’ve got everything back up and running, they’ll be put in prison. They were criminals already, even before Mr. Stark… you know. But it’ll probably take a while. There’s still a lot of confusion, it’s going to take a long time even to get everyone back to their own homes. We have to get power, water, and food to everyone. There are buildings that need fixing or rebuilding. There’s a lot to do, and prisons aren’t exactly our first priority.”

Rhodey nods. “Of course. Might as well get some work out of them anyway.”

“It’s the least they can do,” the man says.

Rhodey holds out his hand and the man shakes it again. “Thank you for telling me. Good luck.”

The man glances between him and Tony again. “Same to you, Colonel.”

Rhodey watches him leave the room, then turns back to their desk. Tony looks up at him and back down. When he gets back over to the desk, Tony says, “you were gone a while. Did something happen?”

Rhodey opens his mouth, but hesitates. They’re out of the city, away from Tony. It sounds like other citizens are just as determined as he is to keep them away from Tony. Thinking about them might just hurt him. Rhodey wonders whether he should even tell him. But, he thinks, it’s not his decision. He doesn’t have the right to keep information from Tony, not when it pertains to him. “Steve, Clint,
and Natasha survived,” he says slowly.

Tony looks up at him, but doesn’t look surprised. He stares into the distance for a minute. “Thanos wanted me to kill them,” he says eventually. “I remember them being there.”

“They’re out in the rural areas now, working on farms and stuff, getting food back to people.”

Tony’s still staring into space. For a minute Rhodey thinks he didn’t even hear him, but after a while he seems to shake himself back into the present. “Good,” is all he says, and then he bends back down to his work.

Rhodey knows he’s thinking more about it, but if he doesn’t want to talk about it right now, Rhodey won’t push him. He goes back to his work as well.

They continue the same work for another hour or two, in the same pattern as before. Every few minutes, someone walks by to talk to them—mostly Tony—or offer them something. Tony’s responses to them get shorter and shorter, though, and eventually drop off completely. People don’t seem to care that he doesn’t respond, thankfully don’t look offended or anything, but Rhodey’s worried about Tony. He looks up at one point and is startled to see that Tony has abandoned his work completely. He seems to be hunching in on himself, looking too close to how he used to after a panic attack, and Rhodey decides it’s time to call it quits.

He gathers up their things—Tony doesn’t react when Rhodey scoops the work up from underneath him—and brings them back to Jackie, letting her know that they’re going back up to their room for the rest of the day. It’s late afternoon now, so he knows they won’t be coming back down, but he gives her the number for the phone they gave him and tells her to call him if she needs anything at all. Jackie thanks him for their work, promises to have someone send some kind of dinner up to them. She asks after Tony, and Rhodey tells her that he’s fine, just needs some rest. He doesn’t want to create a scene, and no one here would be able to do anything for Tony besides make him more uncomfortable. At least, he hopes so. He desperately hopes this isn’t some medical problem, or god forbid an alien one that no one would know how to deal with.

He goes back to their desk and puts a hand on Tony’s shoulder. Tony looks up, face twisted again like last night, like he wants to cry but can’t. Rhodey slides his hand down Tony’s arm to take his hand, and quietly suggests that they go back upstairs. Tony nods and gets up, follows him back to the elevators like earlier in the day. They don’t seem to attract any more attention than usual, and they get up to their room without incident.

When they get there, Tony sinks down on one of the couches and puts his face in his hands. Rhodey wheels around to sit facing him and waits a moment. When Tony lifts his head again, Rhodey takes both his hands in his. “Hey, talk to me. What’s wrong?”

“Sorry,” Tony says first, and something in Rhodey twists, hates Tony feeling like he has to apologize for not feeling well. “All those people.” He stops, and Rhodey gives his hands a squeeze, encouraging him to continue. “They all come up to thank me, and they look at me like… like I can solve all their problems. Like I can help them. But I can’t, Rhodey. I can’t do anything for them. I don’t know what to say to them.”

Rhodey’s heart hurts, hearing this. It’s not really new; Tony’s always felt like he needs to be doing more for people, especially as Iron Man. Anxiety and PTSD and long nights in the lab, trying to come up with new tech for every scenario, trying to do the impossible, to scratch an itch that he’d never be able to satisfy. But this is even worse; with the entire world looking to him and only him as their savior. His physical appearance only adds to it. It makes people see him as powerful, important, and yet he’s still just a person, with human limits.
People will always expect too much from Tony Stark, that isn’t new. What’s new is Tony admitting it to Rhodey. “You’re already doing what you can, Tony. What you were doing today, that was helping. And they’re coming to thank you because of what you already did. They look at you like that because they’re grateful, because you mean hope and freedom to them.”

Tony looks away. “I don’t know how to be ‘hope and freedom.’ I barely remember what hope feels like.”

Rhodey swallows hard past the lump that creates in his throat. “No one has any right to expect more from you than anyone else, Tony. I know that won’t stop some of them, but that doesn’t make it right. You don’t have to be around them if you don’t want to, but if you do, hold on to that. Most of them just want to thank you, Tony, just to see you. You don’t have to do anything, just be there.”

Tony nods. It’s hesitant, but Rhodey will take it. Rhodey leans back, letting go of Tony’s hands, and grabs the remote for the tv off the coffee table next to them. “Wonder if there’s anything actually on this thing.”

He turns his chair and maneuvers himself out of it and onto the couch next to Tony, who readily accepts his raised arm as invitation and presses close against his side. None of the channels are showing anything but static, which isn’t unexpected, but there’s an on-demand movie list available and Rhodey randomly selects some lighthearted animated movie, not really caring what it is, just wanting some distraction that won’t involve explosions or death.

Tony relaxes against him and after a few minutes, mumbles “thank you.” Rhodey just tightens the arm around his shoulders briefly and rubs at his arm in response. They watch for a while longer before Tony shifts like he’s uncomfortable, and Rhodey turns to look at him. “I’m sorry for pulling you away,” he says, eyes on the screen like he’s afraid to look at Rhodey. “You were working and you left because of me.”

“It’s fine,” Rhodey tells him, “they had plenty of volunteers down there, and Jackie told us to take a break or leave whenever we wanted.” When Tony doesn’t look convinced, he adds, “my back was aching anyway.”

Tony sits up and whips around to look at him in concern, and Rhodey puts his hands up with a smile. “It’s fine, Tony. I spent a month sitting in the chair and sleeping on the floor, my body just wasn’t super happy about it. I think sleeping in a real bed last night did a world of good. But being hunched over a desk for hours was bringing back a little ache, that’s all. They sent some pain meds up in that box last night.”

Tony’s brow furrows. “You want them?”

Rhodey’s first thought is to deny it, but he decides what the hell, he really is sore. “Sure, if you want to grab them. I put them up on the dresser in the bedroom.”

Tony gets up and disappears into the bedroom for a minute, coming back out with a water bottle and two pills for him. It’s just over the counter ibuprofen, nothing strong, but it’s analgesic and anti-inflammatory and it seemed to help in the camp when he took it. Besides, he wasn’t lying; though he was pretty sore by the time Thanos died, sleeping somewhere comfortable last night really did help a lot. Even being on the couch now instead of in his chair is helping a bit.

He takes them with thanks and Tony settles back against his side to resume the movie. They’ve been sitting comfortably for a while when Tony speaks again. “I never asked, about what happened to you. I’m sorry.”
Rhodey tenses just slightly at the words. “It’s fine, Tony. It’s not like you weren’t pretty busy yourself.” He pauses another second, then makes up his mind, patting Tony lightly on the back before tossing his arm back around his shoulders. “Later,” he says, and Tony nods and drops it. He doesn’t need to hear it all now, to make himself feel even worse. Besides, Rhodey can admit that as much good as having Tony back is doing for him, it still might take him a while to really process the last month. He’s not entirely sure he wants to relive it right now.

Right as their movie finishes, there’s a knock on the door. Since Rhodey is stuck on the couch, Tony gets up and answers it. It’s a young woman, bearing a large plate of warm food for dinner. She hands it to Tony and nearly trips over herself when he thanks her, leaving the room blushing furiously and telling them to call down to the desk if they need anything else.

Tony, at least, doesn’t look bothered by the interaction. The food’s obviously a previously frozen dinner of some kind, but there’s meat and vegetables and Rhodey’s just happy to have something warm again. There’s some dishes in the room but just sharing the plate is easier. Tony eats nearly half of it, making Rhodey smile to see it and then silently laugh at himself, smiling like a proud parent when his kid eats his food.

The evening passes surprisingly fast considering there’s not much for them to do but sit and talk and be in each other’s presence. Rhodey’s content with just that. When it comes time for bed, he sends Tony in to clean up and change first. When Tony comes out of the bathroom, he offers to help Rhodey, but Rhodey tells him he’d promised to tell Karen what was going on anyway, so he calls down to her room again.

By the time Karen comes up, Tony looks at least relaxed from his earlier state, and he actually holds a short conversation with her. When she can’t seem to help herself and bows her head to thank him like she’s giving worship, he doesn’t flee the room or look like he wants her gone.

She helps Rhodey through his nighttime routine and he tells her what Jackie had said downstairs about their plans to move people. Karen lives in the city, so hopefully she’ll be able to go back home soon.

When she leaves, Tony climbs into bed and settles down while Rhodey moves around again, gathering the clothes they’ve worn—they’ll eventually need to go down and find the laundry—and putting things away. He pulls the curtains partially closed but not entirely, stopping to look out at the city. It’s entirely dark now, not like when he went to bed last night, and it looks odd on the city, seeing some places lit up as usual but large areas still out of power. He can see more stars in the sky than ever before, with so many lights off. He gazes up at them for a few minutes before turning back to the bed and Tony lying in it, lit up like a constellation himself.

For the hell of it, before he gets into bed, he dials his mother’s number on his phone. The call won’t go through, which he expected, but at least he tried. He’ll try again once a day until it eventually goes through, or he finds another way to contact her.

Tony looks like he’s already asleep when Rhodey gets himself into bed, but as soon as Rhodey’s settled down on his side facing him, Tony opens his eyes and scoots closer to him, reaching out to tangle their hands together. Neither of them say anything and Tony’s eyes drift shut again immediately. Rhodey smiles fondly at him and shuts his own eyes, and he’s asleep in minutes.
The next few days are slow but steady progress in every sense.

Tony gets better about talking to people. He’s still bombarded everywhere they go with people who want to go up and thank him, tell him about the family members they still have left because of him, or just be near him for a minute. He doesn’t tolerate too much of it, but he doesn’t withdraw and get upset like he did the first day. If it starts to tire him too much, he just gets back to Rhodey, who’s getting better at sensing when he’s getting overwhelmed. Rhodey always gets him away quietly, without making it obvious they’re trying to escape the company.

Rhodey thinks they’re lucky, at least, that people still seem too awestruck by Tony to be wary of him. He knows if this were the old days, if Tony were just Tony and not the savior of the Earth, wielder of the Infinity Stones who shows it on his very skin, people wouldn’t take his prolonged silences and lack of clear emotion well. But thanks to what happened, they seem to respect him enough, for now at least, not to say anything about it.

That will change, he knows. When things really settle down, the novelty will start to wear off. With the way the invasion affected everyone and everywhere, it’s doubtful Tony’s impact will ever be forgotten, but the awe will eventually fade. When it does, people will go back to being people, like they always have been. They’ll speculate and start rumors and pick Tony and his life apart like he’s a toy for their amusement rather than a person. But hopefully, by the time that happens, Tony will be more settled into himself, on steadier ground. Rhodey’s trying his best to get him there.

On the restoration front, things are moving along as well. After two days of nonstop, grueling work by hand, they organize over a thousand addresses for nearly two thousand people, and begin getting the very closest ones back home. On day two, buses begin ferrying people back and forth within the city, those lucky enough to live in the city and whose homes are still intact.

They’re managing to get a lot of people back to their homes, or at least to their own neighborhoods. In their place, those from out of state or other countries are moving into their hotel and other shelters that are more sustainable long-term. They manage to clear out most of the factories and offices being used as shelters, and get everyone into a place with more than one bathroom per hundred people.

In the wake of worldwide disaster, the capacity for human compassion and generosity seems to know no bounds. People are sharing anything they have, from food to cars to houses. People with room in their homes take in others whose homes have been destroyed or their families killed. Children orphaned by the invasion have no shortage of families willing to take them in. People who are transported home get in their own cars and drive out to the nearest shelters to take others back to their homes.

There are problems, of course, they’re impossible to avoid. Fights break out, there’s stealing and disputes and other issues, but they’re handled quickly and fairly. The new leadership that’s stepped
up is really doing well. Rhodey hangs back, letting the people like Jackie who have taken charge handle most of it. He’s happy to help where he can, but he’s really not ready to step up into a major leadership position, and Tony is his main priority. He’s glad for Jackie and the people like her who are taking control.

On day three, someone somewhere gets into the national broadcast system and sends out emergency messages with news from around the country. There’s still no decent communication up long distance, but it’s good to at least see something from elsewhere. As far as they can tell from the broadcasts coming out, the entire country is facing a similar situation to theirs. There are restoration efforts going on everywhere, and one of the messages sent out on the broadcast system promises that those experts in their fields who survived the invasion are trying their best to get better communication systems up.

The messages urge people to stop trying to place calls or use the internet, in order to clear the traffic so that things can be fixed and the leaders of the organizational efforts can use what’s still working for necessary communication. Maybe it will help them a little, but Rhodey knows there’s no way they’re going to get everyone to cooperate on that. Half the people who see it will assume that everyone else is obeying the plea, and that they can be the one exception. It’s hard to convince someone not to keep trying to contact their lost family.

Following the example of the national emergency system, local news networks and radio stations begin broadcasting as well. The only things being reported are summaries of the organization efforts and instructions for citizens who need shelter, supplies, or are looking for loved ones, but it’s a good start.

They find out from the national broadcast that it wasn’t just the militaries that Thanos and his armies devastated. Nearly all the major political leaders of the world are dead, including the US President, Vice President, and a majority of Congress. With the military obliterated, that’s the majority of the US power structure gone.

It doesn’t change much for them in the immediate future; even if Washington D.C. were up and running perfectly, with communications down and so much destruction and death across the country, they’d still be on their own for a while. It doesn’t change their plans, but it does make the distant future even more uncertain. Rhodey thinks about it occasionally, but he mostly puts it aside to focus on more immediate concerns, and he has a feeling most other people are doing the same.

Rhodey helps out where he can each day, and Tony follows him. He’s always asking Tony’s opinion, trying to make sure he’s comfortable with whatever they’re doing and get him to make decisions, but Tony stays quiet and acquiescent for the most part. He is getting better, however. He doesn’t pause for as long before he speaks, and he seems to make decisions a little faster every day. Rhodey doesn’t ask about it, but he thinks—hopes—maybe it was just some sort of side effect of resurrection after having been dead for a month. Like his brain needs time to warm up and get used to thinking quickly again. He still speaks slower and more carefully than he used to before, but he doesn’t stop in the middle of sentences and make a face like he can’t articulate what he’s thinking.

On day three, they venture outside. There are teams now going out to start cleaning up the streets, and others going to some of the destroyed buildings, looking through the rubble for people who might be trapped or hiding. No one could have survived a month if they’d been trapped in the destruction of the initial invasion, but it’s possible that the movements or crash of the alien ships or the shockwave when the Infinity Stones were destroyed could have taken down a few more buildings.

They’re exceedingly lucky that it’s summertime. If the invasion had happened in the middle of
winter, they’d have a hell of a lot more dead people, frozen to death both in the camps and afterwards, with the power out. There’d also be no new food coming from anywhere local.

Rhodey can’t do any kind of physical work, but they’re also organizing things and people they find, and the shuttles are being handled outside. Rhodey spends the next few days outside, helping to organize some of the transportation and the cataloguing of supplies and new people being transferred between shelters. Tony sometimes helps with some of it, sometimes goes off a short distance away to assist with clearing the streets of some of the smaller debris, occasionally working in tandem with Rhodey and his organizational duties.

It’s on day five after his resurrection that Tony finally asks the question Rhodey’s been expecting for some time. They’re a few blocks from their hotel, part of a group scattered within a small area and cleaning up debris from a collapsed building on the block. They’re all spread out within sight of the industrial dumpster they’ve been hauling around with them on the back on a truck, taking it down the streets with them as they clean up. Rhodey’s carrying some of the supplies in a pack and keeping track of what they’ve done and what’s been found. Tony picks up a few small chunks of rubble, walks over to chuck them into the dumpster, comes back and turns to Rhodey. “Pepper,” he says suddenly, and the one word sends ice through Rhodey. “What happened… to Pepper?”

Tony looks sad, but he always does. Rhodey can’t tell whether he’s already expecting the answer, or has seen it in Rhodey’s expression, but it still hurts to force the words out. Expecting the question for the last few days doesn’t mean he’s ready to tell him. “Tony, I’m so sorry. She’s dead.”

Tony gets that look again, that twisted expression that says he wants to cry. Rhodey finally asked about it on day three, and Tony told him that he’s not entirely sure, but so far, he hasn’t ever cried even when he feels like he should, and he thinks he might not be able to. Seeing that look on his face is almost worse that seeing him actually cry. “You’re sure?” he asks Rhodey, but his voice is resigned, not hopeful.

Rhodey nods, choking back tears of his own. “It was a couple weeks into the invasion. She must have hidden, survived that long without them finding her. She got into one of your suits and used it to attack Thanos. He killed her. But not before she blew the top off the Tower and took a good number of those bastards out doing it.”

He hopes it’s how she would have wanted to go out, at least considering the circumstances. She’d never been very interested in the hero stuff, it had been one of the main points of contention in her relationship with Tony. Despite the stress and excitement, in some ways, of the high-powered business world she willingly put herself through, that job at least didn’t usually involve any life-threatening dangers. She hadn’t been a fan of the constant worry for Tony’s life and the danger he got himself—and occasionally her, despite his best intentions—into. Still, she must have known she couldn’t beat Thanos. She could have stayed hidden through the invasion, tried to wait it out or just survived on her own. Instead, she’d chosen to find out how to get into the suit, to blow the Tower, to go after Thanos.

“She attacked Thanos?” Tony says, looking vaguely into the distance.

“Yeah.”

“…Oh.” Rhodey figures this is one thing definitely bringing out Tony’s ability to feel grief. He stays quiet for a minute, trying to give Tony time to process this. Tony shakes his head after a while and turns to go back to picking up debris. He stops next to Rhodey first, though, to reach down and grip his shoulder for a moment. It feels like there’s a whole conversation contained in the gesture. Rhodey doesn’t mind being there for Tony, of course he doesn’t, but it’s times like these that he hates being the only one Tony has left. He can’t possibly be enough.
Tony lets go and goes back to picking up pieces of debris and tossing them into the dumpster. A few more minutes pass in silence, while Tony starts working around a large displaced chunk of concrete that’s tilted up at an angle, jutting out of the street. They might be able to move it with a large group working together, or it could take heavy machinery. Either way, they need to clear the area around it in order to get to it, so Tony starts getting at everything he can.

Tony clears an area around the large piece and leans against it for a second as he looks back at Rhodey. “My suits…” he says quietly, and Rhodey puts down the list he’s going through with a questioning look. “Pepper got into one of my suits. You mean Iron Man.”

“Yeah?” Rhodey doesn’t mean for it to come out like a question, but Tony seems unsure about something, and he doesn’t know what. Had he not remembered being Iron Man until just now? Is he wondering why Pepper would have used one of his suits?

Tony’s eyes have gone unfocused again, arms loose at his sides and full weight resting against the chunk of concrete. “I am Iron Man,” he says, barely a whisper. Maybe he’s recalling memories—or emotions, Rhodey thinks optimistically—associated with being Iron Man. The whisper certainly wasn’t aimed at Rhodey.

A moment later, he staggers to the side. Rhodey’s staring right at him, but he still has to do a double take and rub at his eyes, unsure of what he just saw. Tony had staggered because the enormous piece of concrete he was leaning on had moved, like Tony’s body weight alone was suddenly enough to shift it against gravity.

Tony’s eyes are wide. Rhodey knows his own mouth is gaping open. A thought is quickly growing in his mind, one that Tony obviously shares, because without a word, Tony turns, puts both hands on the concrete, and gives it a light push.

The entire enormous piece, half a ton in weight at least, moves up to its side like it’s nothing more than a piece of plywood being lifted out of the way, so that the rebar that was sticking out of the bottom is now exposed to the sunlight. As it tips over its side and begins to fall back to the ground, opposite the side it was previously resting on, Tony makes a slight gesture and its progress slows. It stops being pulled down fast by its own weight and comes to rest gently on the road, instead of thumping down with the loud crash that it would have on its own.

When Tony makes the gesture to stop it, Rhodey sees something around him and the slab, just the faintest trace of the same blue light that shines in his eyes and his skin. It’s not like Maximoff’s powers were, no swirling mist that moves like it has a mind of its own. This seems almost like an aftereffect, an exhalation of the light that Tony gives off, like the glow is so great it can’t be contained within just his body.

When the concrete piece comes to rest upside down, Tony lets his outstretched hand fall and immediately staggers and drops to his knees. Alarmed, Rhodey moves as close as he can in his chair, frustrated that he can’t get close enough to touch him, not with the uneven ground Tony’s kneeling within. “Tony!”

Tony’s head comes up, eyes still wide and visibly panting but otherwise looking unharmed. Rhodey lets out the breath he was holding, sagging a bit in his chair. “Holy shit,” he says, gripping the edge of his chair hard to try to steady his hands.

Tony takes a deep breath in and lets it out slowly, something Rhodey’s seen him do to try to stave off or recover from panic attacks. He shifts back so he can sit down fully and sprawl his legs out in front of him. He looks up at Rhodey, still just looking stunned.
“Are you okay?” Rhodey asks.

There’s a pause, like he’s going through his own body and thinking about it, and then Tony nods.

Most important thing taken care of, Rhodey moves on. “So,” he says, trying to disguise the giddy feeling creeping up on him, “what was that?”

Tony’s eyes slide over to the concrete chunk and back to Rhodey. “I moved it,” he says, astonished at his own work.

Rhodey lets out an incredulous laugh. “Yeah, you sure did. Was that… power from the Infinity Stones?”

Tony blinks at him, then looks down at his own hands like he’s seeing them for the first time, maybe examining his glowing marks. “I destroyed them,” he muses, “but I guess… they left something in me. I didn’t know I could do that.”

Rhodey frowns. *Left something in me* sounds suspicious and not very good to him. “Are you saying they’re still here?” He remembers how dangerous Tony said they were, how he’d nearly been consumed by them before he’d managed to destroy them. If this is their power, will using it risk Tony like that again?

Tony shakes his head. “No, they’re gone. Destroyed. Whatever life they had is gone. They just left… an imprint. Of their power. I thought it was just sort of… there. But I can use it.”

“Have you been able to feel it this whole time?”

Tony nods. “Sort of. I thought it was just there because they brought me back. Didn’t think I could access it.”

A shadow falls over them, and Rhodey looks up, startled to see one of the other men from their group. He’d forgotten they weren’t alone out here. The man looks concerned, seeing Tony on the ground, but he must not have seen what Tony just did. “Are you okay?” he asks, looking between Tony and Rhodey.

Tony nods and climbs back to his feet. “I’m okay,” he says, looking at the upside down concrete slab. He tilts his head like he’s considering it, then stretches a hand back out towards it. It rises to hover a few feet off the ground.

“Holy shit,” the man who’d come to check on them says, echoing Rhodey’s earlier sentiment. Rhodey is relieved to see that he doesn’t look wary or frightened, just amazed.

Tony looks around for a second, then moves his hand slightly, and the floating concrete begins moving toward the dumpster. Rhodey realizes in the next second that Tony was looking for the other members of their group, making sure no one is in his path, that no one could potentially be hurt if he suddenly drops it.

The man standing next to them is letting out a continuous stream of astonished noises and exclamations. Rhodey hears several others from their group gasp as well, scattered around the block, as the concrete moves past them and they turn, taking notice of Tony and what he’s doing.

When it reaches the dumpster, Tony raises his hand, and the slab rises with it, floating up over the edge of the dumpster, then down inside it. The sound of shifting rubble and some displaced debris clanging off the metal sides echoes for a second when Tony lets it go, and then there’s a whoop from someone in their group, a few shouts and some laughter.
The group is coming over, drawn by what just happened to gather around Tony. Tony drops his hand and turns, only concerned with heading for Rhodey. Rhodey grabs his hand when he gets close enough, looking up into his face. He looks almost despondent, and Rhodey spends a moment wondering what could be wrong, before realizing it’s just his usual sad expression made worse by exhaustion. It’s not as bad as the first night when Rhodey found him, but clearly, doing what he just did has drained him significantly. “You okay?” Rhodey asks again, prompting concerned looks from some of the others who’ve gathered around them now.

Tony nods slowly, but doesn’t let go of Rhodey’s hand, which tells Rhodey he’s tired, withdrawing a bit, and not likely to tolerate too much of the small crowd now standing around them. “Just… tired. I don’t think I can do that again today,” he says.

The group, at least, shares concerned looks rather than trying to prompt him to do it again. “It’s getting late anyway,” one of the men says, which is a bit of a stretch, but Rhodey appreciates it nonetheless. “We can head back, take you guys back to the hotel if you need?”

Tony looks tired, but his grip is still strong and Rhodey knows he won’t want to be surrounded by the group for much longer, not now that he’s revealed some new power for them to be fascinated with, renewing their staring and their expectations. He smiles up at the man. “Nah, stay out here, there’s still a lot to be done. We’ll go back on our own, it’s not far. Here,” he hands his notebook and bag of supplies to the man next to him. One of them can take over organization for the rest of the day. He gestures with a tilt of his head for he and Tony to head down the street.

Tony nods at him and follows him silently down the street and back to the hotel. Rhodey’s reminded of the day he was resurrected, when they’d made their way to the hotel for the first time. He’d felt like he was on uneven ground then too, not knowing what was going on with Tony, trying to help him deal with some new change.

This time, at least, there’s no holdup in the lobby of the hotel. Tony doesn’t look any different than the last few days, and there’s no way for the news to have spread yet. He has no doubt that by tomorrow morning everyone at the hotel will know what Tony did, but for now, Rhodey just stops at the desk to report that they’re going up but the others are still out, and they make it up to their room without incident.

“So,” Rhodey says once they’re alone in their room, “are you really okay?” He knows Tony will be more honest with him when they’re in private. That, at least, hasn’t changed at all from the old Tony.

Tony shrugs and sits down. “That was weird. I really am tired, but it’s already fading. I think I can do it again, and more. Maybe with some… practice. I can try it again tomorrow, work up to using it more. I might be able to do more than just moving things.”

Rhodey nods. “You’re going to be attracting even more attention again,” he warns, remembering Tony’s issues on day one with being looked at like he’s some sort of all powerful being.

Tony shrugs again. “There’s not much I can do about that. But at least now I can do something more. They look at me, you know,” he raises his arms to show off his marks, “like they expect me to be able to do something more than a human. At least now I can.”

“You are a human,” Rhodey says quickly, not liking that phrasing. Tony just blinks at him, and he frowns.

“Not exactly a normal one,” Tony says before Rhodey can say anything else. Rhodey gets the sense he’s deflecting, and inwardly curses how much harder it is to read him now that his expressions and his tone are only ever variations of sadness.
Tony’s staring off into space again, and Rhodey gets the feeling it’s not just him thinking about being a human. He reaches out to grab Tony’s hand again. “Hey, what is it?” When Tony just frowns at him, he adds, “I can tell something else is bothering you.”

Tony looks down at his hands again like he’s examining the marks. “When I accessed that power earlier…” he stops, and waits so long that Rhodey reaches out to slide his arms up Tony’s, gripping his forearms. Tony mirrors the position and looks back up. “I was surprised. I felt surprised.”

Rhodey just stares for a second, and then a wide smile breaks out on his face. “And that’s new?” he says, trying and failing to contain his delight.

Tony nods. “That was it, nothing else, just surprise. It was there and then gone. But… it was there.”

“That’s what’s important,” Rhodey says, eyes shining with gratitude and relief. Relief for the fact that he hadn’t just been talking out his ass earlier, when he’d promised Tony that they’d figure everything out, that he’d be able to regain his emotions. This is a small step, but it proves he was right. It probably won’t be easy, but they’ll do it.

“This means you can get the rest back, Tony,” he says cautiously. He doesn’t want to seem overly optimistic, or make it sound like he’s placing any sort of expectations on Tony. But god, is this making him feel good.

Tony looks away. “It won’t be easy, Rhodey. I don’t even know where to start for anything else. I didn’t know this would happen.”

Rhodey slides his hands back down to rub soothingly at the insides of Tony’s wrists. “It’s fine, Tony. Don’t push it. Just let it happen. Take as long as you need to.”

Tony nods again, making eye contact with Rhodey before pulling away to stand up and head into the bathroom. Rhodey hopes he’s not feeling overwhelmed. He feels like he’s constantly walking the line between trying to help Tony work through difficulties and pushing him too much.

Rhodey lets it go for now and they spend the rest of the night like usual, watching a movie, talking about nothing important. Rhodey thinks about bringing up Pepper a few times but doesn’t do it, worried that will cause Tony to withdraw. Tony doesn’t seem any different than usual as the night passes and they clean up for bed—Tony’s now taken over helping Rhodey through what he needs to in the morning and evening—and Rhodey doesn’t mention anything more about casualties of the invasion or Tony’s newly discovered abilities or emotion.

Tony’s lack of reaction is bringing him down a bit, but he reminds himself that Tony probably can’t even feel excitement. On day one he’d said he doesn’t even remember what hope feels like. Maybe he’s not capable of reacting much to this news at all. But he’s the one who’s doing the work of recovering his emotions, and now he’s done it once already. Even if he doesn’t feel excited and hopeful about the future, he’s still making it happen. Rhodey can hope enough for the both of them.

Chapter End Notes

Did you think my “Tony with alien powers” tag was just talking about him wielding the Infinity Stones? Hehehe

I’m not entirely satisfied with this chapter and the way it flowed (or didn’t). But it
needed to happen. I hope the pacing change isn’t too odd, but the entire planned story takes place over a year, and some of the chapters need to start containing more time.
Rhodey was right; by the next morning, when they go downstairs for breakfast and to find jobs for the day, it seems everyone knows about what Tony did yesterday. The renewed stares and the slight hush that falls over the people around them remind Rhodey of that first night, immediately after Tony was resurrected.

They go about the morning as usual, trying to ignore it, and Rhodey is surprised to see less tension in Tony than he expected. He’s definitely wound a little tighter than the previous few days, but he’d not withdrawing or ducking away from people’s gazes like Rhodey was afraid he might. It seems like he really was serious about not being as bothered by the expectations people are placing on him, not now that he actually has the otherworldly powers to match those expectations.

Tony had spent a short time this morning making bottles of shampoo and tubes of toothpaste float back and forth across the bathroom. Rhodey had chuckled at the sight. Though Tony still didn’t seem to feel any sort of excitement or happiness about it, there was a spark of something familiar in the way he focused on the task, something Rhodey had seen in him before, usually when he was deeply involved in an engineering project. It just gave more fuel to his conviction that Tony would be able to find his way back to feeling normal again.

Before they go to find work for the day, they agree that they should definitely be outside, where Tony, if he feels like it, can try to explore some of his newly discovered abilities and perhaps make the most difference with them. Though Tony still didn’t explicitly asked to be—this time, they specifically ask at the front. The kid behind the desk who’s assigning tasks for the day, who can’t be more than nineteen, nods and stammers at them, mouth slightly open as he assigns them to a group.

Rhodey once again takes over some organizational tasks, while Tony joins a reconstruction team. They take a bus down several blocks to an apartment building that’s had one side smashed in, a large pile of rubble on the street in front of it and a gaping hole in the side of the building. Though it covers a wide area, the damage doesn’t actually seem to be too deep into the building. If they can get the major problems patched up, at least a hundred people can move back into it—maybe not those whose apartments were right in the area of the blast or whatever it was that caused the damage, but everyone else in the building should be okay. Another group has already cleared the building, deemed it safe and made sure there was no one alive and stuck or sheltering in the building before they try to come in and start moving things around.

As things are beginning to settle down and more and more people are getting back to their home areas—and if they’re lucky, their actual homes—certain people are starting to go back to the jobs they had back before the invasion. Construction workers, safety inspectors, and other similar jobs are in high demand for obvious reasons, and those with any kind of experience are leading some of the cleanup and reconstruction efforts. Doctors, nurses, paramedics and fire rescue, and any other kind of medical specialist, particularly those well versed in emergency medicine, are working wherever and
whenever they can.

Experts have been working nonstop on communication systems. There’s still too much internet traffic and interference to be of much use, but tv stations, news and otherwise, are starting to be used for better communication and organization. There are efforts being made statewide now to coordinate between cities, help to get more people home and find people to work where it’s needed most.

He sees Jackie going in and out of their hotel sometimes, which seems to be her home for the time being, but nowadays she’s usually too busy to talk. He’d never asked her where she was from, if she had family to find, she was always so busy but still, he feels like he did something wrong for not finding time to ask. It’s one of the striking things about this new reality, that the point of conversation after where are you from in small talk with new people is now have you found your family.

With a significant portion of the government dead or in shambles, those who have stepped up as leaders since the end of the invasion are basically creating their own structure from scratch. They’re using some of the basis of what was already there, of course, but tailoring it to the new reality of life on Earth. No matter how well they organize and how fast they clean up, they’re going to be recovering from this physically, cleaning up streets and buildings and trying to settle back into their lives, for at least a year. Emotional recovery will take a lot longer than that. It’s easy, focused on taking care of Tony, to start forgetting that he’s not alone in feeling lost, adrift in a sea of indescribable trauma and trying desperately to find something to start building a future on.

Still, it isn’t all bad. Recovery is progressing. People are generally kind to each other, and the relief that accompanied Thanos’s death is still present. When things start seeming too bleak, Rhodey only needs to look around at all the people who are still alive, fighting to rebuild their lives and helping each other however they can, to remind himself of the good in the world.

It helps, of course, that he spends every day and night with Tony. Every once in a while, just looking at him, Rhodey’s chest suddenly seizes, sharp emotion running through him, reminding him of what a miracle it is that Tony’s here, of how lucky he is. He’s well aware that there are a lot of people out there who aren’t as lucky as he is, who don’t find it as easy to pull themselves out of grim thoughts, because they don’t have someone by their side through this. Even with Tony’s emotional state, he’s still a comfort, and the progress he’s already made gives Rhodey hope and something to look forward to. Many people don’t have that anymore.

Rhodey begins recording their progress as the crew Tony’s part of starts cleaning up in front of the apartment building. For a while, they all just begin clearing some of the smaller rubble in front of the building by hand, Tony included. Rhodey can tell that the others are excited to see Tony try out something fantastic, but he thinks he properly cowed the few who were impatiently glancing in Tony’s direction on the ride over with a few well-aimed murderous looks. They do not need to make Tony feel like he’s a circus performer and Rhodey isn’t going to let any of that shit slide.

After an hour or so of manual work, Tony does step back and begin trying to move some of the larger pieces using his powers. At first, he just moves several out of the way, down to their dump site, hovering a few feet above the ground. He gains confidence as he goes, but still takes a break after a few, looking tired. He spends a while resting by Rhodey, sitting on a flat chunk of concrete next to Rhodey’s chair and draining a bottle of water they brought along.

Tony appears to have retained the trait of trying to push himself harder than he should, because he’s still looking slumped in the shoulders when he starts pushing himself to his feet, declaring that he’s ready to go back. Rhodey puts a hand on his shoulder and pushes him back down, trying to be both firm and friendly in the touch. He still feels a little cautious about some things that he wouldn’t have thought twice about with Tony in the past, but Tony accepts the touch without issue and sits back
down. He looks over at Rhodey, questioning but not upset.

“You still look tired. Eat something.” Rhodey tells him, digging in his bag for a protein bar and handing it to Tony.

Tony takes it and opens it, but looks between Rhodey and the area where the rest of the crew is still working for a moment. “I can still go back.”

“Are you feeling as good as you did this morning?” When Tony doesn’t answer him immediately, he just raises an eyebrow. Tony had accused him of being a mother hen more than a few times in the past; now, with all the new challenges facing them and the changes that make Tony, in some ways, more vulnerable than before, Rhodey’s certainly not going to drop that tendency.

“Still a little tired,” Tony finally admits, and Rhodey reaches out to give his shoulder a squeeze.

“Then rest some more. Don’t push it, Tony. You’ve already done more today than you could yesterday. Give it time to improve.”

Tony nods, taking a bite of his protein bar. He still looks a bit frustrated with his own limits, but he leans into Rhodey’s touch, which reassures Rhodey he’s not annoyed with him. Much as he wants to watch over Tony and Tony seems to be letting him, he doesn’t want to smother him. Whatever changes and problems he’s facing, Tony’s still a grown man, and he doesn’t need a babysitter. It’s a fine line, one he’s been walking the whole time he’s known Tony.

This time, when Tony gets up, he looks like he’s actually ready to go back out, refreshed and at least as energetic as when they’d set out that morning. He also takes it a little slower this time, going back to normal labor for a while between using his powers to do anything.

Even by the end of the day, the others still stop to watch, fascinated, every time Tony uses them. Rhodey can hardly blame them, but he watches them carefully. He’s ready to call every one of them over and kick their asses if need be, if they push Tony or make him uncomfortable. But the closest any of them gets is when one man gives Tony a friendly pat on the back after he’s finished shifting a large piece of roofing and metal. Rhodey thinks Tony manages to hide the slight cringe from any of the others—though Rhodey notices, of course—but he sees one of the others elbow the man in the side shortly afterward, possibly berating him just for touching Tony at all.

Once again, that night, Rhodey has to remind himself that Tony won’t be excited or hopeful about any of his progress. He accepts Rhodey’s praise and happiness for what he did today with a shrug and a distant gaze. But when Rhodey questions him, he says it’s fine, that it’s good that Rhodey is happy for him. It’s harder to tell if he really means it when he still doesn’t express anything but sadness or indifference, but Rhodey takes him at his word. Tony sleeps particularly well that night, heavy and tired from the work he’d done all day.

The same pattern continues for several more days, with few more surprises in between. They continue work on the same apartment building, and in three days, they have it cleared and the open spaces patched or covered, enough to allow habitation of the rest of the building, largely thanks to Tony.

On day two of work, Tony starts moving beyond just taking pieces to the dump. For large areas of walls and roof that they can salvage, they want to move what they can back into place and secure it, helping with the eventual rebuilding that will happen and also sealing some of the gaping holes in the building in order to better secure it for habitation again. Slowly but surely, Tony is able to move some large pieces into place that normally would take a dozen people or heavy machinery and several hours. He exhausts himself doing it, but he does it, and he at least takes several long breaks,
enough to keep Rhodey from exploding where he’s forced to sit and watch.

On day three, Tony exercises his new ability to feel surprise when he discovers a new aspect to his powers. So far, he’s only been trying to move objects, since that’s what he’d discovered accidentally a few days ago. But when he’s holding a large piece of the exterior stone wall in place while the rest of the group places a temporary support structure in place around it, even from his place on the sidewalk, Rhodey can see the sudden change in him. His stance shifts slightly and he tilts his head like he’s considering the wall.

At first, when he moves, Rhodey thinks he’s about to lose his grip on the wall after holding it in place for so long, and is readying himself to call out a warning to the others. But Tony’s movements look deliberate, and after a second, Rhodey see the change in the wall itself. The wall is being held up against the rest of the building where it was blasted away, with gaps ranging from a few inches to feet where pieces at the edges of the break crumbled away. But as Rhodey watches, those gaps disappear. The edges of the stone itself seem to warp and move, flowing back together, until after just a few seconds, the piece of the wall that Tony was holding up is whole again, solidly attached to the rest of the building.

Rhodey isn’t the only one who’s noticed: those in the group who are standing closer to the edges see the change and let out noises of amazement, attracting the attention of the others as well as they drop the support posts they’re putting into place and turn to watch the transformation.

Thankfully, at least one of them is also watching Tony, and lunges forward to catch him a moment later when his knees buckle.

Two of the men end up supporting Tony on either side; he looks like he’s barely standing on his own legs as they bring him over to Rhodey immediately. Rhodey’s already digging food and water out of his bag, and gets them to let Tony down gently next to him and go back to work to give him some space. Tony’s tolerance for other people in his space or touching him drops significantly when he’s stressed or exhausted, and Rhodey’s pretty sure he’s both right now.

Tony just hunches over his own knees and breathes hard for a while, while Rhodey rubs slow circles into his back. When he brings his head up, Rhodey offers him water first, which he takes with a breathless thanks and manages to drink some of. Once his breathing evens out a little more, Rhodey offers him some food as well, bread they’d been sent out with that morning and a few plain crackers. He’s not sure if Tony’s stomach might be upset by whatever using that kind of power did to him, but he figures it’s better to be safe.

When he seems to be as calmed as he’s going to get, breathing slow and even but leaning against Rhodey’s legs in exhaustion, Rhodey gently asks about what happened.

“Not really sure about that either. I was holding it in place, thinking about how it must have fit into the building before it broke off. I was picturing how exactly the pieces fit together, I think, and then it just… happened.”

Rhodey brushes a hand through his hair and settles it on his shoulder. “You want to go back?”

He feels Tony nod against him. Rhodey looks over the rest of the group, moving on to patching up some of the remaining small spaces. They’ve made good progress in the last three days, and the building is nearly ready for its occupants to return. The piece of wall that Tony just reconnected was the last of the large pieces that they were planning to try to fit back into place. By tomorrow, everything should be done, and the crew can finish the rest without them. He doesn’t feel at all like he’s abandoning them by leaving now.
So he beckons a man over and hands over what little paperwork he’d been keeping track of, telling him that they’re going back to the hotel. This time, they’re far enough away and Tony seems tired enough that Rhodey doesn’t want to try to walk back. After some short discussion, one of the group offers to drive them back in the pickup they’ve been using to transport equipment; the bus that took them out to this area in the morning also delivered several other crews to different areas and won’t be coming back again to pick them up for a few more hours.

By now he’s more than used to it, but Rhodey still feels just the slightest squirming in his gut when they have to go through everything necessary to get him into the truck they’re taking back. It doesn’t take long and neither Tony nor their driver gives any indication that they think it’s an inconvenience at all. But it still reminds him acutely of his situation, every time.

There’s no shortage of people willing to help him, even to go out of their way to do so, and not just because of who he is. Not just because of what he’s done as a soldier or an Avenger or for Tony. People are willing to help him because they’re decent and kind, and he needs it, and that’s how a cooperative society works; people with strength in certain areas pick up the slack for those who struggle in those same areas. Rhodey certainly has other skills to put to use, can contribute in other ways, but he can’t pretend it isn’t awkward and uncomfortable to suddenly be on the struggling side of that equation, when he’s always lived as a physically independent person.

He doesn’t resent his situation. He’s not depressed, or angry at the world, or in denial of some kind. He’s dealt with enough injured veterans in his time to have always been aware that he could end up as one of them. He was always prepared for that—as much as someone can be who hasn’t yet experienced it—and he’s always been a practical, realistic person. He’s pushing forward, adapting, getting used to this reality and the new challenges it brings with it. But it’s not necessarily easy.

He’s self-aware enough to admit that seeing Tony discovering these new abilities is making it worse, in some ways. It’s not jealousy. His friendship with Tony would never have lasted this long if he was going to be jealous of him. Tony’s always been the flashier one, getting attention and awards, he was the one who ran a company and appeared on magazine covers and slept with supermodels, and Rhodey was never jealous of any of that. He had his own military career and other accomplishments to be proud of, and he didn’t necessarily even desire some of the things Tony had. Being personal friends with Tony also helped; Tony let him in more than most other people, and Rhodey got to see all the negative aspects of that lifestyle that Tony usually kept hidden.

Being continually outshone by Tony’s genius wouldn’t have done well for them either, if Rhodey was the jealous type. Rhodey’s no slouch himself—which some people tend to forget, that he went to MIT as well and though he’d be embarrassed more than anything if it were brought up, he is certifiably a genius as well—but Tony definitely has him beat in that area. It’s never bothered him; Tony had never looked down on him in any way, certainly not intellectually (not that he’d be able to if he tried, maybe Rhodey didn’t have his creative genius but he could certainly keep up with anything Tony worked on or talked about).

So no, this isn’t jealousy. He’s not feeling inferior or envious because of Tony’s powers—he wouldn’t even know what to do with something like that, himself—but they’re certainly highlighting the difference between their abilities. What Rhodey’s been doing to help with the reconstruction efforts so far is important work, but the plain, simple truth is that he can’t do what most other people can anymore, and it bothers him sometimes.

He tries his best not to let it show. If anything, it’s frustration at himself, but he wouldn’t want to risk Tony interpreting it as jealousy, or anger, or frustration with him. With Tony’s emotional state and his tendency to withdraw already, Rhodey worries that the slightest provocation could have him pulling away from Rhodey. Then he wouldn’t have anyone to depend on, and it would hurt both of
them. So Rhodey tries his best to completely ignore any feelings of inadequacy or discomfort that his situation brings up. It’s exhausting at times and maybe not the healthiest thing to do, but… well, he’s not a perfect person, or the epitome of healthy psychology, despite what some people who’ve only ever seen him next to Tony may think.

Maybe it’s not exactly fair to Tony. Tony may not have his own emotions figured out, but he’s offered multiple times already to talk with, or just listen to, Rhodey about what’s happened to him. Rhodey’s spoken a little now about what happened in the camps, some of the things they did and people he met. He hasn’t gotten into the really heavy stuff yet, but Tony’s always been receptive, easy to talk to. Even with his own issues, he’s doing his best to be there for Rhodey and here Rhodey’s hiding things from him, trying to keep from dumping too much emotional crap on him.

Tony walks under his own power when they get back to the hotel, but he looks a little unsteady still. The man who drove them back walks them to the elevators, making sure Tony’s not going to fall over. When they get up to the room, Tony flops down onto the couch and drapes an arm over his eyes. Rhodey wheels over but hangs back, waiting for Tony to make a move. After a long moment of stillness, Tony moves his arm and looks over at Rhodey through half-closed eyes.

Rhodey gives him a half-smile. “Long day?”

“I’m not really surprised,” Rhodey muses. “If your powers came from the Infinity Stones, well, the stones could do a lot more than just move stuff around.”

“Yeah,” Tony says quietly. “I think there’s other things. A lot, probably. But it’ll take time to… figure them out, work on them. Even that, today, that took a lot of energy, but I don’t think I could have done it last week. I’m getting better at it, it’s just… slow.”

“Let it be slow,” Rhodey says gently, “no need to push it.”

Tony looks over at Rhodey for a long moment, then slowly pushes himself back up into a sitting position. Rhodey frowns at the look on his face and moves as close as he can. “What is it?”

Tony’s gaze looks faraway. “If I can do that, and maybe more, then there’s a lot I can fix up myself. I—”

He stops, and Rhodey waits patiently for him to figure out what he wants to say. He thinks and talks faster now than when he was first resurrected, but he has a tendency to have trouble articulating his own desires or anything he thinks might cause a problem. Not all that different from the old Tony, really, except that the old Tony would phrase those things like a fact and cover them in layers of sarcasm to try to disguise the fact that he was really emotionally invested.

After a pause, Tony says, “If you’re okay with moving—” Rhodey nods “—I think… I want to go back to the Tower.”

That is a surprise. “Back to the Tower?”

Tony nods. “We can’t stay here forever. There’s lots of rooms there, even if my old one is gone. And it’s—it was—home, for a while.” He shrugs. “There could be… memories there, something to help me.”

Rhodey raises an eyebrow, thinking of Ultron, and JARVIS’s death, and the “team” that betrayed him. “They might not all be good memories.”
Tony looks away again. “I know. But there’s good ones too. Being there might help pull something up, emotions I’m missing.”

This seems dangerously close to pushing it, which he’d promised himself he wouldn’t let Tony do, but he does have a point, both about them not being able to stay at the hotel forever and about the possibility of being in a familiar place helping Tony. Rhodey reaches out to put a hand on Tony’s knee and Tony looks back at him.

“If that’s what you want, Tony, we’ll go.”

“Thank you,” Tony says quietly.

Rhodey offers him a small smile. “You don’t have to thank me. I’m not the boss of you.”

Tony’s gaze just slides away from him, drifting off in the way he does now at the end of some conversations when he can’t think of anything else to say. He still looks tired, so they stay in the room for the rest of the night, eating something from their minimally stocked kitchenette for dinner and watching a movie on the couch.

Tony ends up leaning into him and nearly falling asleep against his shoulder before the sun has even set, so Rhodey urges him to bed earlier than usual, pulling the heavy curtains closed and letting Tony softly illuminate the room. He sits up in bed and reads for a while on his tablet, Tony falling asleep pressed against his hip. Tomorrow, they’ll figure out how to get to the Tower. He has a feeling settling into a routine is going to be a lot harder now, but they’ll figure it out. They always do.
Memories

Chapter Notes

It’s been a while, yet again, but I’m still going. Monday was our second exam in three weeks and we have another one this coming Monday. A four day unit, yaaaaay. It’s like this for pretty much the rest of the month, then we get into dedicated study time for board exams, so I’m basically in study hell for the rest of the spring and into summer.

I just wanted to give a huge thanks to everyone who’s left comments on this story and is putting up with my crazy update schedule. I’ve gotten some really amazing comments on this and it makes me super happy to see people really enjoying the story.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It takes them another day to arrange what they need to with the people who’ve been organizing everything and helping them in the hotel. They both express their gratitude for everything, receiving thanks in return that by now isn’t unexpected, though Rhodey still thinks it’s unnecessary. They’d done some work, yeah, but so have other people, and Rhodey feels like they’ve received more than they’ve given. But they exchange their thanks and depart with pats on the back and best wishes from the people they’ve been working with. Then, two mornings after Tony announced his desire to go back, they find themselves on the street, looking up at the Tower.

Miraculously, the building was barely hit in the initial invasion, and doesn’t seem to have sustained any serious damage during the shockwave from the destruction of the Infinity Stones, despite its proximity to where Thanos died. The main problem is the ruined remains of the top fifteen floors, where Pepper set off the explosion that killed so many of the aliens before she attacked Thanos.

From blocks away, where they could see the top of the building, they saw that some of the support structure is still in place all the way to the top, and it looks like one half of the building is still mostly intact on the floors that were blown. Now, from street level, it’s impossible to really tell the extent of the damage, so they head inside.

Self-sufficient from the arc reactor in place, the Tower hasn’t lost power, though everything is off. It’s all automated down on the public floors, independent of the AI that ran Tony’s private areas. Some of the functions have clearly been damaged, though, because a few of the lights and systems don’t come on when Rhodey and Tony enter.

The private elevator goes all the way up and probably isn’t structurally stable, so they take one of the others up to the top common floor, then access an out of the way staircase to head up to the top floors that used to belong to just Tony, then the Avengers. Now they’re just Tony’s again. Tony is able to carefully pull Rhodey’s chair backwards up the stairs—probably not following any medically approved safety protocols, but they make it work.

Already, just walking around where they used to live and work, back before the invasion—back before Ultron, even, when they were all a team, there were some problems already but nothing like after Ultron—is painful. There are a lot of memories here. Memories of the team, of Rhodey and Tony before all of this, and of Pepper. She and Tony had built this place, retrofitted it for the Avengers after the first invasion, and spent a lot of their communal time here. She’d been Rhodey’s close friend too, and he’s seeing her everywhere he looks.
He can’t help but wonder what Tony is feeling, what he’s remembering here. Whatever “break” they’d been on when the whole fiasco before the invasion happened, Rhodey knew they’d both loved each other and had every intention of getting back together, maybe permanently. He’d always had the feeling Tony intended to marry her, but in true Tony fashion, wouldn’t admit it to himself, much less to Rhodey. Knowing him, he probably thought he didn’t deserve it. That, or he was afraid of being rejected, so he avoided creating the opportunity at all.

But Tony moves around like usual, looking at everything with a sort of blank curiosity but no more sadness than is usually in his expression now. They’re still several floors down from the major areas of destruction. Nothing is really out of place down here, except for a few things knocked off of counters and shelves, either during the battle at the beginning of the invasion or from the shaking of the building when Pepper set off the explosion.

Most of Tony’s lab spaces are down here, so they shouldn’t be too badly damaged by the explosion. Of course, the lab where Tony worked on the Iron Man suits is locked down permanently, sealed against any entry after they identified Tony’s body. There’d have been at least one suit stored elsewhere—the one Pepper took to her last stand against Thanos—but the majority of them are gone, sealed under several layers of protection and possibly already starting to slowly self-destruct. It’s possible they can break into the lab, but there’s definitely no way to get at the suits now—permanent lockdown meant permanent with Tony, and there was no reason at the time to think Tony would be trying to get back into the lab after his own death was confirmed. Amazingly enough, resurrection wasn’t something Tony had factored into his plans for after his death.

They don’t linger, instead heading up floor by floor to inspect the building. Starting six more floors up, there are several levels of living spaces. Some of them used to belong to the Avengers; even after they all moved to the Compound and started treating him like he carried the plague, Tony had left them room at the Tower. Now, the thought of their rooms just makes Rhodey sick. The only one of them that hadn’t betrayed Tony, been involved in some way in his death, was Bruce, who’d run away and left Tony to deal with the fallout of Ultron—not that Tony blamed him, or Rhodey, really, considering what the witch had done to him, but still, he’d left Tony with her. Vision, born after the initial destruction of the Tower, hadn’t had a room here. At some point, they should clean them up, get rid of everything those traitors left behind. Rhodey’s first instinct is to see if he can get someone to do it for them, but he’ll have to ask Tony first. Much as he’s apprehensive about the idea, if Tony wants to go through their rooms, possibly thinking something there could help him with his emotions or memories, Rhodey will back him up.

Tony ignores their rooms for now, moving up to an uninhabited floor. His old penthouse room is gone without a doubt after the explosion, but there’s plenty of available space on the lower levels. He picks a suite to be his own during reconstruction, then pauses in the doorway, oddly apprehensive. Rhodey wheels up next to him and peers up at his face. “Something wrong?”

Tony glances at him and then away. “There’s—there’s another suite down the hall for you.”

He says it like a statement, but Rhodey can hear the question in it. He doesn’t even need to consider it. “What makes you think I’m leaving you alone just because there’s more than one room?” he says with a smile.

Tony just blinks at him, but then nods. “Okay,” he says quietly, and Rhodey doesn’t think he’s just imagining the relief in it. Rhodey’s relieved, himself—if Tony had wanted to separate now, of course he would have, but he’s not sure how well that would have gone. His dreams so far since Thanos’s death have rarely been bad enough to wake him in the middle of the night, but he’s pretty sure being in contact with Tony has been helping with that. When he does wake, having Tony right there calms him instantly. Eventually, they’ll have to go back to being on their own for longer stretches, but right
now, Rhodey’s comfortable still staying with Tony as much as possible. It’s only been two weeks since Tony’s resurrection, after all.

They drop off the few things they brought with them from the hotel and keep moving up. As they go up, they start reaching the floors with serious damage from the explosion. The bottom few just have holes in the far walls and ceiling directly above, with a small amount of water damage from the few times it’s rained since then. Farther up, more and more of each level is destroyed, crumbling and unstable, nothing much left except rubble and the overturned furniture, soggy from water damage plus wind and other elements coming in through the open areas. A lot of it is charred on the levels immediately surrounding what must have been the center of the blast.

They can’t get to the top two floors at all; the stairway going up is unstable and there’s too many gaps and chunks of rubble to maneuver Rhodey’s chair past. There’s not much left above them anyway; the steel framing of the structure is still mostly in place, but that’s about it. The walls of the labs where Tony worked are strengthened against various kinds of damage, but the top floors were where Tony lived, relative security sacrificed for aesthetics. The view was certainly worth it, but floor-to-ceiling windows don’t hold up well against explosions.

There’s not much left of the floor they’re on, either, but Rhodey can see where it can be fixed, where collapsed walls can be reformed, especially with abilities like Tony’s. It’ll be a lot of work, but Tony’s getting better at it every day, and if he wants to do it, Rhodey can’t see any reason why he shouldn’t. They finish their walkthrough of the partially destroyed floors and move down to the lowest affected level. If they’re going to rebuild, they’ll do it from the bottom up.

It’s odd, being in the Tower and not having an AI around. For as long as he’s known Tony, his creations—his children—have been around too. Tony built DUM-E back when they were at MIT, and JARVIS not long after that. They were with him through so much. Rhodey wonders what could have happened to the bots. Independent and intelligent (in their own way) though they were, their AI wasn’t as extensive or advanced as JARVIS and FRIDAY, and they weren’t part of Tony’s self-destruct protocol in the event of his death. But they traveled around the Tower, between different labs and other rooms, and if they were in the lab where Tony worked on the suits when it was shut down and sealed off, chances are there’s no getting them back.

The idea twists something in him, all of Tony’s children gone. FRIDAY had been limited at first because of Tony’s paranoia after Ultron, but eventually she’d been free to start growing into herself like JARVIS had. It’s an awful thought, that she’d have destroyed herself after Tony died, only for Tony to come back. There’ll be no miraculous resurrection for her. Tony surely has her base code saved somewhere, but just like JARVIS, they could never get her back, not the way she was. It would be like cloning a person by growing a new embryo from their DNA. Sure, they might be genetically identical, be starting off with the same base, but they wouldn’t have the original person’s thoughts, memories, experiences. All the things that made them who they were. That was why Tony had never tried to touch anything to do with JARVIS after Ultron. Having what was left of him in Vision was a bad enough reminder of the loss Tony had suffered; seeing some blankly cloned version of him without the personality he’d developed would have ruined Tony.

JARVIS was Tony’s father as much as he was his child, named for the man who practically raised him and created to truly grow on his own beyond what Tony had designed. God, Rhodey still remembers Ultron, and JARVIS’s death. None of the others had understood what JARVIS meant to Tony. He couldn’t bring his grief to any of them, because they’d ignore him at best and ridicule him at worst. And he hadn’t even gotten time to really grieve, not with everything that happened with Ultron.

And then the “new members” of the Avengers. Christ, but Rhodey should have realized things
would end badly when Rogers allowed that HYDRA witch onto the team without a second thought. He should have known when Banner ran from the poisonous atmosphere of the so-called “team” and Tony withdrew and isolated himself just to protect himself from the rest of them. But Tony had been grieving for JARVIS, and blaming himself for Ultron, and Rhody had had a lot on his own plate. Tony had seemed to be acting like he normally did after a crisis—not healthy by any means, but not abnormal for him—and so Rhody hadn’t looked deeper. He’d tried to be there for him as a friend, but he’d never pushed, never wondered if there was something more going on.

How he wishes he had. There were a thousand warning signs from the very beginning that the “team” was, at best, a cobbled together collection of deeply flawed human beings forced by extreme circumstances to come together, led by a man with no real experience and who didn’t even belong in this time, yet who was utterly convinced by both his own ego and the pedestal others had placed him on that he was morally superior and therefore couldn’t compromise or accept any dissent. The rest of the team was just as problematic. Two spies whose motives would never really be clear, whose loyalty—assuming they even had any—was only to the shadowy government organization that held their leashes, an organization that, as it turned out, had been thoroughly infiltrated by HYDRA. Banner, a man coerced into joining the team just so they could take advantage of the monster he tried desperately to contain and ignore, Banner himself mostly treated like the third wheel in his own body by everyone on the team except Tony. And Tony, on whom everything was depending—funds, legal support, organization, a place to stay, tech, literally everything—manipulated into giving all of that by SHIELD and their agendas, told that he wasn’t good enough for the team so he’d kill himself trying to prove that he was.

Maybe he’s being uncharitable. It wasn’t all bad, or things would have fallen apart earlier than they had. Tony had truly enjoyed being a part of the team most of the time, and he’d supported it for good reasons. There were times they all genuinely seemed like friends. But looking back, in light of how they’d fallen apart and how Tony had been killed, it’s easy to focus on only the bad. There’s truth in it, though; while maybe it wasn’t as bad as Rhody is thinking now, it’s true that even while they’d put him down at every opportunity, the team was utterly dependent on Tony.

Tony was the heart and soul of the Avengers, and the Avengers had died with him in Siberia. Some people might say they died before that, when the team split apart over the Accords, or maybe even earlier, after Ultron. But Rhody knows that if circumstances had been different, if Tony had survived Siberia and Thanos hadn’t come so soon, Tony would have risen from the ashes and rebuilt the Avengers from the ground up. The team, in every sense, came from Tony. They belonged to him, and if he’d gotten the chance, Tony could have made them into something amazing, the way they should have been from the beginning. Whether he’d have wanted to is another issue, but he could have. If things had been different.

Rhodey would consider it pointless to think about this, it’s done and what happened happened, except he knows it’s going to come up again. The Avengers may have died permanently with Tony, but Tony’s back, and so are people’s expectations of him. Right now, the world is busy recovering from the destruction Thanos wrought. But when everything’s settled down and more or less back to normal, the questions will start coming about who is defending the Earth, and what they’ll do if something like this happens again. Inevitably, all eyes will be turned to Tony.

Tony seems to be embracing his powers and the renewed fame and expectations that are coming along with them so far. But there’s a big difference between the few dozen people that have been around them on a daily basis staring, hoping to see some spectacular show of power, and most of the planet assuming Tony will stand up as its lone protector. It’s not at all fair to Tony, but the world’s never been fair to Tony. All Rhody can do is try to help him navigate it.

They spend a few minutes discussing how best to approach the reconstruction of the Tower and
what to do with it. By now, people who need to stay in the city for a longer time are already in
appropriate shelters. There’s no need to offer the Tower as one, and in any case, it doesn’t actually
have that much room designed to be livable. It’s a place of business for Stark Industries, and once for
the Avengers, not a hotel.

Tony tells him that once communications are worked out, he wants to invite SI employees who’ve
been displaced to stay at the Tower, and open it and their factories up again for business. SI
employed millions of people, many in the city, and if they’re anywhere nearby, it may be easier to
organize them from the Tower. Also, as things are beginning to settle down, there are already people
going back to work like they used to. Right now it’s mostly construction and repairs, but tech and
manufacturing companies are going to be high on the list as recovery efforts continue. SI designed
and created tons of things that could be useful in reconstruction. If there are enough employees who
are willing to come back to work, Tony will make sure they’re paid well for their time, but he can
take that cost onto himself—it’s not like his accounts had been emptied or taken out of his name in
the few days between his death and the beginning of the invasion—and distribute products for free to
those who need them. It’s not too different from the relief foundations he created for Avengers
missions and their fallout, except that in this case, it’s not the unaffected pitching in to help those in
need, because everyone is in need, and no one is unaffected. It’s just good people willing to put in
effort to help others even when they’re facing their own problems.

By the time they’re finished discussing the basics of that plan, half the day has passed. It’s early
afternoon, and Rhodey insists they stop and eat something before Tony starts any kind of work on
the structure. It’s a good chance to just relax and look Tony over. He seems to have been energized
by planning for how to get SI back up and running and help people. Rhodey doesn’t expect any
trouble with beginning work on the Tower, as long as Tony goes slow and doesn’t push himself too
much.

Which is why he’s completely unprepared when, seconds after starting to use his abilities, Tony
promptly drops the cabinet he’s just taken hold of and collapses. Rhodey’s shouting his name in
alarm and moving as close as he can, leaning over as far as possible in the chair to try to shake
Tony’s shoulder. “Tony! Tony, hey, Tony—” he stops when Tony groans and stirs, bright eyes
opening wide and then narrowing with confusion.

“What… happened?” Tony asks, pushing himself up into a sitting position.

“I don’t know, you started to do something with your powers and you just dropped. You feel okay?”

Tony’s brows contract like he’s considering it, but then his face falls further, twists into that
expression he got in the first few days, like he wants to cry. Rhodey’s heart drops seeing it,
wondering what could be wrong, and suddenly he realizes it’s not that Tony wants to cry—he is
crying. There are tears starting to track down his cheeks. And though Rhodey’s not sure what caused
it or what it’s about, while most of him is concerned for Tony, some part of him is relieved to see it,
after Tony had said he wasn’t sure if he could cry anymore, even when he felt like he wanted to.

Rhodey moves to reach out again, opens his mouth to ask what’s wrong, but Tony wraps his arms
around himself and leans forward before Rhodey can touch him, staring at the floor. “Oh god,” he
says, practically on a gasp, “Pepper.”

And he lets out a strangled sob and buries his face in his hands. Rhodey pauses for just a fraction of a
second before he moves around to put his hand on Tony’s shoulder, rubbing slowly and soothingly
at his back. Whatever’s caused this sudden outpouring, Rhodey figures it’s best to just let it happen.
Tony hasn’t had a chance to express any of his grief yet since being resurrected, for anything that’s
happened or anyone they’ve lost. He probably needs this outlet. Rhodey doesn’t want to be happy to
see Tony cry, but this is an emotional release he needs, and it’s progress, even if it’s not a positive emotional state.

It takes a while for Tony to cry himself out. It could all be about Pepper, or he could be thinking of any number of other things too. He ends up leaning against Rhodey’s legs, letting Rhodey card his fingers through his hair. He seems exhausted, and Rhodey can’t blame him. Rhodey lets the silence stretch on long after Tony’s run out of tears, waiting for Tony to decide he’s ready to move on.

“I know why she did it,” Tony finally says quietly, staring at the opposite wall with unfocused eyes. “I just wish….”

“She hadn’t had to?” Rhodey offers.

“Yeah.”

They sit in silence for another minute before Tony moves to get up. He’s perfectly steady on his feet, which Rhodey’s glad for. It seems like this was entirely an emotional event, not the physical effects Tony’s felt before from discovering new powers. They move down the hall and into a fully intact room, and Tony sits down heavily on the couch, bracing his elbows on his knees. He meets Rhodey’s eyes, though, firm and strong, letting Rhodey know he’s ready to talk about this.

Rhodey gets right to it. “So, was it connected to your powers? Or did it just hit you all of a sudden?”

Tony stares intently at the floor for a few seconds, thinking. “I remembered her the whole time. It’s not like I forgot about her. Coming back here, I remembered some more stuff, but it was like everything else.”

“Like you were seeing someone else’s memories?” Rhodey clarifies, remembering what Tony told him that first night about not being able to feel emotions.

Tony nods. “But being here, where so much happened, I don’t know, it… changed something. When I went to access my power, it’s like it repaired a connection. Suddenly the emotions and the memories were part of each other, not just two separate things.”

Tony looks up at him again. “There wasn’t anything else,” he says before Rhodey can even think to ask. “Just… more sadness, more grief. I know there’s happy memories here too, but I guess all that got connected was the thought of her dying.”

He shrugs, and Rhodey doesn’t like how despondent it looks. “Well, that would be the freshest memory of her, finding out that she’s gone,” he says gently. “Maybe it’ll just take more time to get back to the better stuff.”

“Yeah, maybe,” Tony says, but he doesn’t look convinced, and he looks away from Rhodey again. Rhodey decides to drop it. He can’t force Tony to look at it optimistically, and Tony probably can’t, anyway. Rhodey can’t imagine what it’s like to not be able to feel anything but grief when thinking of the woman he loved. He wouldn’t be too hopeful either, in Tony’s place.

Rhodey has his own worries about what happened, too. Though this is progress in a sense, it was intense, and it obviously had a significant impact on Tony. If this is what it’s going to be like all the time here… “Is that going to happen again if you try to access your powers here? Should we leave?”

Tony shrugs again. “Don’t know. I guess I’ll have to find out. And no,” he meets Rhodey’s eyes again, “I don’t want to leave. I… think that was good. If I’m connecting memories and emotions, even if it’s hard—I should stay.”
Rhodey frowns. “If you want to stay, we’ll stay. But don’t force it, Tony. I just don’t want to see you hurt.”

Tony’s expression softens the tiniest bit. “I know.”

They rest for a few more minutes before Tony gets up to head back to the other room and resume trying to rebuild. Rhodey holds his breath when Tony tries again to pick up the same cabinet, but it rises and settles upright again with no problem. He sees a little of the tension in Tony’s shoulders release when he lets go of the cabinet, and knows Tony was also apprehensive. Now that he’s sure no other collapse is imminent, Tony moves on to fix the small hole in the wall on this level while Rhodey finds a trash can and begins sweeping out the broken items from inside the cabinet. He salvages what he can: a few small knickknacks, some minor tech items and pieces.

By late evening, they’ve nearly finished clearing and resetting the floor. All the furniture is back in place, courtesy of Tony, and relatively clean, courtesy of Rhodey. They move back down to the floor their suite is on, and Rhodey reorganizes the remaining unbroken dishes in the kitchen and puts away the generous supply of food the people at the hotel gave them when they announced their intention to return to the Tower.

They made significant progress on the level they worked on today, and it makes Rhodey happy to think about it, though he knows it won’t be so simple on the floors above. There’s much more extensive damage as they go up. And whatever he says, he’s still worried about Tony pushing himself too hard, trying to force more connections like the one with Pepper. Rhodey’s probably going to be spending more time than he should eyeing Tony through this process.

He is getting better, though. Maybe it’s something about being back at the Tower, but even after Tony’s episode earlier, Rhodey spent hours total with Tony out of his sight today. He always went back to check on him after being away a while, and he’s starting to feel a little fidgety by the end of the day, but he attributes that in part to the stress of the whole day, between the move to the Tower, Tony collapsing, and then spending the rest of the day doing manual labor—as much as he can from his chair, at least.

Rhodey’s clearing up from dinner in the kitchen and Tony is in their new suite’s bathroom cleaning up for bed when a sound jolts Rhodey out of his thoughts. It’s his phone ringing in the next room where he left it to charge with his tablet. He rushes over to get it, knowing he’d told his contacts at the hotel to call him if they needed anything. They might just be checking up on him, making sure he and Tony made it to the Tower okay, but he doesn’t want to miss a call. He doesn’t bother looking at the number or caller ID as he accepts the call and brings the phone up to his ear—it’s not like he’s going to be getting spam calls, and the only people who have this number are the local reconstruction leaders. “Rhodes.”

“James?” says the voice at the other end, and Rhodey almost drops the phone. He clutches it tighter and presses it hard to his ear, like it might teleport him there if he can just get it close enough.

“Mom?” he croaks, voice already choked.

There’s a laugh across the line. “James, thank God, honey. It’s me.”

Rhodey lets out a half-laugh, half-sob and hears a similar sound on the other end. “Mom. Are you okay? Are you safe? Where are you—how did you get this number?”

“Slow down, sweetheart, one question at a time,” his mom says with another watery laugh. “I’m fine, I’m at a safehouse. Most of the neighbors are here, we were all in the same camp. They’re sending us back home tomorrow morning. I got this number from the organizers here. I asked around.
about finding you,” she says, and Rhodey knows that means she insisted with her usual stubbornness, and wouldn’t leave it alone until she got information. He blinks away tears as she continues. “I might have had to drop the whole ‘superhero’ thing a few times to get them to listen to me. But finally they got a call up to New York and someone at the center they got hold of had seen you. They got me your number and the people here let me take a minute to call you. I’ve only got a minute, though, they’re busy and I’m taking up the phone.”

“Thank you,” Rhodey manages. “Thank you for doing all that, mom. I tried to call your phone a few times, but I wasn’t sure if you even had it with you anymore, I lost mine, and then they were asking everyone to stop trying to make calls…”

“It’s fine, honey,” she cuts off his rambling. “Are you okay, James?”

Rhodey smiles and closes his eyes, feeling the tears fall. “I’m fine, mom. I’m back at the Tower with Tony. We just got here today.”

There’s a breath on the other end of the line. “So it’s true,” his mom says, “about Tony.”

“Yeah. So they know about it even down there?”

“Gossip spreads fast, sweetheart, even in times like these. People wanted to know what happened, how we were all saved, and the truth is quite the fantastic story. It spread pretty fast. I’m sure he’s heard it plenty by now, but you tell that boy thank you from me, will you?”

Rhodey nods, even though she can’t see it. “I will, mom.” His voice is getting croaky again. “I—do you want me to come down there? I’m sure we could get down there.”

“No, no, not yet. We’re just heading home tomorrow, I’m sure there’s work to be done in the neighborhood. Most of us are here, we’ll help each other out, but it’s going to take a while to get it all sorted, and you’ve got your own stuff to deal with up there. Oh—I need to go, honey. I’ll take this number down and keep it, and I’ll call you again when we’re all settled and I’ve got my own phone again, okay?”

“Okay,” Rhodey says, clutching the phone even tighter, not wanting to end the conversation. “I love you, mom.”

“I love you so much, James, more than the moon.”

Rhodey stifles a sob in his hand at the old phrase from his childhood. “I love you more than all the stars,” he chokes out. “Bye, mom.”

“Bye, sweetheart. I’ll call you as soon as I can.”

The call ends and Rhodey drops the phone into his lap, puts his face in his hands, and cries. He’s incredibly happy, and so relieved, but mostly just overwhelmed. There’s been so much going on; it’s not as though he’d forgotten about his mother for even a second, but he hadn’t expected to be able to contact her so soon, so he’d been trying to put her out of his mind enough to focus on other things. But the persistent nagging stress that she could be dead and he wouldn’t know was constantly building. Now, getting confirmation that she’s okay, hearing her voice unexpectedly, is just overwhelming.

There’s a hand on his shoulder, lightly skimming back and forth. Their positions from earlier reversed, except Tony was grieving someone lost, and Rhodey’s doing just the opposite. He takes a deep breath and looks up at Tony, eyes still watery but a broad smile on his face.
“Your mom’s okay?” Tony asks, and when Rhodey looks surprised for a second, adds, “I heard you say goodbye right when I was coming back.”

Rhodey nods. “Yeah, she’s okay. Probably held a gun to someone’s head to get them to track me down and let her call me, but I’m sure as hell glad she did. She’s at a safehouse, heading back to her place tomorrow, with a bunch of other people from the neighborhood.”

Tony nods. “Good. I’m glad she’s okay.” He looks faraway again, maybe thinking about Rhodey’s mother. She’d always doted on him, from the first time Rhodey had come home from MIT with his teenage roommate in tow. Tony must have memories of her.

“She told me to tell you thanks, no matter how many times you’ve heard it already.”

Tony looks away at that, so Rhodey changes the subject. “She’ll call me back once everything’s okay there. You ready for bed?”

Tony seems to shake himself out of whatever thoughts he was lost in. He nods, and they move back into the suite so Rhodey can get ready for bed. By the time Rhodey’s finished brushing his teeth, Tony is in bed, eyelids already drooping. Rhodey smiles fondly at the sight, goes over to turn off the lights, then makes his way back to the bed by Tony’s light and hoists himself up into it.

When he turns to face Tony, he stops short. Tony’s practically asleep already and just moves slightly closer to intertwine their hands, not noticing Rhodey’s staring. Rhodey settles down, but he finds himself still staring at Tony’s closed eyes. When he’d turned to Tony just now, he could swear that his eyes were clearer than before. In fact, now that he thinks about it, they were a little clearer earlier in the day, after his breakdown over Pepper. Rhodey hadn’t noticed at the time, between the tears still in them during their conversation and then spending most of the day working, not usually face to face with him. But in the dark room, it’s more obvious. Just now, with Tony giving off the only light in the room, Rhodey could see his eyes more clearly than ever before. They’re still bright and glowing, but the light seems to have settled into the iris and toned down just a bit, giving his eyes more distinct definition.

Rhodey has no idea what this might mean. He’s fairly sure it’s connected to the thing with Pepper and Tony’s collapse after accessing his powers earlier, but he has no idea exactly how they’re connected. He could lie awake in bed for hours and come up with a hundred ideas, but that won’t go anywhere, and it’ll just make him anxious about it. He resolves to simply keep an eye on this development, confirm the change tomorrow and see if anything else happens. Mind made up, he relaxes further into the soft mattress, lightly squeezing Tony’s hands. He feels a slight pressure in return, and smiles as Tony shifts half an inch closer to him in his sleep. It seems like Tony’s improving a little every day, and his mother is okay… things are looking up.

Chapter End Notes

Lots of crying in this chapter.

That whole tangent thinking about the Avengers wasn’t planned, it just sort of happened. Well, got to think about them sometime.
Rhodey is nervous.

They’ve been back in the Tower for a little over a week now, and working steadily every day. The damage gets worse as they go up, but Tony’s getting a better hold on his powers as well. He’s able to work for longer and get more done at once. He’s now rebuilt the bottom four damaged floors. Rhodey’s been helping where he can, and Tony’s always grateful for his support and his presence, but Rhodey’s also been going off for other tasks by necessity. They need supplies, mostly food, now that they’re living on their own again, and delivery isn’t really an option when even the streets are still being cleaned up. Rhodey’s been heading out to get them when needed, and he’s also now organizing the first of the SI employees coming to stay at the Tower.

It’s good for him, actually, to feel like there’s something he’s in control of and responsible for, and not like he’s just making a minimal contribution to Tony’s work on the structure. His job with the new guests is just as important to both of them as Tony’s work, and Tony’s grateful to him for doing it. Tony told him, just as the first family arrived to stay in the Tower, that he was uncomfortable with the idea of talking to them, worried about what they’d think of him and his offer, or that they’d be reluctant to stay near him. Rhodey didn’t think it was likely Tony would make anyone uncomfortable, but he couldn’t deny that they’d treat him differently than Rhodey. All the staring and the way people treat him, the expectations and the reverence and the detachment like Tony isn’t a person like them, can’t be doing much for his emotional state, so it’s Rhodey who takes care of everything to do with their guests for now.

Rhodey’s more frequent absences from Tony’s side are both good and bad. Right now, it’s allowing him to be here without having to tell Tony about the trip yet, which he’s grateful for. He won’t deny that having Tony here might have done something for his nerves, though. He’s not the biggest fan of the uncertainty and lack of control inherent in hospitals, particularly for him, after his injury.

One of the jobs in highest demand after the invasion, naturally, was any kind of medical profession. Doctors, nurses, emergency medical workers, any and all others have been working nearly nonstop since Thanos’s death. There’s both a shortage of medical professionals and an increase in demand, and though they’re doing their best, doctors just aren’t able to keep up right now. 

People are doing their best to help, getting food and shelter and anything else they could need to doctors who are working around the clock, so that they don’t need to worry about anything else. Those who can, in some of the less affected areas and with assets they can still easily access, are paying for what they can. People in general are trying their best to transition back into the old patterns of society, including using money. Free relief efforts, supplies for those who need them, and volunteer labor are of course still being utilized without involving money, but money is going out where it can, and more and more people are starting to accept and give money for goods and services
again, including medical services—though doctors are accepting money mostly as donations, of course, no one is even thinking of expecting payment for anything or denying care to anyone who needs it.

There are so many people in need of medical care that Rhodey hadn’t wanted to impose, even as he finally forced himself to seek out a doctor. He felt like he was taking valuable time and resources away from people who need them more than he does. But when he’d approached the nearby hospital about seeing a doctor, hoping to be put on a wait list of some kind, he’d been frontloaded and given an appointment for that afternoon. It wasn’t entirely surprising, Rhodney was not only known as War Machine and now one of the few remaining superheroes on the planet, but now everyone knows that he and Tony, savior of the Earth, are essentially inseparable. It felt unfair, but it also would have felt ungrateful not to accept it, and arguing about it would have just wasted more of their time.

So he found himself seeing a doctor that afternoon, explaining what had brought him there and then having several tests done. That was two days ago, and now he’s back for the results, and he’s nervous.

It’s not so much what he might hear as what it means. He’s had plenty of time building up to this to start to wonder about it, and by now he’s fairly sure of his conclusion. Despite feeling sure, having it confirmed by a doctor will just make it real, somehow, and then it’ll be something he has to actively deal with instead of just avoiding and wondering about it. Then it’ll be a secret he might have to keep.

But it isn’t something he could just keep ignoring and he knows it. He’s always been the type to face a situation head on, even if it might be troublesome, and that’s what he’s doing here. Besides, in regards to his own health, he’d rather not ignore this, not when being here could help him.

What he told the doctors two days ago was the truth; for the last week or so, he’s been starting to feel something in his legs and feet. Just pins and needles, really, with an occasional flash of pressure, but it was something, definitely more than the nothing he’s been feeling since his injury. He’s fairly sure it’s not phantom pains, nor is it in his head.

And it’s unexpected. His was a complete spinal cord injury, and if he hadn’t felt anything for the last two months, he shouldn’t be suddenly feeling anything now. His muscles had gone through a period of spasticity and then started to slowly atrophy, exactly as expected for denervation injury according to the doctors, and this sudden new sensation was a mystery. So he spent the day going through a myriad of tests, everything from blood tests to nerve conduction tests to MRIs of his brain, spinal cord, and legs, and several muscle biopsies—during which he started to feel pressure again, prompting a whole new set of tests and excitement from the doctors.

The doctor he’d seen two days ago had consulted with neurology, not feeling confident enough himself to take on Rhodney’s case alone. The chief neurologist who’d consulted comes back into the room now with his chart and a bewildered expression. After exchanging some pleasantries, she takes a seat on a stool across from Rhodney’s chair.

“Well, your tests have shown a functional, if slow, reflex arc below the L1 level. Muscle contraction strength is weak, as expected with atrophy, but present when stimulated, and with the beginnings of sensation returning, I’d almost like to say your injury was misdiagnosed as a complete spinal when it was actually an incomplete or something more temporary.”

“But?” Rhodney prompts, hearing the question in her voice.

“While it’s not entirely uncommon to see recovery of some sensation and even motor function, it’s rare below the sacral levels, and after this much time, and considering the level of muscle atrophy
already and the pattern of sensation return, it just doesn’t seem likely. This isn’t following the usual pattern of nerve recovery.”

Rhodey can see that there’s something she’s hesitating to say, but he doesn’t really want to lead her to it, worried they’ll come to the topic he’s avoiding. Still, he needs to know more. “Unlikely, but possible?”

She nods. “Of course, and evidently, it’s happening. Things happen all the time in medicine that we don’t fully understand yet. Your case is… unique, but, well, there’s been a lot of unique things happening lately, I suppose.”

That sparks Rhodey’s curiosity, even despite his desire not to get too close to a touchy topic. “Unique, how?”

She glances down at his chart again and he sees her face draw down into a puzzled frown. “Your biopsy results show the expected changes seen in muscle cells with early-stage denervation. But there are scattered areas that are different, almost like the cells are spontaneously rebuilding and reorganizing into functional motor units. Your nerve conduction studies showed some peculiar results in certain areas, and your MRI was something we’ve never seen before.”

Rhodey frowns at the jargon. “Meaning what, exactly?”

She shakes her head. “As far as we can tell, your nerves are… rebuilding themselves, from both ends. Nerves are capable of self-repair, but not usually with extensive damage like yours, not after this amount of time, and definitely not from both ends. Like I said, unique. It definitely hasn’t been seen before, and I’d like to continue to monitor it, try to learn more about what exactly is happening and how.”

Rhodey raises his eyebrows. “So… you think this will continue?”

“I really don’t think I can give you an informed opinion on that. This is something we’ve never seen before, something we didn’t even know was possible. Of course, there are always things we haven’t yet discovered or understood about biology. And of course, with the invasion, we were all exposed to new, alien technology, radiation possibly, it could have changed something…”

She goes on to describe various ideas for how this apparently miraculous healing could be happening. Rhodey stays quiet, nodding or asking short clarifying questions when necessary in order to keep her on her theories. As long as she’s coming up with her own ideas, Rhodey won’t feel like he’s actively avoiding the truth.

He’d told the doctors the important details, of course, two days ago. But what he hadn’t told them was the rest; that the feeling he’s regaining is strongest when he first wakes up in the morning and wanes when he’s out on his own for long periods, that there are certain things that clearly provoke it. That it’s obviously Tony’s doing.

He’d figured it out pretty quickly, once he’d started to really notice that he was feeling better. At first, when it was just fluctuations in pain level, he’d thought it was just normal timing that should go along with the pain in his kind of injury. He’d thought that sleeping in a comfortable bed was making him feel better, and being up and about during the day just slowly made it a little worse.

But when he’d started to feel some sensations again, he’d connected it pretty quickly. He’s spent every night since the end of the invasion in contact with Tony, the two of them pressed against or wrapped around each other. Even back at the hotel, before the return of any sensation, his pain had
subsided each morning and usually come back by the end of the day, but it had also decreased if he’d spent a few hours on the couch next to Tony, watching a movie or just talking, always in physical contact.

He remembers the day Thanos died, when Tony found him again. When Tony had touched him, he’d felt instantly better, like his pain had faded into the background. At the time, he’d thought it was just a psychological thing, the effect of seeing the best friend he’d thought was dead and confirming that he was real. Now, he’s fairly sure it was more than that.

He hopes that keeping this from the doctors isn’t going to cause any issues moving forward. From the sound of it, they don’t know what’s causing it and aren’t going to do much more than keep an eye on it and hope the miraculous healing continues, which reassures him that keeping quiet about the real reason for it won’t hurt him.

It’s not that he doesn’t trust the doctors, really, but he doesn’t feel like he can trust this to anyone. Inevitably, if he tells anyone, it will get out. Soon everyone will know, and he can’t do that to Tony.

Tony’s handling the expectations that come with his powers very well so far. But this… this is something completely different. For one, Rhodey’s sure he’s not doing it intentionally. He’s not sure he even can do it intentionally. If it really does take this much time, and physical contact, that would be completely impractical to try to apply to anyone else.

Not that that would stop anyone from expecting it. Health is a topic guaranteed to create extreme emotional reactions, and if people find out that Tony, in any fashion, is capable of healing someone, he’ll be mobbed in the streets. Not only will people expect something he can’t deliver, but they’ll be angry when their expectations aren’t met. Even if Tony were capable of controlling it and healing someone quickly, it would be impractical and exhausting for him to try to do it for everyone. He’d be absolutely overwhelmed by the number of people who’d show up, and there’d be resentment and anger from those who were denied for both Tony and the few who were lucky enough to be chosen.

So Rhodey keeps quiet about it. He’ll keep this to himself for now, especially as long as he doesn’t know for sure the extent of this, how far it could go or how much is Tony’s influence. For the same reason, he makes the decision on the spot not to tell Tony either, not yet. He feels slightly guilty for it, but he doesn’t want to burden Tony with this right now. The last thing either of them needs is Tony hurting himself by trying to force it. Rhodey will tell him, he doesn’t plan to keep this a secret for long, but right now it just seems pointless—there isn’t even anything solid yet, anyway. A few pins and needles isn’t enough to justify burdening Tony with the knowledge and the additional responsibility that’ll come along with this. Responsibility for Rhodey, more than he already seems to have taken on, with him now being Rhodey’s sole caretaker.

He knows he’ll be overthinking this for the foreseeable future. There are so many variables, so many unknowns and possibilities, he could probably spend the next year just imagining a hundred thousand scenarios. Whatever he’s trying to protect Tony from, he knows it won’t last long. Keeping secrets from Tony for any reason makes him feel guilty, and that will force him to tell him soon. He’s too protective, respects and loves Tony too much, to keep this from him for long. Tony deserves more than to have Rhodey keep secrets from him, particularly when they have anything to do with him, for any longer than Rhodey really needs to just process this, be sure, and decide how best to tell him. In the end, this is information Tony has a right to know, and it’s also Tony’s decision what to do with it, not Rhodey’s. Rhodey thinks it’s a good idea not to let it go public, and he’s fairly sure Tony will agree, but it’s still Tony’s decision.

Along with guilt about not telling Tony right away, more than anything, this whole situation is making him feel profoundly selfish. Unlike the decision not to tell Tony about this immediately,
which he’s still not very sure about, he’s certain that keeping this from being widely known is the right decision. But it doesn’t stop him from feeling selfish for it. Sure, it’s easy to say that it’s impractical or even impossible for Tony to be using this potential ability for the masses when Rhodey himself is still benefitting from it. Maybe he’s not trying to keep it for himself, for any kind of self-servining reasons, but that’s the end result, and it twists something inside him to realize it. He’s going to let himself be healed, but deny anyone else the possibility in the name of keeping Tony safe.

Yet another thing to keep him up at night, but also another reason, he thinks, to keep this from Tony for now. At the very least, until Rhodey gets his own emotions straight. It feels like an instinctual desire to tell Tony everything the second he gets back to the Tower, to unload all the burdens that have just been placed on him with this knowledge. But that would be asking Tony to share in those burdens, and he won’t—he can’t—do that to him. He can’t put these same questions, about whether it’s really okay to try to keep this from the public and how it might turn out, onto Tony’s shoulders, not while Rhodey still doesn’t know what he thinks about it himself.

He needs some time to take this in, think it over, and at least decide on his own justifications and reasoning for his thoughts. When he’s sure about that, then he’ll feel like he can be there for Tony when he asks the same questions. He can’t make Tony’s decisions for him, but he can at least present his views with a solid reasoning, and be removed enough emotionally to provide at least a small amount of objective analysis for Tony.

Hopefully, by the time he feels he’s figured all of that out, he’ll also be a little more sure about the physical process itself. He still thinks there’s no point in telling Tony about any of this as long as it’s nothing more than the beginnings of an unknown healing process and maybe the tiniest bit of sensation.

He won’t outright lie, though. If for some reason it comes up, if Tony asks, Rhodey will tell him, no matter whether he’s figured any of it out himself or not. He’s hoping that doesn’t happen, though. He wants to be able to figure this out on his own. He feels guilty even thinking about keeping this from Tony, yes, but he’d feel even more guilty for telling Tony everything and not yet having worked through his own thoughts and emotions enough to be there for him through it. Tony might be taking care of him, physically and emotionally, but Rhodey’s taking care of Tony too. He’s trying his best to be there for Tony through these strange changes and new challenges he’s facing, and he feels a great responsibility for that role. It would feel like a failure to Tony for him to go out one day and come back with this kind of news, dump it on Tony and just expect him to figure it all out himself while Rhody sits to the side, too anxious about whether he’s doing the right thing to be of any help to his best friend.

All in all, this news is bringing him a fair amount of grief. New considerations, burdens, secrets. But he can’t regret it. Even if it doesn’t go very far, he’ll happily take any physical progress, particularly if it makes him any more independent, more able to help Tony, other people, and himself. And if this healing really does continue and do something good for him, he’ll be ecstatic to bring that kind of good news to Tony. Even with all of the other issues, knowing he’s helping someone close to him like this would be good for Tony, Rhody’s sure.

He shakes himself out of his racing thoughts enough to thank the doctor for all her help and ask her to pass on his thanks to the rest of the neurology team. She tells him to come back in a while for more evaluations, or sooner if anything changes, and he promises to do so. He leaves to go back to the Tower, fairly confident that there isn’t going to be any risk of Tony’s potential healing abilities becoming public knowledge yet. With all their theorizing, and the fact that they all know Tony and Rhodey are nearly inseparable, Rhodey knows there’s no way the idea of Tony having something to do with this hasn’t crossed the minds of any of the doctors. But hopefully, Tony’s absence at the hospital so far and Rhody’s avoidance of mentioning him has kept that under wraps for now.
Whatever the emotional burdens this has wrought and whatever challenges it might bring soon, Rhodey leaves the hospital and heads home feeling lighter.

Chapter End Notes

I apologize if any of the neurology stuff is inaccurate and ruining the story for anyone out there. I’m not a neurologist and the stuff we learn for Step 1 isn’t really that comprehensive in regards to spinal cord injury or denervation/etc (plus I’ve forgotten most of our anatomy/spinal injury stuff from last year, oops…) and I have no practical experience yet with it.
Sorry again that it’s been so long, I hope everyone hasn’t given up on this story. Like I said last chapter, exam hell. But we’re just about done with the actual school exams, and then the only thing that’ll be occupying me for the next month is studying for board exams.

I haven’t watched Infinity War yet, though I know all the spoilers (looked them up and also asked people about them). None of that will be influencing this story, it’s all already planned anyway. I do ask that anyone who wants to discuss IW in the comments make it clear if you’re going to include spoilers in your comment, just so those who are avoiding them can skip past it.

For those wondering where, exactly, this story is going, it’s meant to be focused on the emotional stuff, so the majority of the chapters are going to be about thoughts/emotions/relationships between people. There is, however, a bit more plot stuff to come; I’m sure most of you can already guess what about. There will also be a few more canon characters showing up eventually!

They’ve settled into somewhat of a routine. A few days before Rhodey’s second hospital visit, Tony began leaving the Tower to help again with some of the surrounding buildings’ reconstruction. He told Rhodey that while he wanted to focus on rebuilding the Tower, he also felt he should be helping out in the surrounding areas. Rhodey hadn’t disagreed. He’d thought it would be good for Tony to get out a little more, particularly now that Rhodey is often busy helping with the new people moving into the Tower and with SI business.

It’s a good thing for the people out there, too. The streets are done being cleared and there’s heavy focus on reconstructing buildings and distributing resources now. They’ve been moving quickly, considering the damage and the decrease in population. Tony’s abilities certainly would be a help to any reconstruction project, particularly now that he’s been honing them working on the Tower—not that the rebuilding isn’t proceeding fine without Tony, but no one would ever say no to his assistance—but that wasn’t the main reason that Rhodey thought it was good for Tony to be out there.

People see him as their savior, and though Rhodey isn’t necessarily completely comfortable with them making Tony out to be some sort of a god—for their sake or Tony’s—he understands that his presence is still a morale booster for everyone around him. Seeing him around, working with him, is good for people. Not that Rhodey would tell Tony that that was the reason he wanted him out there, not with Tony’s reluctance to appear as any kind of hope or happiness for people when he couldn’t even feel it himself. Rhodey understood the feeling—as much as he could, at least, without having any clue what it was actually like to be Tony right now—but as long as they weren’t bothering Tony, and as long as Tony wanted to be out there, it seemed like a good arrangement for everyone, and Tony’s been doing well with it for the last week or so.

The key to that, however, being the “as long as they weren’t bothering Tony.” So far, it seems like everyone has been polite, respecting Tony’s boundaries and limitations. They keep their staring to a
minimum, at least as much as can be expected, and no one seems to be pushing him to do any more than he should. He does plenty of that himself, but he does stop when he’s tired, both to keep himself from getting hurt and, possibly, to avoid Rhodey’s wrath should he come back home exhausted and near collapse. So maybe Rhodey’s mothering the living shit out of him now. He’ll take it any day over Tony being dead and Rhodey going through the recovery from the invasion alone.

So they’ve had a routine for the last week. That’s how “routines” go in this healing world, now: there’s too much happening, too much to do and too many unknowns, for any regular schedule to really be permanent. The idea of settling into something is much more fluid than it used to be. For them, it seems a week or so of doing pretty much the same thing is about as much as they can hope for before something changes.

For now, it’s the completion of the Tower that Rhodey is expecting will be a change to their current schedule. The structural repairs that have been taking up most of Tony’s days are nearing completion thanks to Tony’s hard work and his expanding powers. He’s continued getting stronger every day, and he’s been putting a lot of effort into the Tower. Right now, he usually spends his morning with Rhodey, eating breakfast, talking, planning the day. Then he goes out to help with the repairs to nearby buildings for half the day while Rhodey works with SI people to get the Tower’s operations back up and running and to help organize SI employees and properties to begin work again. They’re beginning to gather up their remaining employees, people who are willing to get back to work to help everyone else in a way that best fits their skills. They’ve got R&D people already starting to meet and being the planning process for new equipment, tech, emergency devices, and other things that could be helpful in the upcoming months and years of rebuilding the world.

By midafternoon, Tony is usually back in the Tower, working on his own repairs to his home. He’s finished repairing everything there was to repair on the lower floors; now it’s about rebuilding the top floors from scratch, which means he needs to take delivery of raw materials with which to create the structure. It’s the delivery and movement of glass, metal, and concrete that is slowing down the process the most right now. Despite Tony’s incredible ability to meld together broken pieces of objects, sometimes appearing to create substance from nothing to fill in the gaps, he hasn’t been able to just create something out of thin air.

His powers, and the things he can and can’t do with them so far, don’t always make sense, even beyond them obviously defying many of the known laws of physics. Rhodey has gotten used to the “magical” aspect by now, having spent the last few years around superheroes who don’t make any sense themselves. Iron Man and War Machine may have been created by a human hand and followed human limitations—what few there were to a mind like Tony’s—but people like Vision and Maximoff, enhanced beings with powers that couldn’t be explained, had become practically routine even before the invasion.

It had still bothered Tony, and Rhodey had suspected it always would. He knew part of Tony’s panic over the initial invasion revolved around not being able to explain what had happened, and though he’d disguised it beneath snark and attitude, Rhodey knew it had always frustrated him to no end that there was no way within their understanding to really explain the Infinity Stones, their powers, or the abilities they gave people.

It would have stressed the old Tony out to an incredible degree, having those kinds of powers himself now, but he hasn’t appeared to really be bothered by it, at least not that he’s told Rhodey. He could be holding something back, possibly not wanting to burden Rhodey with his issues, but along with his missing emotions has come a lowered ability to disguise what feelings he does have, and Rhodey can read him better than ever. He’s fairly sure he’d know if Tony was lying to him or holding something back when they talk.
Being with him every day helps, too; it wasn’t often that Tony really went out of his way in the past to hide something from Rhodey, he was generally honest with him, but with their jobs separating them so much, it made it easier for Tony to keep Rhodey from knowing what was going on with him. Usually, when he “hid” something from Rhodey, it was less a purposeful move and more a product of Rhodey just not being around enough to know.

It could be, too, that along with his powers has come some sort of intrinsic understanding, one that’s calming his natural propensity to question everything. Rhodey doesn’t quite think that’s true, not with how confused Tony seems to be by his own powers, but there might at least be something to the theory that they keep him from panicking about his own state. Rhodey hopes that’s the reason, not that Tony is so emotionally vacant that he no longer cares about it. Rhodey wouldn’t wish the anxiety back on his best friend, but he wouldn’t wish a lack of curiosity and questioning on him, either.

Rhodey tries not to dwell too much on the nature of Tony’s powers—what’s done is done, Thanos is dead and the Infinity Stones are gone—or his emotional state. They talk every morning and every night, and it seems like Tony is keeping him updated on everything he’s been thinking and feeling. They trust each other completely, and Rhodey has no choice but to trust that things will continue to improve.

For all he tells Tony to just let it happen, not to try to push things, and that they won’t know what to expect so having specific expectations is pointless, it’s difficult to follow that advice himself. Sometimes it makes him feel a little selfish, like he’s sitting around wishing that he could have the best friend he remembers back, but that’s not it. This is Tony, every part of him is still here, even if he’s having a few problems. It’s mostly just that he wants Tony to be okay. Rhodey will be here for him no matter what, he’s willing to be patient and wait for Tony to recover the rest of his emotions, or even to find a new normal with Tony the way he is now, if that’s how things go. But he doesn’t want Tony to suffer in the meantime. That’s what’s driving his moments of impatience.

Tony hasn’t made any new major breakthroughs in either his feelings or his powers in the last week, but he’s steadily improving in both. He may not have had any more sudden powerful revelations—and Rhodey won’t complain about him not collapsing left and right when he discovers some new ability—but he’s able to do more and work for longer every day. He’s made more progress on the Tower already than Rhodey could have imagined when they first came back.

As for his personal state, Tony’s working with it. He talks to Rhodey, works through some of the things he tends to get stuck on. He hasn’t been focusing on personal guilt or anxious worries like he used to, but when he still can’t feel much beyond sadness, it can be difficult to keep pushing himself to move forward. He responds well to Rhodey’s encouragements, which Rhodey is beyond grateful for. He wouldn’t have any idea what to do, what to say to Tony, if Tony just gave up, couldn’t find any reason or motivation to move on. If Rhodey was a believer, he’d be thanking God for Tony’s strength. Tony’s always been one of the strongest people he knows in the face of adversity, but this is a true test of that strength, and Tony is pushing through, finding something, god knows what, to rely on to keep him going even when he doesn’t actually feel hope, happiness, or excitement. It’s a daunting task, one Rhodey can’t imagine having to face himself. He can only hope that he’s part of what Tony’s relying on.

It’s midafternoon now, around the time Tony usually comes back to the Tower for a break before resuming work on it. He’s been out all day, working with a construction crew on a high rise a block over. When he’d first gone out intending to help nearby, he’d just joined whatever group happened to be closest. After just a day of it, it seemed everyone knew that Tony and Rhodey were staying in the Tower and that Tony was coming out to help with rebuilding, because every morning since then there’s been someone waiting outside for him. Rhodey’s not sure how exactly they’re choosing who
gets to have Tony working with them each day, because surely there’s plenty of crews out there who want him around, but whatever they’re doing, they’re civil about it, and they’re not putting any undue pressure or stress on Tony. That’s good enough for Rhodey.

Rhodey’s actually been in an office building down the street for most of the day so far, meeting with some SI and government people. There’s not much of the government left, but the people who took charge early after the invasion have been working hard to figure something out. They’re not trying to do anything radical, just rebuilding a more focused, streamlined version of the old government, one that’s entirely dedicated right now to distributing resources and organizing people in the aftermath of the invasion. Since they have a bit of structure already figured out, Rhodey and the SI people have been meeting with them to get their input on resources needed and how distribution will work.

Rhodey has more or less taken a job at SI. He was already known for working with Tony as War Machine and as a military liaison before that, and he’s certainly technologically inclined and perfectly comfortable with the kind of work they do. With the military that used to be his life and career more or less obliterated, he’s latched on to SI responsibilities gratefully.

He’s building up a frighteningly extensive list of traumatic experiences and thoughts to eventually have to work through, and one of them is the destruction of the organization he’s devoted most of his life to, along with most of his friends and brothers in arms. Still, he’s nothing if not versatile. He wasn’t entirely dependent on the Air Force for a sense of meaning in his life, and it’ll never be repetitive or anything less than invaluable to remind himself that being alive now and having Tony with him makes being here worth something. He’ll figure out a way to come to terms with all of it.

When his meetings end, he heads back to the Tower on his own, enjoying being outside. The streets are clear, and though there’s a lingering smell of dust and debris in the air from all of the construction, it’s still a nice day, and the relatively fresh air feels good after spending most of his time inside lately.

He turns at the sound of his name and smiles at Tony walking towards him, bright markings not diminished by the blazing sun overhead. Tony reaches for him when he gets near, and they clasp hands briefly before turning to head back to the Tower. “Coming back for the day?” Rhodey asks.

“Got the exterior walls finished,” Tony reports. “That’s twenty more apartments that they can have people back in within the week.”

“That’s great,” Rhodey says with a smile, pleased to hear that things have been going well for him. They chat idly as they finish the walk back, Rhodey wheeling along and enjoying the simple pleasure, among all this stress and uncertainty, of being in the sunlight and just talking with Tony. It’s an oddly peaceful moment.

The peace is broken when they reach the Tower. There are several men waiting for them outside the entrance. Or waiting for Tony, more accurately, because they immediately turn to him, one of them holding out his hand after the same brief, awed hesitation that most people display now when they’re trying to be professional around Tony. It’s not all that different than before the invasion, actually—Tony’s been famous since childhood, and becoming a superhero had only made him more intimidating. Rhodey’s seen more than one powerful person pause before introducing themselves like Tony’s presence is a bit overwhelming.

“Mr. Stark, I’m Cory Jamison, I’m heading some of the upstate reconstruction projects,” the apparent leader says as Tony takes his hand to shake it.

Tony inclines his head, not bothering to introduce himself in return—they obviously know who he is. Before he can say anything, however, Cory turns to Rhodey, holding out his hand again.
“Colonel Rhodes,” he says respectfully, and Rhodey reaches out to return the firm handshake.

Addressing Rhodey as well instead of acting like he isn’t there seems to have gotten him some points with Tony, because Rhodey sees Tony’s stance relax by degrees. “What can I do for you?” Tony asks.

“We’ve heard you’ve been lending your, ah, skills with some of the reconstruction here in the city.” He waits for Tony to nod before continuing. “We’ve been working on some of the industrial and farming areas upstate. I’m sure you know getting food production back up is one of the major focuses right now.”

Tony inclines his head. “Of course. Stark Industries is working on getting back up and functioning, too, we’ve got significant production capabilities and we’re certainly planning to dedicate some of our resources to food production and distribution.”

Rhodey sees a slight hesitance in Cory and it gives him a bad feeling. “How is that coming along?” Cory asks, and Rhodey senses it’s not just polite or professional interest in the state of the company.

Rhodey speaks up before Tony can. “The company is large, and there’s a lot of employees here in the city who are already coming together. Now that we’re getting the internet back for the most part, we’re also able to organize some of the people gathering at other outposts and factories. It’s still going to take a lot of work, and a lot of organization from a higher level,” he adds, guessing where Cory is hoping to take this.

His suspicions are confirmed when Cory hesitates again. “Ah, yes, of course. But now that we have the internet working pretty good again, you can do that remotely, huh?”

Rhodey can see the way Tony tenses up. “I… suppose so,” Tony says, but it’s quiet, unsure.

Cory smiles, missing the change in Tony’s attitude. “We were really hoping to get your help out there. You’d be a hell of a good guy to have around, getting us through the work a lot faster, and everyone up there would be real glad to see you.”

It’s obvious from his tone that he thinks this will encourage Tony, but Rhodey can see the way Tony is shrinking back. He’s hunching in on himself, withdrawing the way he used to right after his resurrection, when he still wasn’t comfortable around people. Rhodey’s not quite sure what exactly is causing this extreme reaction, but he’ll back Tony up all the way.

He fixes Cory with a stern look, wheeling forward a bit to subtly put a hand over Tony’s knee. “I’m sorry, I know you could use all the extra help you can get, but Stark Industries really has to be our priority, and we’re both going to be able to do a lot more for people by staying here and continuing our work with the company,” he says to Cory, then turns his attention to Tony before any of the men can say anything else. “Tony, you going up? I know you wanted to get those new girders in place before the glass gets delivered.”

Tony latches onto the excuse, nodding. He moves around the men, avoiding eye contact with anyone, and disappearing into the Tower without another word. That alone raises Rhodey’s concern level and tells him that this is serious to Tony, whatever it is that’s bothering him right now.

He sees Cory and the other men frowning after Tony, and Cory even opens his mouth, but doesn’t say anything as Tony retreats—thankfully, for his own sake. It should be obvious by now, even to someone who doesn’t know Tony at all, that the conversation made Tony uncomfortable, and if any of the men had bothered him while he was obviously walking away, Rhodey might have to kick their asses.
“I’m sorry to send you back empty-handed,” Rhodey offers, trying to convey his sincerity. Some of his charitable feelings disappear, though, when Cory turns back to him with an irritated expression.

“Look, Colonel, I know there’s a lot to be done here, but we could really use his help. I think getting food out is a little more important than staying in the city to direct the company, when you can just do that remotely. I know it might be a little difficult for you to—to move out there—” he begins, glancing down at Rhodey’s chair, and Rhodey narrows his eyes, dropping the friendly pretense.

“Let me stop you right there,” he says icily, and Cory at least has the grace to look slightly embarrassed. “This has nothing to do with me. But it does involve Tony, which makes it my problem. And he clearly isn’t comfortable leaving the city yet. I’ll remind you that he’s still recovering, I don’t think he should be going far.” He hopes they’ll accept that explanation and make their own assumptions about Tony’s physical fitness after what Thanos did to him. No one but Tony and Rhodey knows about Tony’s emotional deficit, and he doesn’t plan on telling anyone else anytime soon. He definitely can’t risk it getting out—people are willing to accept Tony’s powers and his physical appearance because it represents what he did for the world, how he defeated Thanos, and it makes him a powerful and mystical figure. But they wouldn’t understand his emotional problems. They’d be afraid of him at best, and Rhodey doesn’t want to deal with that himself, much less make Tony deal with it.

Cory looks slightly ashamed, but one of the other men speaks up hesitantly. “With all due respect, sir, we’re all recovering. The entire world. That’s what we’re trying to help with out there. And he’s obviously helping here…”

Rhodey keeps his voice flat. “And that isn’t enough for you?” At the man’s confused look, Rhodey elaborates, “Tony’s been devoting practically every waking hour to reconstruction, either of his own home or the surrounding buildings. And you come in here demanding that he do even more? You have no right to expect any more from him than anyone else. I don’t give a damn what you’ve heard about what he can do or what expectations you had when you came here. He’s still a person, and he has limits too. Your work doesn’t automatically take precedence over the thousands, millions, we’ll be helping reorganizing Stark Industries and getting supplies out all over the country.”

“Of course it doesn’t,” Cory says quickly, holding his hands out, “but we just came hoping to ask for some assistance along with the work he’s—you’re—already doing.”

Rhodey crosses his arms. “Ask, or demand? Because asking implies that you can take no for an answer, and it seems to me like you came here expecting a yes no matter what, like you didn’t plan on giving him a choice.”

Now they’re all looking away, ashamed. Still, Rhodey senses that some of them are still holding onto offense, or righteousness, or whatever brought them here to demand Tony come and work for them without a thought to Tony himself, so Rhodey finishes his thoughts. “And we may all be ‘recovering,’ but I don’t think any of you are recovering quite like Tony. Have any of you been murdered and then resurrected? Hm?”

The fight goes out of all of them at that. “Of course not, I’m—I’m so sorry. We didn’t even think… I can’t possibly imagine what that was like,” Cory says quietly.

Rhodey’s not pleased, exactly—these are all good men, just trying to help people however they can—but he’s glad to know that they’re not going to go back thinking that Tony blew them off. If they understand the gravity of the situation—even if Rhodey’s not sure that’s actually what this is about for Tony—then they won’t be going back and spreading rumors about Tony being unhelpful, or weak, or any number of negative things that he does not need going around, especially now that the internet is nearly back to normal and news is spreading exponentially faster than in the first weeks
after in the invasion.

“I’m sorry to send you back without the help you came for, I really am,” Rhodey says with genuine regret, moving forward to hold a hand back out to Cory. “As things move forward a little more, we’ll keep your work in mind. And if there’s anything Stark Industries can do for you remotely, or some other way we can work together, please let me know. We really would like to help you out.”

Cory takes his hand with a small smile and shakes it again. “I appreciate that, Colonel, I do. I’m sorry again for the… assumptions we made. Thank you for the offer. We can always use more help, so as long as you’re open to it, I’m sure we’ll find a way to work together. I—please give our apologies and our best wishes to Mr. Stark.”

They turn to leave and Rhodey takes a deep breath, going back into the Tower and heading straight for the private elevator that will take him up to his and Tony’s living spaces. Now that that’s dealt with, it’s time to find out what, exactly, is up with Tony.

Chapter End Notes

The next chapter will probably be pretty short, but it should be coming very soon, now that I’m just about done with exams for a while. Hope you’re enjoying it!
Chapter Notes

I’m officially done with school exams for the year, now I have 4 weeks to prep for board exams. I’ve given myself an hour a day for a “mental break,” not the bad kind lol (plus some free time on weekends) in my study plan, which can and will include writing, so I hope to get plenty more of this story done, plus some parts of my bitter series, and maybe even start on one of the other fics I have half-planned. That might be a little ambitious, but oh well, I’ll try.

I’ve had several questions about some of the characters that aren’t going to be appearing, mainly Bruce and Thor. I believe it’s in the notes in a much earlier chapter, but neither of them will be showing up in this story; Thanos came very early here compared to the MCU timeline (right after CW) and he had all the Infinity Stones except Time with him, meaning he invaded/destroyed Asgard already. You can picture Thor as dead or escaped to some other planet and hiding out, whatever you want, and same with Bruce. Personally, I see Thor as dead in this story and Banner off-world somewhere as the Hulk, maybe on Sakaar (this time no Thor to come and bring him back, sad I know but oh well, this story is mostly not happy for other characters), but since they won’t be appearing here, you can think whatever you’d like about them.

Rhodey finds Tony sitting on the couch in one of the smaller lounges. Everything about his body language is closed off and Rhodey hurts just looking at him. There’s food on the coffee table in front of him, a late lunch, but Tony’s barely picking at it. Rhodey wheels slowly into the room and stops in front of the couch, a respectful distance from Tony but close enough to reach out if necessary.

Tony clearly knows he’s there—something in his posture shifts—but he won’t look up at Rhodey, and he hunches just slightly farther in on himself, which hurts. Whatever this is, Rhodey doesn’t want anything to make Tony feel like he can’t trust Rhodey, like he should be afraid of talking to him.

He sits there in an uncomfortable silence for a minute, trying to figure out what to say to Tony to ease him into this conversation while simultaneously reassuring him that whatever he’s thinking is okay, okay to feel and okay to express. It’s a daunting task, but while he’s still sitting there trying to figure it out, Tony blurts out, “I’m sorry.”

Tony’s always hated silences between people, particularly when he feels like someone is disappointed or angry with him. It’s a trait that’s apparently continued through this emotional purge and resurrection, and Rhodey feels like an idiot for not expecting it. He should know better than to sit in silence and make Tony feel like he has to just say something; that nets him nothing but formless apologies and anxiety that makes everything harder.

Rhodey’s first thought is to say “for what?” but that can be interpreted as a condescending demand for an admission of guilt—a tactic he knows Rogers was fond of using on Tony, and one Tony loathed. “I don’t see why you should be sorry,” he says instead, trying to keep a gentle tone.

Tony tenses up even further. “I—I didn’t mean to close up. Walk out of there like that. They probably think I’m—I don’t know, I…”
He’s not quite stammering, but he seems unsure of his words the way he used to be a few weeks ago, and that’s not good. “Okay,” Rhodey interrupts him, reaching out. Tony falls silent, but when Rhodey takes his hands he finally looks up, face twisted up but at least meeting Rhodey’s eyes. “It’s fine, Tony,” Rhodey tells him, squeezing his hands for emphasis. “You have every right to refuse to do something, whatever the reason. They shouldn’t have just expected you to run off with them, that’s ridiculous.”

Tony’s breath hitches just the tiniest bit. “They’ll hate me. I didn’t mean to just refuse them outright. What they’re doing is important. They shouldn’t be turned away.”

Trust Tony to be thinking of others all the time. “It’s fine, Tony, we talked. They’re not mad. They understood after a minute, and they left with no hard feelings. SI is going to help them out however we can, from a distance. You don’t need to be there.”

“Oh. I—really?” Tony looks confused, maybe a hint skeptical, which actually makes Rhodey feel better. It’s a very Tony expression.

Rhodey sighs. “They wanted to be upset, sure, but we had a talk. I made it very clear they have no right to expect any more from you than anyone else, that you’re still recovering from Thanos—not that I told them anything about, you know, you—” he adds quickly, before Tony can worry that anyone else knows anything about his emotional state, “and they understood. Cory wanted to apologize for cornering you like that, and to say good luck with everything here.”

“Oh,” Tony’s looking at the floor again. Rhodey frowns, but when Tony adds, “thank you for talking to them,” very quietly, he thinks he understands. He’s not quite sure if “embarrassment” counts as an emotion, but apparently Tony can feel it. Rhodey resists the urge to smile, in case Tony looks back up and thinks he’s mocking him.

“Course, Tony. It’s my job to watch your back.” Tony visibly relaxes even more, and Rhodey repositions his chair so he can pull himself onto the couch. Tony accepts his raised arm as an invitation and presses close to his side, bringing back memories of the hotel they’d stayed in right after the invasion. Rhodey reaches forward to snag his phone and Tony’s plate from the table. He uses his phone to turn the tv on and put on a movie and they settle back to watch it, Tony finally eating his lunch instead of picking at it and Rhodey occasionally stealing bits of it.

It’s comfortable, and Tony slowly relaxes completely, slumping against Rhodey after he’s finished eating and becoming absorbed in the movie. Rhodey relaxes as well, mind drifting. He thinks about SI, mostly, and some of the work they’re planning. He has ideas already for some of the devices they could create to help with cleanup and resource distribution, particularly out in the rural areas, where manpower and transportation pose the greatest challenges.

But they haven’t mentioned the labs even once since Tony’s resurrection. They’ve talked about SI, of course, but Tony’s work with them and conversations about the company have mostly been in the position of CEO, since Pepper is dead and the company needs a leader and organizer. They have an excellent R&D department, naturally; some of the best technical minds in the country, even the world, have always flocked to Stark Industries, where they can have a great impact, work freely on projects other companies couldn’t even imagine. Not to mention the possibility they might run into their boss, a celebrity even before he was a superhero. And while they’re perfectly capable, Tony’s always been involved. It seems fundamentally wrong not to have him putting out ideas and producing tech for the company.

Rhodey’s not sure what Tony’s thoughts are about getting back to inventing. It’s always been such an integral part of him, and there’s no way anything Thanos or the Infinity Stones did to him could have destroyed his intense drive to create, but… well, Tony hasn’t mentioned it, and he could be
avoiding it for any number of reasons. Rhodey’s not quite sure how to bring it up, and he doesn’t want to seem like he’s trying to push Tony to “get back to normal” or do something he’s not ready for or willing to involve himself in.

Still, it can’t be entirely good for him to be suppressing it. In the past, Tony often described feeling like he had too many thoughts in his head, too many ideas, and prolonged inactivity actually gave him migraines. If he’s resisting the urge to go down to the lab now for whatever reason—maybe because he’s afraid of what he will find, the memories it might bring back, how his creativity might have been affected by what’s happened to him, any number of possible reasons—it might be hurting him. At some point, Rhodey won’t be able to stop himself from bringing it up, but he’ll wait a little longer to give Tony a chance to make the first move on the subject.

They’re halfway through the movie when Tony speaks up. “That’s not it,” he says, quietly, but Rhodey hears it and immediately pauses the movie, turning to look at him, knowing this is going to be important. It takes him a minute to figure out what Tony must be talking about, after just thinking so much about SI and lab work.

“What’s not it?”

Tony sits up straight and his gaze drifts away from Rhodey’s. “What you said about… recovering. That’s not why I didn’t want to leave with them.”

“I guessed wrong, huh?” Rhodey says it with a small smile, meant to encourage Tony to continue.

Tony shakes his head. “You weren’t wrong. I’m still… a little messed up, and I don’t just mean the emotion thing. You were right, I feel safe in the Tower, and I don’t really want to leave right now, not while it’s still being rebuilt, not when we’re still trying to organize everything here. But that wasn’t why I… why that happened. They came up and started talking about how everyone knows what I’ve been doing, and then asked me to leave the city with them to do even more, and I just…”

“Got overwhelmed?” Rhodey suggests gently.

“I remember it,” is Tony’s answer, and Rhodey frowns.

“Remember what?”

Tony takes a deep breath. His gaze is faraway. “I remember being Tony Stark. Billionaire and businessman and superhero and it was all so much. I was so tired, Rhodey, all the time. For the last few years, I was stretched so thin, I never got enough sleep, I barely ate enough anymore, and I felt like I was barely keeping it together. I spent every day trying to work just a little harder, feeling like if I ever took a break, everything would just fall apart.”

Tony’s eyes close. “I could never stop. I felt so guilty, all the time, for so many things, and I let it drive me. People were always asking me to do more and I never refused, because I felt like I owed it to them, and I’d feel like I failed them if I didn’t.” He forces his eyes open again to look at Rhodey, his expression full of grief and exhaustion and something like shame. “I don’t want to go back to that,” he whispers.

Throat tight at the revelation, Rhodey reaches out to take Tony’s shoulders and pull him in. Tony comes willingly, eyes closing again as he leans into Rhodey’s brief, fierce embrace. “I’m so sorry, Tony,” Rhodey whispers into his hair.

After he lets Tony go to sit back against the couch, Rhodey spends a few minutes quietly contemplating. “Do you want to stop going out to work nearby? Because you know that’s just going
to end with other people asking more of you.”

Tony’s already shaking his head even as Rhodey finishes speaking. “No. No, I’ve been helping, I want to continue that. I need to be out there helping. I can’t just do nothing with these powers.”

Rhodey frowns. “See, you just said you used to do things because you felt like you owed people, and now, what you’re telling me, it just sounds like the same thing over again.”

Tony’s face scrunches up like he doesn’t like the idea. “Tony,” Rhodey says, and Tony looks at him. “Do you want to be out there?”

Tony just looks at him for a long moment, but when he finally nods, he looks sure of himself. “Yes. I do want to be out there, and not just because I think I should be. It’s… good for me, to be helping, and working at honing my powers. I think it’s good for me, you know, emotionally too.”

“Okay,” Rhodey says, relaxing a bit, “good. So keep doing that. But you don’t have to feel bad about turning anyone away who asks you to leave the city, or do something you’re uncomfortable with. You can send them to me, if you want, I’ll set them straight.”

Rhodey’s lips actually twitch upward a moment later at the look Tony gives him. It’s very reminiscent of the old Tony. “I don’t need you to talk to other people for me,” Tony says flatly, and Rhodey would sooner cut off his own arm than point out to a still raw Tony that he did in fact need that, earlier today. But a moment later, Tony quietly adds, “but thank you.”

They sit in silence for a minute before Tony sighs and scrubs his hands over his face. “I think I can work up to it, eventually. I’m not going to stay here, afraid to leave the city, forever. I don’t want to. Just… not yet.”

“You don’t want to be pushed into something you’re not ready for, end up taking on more than you can handle, and spend all your time trying to catch up, like before.”

“No, I really don’t.” Tony’s looking at the paused screen, but maybe the Infinity Stones gave him mind-reading abilities and he just hasn’t realized it yet, because he adds, “doesn’t really sound like me, does it?” which is exactly what Rhodey was thinking.

“It sounds like a you that’s been hurt,” Rhodey says softly, seriously. “And it sounds like you’ve spent years looking for an opportunity to take a break from having the world on your shoulders.”

“But I do.”

Rhodey frowns again. “What?”

Tony looks at him again, and his face is full of the kind of despairing sadness it held in the first few days after his resurrection. “I do have the world on my shoulders. Now more than ever. I—I saved it, and everyone knows it, and they’re all expecting me to keep it up, to live up to something more than human. I know this is just the beginning, Rhodey. People are going to expect me to defend the planet.”

Rhodey’s not quite sure what to say to that, because the problem is, it’s absolutely true. Rhodey might be able to turn away a few people with a speech about recovery and some guilt, but he can’t fend off the entire world. Tony has always been held to a higher standard, especially after becoming Iron Man, but now it’s going to be worse than ever. Not only did he singlehandedly save the entire planet, he saved it from a hell that had touched everyone’s lives. Flying a nuke into space after a few hours of an invasion that only affected one city was one thing; coming back from the dead with alien powers and defeating an alien dictator, freeing an entire world from weeks of his oppression, is
And he’s right to think that people will expect him to continue stepping up to defend the planet. Not only has he proven himself capable already, but he’s the only one left as far as the world knows. Most of its heroes and defenders died in the invasion. Rogers, Romanoff, and Barton, off being put to work before they eventually get sent to prison for betraying the world and murdering Tony, certainly don’t count. Rhodey’s currently no good as a superhero, and even if he does heal and can someday get into the armor again, he knows War Machine is nothing next to Tony as a potential defender of the world, at least in the eyes of the general population.

He can only hope that the other threats out there—because there’s no doubt that there are plenty more, though hopefully few of Thanos’s caliber—will wait a while before making any moves toward the Earth. That they’ll wait and give other defenders who may have survived the invasion the chance to step up, give Tony a chance to recover more, give the people time to rebuild the government and their cities and their families.

Rhodey puts a hand on Tony’s shoulder, making sure he has his full attention. “Tony, you don’t have to do anything. I know that sounds ridiculous, and I’m not saying it would be easy to tell people no when they’re expecting so much of you. But you can do it. If you step up to defend the planet, you should do it because you want to, not because you feel like you have to.”

He can see Tony’s throat working. “Isn’t it selfish,” Tony says quietly, “to have all this power and not do anything with it? I defeated Thanos. I can defend the Earth. I might be the only one who can. If there’s another threat, how am I supposed to just let it go, sit back and tell everyone that I need time to myself, while people die?”

Rhodey is caught up in Tony’s eyes, electric blue and shining all the more brightly with unshed tears of tired despair. Exhausted, manipulated, resurrected without his consent and given abilities against his will and beyond his comprehension, taking on those burdens and honestly feeling that it would be selfish not to drive himself to the edge trying to help others using the curse they all see as a gift. Rhodey aches for him in a way that’s fluid, undefined, and he risks drowning in that despair.

He has to pull himself together to address this. Because if he can’t provide a logical answer, Tony will take his silence to be agreement with every bad thing he has thought or assumed about himself and his position. “It’s not selfish not to do something that hurts you, Tony. If you really want to help people, and to do good with your powers, then you need to be healthy and stable, and you need to be happy with what you’re doing. Doing the right thing for the wrong reasons can end just as badly as doing the wrong thing.”

Like we’ve already seen goes unspoken between them, and Rhodey wonders if Tony is thinking about himself, his past mistakes. While they’re certainly not small in number or consequence, Rhodey isn’t reminded of Tony when he thinks of “doing the right thing for the wrong reasons.” It’s Rogers his mind brings up, the man who, ironically despite all his barbs at Tony about it, had easily the largest ego on the team. The one who, yes, was good at heart, but he wanted too badly to be an independent hero, a role model, and he wasn’t willing to accept oversight because it inherently meant he was less than perfect. The “little guy” who, when he finally became large and powerful, stopped looking out for the people and instead aggressively pursued his own ideals and agendas without bothering to wonder whether anyone else’s opinions differed from his own.

Tony’s gaze drops to his hands. “So… you think I should stop? That I’m not committed to this?”

Rhodey covers Tony’s hands with his own and Tony looks back up at him. “Do you want to do this? Be the protector of the Earth, stand up as a superhero again?”
There’s a long silence, then, “…I don’t know,” Tony confesses, and Rhodey smiles.

“Then wait and see. You don’t have to make this decision now, Tony, and in fact if you did, I’d think you were rushing it. You’re still recovering, still trying to figure out this whole emotional thing and your own powers. For god’s sake, you haven’t even finished rebuilding your home yet. So let things happen, and just keep it in mind. You can make that decision when you’re ready.”

“People are going to keep asking,” Tony says.

Rhodey nods. “Yes, they’re going to keep asking more and more of you. It happens. But none of them are going to be your one and only chance to decide your entire future. That’s your decision, when you’re ready to make it. In the meantime, do what you’re comfortable with. Don’t be afraid to tell people that you can’t help them yet. If they have an ounce of decency, they’ll understand. And if they don’t—” he trails off, mind half-forming threats while his mouth tries to put them into an eloquent sentence. Tony interrupts before he can articulate what he’ll do about people who won’t leave Tony alone, however.

“—I have plenty of experience dealing with negative press, Rhodey. Once the whole… shock, or whatever, wears off, there will be plenty of people who hate me, people that don’t like me no matter what I do. I’m not going to fall apart because of it.”

Privately, Rhodey has his doubts about that. Not about Tony not falling apart—though he is more vulnerable than before, he’s also right about knowing how to deal with negativity and Rhodey doesn’t doubt his strength in the face of it—but about the shock wearing off and people hating him. This wasn’t some isolated incident that people could look at from afar and judge without emotion. Tony literally saved the entire world. Every single person still alive on the planet now knows the horror of the invasion in some way, and now Tony, this ethereal, supernatural being in their eyes, is their savior and their symbol of hope and freedom. Rhodey doesn’t doubt that there are some people out there who can and will find an excuse to hate him, but he’s also sure that at least for the duration of the reconstruction and its physical reminders of the trauma they’ve all been through, which could easily last for years, any person trying to say anything less than positive about Tony will be shouted down and torn apart.

Essentially, he doesn’t think Tony’s going to be receiving any hate mail any time soon. But he doesn’t say this to Tony, in part because he knows Tony wouldn’t know what to do with that kind of cheery outlook and glowing assessment of his person.

“Well, good,” is what he says instead, tossing his arm back around Tony’s shoulders and relaxing back into the couch, reaching for his phone to resume the movie.

Tony curls back into his side, resting his head on Rhodey’s shoulder and letting out a long sigh.

“Thank you,” he says again.

“You’re welcome, Tony.” It’s gentle and sincere. They pass the rest of the movie in silence, Rhodey’s hand slowly drifting up from around Tony’s shoulders to run through his hair, which causes him to practically melt into Rhodey’s side.

When the movie is over, Tony gets up and does his daily work on the Tower with just a little bit of time lost, while Rhodey goes down and oversees another family that’s moving in downstairs. They pretty much go back to normal for the moment. This conversation hadn’t solved everything, and there’ll be more challenges ahead, he knows. Whatever he told Tony, it isn’t going to be easy to hold off everyone and their expectations while they wait for Tony to feel comfortable moving forward. Still, Rhodey will be by his side through whatever comes to them.
So the “writing a lot during my study breaks” isn’t working out as well as I’d hoped, mostly because I never realized how much time it really took to write so much, but at least I’m still going, if slowly. Step is in a week and a half and hooooooooly shit. I’m simultaneously not ready at all and desperate for it to just be over with. Probably won’t be posting anything else until after it’s over, but once it is (after I’ve napped for approximately 3 years) I’m going to write the shit out of some stuff.

This chapter doesn’t have much in the way of plot, but it’s got plenty of feelings. It was intended to be plotless fluff, but parts of it got a little more emotional than I was originally intending. Pretty soon we’ll be getting into a little more plot-type stuff, life moving forward and all that, and eventually there’s actual *plot* too, you know, with problems and actions and important things popping up. But in the meantime, have some emotions!

“Perfect,” Rhodey says, smiling wider than he has in a while.

Tony’s just finished melding glass seamlessly into place in the penthouse, the very last of the structure to be remade. The sun is just starting to sink down on the horizon, sending brilliant blues and purples streaking across the sky, and Tony is officially done rebuilding the Tower.

If he’s had any trepidation about finishing the project, he hasn’t shared it with Rhodey. It’s been nearly a week since Rhodey started running more careful interference with the people requesting Tony’s time and attention and powers, and the reconstruction of their home has been a part of the reasoning he’s given to anyone he had to deny. So far, luckily, everyone has accepted that and no one has seemed insulted by the rejection, but now that the Tower is finished, that isn’t an excuse he can use anymore.

There’s plenty more work in the city to be done, of course, that doesn’t require moving more than a few blocks out. Tony’s still been helping out nearby when he’s not working on the Tower or with SI, and he’ll be able to do more of that now that the Tower is completed. It’s really up to him; there’s availability and need in pretty much every conceivable area.

But Rhodey doesn’t really want to sit down and have that discussion now. This is an accomplishment they should spend at least a little time celebrating, not immediately move onto the next of infinite responsibilities. They need to take a break sometime.

Tony drops the hand he had raised to smooth out the glass and looks around at the room at large. Rhodey can see his eyes tracking the progress he’s made, looking at what he’s done. Perhaps he’s imagining the satisfaction in them, but maybe not.

Tony turns back to Rhodey, who gives him an encouraging smile. “Is it good to be finished?” he asks.

Tony nods, glancing around the room again. “Seeing something completed, rebuilt instead of
destroyed, is… good.” He says it slowly, like he’s not sure about using the word, but Rhodey can tell that he means it.

They take the now functioning elevator back down to their floor to eat dinner and relax for the rest of the night. They’ll move back into the penthouse once it’s refurnished, but for now, they’re still staying nearly twenty floors down, in the same room they picked out the day they came back to the Tower.

That first day back simultaneously feels like yesterday and a lifetime ago. When Tony had collapsed trying to use his powers, cried about Pepper. When Rhodey still hadn’t been sure if coming back was a good idea. He’s sure now. Tony’s been getting stronger all the time, and if there’s anywhere guaranteed to help him recover emotions, it’s here. Tony is working to get SI back up and running and Rhodey is fairly sure he’ll be back in the lab eventually. Not to mention they have a permanent home now. This has been good for him.

They’re just finishing dinner when Tony speaks up again. That’s something that’s taken some getting used to; how quiet Tony is now. Contrary to popular belief, Tony’s always known how to be quiet, and his silences were always generous and peaceful around those he was comfortable with. The incessant chatter he was usually known for was more a product of his discomfort and distrust of situations and people. Still, there was no doubt that he talked more than most. He always had a million thoughts running through his head, and speaking at least a few of them aloud seemed to help him focus.

Now, his words are rare. They were always a good thing, at least to his friends—maybe some of them were stupid jokes and annoying snark and even snippy arguments, but Rhodey, at least, could always appreciate the friendship beneath them—but now they’re a gift. The Tony he has around him now only speaks when it’s necessary, and he does it with careful thought and consideration.

It reminds Rhodey somewhat of the touch-starved, friendless teenager he’d first met at MIT. For all that Tony talked to fill silences in conversation back then, he was a lot quieter around Rhodey than his adult self was around anyone. Rhodey came to learn that it was Tony’s expression of uncertainty combined with his deep desire to actually be friends with Rhodey—he hadn’t wanted to drive Rhodey away. It had been a challenge, and a reward well worth the wait, to get Tony to feel comfortable around him. He thinks maybe this is something like that was; that this Tony, as much as he seems sure of Rhodey’s friendship and devotion to him, is still unsure in a lot of ways, and Rhodey just needs to put in the work to show him that he can be comfortable talking a lot, sharing his thoughts, again. It’s more than worth the effort.

Because he knows by now that Tony thinks about something for a long time before talking about it, he pays particularly careful attention to what Tony does say, knowing that it’s important. Tony’s just finished eating and Rhodey is nearly done when Tony quietly says, “I want to go farther out.”

The scarcity of words has spread to Rhodey too. Tony doesn’t seem to have any trouble listening to him no matter how long he speaks, but Rhodey still tends to feel now that he needs to think over his own words before talking. He finishes the last few bites of his dinner, watching Tony stare at the tabletop. When he’s done, he slowly sets his fork down and leans back in his wheelchair. “Out in the city, you mean?”

Tony nods and looks up at him. “Now that the Tower is done, I can spend that time working with SI. But I still want to be out in the city, helping with the physical reconstruction. And I think… I’m ready to go farther out.”

“How far?” Rhodey asks. He wants both to gauge how sure Tony is of this and to support him.
“I still want to stay in the city, I think. But I can go farther than I have been. Other side of Manhattan, outside it, maybe.”

Rhodey nods, thinking about that. “Roads are all clear, traffic’s still light, mostly reconstruction and people getting back to work. It wouldn’t take that long every day to go a few miles out, if you’re comfortable with it.”

Tony sits back as well, looking briefly up at the ceiling like he’s picturing the rebuilt floors above. “The Tower is proof that I can work on a project this big and follow through. There’s a lot of bigger buildings farther out that need help. And I’m… not going to be available for it forever.”

Rhodey raises his eyebrows, a small smile on his face. “You’re not?”

“As we get SI running smoothly again, they’ll need me to be doing more than just organizing employees and being a stand-in CEO.” He practically whispers it, glancing at Rhodey and away again.

Rhodey knows not to push it. “Well, tell me when that time comes. I can help. By that time maybe there’ll be more of a news scene, too, some way you can get the message out.” Most of the live tv back on now is still reconstruction and transportation news. There are still plenty of people trying to get back home, find their families and gather the remnants of their lives. Sometimes it’s sobering to think about, that Tony and Rhodey are back in the Tower and moving forward with their lives while some people have been living in makeshift hotels since Thanos’s death, still not knowing whether their spouses and children and siblings are alive or dead.

He can practically see the relief in Tony at not being asked more about going back to R&D work for SI. Rhodey sits up straighter in his chair, catching Tony’s attention. “We’ll deal with getting you out farther, and SI, and everything, okay? But for now, we need a break. A real one. You just finished rebuilding the whole Tower, I think that’s reason enough to take a day off, don’t you?”

Tony looks a little surprised at that, but he just nods along. “Okay.”

Rhodey smiles. “And I don’t mean a ‘sit around the Tower’ break, either. We do that plenty when we need an hour off. We’re at least going to leave. I can go down in the morning and tell everyone you need a day and we can go out one of the back ways.”

Tony doesn’t look thrilled by the idea—not that he ever exactly looks excited by anything anymore—but he doesn’t protest, either. They relax for the rest of the night, and in the morning, Rhodey does exactly what he’d planned. He makes sure both the SI employees in the building and the construction people in the front know that Tony needs to take a day after all of the work he put into the Tower, and if any of them have anything negative to say about it, they’re smart enough not to do it in front of Rhodey.

They enjoy a longer breakfast than usual and then head out one of the side entrances, just in case there’s any sort of a crowd out front looking for Tony. Not that people won’t recognize them in a second on the street, but at least those people won’t be explicitly looking for them.

They just walk—wheel, in Rhodey’s case—along for quite a while, occasionally talking but mostly silent, just enjoying the warmth and fresh air. The lingering smells dredged up by construction work still permeate everything, but it’s better than the smell of death and rot and destruction that was hanging in the air throughout the invasion, and the air is still cleaner than New York City ever was before the invasion, with relatively little traffic back on the streets yet.

As they move along, taking everything in at street level as they go rather than just heading to a
destination, Rhodey starts to realize how much he’s been missing, spending most of his time in the Tower and so focused on SI and Tony. While the work he’s doing is important, of course, it’s just one small part of the rebuilding of lives that’s happening all over the world. They’ve been focusing on what they can do to help people recover, but that’s a large-scale idea, and he hasn’t really been taking the time out to think about the little details of everyday life for normal people.

On the one hand, there are obvious differences. There are still people out on the street, going to and fro or even just walking aimlessly like Tony and Rhodey are. People at work, people alone, friends, families. They stare at Tony, which isn’t really any different than it used to be. But aside from a few people surreptitiously snapping pictures of Tony on their phones, there’s no one bothering them, definitely no media people looking for an interview or paparazzi looking for something to sell.

It’s only when he actually sees one on a leash that he realizes how few dogs he’s seen. Of course, pets had to be left behind when everyone was moved to the camps. Alone for more than a month, most of those that didn’t—or couldn’t—run off probably starved. Rhodey’s never been much of a pet person himself, but the thought of finally coming home after a month of absolute hell and finding the family cat or dog dead on the floor pierces his heart.

Though some people, notably families, appear to be out walking just for the sake of getting air like Tony and Rhodey are, it’s not the same kind of carefree recreation and movement as before. There aren’t people carrying boutique shopping bags, jogging with earbuds in, riding bikes. Children are quieter than usual, everyone has a slightly haunted look even beneath their smiles and laughter—which come more rarely than they used to. Even if they wanted to forget everything that had happened, passing by the occasional destroyed building or pile of wreckage would make that impossible.

They walk by an abandoned tank down a side road that’s been blocked off and is being used as a temporary dumping ground for debris, and Rhodey realizes something. With the military essentially obliterated in the invasion, they’d left behind a considerable amount of property that now belonged to no one and wasn’t regulated or accounted for. Human nature is human nature, and he has no doubt that any dropped weapons—human or alien—have long since been picked up and taken back to people’s homes. He spends a moment wondering whether there’s alien tech out there that’s potentially dangerous and needs to be taken care of, and another wondering how long it’ll be before people start forming militias and then full militaries again. Before they get over the camaraderie of a worldwide disaster and start warring with each other again. He promptly shoves both ideas to the back of his mind—this day is supposed to be a vacation, and he shouldn’t be spending it thinking about things like that. He’ll bring those thoughts up later, as they become relevant, but not now.

Even with all the obvious differences since the invasion, though, it’s incredible how fast some things have gone back to normal. The human capacity for resilience and recovery really is amazing. It’s particularly clear when they get into parts of the city that were hit a little less in the battles, where people are living and working again, where stores have opened back up and are starting to take money, where streets are cleared and there’s some general traffic, not just construction crews and buses still taking people back to their own states and countries.

They pass by several food vendors, which makes Rhodey smile. They’re giving out what they’re making for free, but nearly everyone who’s taking something is leaving money or something else of value for the people working. They walk past the first and second, but the third is an ice cream truck with a jovial man handing out popsicles to a small crowd of children gathered around him, refusing to take money from their parents. As Rhodey and Tony draw near, Rhodey sees a boy at the front of the crowd catch sight of them, eyes wide, and turn to frantically whisper to the man in the truck, hands cupped around his mouth in the universal childhood gesture of sharing a secret.
The man hands him several popsicles, and he turns to dodge his way through the other kids and make a beeline for Rhodey and Tony. The kid can’t be more than six, with a thick head of brown hair that reaches his shoulders. Rhodey briefly wonders whether it grew long during the invasion and hasn’t been cut since then, then thinks how sad it is that he’s framing everything in terms of the invasion now, even for children.

The boy approaches them, eyes wide with innocent wonder as he looks up at Tony. Rhodey feels a half-second flash of apprehension, wondering how Tony, still unable to feel much beyond grief, will react to this child. But he has no reason to worry. The boy stops right in front of Tony, stares for a few seconds, then says, “Mister Iron Man?” and holds out one of his popsicles, bright red like the Iron Man suit he obviously remembers.

Tony hesitates for less than a second before crouching down to the boy’s level and reaching out to take the popsicle from him. The boy gives him a wide, delighted smile, then turns to Rhodey to hold out the second of his three popsicles, keeping the last one for himself. Rhodey’s half surprised—he’s pretty sure the kid doesn’t recognize him—but smiles just as wide and reaches to take it with a cheerful “thanks!” to make the child smile.

Just as he says it, a man that must be the boy’s father comes rushing forward from the other side of the crowd. “Kevin!” he says, catching sight of the boy, but the slightly reprimanding tone of a parent whose child wandered off is eclipsed by the relief Rhodey can hear in his voice. The invasion has set them all on edge; he can’t possibly imagine what it was like to be a parent through all of that, to have the awareness of how quickly, how easily your child can be taken from you be pressed on you so thoroughly by unending death and misery. Losing sight of them for even a few seconds now must be terrifying.

The father scoops Kevin up, then seems to register who he’s looking at and stops short with a surprised look. He’s staring at Tony, who rises back to his feet, still looking at Kevin. “Oh, hello, I…” the father starts, but he doesn’t say anything else, apparently too stunned just by Tony’s presence.

Tony glances down at the popsicle he’s been handed and then back at the boy. “Thank you, Kevin,” he says softly, and Kevin giggles.

Tony turns away and steps back, breaking the spell, and Rhodey looks up at them both. “Thanks, Kevin, that was very nice of you,” he tells the boy, then nods at the father. “Sorry to have distracted him,” he says with a rueful smile.

The father blinks rapidly, expression still more stunned than anything else. He glances once at Tony and back at Rhodey. “Oh, it’s—you don’t have to apologize, he—” he trails off and Rhodey gives him a last smile and turns back to follow Tony, sparing the man from having to come up with any more words.

They head around a different corner, avoiding distracting any more kids. Rhodey sees Tony look down at the popsicle, shrug, and start eating it, and finally gives in to the urge to laugh out loud. When Tony gives him a questioning look, he just smiles fondly at him and starts eating his own. “That kid was better at talking to you than his dad,” he observes, chuckling, then adds, “I thought you weren’t much of a popsicle guy.”

Tony shrugs again. “It would be rude not to eat it,” he says simply, “and I thought everyone liked frozen sugar,” which makes Rhodey laugh once more.

They move to the shaded canopy of a closed storefront and settle back to eat; Rhodey can’t eat and move at the same time, not with something so potentially messy if it begins to melt. They spend some
time in companionable silence just people-watching. Tony, with his glowing marks, sticks out standing in the shadows even more obviously than he does in the sunlight and Rhodey sees several people glance their way, turn to nudge and whisper to companions, or try to surreptitiously take pictures of him, but he doesn’t seem to care.

They walk on some more when they’ve finished, moving through mostly the same scenery they’ve already witnessed. It’s odd, how quiet it is even in the middle of what used to be—and still is, now, just by different standards—one of the busiest parts of the city. The sounds of traffic are muted with so few vehicles on the road, and even the ever-present construction noise isn’t enough to make up for it. The hundreds of voices that used to be competing on every block are now a couple dozen at most.

A few blocks down, Rhodey starts to hear faint music. From the tilt of his head, Tony hears it too, and they share a glance before heading in that direction, curious. The relative quiet on the streets means they have to travel nearly half a block before they find it, sounds traveling farther now than they used to before being swallowed up by the ambient noise of the city.

They round a corner to find the music and it takes Rhodey a moment to understand what he’s looking at. They’re in front of a field of rubble strewn over a cracked foundation and a broad set of once-elegant steps that now lead to nowhere—all that’s left of the building that was once here. But the debris is practically hidden underneath the items people have laid down here.

There are flowers, hundreds or maybe thousands of them. In contrast to the usual vibrant colors and varieties of florist-purchased arrangements, these are all native wildflowers, clearly picked up around the city from where they’ve been growing in cracks and planters and open fields for months, free from humans calling them weeds and pulling them out. They create a beautifully cohesive blanket of just a few bright colors across the ground.

Interspersed among the flowers are other items: pictures, some framed and some loose, but also personal items left by those who didn’t have a picture to contribute to this mass memorial, or maybe people who wanted to keep what pictures they had for themselves, or who couldn’t bear to look at the trinkets that used to belong to their loved ones. They move slowly along the edge of the steps and Rhodey sees everything from decorative statues to children’s toys to articles of clothing. He spots something sparkling near a mass of flowers and after a moment of squinting, realizes he’s looking at dozens of wedding rings laid out in a circle.

A sharp grief rises in him at the sight. Here are the personal reminders of everyone lost. Proof that they existed, not just in the haunted expressions of those they left behind, but the memories they made, feelings they created that were strong enough to bring the people who remember them to this spot, to take the time to put them to rest in some way even when so much has been lost. This is proof that the rising tide of loss and grief and pain hasn’t drowned everything out, that even with so much death and destruction, people haven’t lost hope entirely, haven’t lost sight of what it means to love and lose someone. On the whole, humanity might be putting aside everything that happened to move on and push forward, but they’ll still take the time out to remember why they’re doing it.

He wonders at the different emotions that have brought people here. The different reasons for laying down a tribute. He’s sure that many people are trying to be as close to a traditional memorial as possible, immortalizing the dead with physical reminders of them. But some of the people here have surely been looking to forget, trying to move forward without heavy grief weighing them down. Perhaps some people came to try to purge the reminders of those they lost, hoping that by leaving behind their wedding ring or their baby’s toys, they could also leave behind the memories and the all-consuming grief, have some hope of ever moving on with their lives. He wonders if it really worked for any of them.
It strikes him suddenly, the thought of what he’d be doing now without Tony. If somehow this miraculous freedom had come, but without his best friend back among them—maybe if Tony had died defeating Thanos. It’s almost too painful to wonder whether he’d have found his way here, maybe plucked a flower from a crack in the sidewalk and laid it down here for Tony. He didn’t have anything else of Tony’s.

Then a spike of shame goes through him. There are plenty more people he could be honoring here, even with Tony alive. Pepper, Vision, any of his friends in the military, even anyone they know who hasn’t yet been accounted for and might well be dead. He thinks for a moment that he’s been remiss in his expression of grief, putting all of them aside to focus on Tony. Tony is his best friend, his brother, and there’s no one he’d rather be with now, but everyone else had mattered just as much, and he should still feel their loss.

But he does feel it, he realizes quickly. The brief moment of shame fades as he ponders why he hasn’t been thinking so much about them. They’re trying to move forward, move on, and he can’t afford to be preoccupied with what he’s lost. He hasn’t been neglecting their loss; he’s simply been focusing on what he still has. Keeping himself from sinking into despair by looking to the future and staying in the present. The thought makes him realize just how close he is to that edge—Tony is just about the only thing he has left, and without him, he might very well have drowned by now in the memories and the grief.

The thought sends a vague, unformed anxiety through him at the idea of the loss of Tony, strong enough that he’s suddenly seized by the urge to reach out and make physical contact. He keeps his eyes on the memorial, but feels the warm pressure of Tony’s hand in his the moment he reaches out, and wonders if Tony is thinking any of the same things he is.

As he takes Tony’s hand, he suddenly becomes aware again of the music that drew them here. There’s a girl standing at the other end of the steps, eyes closed and playing a violin. She can’t be more than twenty, and Rhodey wonders what brought her here, who she lost—because everyone has lost someone, and though visitors like Tony and Rhodey might be sharing in the music she’s creating, he’s sure this is her gift to someone they don’t know.

There are a few others drifting by the memorial. Nearly everyone stops for a time, to listen to the violinist, look at the gifts laid out, or to stoop and add their own flowers or treasures to the mix. Rhodey’s not quite sure how long they stay there, listening to one song become another and looking over this expression of human emotion, resilience, memory, and solidarity.

A mother and son walk by and Rhodey watches them. They approach the memorial, and the woman bends down to place a framed photograph, around which her son arranges several flowers. Rhodey can’t see the photograph, can’t tell who it is they’re mourning. Perhaps the father, or maybe another child. They spend a moment crouched at their addition, private in their grief, and then they move toward the girl playing the violin. She doesn’t stop playing when they approach her or when the mother leans in to say something to her, but she nods. When she finishes the melody she’s currently playing, she takes a short pause before beginning again, and Rhodey immediately recognizes Amazing Grace.

The mother and her son stand near the violinist and look back at the photo they put down, quietly singing along. Rhodey can barely hear them, but then another man behind them joins in, then a woman beside him, and another. Rhodey finds himself singing with them as well, drawn in by the now growing crowd made cohesive by music and shared emotions.

He’s almost, but not quite, surprised when he looks up and sees Tony singing along as well. The sad expression he always wears now is there with intensity, but there’s a soft aspect to it that Rhodey
would almost call good. It’s not the consuming, directionless grief that was all he’d been able to feel when he’d first been resurrected. This is more like the sadness on his face when he’d cried over Pepper. It’s a very human emotion.

The crowd isn’t exactly large, maybe twenty people at most gathered and singing with them, but it feels all the larger for the solidarity of the moment. When they reach the end of the last verse it falls quiet, people looking over at the memorial and lost in their thoughts. There’s a few moments of silence before the violinist starts up her own melancholy song again. Slowly, people begin to drift away, and eventually, by some unspoken agreement, Rhodey and Tony turn and head back as well.

They take a different route through the city and back to the Tower, seeing new people and buildings and projects. It’s a good reminder of the life still in the world, after being at the site of so much grief and loss. He hadn’t meant for their “vacation day” to take a detour into that kind of territory, but he thinks—for him, at least—it was freeing, in a way. A good expression of emotions, and a reminder of their humanity.

Tony’s quiet for a while, but he doesn’t have that pinched, exhausted expression that he gets when he’s feeling overwhelmed, so Rhodey doesn’t bother him. They move in thoughtful silence for at least an hour, back to people-watching and thinking and just… existing. They come across several more food stands and open restaurants and eventually, when Rhodey realizes that they’ve been out most of the day and the sun is starting to get a little lower in the sky, he proposes the idea of getting dinner out here. They’d skipped lunch, not that Rhodey had really missed it when they were busy. Tony agrees and they end up buying something fried and wrapped from a street vendor who’s set up across from a small park, where several people are scattered around, sitting on the grass and eating or just talking.

It’s a little difficult to maneuver his chair across the grass, particularly since it hasn’t been tended for months and has grown long and wild, but they find a relatively clear spot and Tony sinks down to lean against his legs and eat. While they can still see the road and everything around them, the longer grass and the quiet scene give an illusion of tranquil privacy that relaxes Rhodey—and Tony too, if the way he slowly leans more and more into Rhodey is any indication.

They’ve been finished with their food and just sitting for a few minutes when Tony half-turns to look at him. “Thank you,” he says, gazing around the park, “for suggesting this. For pulling me out. It was good to take a day off from worrying about…everything. You were right, I needed it.” He sighs and closes his eyes when Rhodey’s hand reaches forward to stroke through his hair.

Rhodey smiles softly, fondly. “Good. I’m glad it helped.”

He feels like he could stay in this moment forever. But there’s still a world out there that needs to be faced, to be helped, and once this day is over they’ll have to go back to it. It’s work, but it’s not a burden. While he might wish in some moments that he could take Tony off somewhere peaceful forever, where he would be free from expectations and harsh realities, they could never actually do that, not while the world still needed them. Neither one of them was ever one for inaction, and they’re not old enough to retire yet, however much it might feel like it some days.

They eventually get up and finish the walk back to the Tower. Their shadows are stretching long across the ground and the sky is just starting to darken as they make it back. Rhodey almost sends Tony up to their floor alone and stops to check on some of their guests, but tells himself not to; he knows they’re fine, and it’s still their day off. SI, work, the state of the world—it’s all something to be worried about tomorrow. When Tony starts to ask about checking on messages he’s gotten, Rhodey firmly tells him as much, and they agree to leave everything for tomorrow.

They spend the evening in the lounge adjacent to their room, reading and chatting and doing nothing
important, a perfect end to the day. It’s when Rhodey’s cleaning up a set of cards from the table and
Tony has headed into their bathroom to brush his teeth that one of Rhodey’s legs gives a jolt so
strong he could swear he sees it twitch.

He spends a minute just staring at it, feeling a sort of tingling running down his thigh. He’s almost
afraid to try and move it, suspended in the moment and wondering what might happen. He doesn’t
realize he’s holding his breath until it comes out in a sigh when he tries to move the leg and nothing
happens. He sags in the chair, shaking his head at himself. He’s not sure what he was expecting.
Even if he really is healing, it’s going to be a slow process, not some sort of sudden miracle.

He puts the cards away, wheels into the bedroom, and stops outside the closed bathroom door,
waiting for Tony to finish so he can go in and get ready for the night. But when he drops his hands
into his lap and sits back, he feels one of them hit his thigh, and that has him jerking his back upright
again and staring down, wide-eyed, at his own leg. Slowly, cautiously, he runs his hand again over
his thigh, and almost cries at the weak feeling of pressure. He’s definitely not imagining it.

It’s more tingling than anything, and it fades after a minute even as he keeps poking and rubbing at
the thigh, but it was there, real and present and absolute. He lets out a silent, incredulous laugh and
sits back. There isn’t much he can do with this except wait and see what else comes of it, but it’s
bolstering his hopes, his confidence that this really is progress and the doctors weren’t wrong.

He hears the toilet flush and the water run and shut off again, and his mind is caught in a brief war
between two instincts. Part of him wants to shout the news to Tony the second he emerges from the
bathroom, to share in this joy and give Tony something to be happy about and look forward to as
well. It’s the same part of him that’s wanted to tell Tony all along, ever since he went to the doctors
about his tingling feelings, and the part that’s felt guilty for keeping it from him since then.

But the more rational part of him still doesn’t think it’s a good idea. A few seconds of sensation were
great, but they weren’t proof of anything. If he tells Tony about the good news, he’ll have to tell him
everything else, too. All the confusion and worry and fear he’s felt about the entire thing. How no
matter how much he logically knows that he won’t just wake up one morning able to walk, he can’t
stop some small, stupid part of his brain from hoping so intensely every time he starts to feel
something, then devolving into bitter disappointment when it inevitably fades. He doesn’t want to
confess to Tony how upset it’s making him to see how thin his legs have become in months of disuse
—how he’s starting to really look like someone who’s bound to a wheelchair—not until he also has
some definitive good news to tell Tony as well. Something more substantial than random bouts of
sensation.

So he takes a deep breath and relaxes back into a neutral expression. He keeps the hope and joy and
the fear and pain to himself, and when Tony comes out, Rhodey greets him with nothing more than
the fond smile he usually does and moves into the bathroom to get himself ready for bed. All this
worry is yet another thing to be dealt with tomorrow.

When he pulls himself into bed later that night and Tony scoots over to wrap himself around him,
head on Rhodey’s shoulder and octopus-limbs holding him hostage, Rhodey finally relaxes
completely and shuts his eyes. All their problems can be dealt with later. This was a day to just relax
and focus on the little things, and he should be thinking about that, not worrying about the future.
They’ll face it as it comes.

Chapter End Notes
I just realized that I’m posting this on Memorial Day in the US, which was completely unintended but appropriate.
So, anyone who reads my other stuff too has probably noticed that I posted several new stories during my couple of weeks off between Step and the start of rotations, but ignored this one. Sorry about that. I was riding a wave of bitterness that made me want to write some extra salty stuff, and also this chapter really didn’t want to be written. I finally had to sit and force myself to write it, so I’m sorry if some of it doesn’t flow well, I’m still not entirely happy with it, but I got into it once I’d started.

It’s only been a few days since the Tower was finished when Rhodey gets another call from his mother. They’ve been focusing in on SI operations now, already starting to get some basics out to people from their factories, and Tony is doing a good job of taking over. His employees are at least professional enough to treat him like they used to, allowing him to do his job as head of the company without too much trouble.

Rhodey’s mom tells him that she’s back at her house, which thankfully wasn’t hit in the invasion. No damage in the neighborhood except what the elements did over the weeks they were all gone, with some windows and even doors left open when Thanos’s minions came and cleared the houses. Some of the neighbors haven’t come home and likely won’t, but for the most part, they’re all still alive, and now they’re back home and trying to move on, move forward like everyone else. She assures him that he has no reason to worry, that everyone who’s still alive is even closer in the aftermath of the invasion, and taking care of each other.

Still, Rhodey spends a while anxiously questioning her about her safety, how the house is holding up, how they’re getting food and supplies, every detail he can think of. She answers his questions with the indulgent patience of a mother. He’s so insistent that she barely gets in any questions of her own, which he doesn’t realize the consequences of until later.

Rhodey asks again if she wants them to come down there—to visit, not to stay, he’s sure to say, what they’re doing in New York is too important to leave even to be with his mother, and she understands—and this time he says yes. With there not being too serious a schedule yet for them, they can go any time so long as Tony is ready, so he tells her they’ll be down in a few days, a week at most, and he goes to tell Tony the news.

Tony is oddly reluctant when Rhodey tells him they can visit his mother. Not that Tony expresses happiness or excitement now, but Rhodey can tell when he wants something, and he can tell now that Tony is hesitant. “What’s wrong?”

Tony gives him a look that Rhodey thinks is vaguely guilty. “Are you sure bringing me there is a good idea?” he says quietly, gesturing generally to himself.

“Oh.” That doesn’t hurt, exactly, but it’s not nice to hear. “Tony, you know my mom loves you like her own son. This, anything that’s changed about you, it’s not going to matter to her any more than it does to me.”

Tony just keeps his eyes on the ground. “She’s not around me all the time like you are. I know she
loves me, but you’ve seen how other people react to me. Even people who work with me, who respect me. I can’t blame them, I don’t, but… you’re the exception, you’re more understanding than anyone else would be, and I just…” There’s a pause and Tony takes a deep breath, then finally looks up at Rhodey. “Maybe it’s better for her to remember me, you know, like I was.”

That brings a lump up in Rhodey’s throat, but also something fierce. “So are you going to avoid her forever? You shouldn’t hide away from people who care about you, Tony. Give them a chance to show you that what’s happened to you doesn’t matter. You’re still you.”

He says it a little more harshly than he means to; maybe a tiny part of it is protectiveness of his mother, automatic rejection of the idea that she would think any less of Tony now than she did before. But at the same time… he can’t deny that it might be true. His mother loves Tony, there’s no doubt about that, but she doesn’t know him like Rhodey does. He knows he’s uncommonly understanding of Tony’s emotional problems, and it’s quite possible, as much as it hurts to think it, that his mom might not be. Tony won’t smile at her, won’t laugh, won’t be visibly happy to see her, and that could hurt all of them.

But he stands by what he said to Tony. He can’t hide away from people who love him. Maybe it will take some adjustment, but he needs to give that chance to people. Others can and will get used to the changes to Tony, but they need the opportunity to do so. He understands that it’s not exactly fair to Tony, to ask him to just bear through the beginning of every repaired relationship, the weeks or months or whatever it takes for people to stop looking at him like some kind of alien and start seeing him as Tony again. It’s not fair to him, but… when has the world ever been fair to Tony?

He tries to soften his voice and his expression when he sees how Tony is looking back at the ground. “If you really don’t want to go, Tony, I’m not going to try to force you. And I’m not going to be mad at you. But if you do, then I’d appreciate you coming with me.”

Something softens in Tony’s face too, and though he still looks a bit unsure, he nods. That brings warmth into Rhodey’s chest, to know that Tony is willing to do this for him even if he’s not absolutely sure about it.

He hadn’t necessarily thought of it before, but it’s a good thing that Tony is coming, because Rhodey can’t drive in his condition. There’s no shortage of people who would be willing to drive Rhodey down to Georgia, of course, but not any that he knows well or would really feel that comfortable with on the journey.

The one person who might have been willing and was close enough to them for Rhodey not to feel awkward was Happy, but that’s not an option. They’ve tried, a few times, to get hold of Happy—as have several SI people—and had no success. As far as Rhodey knows, he was in the city when the invasion began, so they’ve been forced to conclude that he’s probably dead. It’s painful to admit, and it brings a sort of despairing sadness to Rhodey, probably to Tony too. It’s been months now since the end of the invasion. They’re trying their hardest to move forward, but these reminders of everything they’ve lost keep coming up. How long will it be before they no longer receive more news of dead friends?

He could blame the stress he’s under, the many distractions, or any number of things for how long it takes to realize something important. They’re already in the car and outside the city when Rhodey jerks forward in his seat with an “oh, shit!”

Tony, at least, doesn’t swerve or panic or crash the car at Rhodey’s exclamation. Rhodey had been a little worried about Tony on a long drive in his state, with the way he can sometimes be distracted and slow to process still, but he’s been entirely attentive and reactive to the road so far. At Rhodey’s outburst, he glances over before focusing back on the road. “What’s wrong?”
Rhodey puts his face in his hands. “My mom… she hasn’t seen me since at least six months before
the invasion.”

It doesn’t take Tony more than a few seconds to get it. “Oh,” is all he says, and Rhodey groans.

“The invasion started just a few days after I went to the hospital. In all the confusion, with everything
that was happening with you, and Rogers, and then Thanos… no one ever called her to tell her I’d
been injured. We’ve talked on the phone twice since then, but I never told her. I just… didn’t think
of it.”

“Well,” Tony says cautiously, “you had other things to worry about.”

“Shit,” is all Rhodey says. Well, there’s nothing to be done about it now. He’s not going to call his
mother from the car to deliver the news of his injury; he’ll have to just deal with it in person when
they get there. It’s almost hard to believe that he’s become so used to it by now that he didn’t even
think to tell his mother when she called him, but Tony’s right. He really did have much more
important things to worry about.

The ride isn’t too long. After leaving early in the morning, it’s about twelve hours to his mom’s
place. There’s a few slowdowns along the way where roads have been destroyed or blocked off, but
the lack of traffic most of the way more than makes up for it, and they make good time, getting there
just as the sun is starting to sink low in the sky. Rhodey spends some of the ride contemplating what
he’s going to tell his mom about his own injury, and also about Tony. They agreed before they left
that they’ll have to tell her some of the details about Tony—Rhodey trusts her not to go spreading
rumors about Tony and his emotions, but if they’re going to spend a day with her and be close to her,
she’s obviously going to notice that something’s off with Tony. They won’t be able to get away with
the professional distance and awe over Tony’s appearance and powers that’s been keeping most
people so far from noticing that he never smiles or laughs anymore.

The neighborhood is maybe a little quieter than it should be, but it’s oddly peaceful and normal-
looking. There was some destruction, some debris, some evidence of the invasion on the way out
here, but this is a very suburban area. Compared to NYC, where they can’t go half a block without
some large, obvious reminder of the invasion, out here he can see how it would be… maybe not
easy, but easier to forget what’s happened. He hopes it’s doing some good for his mother.

They pull up in the driveway and Tony gets out first, heading around the car to grab Rhodey’s chair
out of the back and open it up next to the passenger door. As Rhodey starts to pull himself out of
the car and into it, he hears the front door of the house open. Tony gives him a furtive glance and goes
around the back of the car to get their bags, either to put off the meeting for a little longer or just to
give Rhodey a moment to greet his mom alone and give her the news about his injury.

He wheels himself around the other side of the car and over to the porch just as his mother is coming
down the steps, and some heavy weight is immediately lifted off his shoulders at the sight of her.
He’s spoken to her on the phone, of course, and knew intellectually that she was okay, but seeing her
is different, it’s a confirmation that he needed. Maybe it’s also just the plain comfort of being around
his mom, a basic happiness that will never diminish, no matter how old he gets.

She’s lost a little weight, not surprising considering the invasion, but she still looks healthy, whole,
and as bright as ever. Whatever he’d thought about his reaction goes out the window and tears prick
his eyes as she comes down the steps toward him without hesitation. “Mom,” he croaks out as she
approaches.

Then she’s there, bending down in front of him and taking his face in her hands, pressing a kiss to
each of his cheeks before wrapping her arms around him. Sitting here, hugging his mom, it feels for
at least a moment like he could forget everything wrong with the world.

She pulls back and looks him over. “Oh James, honey, it’s so good to have you here,” and if he’d felt any trace of embarrassment at nearly crying over seeing his mom, he’s gratified by the shine of tears in her eyes as well. He sees her look over his chair, but she doesn’t say anything about it right away, instead leaning back and announcing that he “needs to eat more.”

He chuckles at that and shakes his head as she straightens and looks around. “Now where’s that scrawny kid of yours?” she says a little louder, and Rhodey suppresses a smile at the words. She’s always referred to Tony as his kid, ever since the first time he’d brought him home during a break at MIT. Never mind that Tony was only a few years younger than him; he had, in fact, been scrawny as a kid, not to mention shorter than even other kids his own age, and with Rhodey’s mother’s tendency to want to feed everyone in sight at all times, she’d latched onto Tony in no time.

Rhodey hears the trunk of the car close and keeps his eyes on his mother’s face as Tony comes around the car with their bags. Her eyes widen as she catches sight of him, the shock obvious on her face. He’s not sure whether she might have already seen a picture of Tony on the internet, but even if she has, a picture can’t compare to the real thing. The dusk starting to fall over the neighborhood is just making Tony appear to glow even brighter, Rhodey knows. Still, despite her obvious shock, his mom hitches a large smile onto her face and steps forward to greet Tony.

“There you are, sweetheart, how are you?” She pulls him into a hug as soon as he’s close enough, even though the bags he’s holding over his shoulder mean he can only return the hug with one arm.

“Hello, Mrs. Rhodes,” he says quietly, and Rhodey hears her tsk at him as she pulls back.

“What am I, your ninth grade teacher?” She says it like a fond joke, but Rhodey can already see the hint of confusion and hesitance in her face, and that means Tony probably can, too. Rhodey can see her becoming more unsure as the seconds tick by and Tony doesn’t offer her so much as a smile.

“Sorry, Roberta,” Tony says, just as quiet, but it does seem to soften her a little bit. She gestures them inside, and Rhodey’s too busy now worrying about how to approach the subject of what’s happened to Tony to pay much attention to how closely she’s watching them as Tony helps pull his chair up the porch steps and into the house.

It’s a small house and maneuvering his chair through the halls is a little tough, but they manage. When they get into the kitchen, she’s already directing them to sit and placing steaming plates heaped with food in front of them. Tony moves the chair in front of one of the spots so Rhodey can pull his chair up, and soon they’re all settled down and eating.

Tony eats better now than he did when the invasion first ended, but still not nearly as much as he used to. Rhodey hopes his mother doesn’t take it as an insult, but he can see her watching Tony with concern through the first few quiet minutes of the meal. Finally, it seems she can’t resist any longer, and she reaches over to put her hand over Tony’s. It puts Rhodey on edge, knowing Tony can’t be completely comfortable with it and wondering if he’s going to pull away, but he doesn’t.

Still, his mom must see the slight stiffening of his posture, because she asks, “what’s wrong, honey?”

Tony swallows and looks over at her. “I’m sorry,” he says immediately, and Rhodey resists sighing at the automatic apology. Not that he didn’t already see the signs, but the tendency to revert to apology is just further proof that Tony’s not entirely comfortable here. “Nothing is wrong.”

His mother doesn’t look convinced. “You’ve looked upset since you got here, baby. Is it something I did?”
Rhodey leans forward at that, seeing that this is headed down a bad path. His mom is taking it personally, and he can tell that Tony’s already withdrawing at being so directly questioned, and he needs to interfere. “Mom, no,” he says, and she turns to him, moving her hand off of Tony’s.

“Look, there’s a lot to Tony’s, um, resurrection that you don’t know about,” he says, glancing at Tony, who looks more relieved than anything that Rhodey is taking over the explanation. “We didn’t want to tell you over the phone, or just spring it on you as soon as we got here, but there’s things you need to know.” He glances again at Tony before focusing on his mom’s face once more. “And so you know, this needs to stay between us. No one can know, not even your most trusted friend or neighbor, not your doctor, not anyone, okay?”

She nods seriously. “I told you, I know how rumors spread, honey.” She looks over at Tony again. “So what is it you haven’t told me?”

Rhodey gives a modified explanation. He leaves out some of the details, personal bits and things he just doesn’t think she needs to know. Tony doesn’t contribute much, which Rhodey doesn’t mind. And maybe he makes it sound like he’s more confident than he really is about Tony’s emotional progress and the future ahead of them. But he doesn’t think there’s anything wrong with that, especially when he sees the hesitance still present in his mom. If he’s exaggerating how sure they are of the progress, it’s just making his mom a little more confident that Tony will improve.

She looks sad when she gets up to embrace Tony after he’s done explaining, which is expected, but it disturbs Rhodey a bit. Because it’s the kind of sadness that comes with something permanently lost, not something changed. It hurts a little to think that his mom is looking at Tony like he’s a completely different person. He doesn’t want the two of them to be less than close, and he definitely doesn’t ever want to feel like he has to choose between the comfort or defense of one or the other.

He tries to put aside the worries, telling himself that it won’t do any good, and anyway, they’ve only been here for a few hours at this point. He can’t expect his mom to take all this in and be perfectly fine with it immediately. Still, they’re going to head back tomorrow morning—they can’t be away from SI and their responsibilities for very long—and things are going to have to move quickly.

He’s distracted from thoughts of Tony when they’re cleaning up after dinner, and his mom finally turns to him with her hands on her hips, staring down at his chair. “So, James, you didn’t tell me you’d been injured,” is what she leads with, and Rhodey feels heat creeping up his cheeks at the accusation and the guilt it brings up in him, knowing she’s right. He doesn’t really have an excuse for not telling her earlier. She gestures at his chair. “How long is this for?”

His heart sinks immediately. Oh god, he hadn’t even thought of this, that the reason his mother hadn’t said anything earlier, why she hadn’t freaked out when they’d arrived and she’d first seen her son in a wheelchair, is that she’d assumed it’s temporary. His throat is tighter when he opens his mouth again. “Mom,” he starts, and feels even worse when her face falls at his expression. She must be able to see in his face that this isn’t good news. “This isn’t… this isn’t temporary, mom. I’m paralyzed. I can’t… I’m not getting out of this chair.”

His mom’s face twists and he can see the tears forming, and now he can’t stop his own eyes from starting to water either. She kneels in front of him and takes hold of his shoulders. “Oh Lord, James, you don’t mean that?”

“I’m sorry, mom,” he manages. “When you called and we talked, I just… I forgot to mention it. I guess I’m already used to it, and there were so many other things to ask about, I just…”

She bites her lip and looks down at his legs and back up again. “How do you know, how can you be sure? Have you seen the doctors, with how busy they are? Maybe they missed something—?”
The denial isn’t unexpected, but Rhodey turns away. “This wasn’t—this didn’t happen in the invasion, mom. It was right before it. When everything was normal. They were sure.”

“Before the invasion?” His mom’s voice is incredulous, and he winces, looking back at her.

“Just a few days before, mom. It was that fight, between the Avengers. I was unconscious for a while, and then when I woke up, Tony was missing, then he turned up dead, and then the invasion was just a couple days after that. I’m so sorry, I just… there was so much happening, I never got a chance to call you and tell you about it.”

Now it’s her turn to look away, at the floor. He sees a few tears fall, which just makes him feel worse than ever as she processes this. “I’m so sorry, baby,” she finally says, practically a whisper. “I’m sorry I wasn’t there with you.”

His own tears fall for real now. He leans forward to hug her again. “Please don’t be sorry, mom. It’s not your fault, there’s nothing you could have done about it, and honestly, after everything? After the invasion? It’s not even that big of a deal anymore. I know I’m lucky as all hell that you’re still alive and okay. I can’t exactly complain about this when my mom’s still here.”

She gives him a watery smile and pulls away, but he can tell she’s not over it. Not that he can expect her to be, not this quickly, but he wants her to be. He wants her to not cry over him, to not be upset about Tony. He just wants everything to be okay, but he knows he can’t have that, not without time and a ton of work.

They move onto slightly happier topics of conversation—and Tony, who’d edged out of the room to give them privacy when his mom had started asking about his injury, comes back to join them. They talk the rest of the night away, mostly Rhodey and his mom with Tony occasionally contributing, sitting close to Rhodey and making a little less eye contact than usual, but not too stiff or visibly uncomfortable. It gets late faster than it feels like it should, but he supposes being around his mom, around one of the few people he’s very close to who’s still alive after the invasion, is making the time fly by.

His mother has lived alone for the last eight years since his dad died, and she moved quickly into this smaller house after it happened, looking for something easy to manage. There’s one guest bedroom behind his mom’s, which Tony and Rhodey have already shared a few times since she moved in, when Rhodey had managed to get Tony away from work long enough to come visit with him. They’ve been sharing rooms and beds without a problem for decades—which makes it all the weirder when his mom asks just one too many times whether they’re okay sharing.

They have to take turns in the one bathroom, so Rhodey hovers in the hallway while Tony is inside getting ready for bed. His mom, already in a nightgown, passes by on her way to her room and stops to give him a kiss and say goodnight. She smiles at him, but he can see the way her gaze lingers on his chair and the sadness lurking beneath her eyes. When she turns away from him, he hears a suspiciously wet sniff, and it absolutely breaks his heart.

Now more than ever, he’s tempted to just blurt out the truth. He’s never yet been so tempted to talk about his potential recovery, about the occasional feeling he’s getting back in his legs and everything it might mean. He could so easily call Tony out here and tell them both, put a smile back on his mother’s face and maybe give Tony a reason to start to feel some kind of hope, or at least see a personal benefit to his powers.

But it isn’t right, it’s not fair, for the same reasons he hasn’t told Tony yet. He’s still not sure at all. He hasn’t yet been back to the hospital since the bout of sensation he’d felt on the day he and Tony went out to see the memorial, so he doesn’t even have any kind of updated medical scans to show
that he’s making quantifiable progress. For all he knows, the progress they saw at his first appointment has halted, and just took this long to show up noticeably in his body. He feels awful knowing his mother is crying over his situation, but he’d feel even worse making her think that he might someday walk again, only to find out that’s a lie. It’s the same for Tony, possibly even worse with his precarious emotional situation. Rhodey doesn’t want to make Tony think that he’s expecting some kind of miracle out of Tony—or that, by extension of that, he would be disappointed if Tony can’t actually heal him. So, tempting as it is to say anything he can to cheer his mother up, he stays quiet and tries to put it out of his mind.

They settle into bed without a problem and Tony’s asleep fairly quickly, which Rhodey is thankful for. After the long drive and some of the emotional ups and downs of the day, Rhodey also falls asleep fast, and wakes up feeling pretty refreshed. Tony also looks like he slept well, which is good. Rhodey’s been worried that Tony is upset about his mom’s slight hesitance around him, but Tony seems to be taking it mostly in stride the same way he does with everyone else back home. It’s a bit distressing to realize that Tony hasn’t found a second unconditional ally here like he has in Rhodey, but he supposes Tony already suspected this before they left. His mom will come around, and it’s not like she’s treating Tony like he’s diseased, just… not quite as warmly as she maybe used to.

His mom makes them breakfast early in the morning and fusses over them—mainly Rhodey—a bit more. Whatever the worries and problems they’ve encountered over the visit, the time to leave approaches too quickly, and part of Rhodey doesn’t want to leave. Even with his paralysis and Tony’s changes, this is a peaceful little bubble, away from the reminders of the invasion and everything that’s happened, all the responsibilities they have back in New York, the entire world resting on their—mostly Tony’s, though Rhodey is trying his best to share some of that burden—shoulders.

Tony goes out to pack their bags in the car, along with the mountain of homemade food and small gifts that his mom has insisted they take with them—where she got them, the time to make them, or the materials to do so is beyond him, but it doesn’t exactly surprise him.

While Tony’s out at the car, Rhodey’s mom pulls him aside, into the kitchen. She gives him a hug, then holds him by the shoulders and leans down to fix him with a serious look. “James, I know you’re going back no matter what and that your home’s back there, but I need to ask you something. Are you… are you sure you feel safe with Tony?”

His shocked expression must be obvious, but he hopes she can’t see any of the slight anger in it. God, this is a nightmare, exactly what he was hoping wouldn’t happen. There’s leaden disappointment weighing his guts down, realizing that this is more than just hesitation. His mother really doesn’t think Tony is the same person. The changes to him are more than she can overcome. And maybe that’s not entirely true—he knows she still loves Tony, deep down, nearly as much as she loves Rhodey himself—but for her to actually be questioning Rhodey’s safety around Tony hurts him. He knows he’d rather cut one of his arms off than let Tony find out about this conversation.

“What do you mean?” he asks, trying his hardest to keep his voice level, hoping for an elaboration that might soothe some of his apprehension.

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“What do you mean?” he asks, trying his hardest to keep his voice level, hoping for an elaboration that might soothe some of his apprehension.

She obviously sees something in him, because her face immediately softens. “Oh honey, I’m sorry. I don’t mean to insult you, or Tony, I promise it. It’s just… he’s so different, who knows what that Thanos or those stones did to him, and if he can’t even show any real emotions… how are you supposed to know what he’s thinking?” At Rhodey’s continued twisted expression, she adds, “And if you’re spending all your time taking care of him, who’s taking care of you?”

He drops his head and takes a deep breath. That’s… better. He knows she’s trying to backtrack a
little, he doesn’t doubt that she’s still a little wary of Tony, and that upsets him, but it all comes from concern over him, her son, and he can hardly blame her for that. He looks back up and reaches up to grab onto her hands on his shoulders, doesn’t break eye contact, trying to show how much he means what he’s about to say. “Mom, I get it, I really do. Of course you’re concerned about me. But I promise you, I’m absolutely safe with Tony. I’ve trusted him with my life for years and that hasn’t changed. And believe me, I might be taking care of him, but he’s taking care of me too. I know you’re worried, mom, but there’s nowhere in the world I’d rather be than wherever Tony is.”

She doesn’t look entirely convinced, but he wasn’t expecting her to. The soft, real smile she gives him is worth it, and he trusts that she’s understood him, that she at least believes that he believes he has everything he needs with Tony. That’s all he really needs from her. As much as he will always love her and always take comfort in her being around, he is a grown man now, and he doesn’t need his mother to protect him or make decisions for him. She’s raised him well enough to be able to do that for himself, and now she needs to trust that he can.

“Okay, sweetheart,” she says, giving him another hug and stepping back. “Well, you take care of yourself, okay? And you take care of that boy, too. And maybe, someday, you can get your friend back.”

Before Rhodey can even begin to formulate a response to that, the door opens again; Tony is back, and his mom steps away so they can all move back into the entryway. They say their goodbyes, his mom treating Tony with as much sweetness as she has been since yesterday. Despite his dark thoughts about their last conversation, Rhodey hugs her tightly and promises to keep in touch. She waves them out the door and they begin the journey back home just as the sun is rising.

Once they’re back on the road, Rhodey’s mood drops and he goes back to brooding. He doesn’t blame his mother, exactly, but… it still hurts, what she said to him. The idea that she thinks that way of Tony, but more than that, that that’s how most people would react, at best, to the knowledge of what’s happened to Tony. It makes him feel lonely, and heavy with responsibility, knowing that he might very well be the only person left on the planet who won’t judge Tony for what’s happened to him.

But it really doesn’t change anything. After some thought, he comes to the understanding that his mother, for all she’s doted on Tony in the past, doesn’t know him the way Rhodey does, not as closely. She hasn’t been there with him through everything Rhodey has, she doesn’t know Tony inside and out the way he does. She just doesn’t know enough about him to see that he’s still the same person, despite his changes. She’s wrong: he already has his friend back.

Rhodey knows, still as surely now as he did the first time Tony spoke his name after invasion ended, that this is still the same Tony. Even if he never regains all his emotions, he’ll still be the same person. Rhodey knows Tony loves him as much as he loves Tony, even if Tony has trouble expressing it. And whatever other people—even Tony himself—might think, it’s done nothing but make Rhodey more determined to prove what he already knows: that Tony, his Tony, is still here, right beside him.

Chapter End Notes

I did a very basic google search (again, not a comics person at all, I had to rely on the wiki) and apparently in at least one comic Mrs. Rhodes appears and her name is Roberta, so I used that here. For all I know it’s some weird alternate universe-clone-evil
twin-etc., I don’t know, the comics are weird and have way too many timelines and crap going on (one reason I can’t get into them, not with my schedule), but that’s what I went with.

I hope no one hates me for making Rhodey’s mom a little wary of Tony. I’m sure she’s a wonderful woman, but she has to be concerned about her own son above all else, especially after the invasion. And realistically, I think most people would be a little uncomfortable around someone who doesn’t show emotions (except negative ones, at this point), even if it was someone they’d known for a long time. Rhodey is definitely uncommonly understanding of Tony.

I’ll be very busy in the hospital starting tomorrow but I’m happy to report that I’ve already at least started the next chapter, so I really hope it won’t be another month before I update this again. We were supposed to be getting out of the semi-depressing chapters by now and into happier stuff (and eventually actual plot), but it’s been taking me too long to write! But I swear, after one more not quite happy chapter, there’ll finally be some good things happening, and then we get into some actual plot-related Things happening too.
Echoes

Chapter Notes

There are some things Rhodey still doesn’t know and needs to find out. I’m sure some of you noticed the little bit hinting towards this chapter that came a while back.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Less than a week after their visit to his mom, Rhodey and Tony get another important visitor, this time in the Tower.

They haven’t had much time yet to establish a routine with SI, but they’re settling well into their roles. Now that the Tower is finished, they have a lot more to do, and they’re getting more and more comfortable in their roles within the company. It’s really getting up and running now that they’ve got a lot of their employees—those who survived the invasion and are now in safe and relatively stable housing situations—back and working.

They’ve really come together, despite their personal situations. Rhodey’s sure it helps that Tony and the company are paying extremely well, plus offering help with housing and rebuilding and anything else they might need, and that, in the end, everything the company is doing is coming right back around to help the general public. Still, the thousands of employees jumping back to work without hesitation have no obligation to do it, and it warms Rhodey’s heart to see them helping however they can.

He knows the expectations and responsibilities are just beginning. When they were spending most of their time on physical reconstruction, Rhodey became responsible for fielding requests for Tony’s time and presence. Watching out for Tony by making sure he wasn’t overextending himself or being asked too much. Now, it seems, that same duty is going to shift to SI.

He’s already had a few people from R&D nervously approach him to ask about consulting on projects with Tony. The problem is that this time, Rhodey doesn’t quite know what to tell them, other than that Tony is busy trying to set up concrete structure within the company again and—this is true, but the excuse is starting to wear a little thin—is still recovering from Thanos.

The truth is, he’s not sure what Tony thinks about the whole thing. Tony hasn’t even approached the topic of engineering or inventing since his resurrection, and Rhodey’s not sure why, but he feels strangely apprehensive about asking. Maybe he’s afraid that Tony’s answer will be a firm no; that Tony feels he’s lost that part of himself completely and doesn’t want it back. Or maybe he’s just worried that he’ll drive Tony to withdraw if he pushes him into something he’s not ready for.

Still, it’s just going to keep getting harder to avoid the subject. Practically everything Tony is known for revolves around his legendary mind, from being Howard Stark’s son to personally being responsible for a good percentage of SI’s most valuable products to being the creator and pilot of Iron Man. People hold certain expectations, and if he’s not going to meet them, he’s eventually going to have to give a good reason why.

Rhodey’s spent days trying to think of how to finally ask him about it when he’s interrupted by a visitor to their upper floors. That in itself is unusual, since security would usually just send visitors to an open conference room and call Rhodey or Tony down to them. Curious, Rhodey and Tony both
make their way over to the open common space, where the elevator lets their guest out.

A stocky, grim-faced man walks up and introduces himself as Gordon Mornain. He gives Tony and Rhodey each a solid handshake and a respectful nod before getting right to the point. “I’m here to tell you that Barton, Rogers, and Romanoff have been moved into a max security upstate.”

Tony and Rhodey exchange glances at that. Rhodey’s not surprised, exactly; after all, one of the runners back in the first few days after Thanos, when they were back in the hotel, had told them the three were destined for prison once they were done working upstate. The announcement throws him a little off guard just because he’d nearly forgotten about the remaining former Avengers. Not that he can ever forget their betrayal, the clusterfuck that led to his injury or Tony’s death, but he doesn’t actively think about it, not regularly. He doesn’t care nearly enough about any of those bastards to waste his energy on them in any capacity. He’s so focused on the future with Tony that he doesn’t dwell much on the past these days.

“Already?” Tony asks, and Rhodey knows Tony’s thinking along the same lines as him. Though things are settled by leaps and bounds in comparison to immediately after the invasion, there’s still a hell of a lot of work to do, particularly out in the farmlands, where he’d last heard of the trio working. Not that prison isn’t right where they belong, but he’s surprised those in charge are not only using the resources necessary to keep prisoners incarcerated, but also wasting the prisoners’ potential labor.

Gordon nods. “We were already gettin’ the prison back up and running. Seems like a waste, I know, but people were starting to get settled enough to start gettin’ scared about a bunch of prisoners running around. I imagine not many folks care about that, but when your house is a half mile from the prison that used to lock up rapists and serial killers, you get worried.”

“Understandable,” Rhodey says. He supposes it would be hypocritical of him to want his former teammates in prison because they’d hurt him and his family personally, but not care as much about people who’d done the same to others.

“We sorta lost track of everyone,” Gordon continues. “The prison yard was a camp during the invasion, but they brought in people from the whole area around it too, plus the guards and all were in there too. When it ended everyone left, and it’s not like the prisoners just volunteered to come back.”

Rhodey snorts at that. “But people started getting nervous about the worst of the criminals being out?”

Gordon nods again. “Yeah, so we started puttin’ a little effort into bringing at least the very worst of them back. Life sentences and violent crimes and stuff. We’ve got enough of the guards and officers back home now that we can run at least part of the prison.”

Tony’s been quiet, but he speaks up at that. “What about Rogers and the others? I know you said it’s a maximum security, but that’s meant for normal people. They could stage a breakout.”

Gordon shakes his head. “We’ve got them under extra guard and in the safest part of the prison, all in solitary, and in solid rooms. No bars to bend or break, and they go out for exercise alone except for the guards, not in a group with the rest of the prisoners. Don’t worry, we’ve definitely got them controlled.”

“Why now?” Rhodey asks, and sees Tony nod next to him, clearly wondering the same thing.

“Like I said, people are gettin’ a little more settled down, now. And word was spreading about
where they were. The people working with them were already a touch uncomfortable, but they put up with it. But we were gettin’ mobs of outsiders forming, coming out and trying to find them, exact some vigilante justice. I don’t know that many people would really cry if any of them got killed, but it was interfering with productivity where they were working. They were more trouble than they were worth to keep out on the farms, so we took them to the prison. They ought to be grateful, it’s the only reason they’re still alive by now.”

They exchange a bit more information about the prison itself and Gordon gives them a phone number to contact the people in charge of their former teammates. Tony looks lost in thought, so Rhodey rolls forward to shake Gordon’s hand again. “Thank you for coming here to tell us, we really appreciate the update.”

“Of course. They suggested just calling up here, but considering… well, everything, we figured we should send someone in person.”

Tony steps forward to shake his hand again too, and then he’s gone. Now, after that visit, thoughts of anything but Rogers and his team have been banished from Rhodey’s mind for the time being. He’s pretty sure Tony’s feeling the same. Rhodey reaches over to put a hand on his elbow and Tony jerks his head up slightly like he’s snapping out of a trance, blinking down at Rhodey.

They move into the next room over and Tony sits heavily on the couch, the faraway look back in his eyes. Rhodey carefully moves his chair around to be right in front of Tony, then reaches forward to put his hands on Tony’s knees. “So,” he says, and Tony sighs. “They’re in prison.”

Tony just looks at him for a minute. His expression is hard to decipher, but Rhodey worries, knowing how Tony tends to think. “Don’t tell me they don’t deserve it,” he warns.

Tony shakes his head. “No. They deserve it. They’re criminals, they broke laws of their own free will, they got innocent people killed. They killed innocent people. Besides, it’s as much for their protection as other people’s. You heard Gordon, people were going to riot, to kill them themselves.”

Rhodey narrows his eyes, watching Tony carefully. “You don’t think they had a good enough reason?”

He knows he’s being unfair, unlike himself. He’s always been a believer in the justice system, and therefore in letting people have a fair trial, no matter what their crimes. If anything, it comes from an understanding of why rules and order are important. The right to a fair judgement has to be applied to everyone or it means nothing. Tying to single some people out for alternative justice leaves a blurry line that can be moved around and used to manipulate people, to push certain agendas, and it leads to all kinds of problems. Still, it’s so damn hard to apply the same rules when it’s Tony they hurt, Tony and Rhodey himself. When it’s his family that was torn apart, murdered. The month of hell and the long reconstruction ahead of them aren’t helping matters.

Tony must be able to read his mind, because he sighs again and looks at the floor. “The people coming after them have a reason, of course they do, but… they’re not thinking things through. It’s mob mentality, and it’s the stress of the invasion and the rebuilding, the strain on our resources, all the people who are dead. People aren’t thinking clearly.”

“I don’t think it’s that unclear, what they did to you, or me, or anyone else they got hurt,” Rhodey says. He tries to keep his voice unchallenging, to make sure Tony knows this is just a discussion and that Rhodey won’t get mad at him for whatever he thinks.

Tony shakes his head. “Maybe not, but it’s been… amplified, beyond normal, by what’s happened. Something like the invasion can make people act unbelievably kind, but it can also make them
incredibly angry. People came together to help each other after the invasion, but now that it’s settling
down and they’ve got their basic needs covered, they’ve got time to really think, and they’re mad.”

Rhodey can understand that without issue. “That’s a pretty universal human reaction to big
disasters.”

“It is. They’re angry about what happened, how unfair it is, how awful. They’re upset and they want
someone to blame. Thanos is obvious, but he’s dead. The aliens are gone. It’s hard to take your
anger out on something dead, so they needed different targets. The closest they could find were the
‘heroes’ who were supposed to protect them and failed. So they’re criminals, yes, but there wouldn’t
be this much anger towards them if the invasion had never happened. It’s not… well, fair isn’t the
right word, but it’s not exactly all rational anger about what they’ve done.”

Rhodey just sits and thinks about that for a minute. Before he can formulate a response, Tony is
speaking again. “Really, having any small, unregulated group of people be in charge of protecting
the planet, calling them ‘superheroes,’ was always a doomed system. I should have seen it from the
start. I did, actually, but I ignored it because I wanted it to work so badly. But they’re just people. We
all are. We all make mistakes. But when the world is elevating you to something more than just a
regular human’s status, the expectations rise too. Sooner or later, you’ll make a mistake, and
everyone who thought of you as ‘superhuman’ will be angry that you let them down. It was never
going to work.”

Rhodey is too distracted to enjoy the tiny glow of satisfaction at the fact that Tony is calling himself a
human. He doesn’t like the implication of what Tony’s saying, the idea that it was a flaw in the
system, not flaws in the ex-Avengers themselves, that caused the mess when they split.

“I think that’s putting a little too much philosophy into it,” Rhodey says carefully. “Yes, maybe
people are upset and looking for someone to be angry at, but it’s not like they’re just picking anyone.
Maybe Rogers wasn’t responsible for the invasion, but he claimed to be a protector of the planet and
then he killed you. You, one of the most important superheroes, and the person who probably would
have had the best chance against Thanos. People still remember New York, Tony, and you know
you were the one who won that fight. You’d already saved the world once and then Rogers
murdered you. But even then, you came back and you saved everyone.”

Rhodey is speaking passionately and realizes his voice is rising a little, so he sits back and takes a
deep breath. “I don’t think people are angry because of some big picture ideal of superheroes that
was ruined for them. They’re angry because millions of civilians are dead, their friends and families,
while the people who wrecked the Avengers, failed to defend the planet, and killed the man who
saved it are still alive.”

Tony tilts his head, expression unreadable. “Maybe they are. But it’s still not exactly fair to them.
The invasion made everything worse than it should have been.”

A twisted feeling briefly numbs Rhodey’s fingers where they tighten on Tony’s legs. “Tony, you’re
not defending them?”

Tony looks away, but he shakes his head. “I’m not… defending them. Clint and Natasha, they went
too far, they were irresponsible and reckless and they refused to take responsibility for it. And Steve
was the worst of all of them. I—” He pauses and takes a shaky breath, looking back up at Rhodey.
“If things had been different, if I’d lived through Siberia, I might have still tried to make it work. I…
even after everything they did, I can still understand why they did it. They’re not bad people, and
god knows I’ve made too many mistakes myself to be judging them. But… well, however much it
just made me hurt and sad instead of angry like Thanos wanted, what Steve did… I don’t think I
have the capacity to forgive him, not anymore. Nothing like being betrayed and dying to really,
Tony hunches in on himself with a shiver at that, and Rhodey reaches up instinctually to take his shoulders, rub at his arms to offer comfort. He can’t possibly imagine what it was like to die, at the hands of a supposed friend no less, and then to wake up again with the world and his own body so drastically changed. And while Rhodey can recognize on an intellectual level that Tony is right about Rogers and his gang not being inherently bad people, and that the world’s anger at them is maybe a little blown out of proportion because of the invasion, he’s still glad to hear that Tony doesn’t want to forgive the man who murdered him, or try to make amends with his former teammates. Because Rhodey’s seen how that goes, how “making amends” and “working together” worked after New York, after Ultron. It always seemed to involve Tony alone making sacrifices, working himself to the bone and giving everything to people who didn’t even thank him.

Tony leans into Rhodey’s hands, then takes another shuddering breath and raises his head again. “I understand what you mean, about people being angry because they lived while others died, but not about me. I mean, I know I killed Thanos, but if I’d lived through Siberia, if I’d been alive when the invasion started, I couldn’t have stopped him. I probably would have died fighting him, and then Thanos would never have been stopped. So in a way, it was a good thing that I died when I did.”

Rhodey sucks in a sharp breath at that and squeezes Tony’s shoulders nearly to the point of pain, making sure Tony’s bright eyes are absolutely focused on him. “No one could have predicted that,” he says fiercely. “Yeah, maybe the blind luck of the universe worked out so that you’re here now, so you got the chance to defeat Thanos because you weren’t here when he first came. But Rogers didn’t know that when he killed you. He couldn’t have known anything except that he was betraying a friend. Don’t give the bastard credit he doesn’t deserve.”

Tony nods again, but his expression is so sad it physically hurts to look at. “It wasn’t even about me,” Tony whispers, looking down at his lap again, and Rhodey leans forward to tilt his chip up with one hand.

“What do you mean?”

Tony closes his eyes and takes a deep breath. “It was never about me, and I think that hurt the most. All he cared about was Barnes, the entire time. Even when he was watching…” Tony cuts himself off and swallows hard. “Howard was his friend, and he didn’t even care. It was only ever about Barnes.”

Rhodey knows he’s missing something important. He remembers once before, when Tony was talking about how he died, he’d mentioned his parents, and Rhodey had been confused, but he hadn’t asked. Now, he needs to know. “Tony,” he starts, and when Tony looks at him, he knows Tony knows what he’s going to ask. “What happened in Siberia?”

Tony blinks, tears finally spilling over, and Rhodey’s heart breaks for him. If he were more cowardly at heart, he wouldn’t want to know whatever Tony’s about to tell him. But Rhodey has always been one to face his problems head on, and as much as it might hurt to tell it, he hopes that Tony will find some peace in sharing this burden.

“After you were hurt,” Tony starts, and his voice is already tight, choked, “I went to the Raft, to try to find out where Steve and Barnes went. Ross wanted them killed at that point. I was trying to find them so I could bring them in peacefully. That was probably stupid, to think I could make them listen to me. But I was desperate to fix it all. Wilson told me that they’d said something about more Winter Soldiers.”

“More?” Rhodey can feel his heart beating faster just at the thought.
“In a HYDRA bunker in Siberia. They said Zemo was going to activate them and Steve and Barnes had gone to stop them.”

Tony pauses, and Rhodey takes the opportunity to snarl, “And they couldn’t have bothered to tell us that in Germany? Tell people who could have helped them that they weren’t just running away from the law, instead of fighting their own team?”

Tony just shrugs, eyes drifting down again in that way of his that means guilt. “They didn’t trust me, for working with Ross and the Accords. That fight never should have happened, you never should have been hurt. If I’d tried harder to let them explain—”

“I was right there with you, remember?” Rhodey interrupts before Tony can continue blaming himself. “You gave them plenty of opportunity to talk. They were the ones who decided to solve all their problems with violence.” And they never trusted you to begin with, because they were morons, Rhodey thinks privately, but saying that out loud won’t help Tony. Tony doesn’t look convinced, but Rhodey knows he’s getting them off track. “So you went to Siberia to help them, and they attacked you?”

Rhodey immediately knows he’s said something wrong by the way Tony leans back and wraps his arms around himself. “No. I attacked them.”

There’s more to this, that much is glaringly obvious. Trying to be patient, knowing how Tony blames himself for everything under the sun, Rhodey sits back again, resuming his earlier position with his hands on Tony’s knees. “What happened?” he asks softly.

“The Soldiers were already dead. Zemo had never intended to activate them. It was all a trap for us, and I fell for it. I… he had a video.” Tony drops his arms and looks at Rhodey again, but now his eyes have taken on a terrifying emptiness. “My parents didn’t die in a car crash. HYDRA was after the serum my dad was transporting, and they sent the Winter Soldier after them. Barnes killed them. He beat Howard to death and then he strangled my mom.”

Rhodey can’t breathe, his chest held too tight by grief and anger to draw in air. To hear this, to think about Tony not only finding out, alone in that bunker and standing right next to the man who did it, but having to watch it happen, is horrifying. Tony is trying and failing to hold back tears, head beginning to fall like it’s too heavy to hold up. Rhodey gasps in enough breath to speak. “So you attacked Barnes?” Tony’s head jerks up at that, and Rhodey hates the confused look, like Tony can’t believe that anyone else would come to the same conclusion or understand what he did. “That’s the only thing I can imagine happened. The only thing anyone would have done in that situation. Tony, you aren’t really blaming yourself for reacting like a human to something like that?”

Tony shakes his head and lets out a strangled sob. “It wasn’t even just that. I… I wanted Barnes to hurt, yeah, but I could have… could have held that back. I knew he’d been brainwashed. Even if it was him that did it, he didn’t… didn’t want to. I wasn’t really thinking straight, but… I think I could have calmed down, under the right circumstances. But then Steve…”

Rhodey thinks he knows what’s coming. Rogers made everything worse, because like Tony said, all he’d ever cared about was Barnes, his best buddy. If it was a choice between a grieving man lashing out in anger and the brainwashed assassin who’d orphaned him, Rogers would choose Barnes every time. Rhodey can see it all in his own head, Tony going for Barnes and Rogers escalating the situation instead of trying to make peace. But Tony, eyes squeezed shut and fingers digging into the couch, stops him short with his next words.

“Steve knew.”
It’s like Rhodey’s there in the Siberian bunker himself, the way an icy cold is spreading through his body. “What do you mean, Steve knew?” he says, and thank god Tony doesn’t take it the wrong way, because there’s no way Rhodey can keep the dangerous, forcibly—unnaturally—calm rage out of his voice.

Tony opens his eyes again to look at Rhodey. “I could see it in his face. How he wasn’t surprised at the video. So… I asked him if he’d already known. He tried to lie, but I didn’t… I wouldn’t buy it. So I asked him again, and he told me the truth. He knew about it, and he never told me.”

Rhodey never thought he’d be glad for his paralysis, but it’s the only thing in that moment that keeps him from jumping up and storming straight to the prison where they’re keeping Rogers. He wants to track the son of a bitch down and kill him, but before that, he wants him to suffer. He can think of some creative ways to make it happen. All he needs is a knife and a few hours, or something burning hot or icy cold, just about anything, he’s already planning methods of gruesome torture. What would be it like, he wonders, to make Barton and Romanoff watch it? To show them what their great hero is really made of?

And all at once, he’s shaking and gasping in air, because this isn’t him. He’s angry, yes, but he’s not evil. He wants justice for Tony, for himself, but not like this. He isn’t thinking clearly and he knows it. All the stress of everything that’s happened since the split of the Avengers is catching up to him, and it’s turning him into something he doesn’t want to be. He’s just so exhausted, he’s been on edge continuously since the invasion started. He’s physically hurt, maybe permanently, he’s trying to care for a best friend with problems he can’t begin to understand, and trying to help run a company that’s attempting to help an entire planet recover from something they can barely comprehend. The sheer scale of everything that’s happened is crushing him, and now it seems he’s having the breakdown he’s been putting off since he found Tony again.

He becomes aware, slowly, that his eyes are tightly closed, his teeth biting hard enough into the inside of his cheek to draw blood. When he forces his eyes open, Tony is kneeling in front of his chair, hands framing his face and brows drawn in with concern. Rhodey manages to bring his own hands up to cover Tony’s. He threads his fingers between Tony’s and pulls their hands down to his chest, feeling his own heart thumping, his chest heaving, and wills himself to calm down.

As he calms, a thread of guilt weaves between his slowing heartbeats. Tony just spilled his guts to him, told him about the worst day of his life—and death—and now Rhodey’s the one having a breakdown over it. He should be focused on helping Tony. He licks his lips, tasting salt and realizing that he’s been crying, then clears his throat hoarsely. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to freak out on you.”

Tony shakes his head. Without pulling his hands from Rhodey’s, he shifts around so he’s sitting more comfortably in front of him. “Don’t be sorry. You… I know how stressed you’ve been. I shouldn’t have put this on you.”

Now Rhodey’s the one shaking his head, squeezing Tony’s hands for emphasis. “Don’t. If I’m not allowed to blame myself here, neither are you. I wanted to hear this, Tony. I needed to. And I’m so sorry that you had to go through that, that you had to go through it alone.”

Tony looks up at him, raw and open. “If you’d been there too, and you’d died… I never would have forgiven myself,” he whispers. “We’re here now. They can’t hurt either of us anymore. It… things aren’t good, not yet, but they will be. We’ll work it out.”

Rhodey can only nod, more tears running down his face, and let go of Tony’s hands to pull him up into a hug. It’s awkward with him in his chair, but Tony doesn’t care, practically climbing on him so they can wrap their arms tightly around each other.
That night, when they’re in bed—clinging to each other a little harder than normal, maybe—Rhodey reflects on his own attitude about everything. Now, when he’s had some time and distance from the news, he can see that storming after Rogers in any capacity isn’t going to solve anything. It’s not going to hurt anyone but himself and Tony.

The best thing they can do for themselves is move on. Forget all about the people who lied and betrayed them and try to do the best they can to build new lives. If anything, they’re better off now without people like Rogers in their lives. He knows Tony won’t necessarily feel that way for a while; he’d thought he had a real friendship with Rogers, with all of the Avengers, and Tony has always formed strong emotional attachments. Whatever Rhodey thinks about it, however they treated him in return, Tony loved those people, and he’s not going to just drop all his feelings for them in a hurry. He might not ever forgive what Rogers did, but that doesn’t make it any easier for him to stop caring about him, stop hurting and longing in equal parts for the friendship and trust that was destroyed. And all Rhodey can do is be there for him while he figures it out, and hope that time and distance will lessen those pains.

He can also recognize that there’s truth to what Tony said about everyone’s reactions to the ex-Avengers being unfair. Even Rhodey’s, even after he found out the truth about Siberia and how Tony died. They made mistakes, yes, but all of them did, on both sides. Maybe all of the ones who fought against the Accords were arrogant and egotistical and all the bad things that they’d always accused Tony of, but Tony’s right. They’re not evil. They’re not inherently bad people, they weren’t trying to hurt anyone. In their own idiotic, shortsighted, self-righteous way, they were trying to help people. They were wrong, but they had good intentions, at least at the start.

That doesn’t make them any less guilty of the crimes they committed, the people they got killed, but… at this point, Rhodey thinks, it seems like they’re being punished enough. If they’re really the good people they claim to be, then they’re devastated to know that they failed the world, that millions of people are dead because they couldn’t fight off Thanos. That guilt will never leave them. And even if they don’t feel any responsibility for that, they’re in prison. The whole world hates them and that likely won’t change in their lifetimes, if at all. They’re all going to die alone, as criminals, as failures.

And Tony and Rhodey are here, in the rebuilt Tower, putting their lives back together and looking at a future that has the potential to be great. Whatever Rogers did, Tony is alive now, and that’s a victory in itself. Whether he heals or not from the damage done to him in Germany, Rhodey is alive as well, and he has the chance to do a lot more for Tony, for SI, for the world. A chance that none of the former Avengers will get. And most importantly, for both Tony and Rhodey, they have each other.

Chapter End Notes

This isn’t the last we’ll see of the ex-Avengers, but they won’t be back in a chapter for a long time. The next chapter will have happy things, I promise, not just a bunch of sadness followed by a hopeful thought from Rhodey.

Personally (as anyone who reads my bitter stories obviously knows), I don’t take such a forgiving attitude towards Rogers and his group of assholes as Rhodey does here. But in the face of such worldwide destruction, what they did takes a different perspective, and I’m trying to present a healthier, less biased viewpoint here. Tony and Rhodey need to move on, and not waste any of their time or energy on Rogers, even if it’s just to hate
him. And there’s truth to what Rhodey thought about, that at this point, in this story, they’re certainly facing plenty of punishment (not that it absolves Rogers at all of having brutally murdered Tony, not to mention the people he killed in Romania, but still. It would be bad for Tony or Rhodey as people, even if I think he would deserve it, for either of them to go murder Rogers now).
It’s time.

The timing is perfect, really, because Rhodey was very close to giving up on trying to field requests for Tony’s tech and consultation time. Before he was finally forced to figure out how to bring it up to Tony, however, Tony did so himself.

Tony had approached him yesterday afternoon, near the end of their short break time before splitting apart for more SI meetings and responsibilities. Quietly, Tony had said that if he wanted to do much for SI, he should be back in the labs, working. They’d been busy at the time, so Rhodey couldn’t address the hesitance or the guilt in Tony’s eyes. He’d only had time to smile and tell him that if that was what he wanted, then they’d go together tomorrow.

Now, they’re standing in front of the doors to one of the smaller labs, and there’s tension in the air.

There are various lab spaces scattered throughout the building, both in the areas open to the public and the top, private floors. The one they’re standing in front of isn’t the main lab, where Tony used to work on and store the Iron Man suits. That one, because of the suits and other dangerous tech inside, was sealed off with multiple layers of security upon Tony’s death. It’s possible they could break in, but that would take time and effort and for now, Tony hasn’t given any sign that he wants to return to Iron Man, just that he’d like to get back to engineering work for SI, so any lab will do.

None of them have been touched since Tony’s death, not even during the reconstruction of the Tower, by virtue of all being on the lower levels, below where the explosion had happened. And even when Rhodey and Tony came back and rebuilt the Tower, Tony didn’t seem to want to go back. Rhodey has never been sure why, but now that they’re about to go back and he can tell that Tony is worried, he figures it’s about time to address it.

He thinks about asking “Why now?” but that’s a stupid question. SI is pretty much running smoothly again, even with a reduction in employees, but they’re looking to expand the company once more, to integrate into the recovering world with new tech and new ways to help people. Even with a well-staffed, brilliant R&D department, everyone knows that the most incredible innovations out of SI always came from Tony himself, and Tony knows they’re all expecting him to get back to it. Rhodey also firmly believes that it’s a part of Tony, something that hasn’t been lost just because of his death or what Thanos did to him. So it’s not a question of why Tony’s returning; it’s what has held him back until now.

He decides to just come right out and say it. “What are you afraid of, Tony?” he asks quietly.

He can see how Tony tenses next to him and there’s an uncomfortable moment of silence. “I’m not
Tony finally says. Rhodey hears him take a deep breath and let it out slowly. “This is… something I used to do. It used to define me, more than anything else did. I know I can still do it, I’m physically capable, my powers might even help me. I don’t get distracted as much now as I did at first, I think faster. But…” there’s a long pause, long enough that Rhodey starts to think Tony won’t finish, before he finally whispers, “what if it’s not the same?”

Rhodey twists to reach for Tony’s hand, grabbing it and feeling Tony’s fingers tighten around his immediately. Tony turns to look at him, expression heartbreakingly unsure. There are a million things Rhodey could say, a million reassurances he could give, but none of them would be absolutely certain or meaningful to Tony. They would sound empty. So instead, he tells him the simple truth that he hopes will mean the most. “When has that ever stopped you?”

Tony just stares at him, blinking, for at least a full minute. But finally, the hesitation on his face gives way to something determined that fills Rhodey with pride. Tony nods silently and turns back to the door, moving forward with confidence now to place his palm on the scanner and enter his credentials into the backup system.

Back when there was an AI in the Tower, the doors would have opened automatically for Tony, Rhodey, and anyone else with permission to enter the lab. They would have stayed shut until permission was given for most others, and never opened for the short list of banned people. But in case of any kind of catastrophic failure, Tony shutting the Tower AI down briefly for maintenance or other reasons, or any other reason the AI could be offline, the backup system is just the traditional security methods.

The doors open nearly silently, even though Rhodey feels like there should be a swelling of music or a momentous chime as they pass through, as Tony embraces this part of his past and future. They walk into a darkened room—the labs have no windows for safety reasons—and there’s a moment of stillness before the lights flicker on.

The usually shining surfaces are slightly dulled by accumulated dust, but that’s an easy fix. The air of disuse in the room will disappear quickly as Tony gets back to work. They move into the room slowly, Tony looking around like he’d forgotten what it was like to be here. Rhodey watches him carefully and hopes, more than anything, that this will be a positive experience for him.

Tony stops and Rhodey sees him take a deep breath in as he looks around. When he lets it out, his entire body just relaxes, and Rhodey smiles. This is where Tony belongs. And whatever was scaring him into staying out of the lab has obviously fallen by the wayside. Rhodey is getting a good feeling about this.

His good feeling is proven right after a few moments of silence in which he watches Tony just stand and breathe. Tony hasn’t yet stepped into the center of the computerized circle that will activate any of the screens or other tech around the room, and so Rhodey is momentarily confused when there’s a mechanical whir from somewhere across the room.

He sees Tony’s head turn as well, looking over the desk and half-wall to the source of the noise. The whir is replaced by a low, inquisitive beep and Rhodey places it just as Tony’s entire face drops into a shocked expression even stronger than the day he discovered his powers.

Tony seems speechless, and Rhodey is too, as they make their way across the room to meet the bot. Rhodey is a few feet back in his chair, watching Tony cautiously step up to DUM-E where he’s rolled forward towards them.

DUM-E gives another low, questioning sound as he raises his claw and camera to examine Tony. Rhodey can see the tension winding Tony’s body tight, and he suddenly understands the hesitation
in his movements. “Hey, buddy,” Tony says quietly, and holds his hands out for the bot to examine.

DUM-E moves his camera carefully over Tony’s hands, down to his feet and then back up his torso to gaze up at his face. Rhodey can practically feel Tony’s fear that he won’t be recognized, but DUM-E lets out a high-pitched squeal and rolls forward to clumsily shove his arm into Tony’s chest.

Tony stumbles back half a step with the force of it—or maybe the surprise—but his arms come up immediately to wrap around the arm in the closest approximation of a hug possible for them. “Yeah, I’m here,” Tony says over DUM-E’s excited beeping, patting the top of his claw, and Rhodey thinks he might hurt himself smiling so hard at the two of them.

It’s not long before the bot turns his attention to Rhodey himself, rolling over to intently examine his wheelchair and his face. It’s clear he recognizes Rhodey immediately, so while Rhodey pats his claw and says hello again for the first time in months, Tony takes the opportunity to examine DUM-E, running his hands over every inch of him, frowning and muttering to himself the way he used to whenever he was in the workshop and thought he was alone.

It makes Rhodey’s heart soar, far more than seeing Tony hip-deep in engineering projects ever would. To see him treating his robot, his child, with the same care and concern he always has. Losing himself immediately in taking care of something he built and gave life to. And he might not be quite the same as Rhodey or another human, but DUM-E is another friend to Tony, one who loves him unconditionally and won’t treat him differently just because of how he’s changed.

When Rhodey’s done greeting DUM-E and Tony’s finished looking him over, Tony moves around to stand next to Rhodey again. DUM-E gives him a happy, inquisitive beep and Tony bites his lip as he looks him over again. “Where’s your brother, huh?”

Oh. In the excitement of seeing one of the bots again and realizing that DUM-E wasn’t locked away and potentially destroyed with Tony’s suits, Rhodey had nearly forgotten about U. His brief moment of guilt over that is forgotten when DUM-E gives a series of beeps and grabs Tony’s shirt in his claw, reversing across the lab and awkwardly dragging Tony with him.

Rhodey laughs at the sight, and the indulgent way Tony stumbles along with him, and follows them across the lab. His mirth dies off when they get into the corner where DUM-E is leading them and see the collection of broken and charred parts just barely recognizable as another bot. DUM-E lets go of Tony to go and poke at the pile with a low, sad noise.

Tony kneels down and runs his hands over some of the parts. Rhodey understands what happened at the same time Tony mumbles, “He was upstairs, huh?” U must have been up on a higher level of the Tower when Pepper blew the top floors, and he’d been caught in the explosion. “Did you bring him here yourself? For me? Good job, buddy,” Tony says, patting DUM-E’s claw with one hand and staring down at U.

Understanding dawns on Rhodey at that. This is one of the smaller auxiliary labs, and Rhodey was wondering what DUM-E was doing down here. But it’s the lowest down, farthest from the scene of destruction that was the upper levels of the Tower. DUM-E must have dragged the broken pieces of his fellow bot down to what he saw as the safest place for them to hide, then shut himself down to conserve power—there’s no charging station for the bots in this lab, since Tony rarely worked on anything where he’d need their help here—in the hope that Tony would come back and be able to fix them. Rhodey’s heart hurts a little at the humanity Tony’s creations display, the fact that they so clearly have emotions, and therefore were hurt by the invasion, by the deaths of many of their friends, and the past months without any contact with anyone.

DUM-E makes another low, sad noise, and Tony absently reaches back to stroke along his claw.
“Don’t worry, DUM-E, you did good. I’ll fix him.”

Tony stands again and moves over next to Rhodey. His face looks lighter than Rhodey’s seen it since his resurrection, and Rhodey gives him an encouraging smile, beyond glad that Tony chose to come back to the lab. Some of that lightness disappears a moment later, when Tony throws a guilty look in DUM-E’s direction. The bot has moved back around to watch Tony again. “I’m sorry I left you here so long,” Tony says, quiet again.

Rhodey reaches up to grab his hand. “I’m pretty sure he’s just happy to have you back, Tony, no matter how long it took,” he says, and DUM-E confirms that with a happy series of beeps. Tony ducks his head, but some of the renewed tension eases from his posture again, which is good.

Rhodey lets the comfortable silence stand for a minute or so before he lets go of Tony’s hand and turns his chair toward the center of the room. “So, are you ready to get to work?” he asks, and Tony looks up again and nods.

Tony moves past him and over to the long desk, standing on the activation pad. As soon as he makes contact with it, a holographic screen pops up in front of him, waiting for him to enter his credentials. He does so quickly, comforting familiarity in the movement, and it makes Rhodey smile again to watch him. The main screen switches over to his desktop and a dozen miniaturized boxes pop up on either side of it, waiting for Tony to activate the other screens around the room and open up his work on every available surface, like usual.

With a flourish of his hands that sends a jolt through Rhodey—he hadn’t realized how much he’d missed the little gestures that give Tony so much personality—Tony reaches for the screens and then flings his arms wide, sending holographic projections up all over the room in a wide, glowing arc around him. Standing at the center of this constellation of technology, with his glowing marks matching the color of the projections around him, Tony looks more than ever like he’s one with his tech; but rather than making him look alien and strange, it suits him.

Tony turns slowly in a circle on the spot to look around at the room, at all of his own tech, here in the environment where he’s always been most at home. When he finishes the turn and faces Rhodey again, there’s something so stunningly different about his demeanor that it takes Rhodey a moment to understand what’s changed.

Tony is smiling.

Rhodey’s been aware on a basic level that Tony hasn’t smiled, hasn’t shown any kind of real positive emotion, since his resurrection. But he hadn’t quite comprehended the degree of difference it would make in Tony to actually see it on his face. Yet here it is now, and it’s almost startling, in a really, truly good way.

Tony’s always had a bright smile, one that took years off his face. Now, the Infinity Stones have erased most of the lines, the scars, the marks of a hard life from Tony’s skin, replacing them with the glowing reminders of everything Tony’s been through since his death, in this second life. Still, the glow from his new markings stretched into a smile, the way his eyes still crinkle at the corners; everything about this is both new and familiar, and it’s beautiful.

Tony’s face gradually relaxes back into a neutral expression, but when he looks back at Rhodey, there’s still a bright spark in his eyes. One that gives a sense of reality to the optimistic hope that Rhodey’s been using to sustain his assertions that Tony can recover. Such a sense of relief sweeps through him at that that he thinks if he were standing, his legs might go out from under him. As it is, he doesn’t think he’s imagining the slight tremble to his hands when he grips his chair to wheel himself over to one of the desks.
They pass the rest of the day in the lab, the time flying by faster than it’s felt like it has in years. Though Tony came in with the intention of immediately starting up SI projects, the first thing he does is gather U’s broken parts and start digging around for what he’ll need to fix him. Rhodey thinks he’s doing it both for his own sake—to have the comfort of his bots alive and well—and also for DUM-E, both so he can have his brother back and so he has something to do for a while. It’ll take Tony some time to be out of the planning phase for any SI projects, and after the long separation, Rhodey has no doubt DUM-E—both the bots, really, once U is also fixed and running smoothly again—will be eager to help and to be around Tony.

While Tony is opening panels on DUM-E, cannibalizing spare parts for U and tuning up his working bot at the same time, Rhodey quietly opens Tony’s private server and does some work of his own. There are dozens of open projects relating to the former Avengers, both living and dead, that bring a bad taste into Rhodey’s mouth just to look at them. Tony doesn’t need the reminders of the people who betrayed him—and all the work he put into keeping their ungrateful asses happy, even when they acted like just seeing him was a chore—or the loyal teammates who are now dead. Rhodey trashes any open projects for Rogers, Barton, Romanoff, Maximoff, Wilson, and Vision, plus the smaller files he had on things for Pepper. There are backups somewhere, he knows, and if Tony really wants to go looking, he’ll find them, but they won’t be right there in his face when he goes to open up new files.

He keeps anything related to the Iron Man or War Machine suits, the unmarked personal project files that could be for anyone, and everything Tony has on the Parker kid. It’s entirely possible the kid is dead, but… it’s also possible he’s not. If he is still alive, even if the invasion terrified him into never wanting to take up any kind of superhero work again, Tony will be adamant about helping him out any way he can.

When they finally leave the lab that night—after a moderately long battle in which Tony had to convince DUM-E to stay in the rigged-up charging station Tony had made for him instead of spending the night trying to put more of U’s parts back together or following Tony around the Tower—Tony slumps a bit with the sort of satisfied weariness that Rhodey’s actually happy to see. It’s so much better than the overwhelmed exhaustion that Tony has often been working himself into over the time since his resurrection.

They eat dinner on the couch, idly flipping through news channels to try to keep up a little more with what’s going on in the outside world. Thankfully, it’s mostly good news on the reconstruction efforts and the rebuilding of society, rather than disasters and death tolls. The nebulous “government” that has been in the works since shortly after the invasion is starting to solidify more into something that’s strong enough to split into departments and focus in different areas. While there’s no doubt it will be riddled with issues once they’re given time to appear, at least there’s something in place.

Tony sets his plate down and slumps over to lean his head on Rhodey’s shoulder. “Thank you,” he whispers. Rhodey’s not sure what exactly it’s about; he saw Tony give him a look when he opened up his project files earlier that told him Tony knew exactly what he did and was, if anything, grateful for it, but he could also be thanking him for encouraging him to go to the lab in the first place, or for dinner, or any number of things. Rhodey just puts an arm around him, accepting whatever the thanks is for.

Tony pulls out of his hold, though, to sit up and face him, and Rhodey’s a little taken aback by the intensity in his gaze. “Thank you,” Tony repeats, “for sticking by me through… everything. All of this. It’s… I hadn’t realized how much I was missing from—from myself, before today. I wasn’t really me, was I?”

“You’ve always been yourself,” Rhodey says, then shakes his head at Tony’s doubtful look. “I knew
it was still you back on the day Thanos died, and you still would have been the same person even if you never went back to the lab again. Inventing and engineering and tech aren’t what make you yourself, Tony.”

“But it helps.”

Rhodey can’t disagree with the earnest look on Tony’s face. “…Yeah. It helps.” He pauses, looking at Tony and wondering if it’s the right time to bring it up. “I saw you smile today.”

The corner of Tony’s mouth quirks up at that, for just a second. “I know. I… I can’t say I didn’t know it was the first time since I—died, but I guess I hadn’t realized, I don’t know, how much I was missing.”

“Like something to be happy about?” Rhodey asks, but Tony shakes his head.

“It wasn’t quite that. I… still don’t know if I know what happiness feels like. It’s a pretty distant memory. But being back there, remembering what I can do, it was something like… nostalgia?” Tony grimaces. “That’s not the right word. But I know it was good.”

“Good.” Rhodey leans back into the couch and Tony does the same, scooting closer to him. “Keep that up and don’t let it go. Even if it doesn’t make you happy quite yet, if it’s good, you hold onto it.”

Tony grabs his hand at that and Rhodey, giant sap that he apparently is, has to hold his breath for a few seconds to force himself not to tear up. Tony laces their fingers together and leans into his shoulder again. “I will.”

Chapter End Notes

I know some people like to write U and Butterfingers as separate bots instead of just two nicknames for the same one, but I’m pretty sure that in the actual movies, there’s only two of them, so that’s what I went with here.
Sorry it’s been so long, everyone, my last few weeks have been 13 hour shifts, after which I’m usually too tired to do much but eat a bit, go to sleep, and then go back to the hospital. Been loving labor and delivery, though. Rotations are tiring as hell but neat and totally worth it. My writing opportunities are dwindling, particularly as I reach the end of this rotation and have to study for the shelf exam, but at the end of this month I start psychiatry and should have a little more free time, so I really hope I won’t be going a month between updates anymore.

This is a somewhat short chapter, but important for Tony and Rhodey :)

Stark Industries is taking off again, and occasionally Rhodey thinks to himself that it’s a good thing neither he nor Tony have any greedy, malicious intentions, because they could easily take over the world. Now that Tony is back to what he does best, the company is prospering and spreading and becoming incredibly powerful, with so many people dependent on and grateful to them. Not to mention Tony’s status among the people; most of the population would do anything he asked them without question, and sometimes that kind of influence is a little frightening.

Not that they’re doing it for that. Like with most things since becoming Iron Man—and even some before; contrary to what his reputation suggested, Tony was never completely selfish or greedy—Tony is doing it for the good of the world. Good intentions haven’t stopped him from gaining wealth or power, though. While he initially took a significant hit to his own funds and the pockets of the company by paying his employees so much and taking care of their needs and their families in order to get them back to work, even when they’re sending a good fourth of their products out for free now and selling the rest just barely above cost, they’re back to rapidly hiking up the company’s profits.

And while that’s incredible, and he’s immeasurably grateful for the opportunity to help so many people, on a personal level Rhodey doesn’t really care about any of that. What he’s really happy about is just the fact that Tony’s back to inventing, no matter what it is he makes. Because Tony is more at home in the lab than anywhere else, more relaxed, more like himself.

Even with the destruction of the invasion weighing heavy on them, and the faraway but still very present threat of more alien interference or attacks, there’s something rejuvenating about being in the lab, and the life in Tony when they’re there. For the first time in years, Tony’s creating just for the sake of doing so, without the guilt of past mistakes or the anxious drive of PTSD hanging over him.

Tony got U working again within two days, and both the bots keep them company in the lab on a regular basis now. It’s familiar and bittersweet at the same time, mostly because of the absence of another AI. JARVIS’s death had hit Tony so hard that Rhodey had been afraid he’d lost something of himself permanently, but then FRIDAY started really growing into herself and Tony seemed like he was moving on and coming to love her like the person she was. And now she’s gone too, and Rhodey’s honestly not sure what it’s done to Tony.

They’ve talked about it just once, and Rhodey considers himself lucky that he even got that far. He hadn’t honestly expected Tony to be willing to talk about his AIs at all, but he had. The conversation was short and unhappy, just Tony confirming what Rhodey already suspected: that FRIDAY had
destroyed her own code when Tony died and the invasion began, and though there were backups of her base code, like JARVIS, by the time she died she’d grown far beyond the basics Tony had laid down. Like with JARVIS, reactivating a blank, emotionless version of the AI without any of the personality or memories or experiences would probably be more painful than the loss itself.

Rhodey wasn’t sure, by the tone of the conversation, whether Tony was open to the idea of creating another new AI. He has multiple different basic codes around, Rhodey knows, and could activate any of them any time, he’s pretty sure. But it wouldn’t be a replacement for FRIDAY (or JARVIS). A new AI requires a lot of care and nurturing to grow into even a fraction of the independence and personality that the others had had before they’d died. It’s a long process of learning, one that can’t be pushed or cheated.

So for now, they work in the lab with just the two of them and the bots. Tony’s opened up all the labs on the lower levels for R&D people, and they go down to visit and consult and compare notes often, but they both prefer to work on their own, away from the chaotic environment the other SI employees create. Particularly since some of the things they’re working on are not really for SI.

They’re just outlines right now, but Tony and Rhodey both have been sketching out ideas for large-scale defense systems, scanning technology to detect incoming intruders, and things of the like. It’s not something they’ve shared with anyone else yet, but sooner or later, they both know the new government will come to them, wondering about planetary defense. They’ve already got an increasingly large contingent of people clamoring for Iron Man to return, and Tony has that, his history with weapons design and the Avengers, and now his status as the powerful being who defeated Thanos, all of which are encouraging people to see him as the answer to future defense of the Earth.

Rhodey has started to wonder, along that same vein, about what he’ll say when they inevitably recreate the military and ask him back. War Machine, though they understood that he really belonged to and would always stick with Tony, was technically a military asset, and Rhodey’s entire adult career and life was spent with the Air Force. Now that the military has been decimated, he considers himself lucky that he has other good skills and can help Tony out with SI business, but it’s become more than that. He likes engineering, always has, and the freedom to design that he gets when working with Tony now is something he’d missed a bit in the military structure. Plus, he’s really building himself a role here. He wouldn’t abandon the responsibilities he’s taken on at SI now.

Yet even over time, when he could slowly transition out of SI and back into the career he’d always thought he’d carry into true retirement, he’s no longer sure what he’d say if they asked him back. Yes, it was a large part of his life, but the invasion has had a way of separating everything into then and now, and his history with the Air Force feels a lot like then. It’s in the past and as much as he enjoyed it, he’s not sure he really wants it back in the future.

The entire thing might be a moot point anyway. Even with all the rules and basic structure still in place, with pretty much every active member dead, it’s going to take a hell of a long time for any real military structure to be built up again. Rhodey’s already on the far side of 45. By the time the military is restructured and thinking about asking him back, he might be at or well past retirement age.

So thoughts about the Air Force and his old life stay to the background, and he focuses in on SI work. Though he isn’t churning out revolutionary new ideas quite like Tony, he still makes a valuable contribution. And Tony can always use a sounding board, and be one for Rhodey. Bouncing ideas off each other or even just having someone to talk to—though Tony can use the bots, or honestly a wall, for that just as well as Rhodey when he’s really deep into an engineering trance—helps both of them. Rhodey finds himself remembering just how good they are together, and wondering why he let them drift apart so much over the years. Back at MIT, cramped together in the
same dorm room with a dozen active, probably dangerous, half-crazed projects at any one time and the idiotic bravery of youth, they’d blasted their way—sometimes literally—into plenty of awards, nominations, job offers, and a hell of a lot of trouble.

But then Rhodey went to focus on his military career, and willingly settled his wild imagination for the discipline, relative safety, and personal success of that structure. He used his technical skills as a pilot, but not quite to the extent that he had in college, and even when he became liaison to SI, he’d felt it was his duty to corral Tony more than encourage him. Not that some of the crazier tendencies weren’t still there; he still remembers the rush he’d felt watching Tony’s “accidental” battle with two fighter jets, remembers getting drunk on Tony’s private jet on the way to Afghanistan, remembers being willing to throw his entire career down the drain for one more chance to go out into the desert and look for the friend he’d blamed himself for losing.

War Machine was a great opportunity to let a little of that out, but he still didn’t work all that much with Tony directly. They fought together sometimes, and he occasionally went by to tinker with the suit alongside his best friend, but those times were few and far between, especially once the Avengers came into the picture. Tony was off superheroing and Rhodey was busy constantly trying to keep the delicate balance between reminding the Air Force that his suit was a great asset and keeping them from tearing it apart and trying to reverse engineer it. He could kick himself a hundred times for not ever realizing just how miserable Tony was most of that time with the Avengers, but by now he’s accepted that it won’t do anyone any good. It’s all in the past, and now he’s here, working closely with Tony again. He wouldn’t call the invasion “worth it” by any stretch, but at least some good came out of it.

They’re two weeks into regular lab work when Tony turns to him one day and awkwardly clears his throat, and Rhodey knows instantly from the look on his face that this is something big and important. Tony looks down, picks at one of his nails nervously, then taps out a rhythm on the screen next to him and brings up a hologram of a project Rhodey’s never seen before.

Rhodey thinks initially that it’s another defense project, but at first glance it doesn’t look anything like the others he’s seen. That, and it looks practically finished already, the projection detailed and pages of specs available to pull up next to it. He doesn’t know why Tony would hide a project. But as he looks it over, he starts to understand what he’s seeing.

Tony bites his lip and won’t quite make eye contact. “I’ve been working on them between other projects,” he says quietly, carefully.

He can’t know that the blank look on Rhodey’s face isn’t shock over the project itself, but the paralysis of a hundred thoughts racing through Rhodey’s head at once. A dozen things he needs to say and can’t say and he’d really thought this would happen on his own terms, but he supposes this is what he gets for waiting so long.

What Tony’s planned out is an exoskeleton, bionic legs of a sort, obviously meant for Rhodey. To get him walking again. Rhodey’s throat is a little tight as he swallows, but he’s been silent for too long, letting Tony’s nervousness build up, and Tony is talking again before he can open his mouth.

“I know you get around fine and this probably isn’t the most important thing in the world but you got hurt helping me and it isn’t fair to you and you should really be able to walk again, but I didn’t tell you I was working on it because you’d try to talk me out of it and I—”

“Tony.” The rapid words cease as soon as the one word comes out and Tony’s head snaps up to look at Rhodey, eyes wide and uncertain.

“I’m sorry,” Tony says, slower this time and practically a whisper, “I wasn’t trying to… keep
And Rhodey’s heart aches at that, because this isn’t something Tony would have said a decade ago. This is an insecurity that years of betrayals and berating and shitty teammates with shittier attitudes have beat into him, apparently hard enough that it survived his death and resurrection. And Rhodey realizes with clarity that he needs to tell the truth right now, or risk reinforcing that idea in Tony’s mind.

“Tony, look at me,” Rhodey says, even though Tony is already staring at his shoulder. Tony’s eyes come up to his face, and Rhodey tries hard to look calm, seeing how clearly Tony is expecting to be yelled at. “I wouldn’t have told you not to do it. This… this is amazing, and I wouldn’t say no to the help,” Rhodey tells him, eyes landing on the hologram again for a second. The detail, the very idea, it’s incredible.

But that’s not the point he needs to make here, and his gaze goes back to Tony. “There’s nothing wrong with you hiding this, Tony. You’re allowed to have secrets.”

He knows Tony won’t believe that for a while. He was treated too badly, treated himself too badly, after Ultron. He spent years being told, and then convincing himself without having to be told, that working on something privately would lead to nothing but disaster and death and heartbreak. But once again, Rhodey doesn’t linger on the point, because he has something more important to focus on. The time has come. The time came ages ago, if he’s honest with himself, but he was putting it off because of his own fears and insecurities and stupidity.

“And I have something to tell you, too. This is… there’s something you need to know before you work on this any more.” Rhodey tries to say it plainly, calmly, but he knows his heart is racing. When Tony just gives him a confused look, he takes a deep breath.

“I’ve been…” Rhodey starts, then shakes his head, going back to the beginning. “A while ago, after we got back to the Tower, I started… feeling something in my legs. Not much,” he clarifies hurriedly when he sees the look on Tony’s face, “pins and needles at best, and not often. But I went to the hospital a couple times, while you were busy, and they did some tests.”

Rhodey pauses, but Tony doesn’t say anything, just watches him expectantly. His expression is impossible to read. “They told me that it looked like my nerves were being rebuilt, or something, and… and not in a normal way. They had some theories about radiation and stuff from the invasion, but…”

“It’s me,” Tony says, and Rhodey knows in that instant, though he’d already suspected it, that Tony hasn’t been doing it consciously. The stunned look on his face is enough to confirm that theory.

“That’s what I assumed. It must have something to do with being around you so much. I feel my best when I wake up every morning, and I used to get achy if I spent hours in meetings and stuff alone. It’s better now, everything is. I haven’t been back to the hospital since, but I’ve been feeling a little more practically every day. Lately I can feel pressure, just a bit, almost all the time. And, just a couple days ago…”

He trails off, but bends down to pull off one of his shoes. He concentrates, hoping what’s happened twice in the last few days will happen again, and grins when he manages to move his big toe. Not much at all, but just enough to see through his sock, enough to be sure that it’s a purposeful movement.

He looks back up and Tony is gazing down at his feet with surprise and something like wonder. There’s a hint of a smile on his face, which warms Rhodey’s heart, but then it slides away and Tony
looks back up to Rhodey, mouth pulling down into a frown.

“Why… didn’t you tell me earlier?”

It’s a question Rhodey’s been dreading, but he resolves to just tell the truth and trust that Tony won’t hate him for it. “I wasn’t sure, not for a while, even with what the doctors said. If this turned out to be nothing, I didn’t want to… get your hopes up. Or my own,” he adds quietly, which softens Tony’s look.

“And I didn’t want to burden you with this. With whatever it is. When it first started you were still working out your powers, you still are, and adding this on, I was afraid of what you’d think about it, since you aren’t doing it on purpose.”

Tony just looks at him for a few long seconds, and there’s something uncomfortable in his body language. “I could have handled it myself. I’d have liked to know.”

And all at once Rhodey’s heart is twisting with guilt, because he understands the parallel, sees what he hadn’t before, what might have persuaded him to tell Tony the truth a lot sooner. “Tony, I—I’m sorry. I wasn’t trying to keep it from you because of you. I did it because I wasn’t sure what it meant for me, and I wanted to figure that out so I could be here for you when you were working through it. But that’s not an excuse. You’re right, you can handle yourself, and I shouldn’t have tried to make that judgment for you. I’m not… trying to control you.” His throat tightens on his last thought, he wonders if he should say it out loud, and then decides to go the hell ahead. “I wasn’t trying to be Rogers.”

Tony deflates at that, sighs and wraps his arms around himself. “You’re not. I know why you did it. And it had more to do with you than me. It was your secret to keep.” Not like the one Rogers kept from me. Tony doesn’t need to say it.

Rhodey decides not to mention anything about his fears regarding other people and their potential reactions to Tony’s apparent healing abilities. If Tony isn’t going to bring it up himself, Rhodey doesn’t want to put that burden on him right now. But there is one more important thing.

“I also… didn’t want you pushing yourself. I know,” he says, holding up a hand as Tony throws him a slightly resentful look, “I’m not your damn mother. But come on, Tony, I know you. You’re already up all day working on SI projects and defense projects and you probably sacrificed a few more hours of sleep you could have used just to design this,” he gestures to the hologram of the exoskeleton. “I don’t need you hurting yourself trying to heal me faster.”

Tony taps his fingers against his arms where they’re resting. “I wouldn’t.” At Rhodey’s disbelieving look, he adds, “I mean, I wouldn’t… try anything on you. Not on purpose. My powers aren’t stable enough for that. I’d never risk you like that.”

“I know,” Rhodey says quickly, because he doesn’t need Tony beating himself up thinking that Rhodey believes he’d experiment with his powers on another person. “But man, promise me you’re not going to do anything different now. I know you wouldn’t try to do anything to me on purpose, but just… don’t worry about it, okay? Please?”

“Absolutely,” Tony says with a sarcastic little smile. “I’m well known for my ability to not worry about things.”

Rhodey has to just blink for a second—this is the first time he’s heard anything even approaching a joke or sarcasm from Tony since his resurrection and it seems like a hell of a step to have happened so suddenly—but then he laughs and shakes his head. “Fair point. Just… I don’t know.” He doesn’t
know how to express this thought, this fear that knowing this will change something for Tony.

Tony shrugs like he’s moved on from the subject, then narrows his eyes. “You said you think it’s proximity?”

Rhodey nods, a little hesitant, wondering if this is leading to a difficult conversation about healing other people. “Physical contact helps, at least I think so.”

Tony nods like he’s confirmed something and scoots over the last few inches to the end of his workbench until he’s as close to Rhodey’s chair as possible. He hooks one leg around the inside of Rhodey’s so that their ankles are pressed together. He leans a little to the side and Rhodey meets him in the middle until their shoulders are touching.

Rhodey has to hide a stupid grin. “A little hard to work like this, don’t you think?”

Tony sighs and leans away. “Maybe. And I’ll have to get up and move and get things, but if we’re both sitting, we should be touching.” He says it like a command and Rhodey smiles.

“It might only work when we’re sleeping, you know. Like how you’re supposed to do most of your growing when you sleep.” He glances sideways enough to see the unimpressed look on Tony’s face and has to smother another laugh. Rhodey made plenty of jokes at MIT and afterward that the reason Tony’s so short is all of the all-nighters he pulled as a teenager in college.

Secretly, he’s glad for the added proximity to Tony, even when they were already working in the same lab every day. He would never complain about more contact with Tony, even if there were no chance at all that it would accelerate his healing. Other people might think it’s weird; heck, even though he’s never had much of a personal space in regards to Tony, even he might have thought it was a little weird years ago, to want to be so close to Tony as often as possible. But now, after the invasion and everything that’s happened, to worry about something like that just seems trivial. There are too many big, important things in their life, and they’re too grateful to have each other now, to waste any time caring about old social conventions or holding back any of their positive emotions.

“You don’t know that for sure,” is all Tony says, and Rhodey knows he’s happy about the situation, too. Or as close to happy as Tony can get these days. Tony turns back to the hologram of the exoskeleton. “If you’re going to be moving on your own, then the weight compensation needs to be adjustable. There should be incremental jumps, or a system for detection that provides enough support but still pushes you enough to work the muscles. I could…” he trails off into mutters and starts notating and pulling the projection apart to add and change things.

Rhodey smiles and turns back to his own project. It’s turned out well, but he knows that was close. He hates keeping secrets, was already upset about waiting so long to tell Tony, but he hadn’t made the connection between this and what Rogers did to him. He’s lucky that Tony is so forgiving and understanding.

The strength of their friendship is definitely more than enough to overcome something like this, even if Tony hadn’t taken the news so well, but that doesn’t mean it should happen again. Rhodey can’t promise himself that he won’t ever keep a secret from Tony again—that’s just unrealistic—but not one like this. He swears it to himself.
Well, hello again. I’m alive, I swear, though surgery did its best to kill me. I suppose the one good thing that came out of it is that I’m absolutely sure now that I would never subject myself to a surgery residency. Just being a student was so fucking stressful and awful, the ridiculous outdated attitudes and the general feeling are terrible and I can’t imagine doing that for the rest of my life, the rotation actually made me go home and cry a few times.

Now that my excuses are out of the way, there are over 800 people subscribed to this story now and I’m sorry to every single one of you for taking so long to update this. I really hope none of you have given up on me. I’m hoping to write a ton over this winter break, and I know I owe you guys many chapters of this before I can work on any of my other stories. My only other obligation is a Mass Effect reverse big bang that I signed up for.

This chapter isn’t very long and I’m sorry, particularly since it’s the first one in so long, but on the positive side, the next chapter is already written and just needs to be edited tomorrow before I post it. Plus, only a few more chapters before we get to some serious plot (I know I say that a lot, but it really is getting closer)!

Apparently, the revelation about Rhodey’s legs has opened the floodgates of all kinds of serious sit-down conversations. They already spent their mornings talking about feelings and thoughts and basically having daily therapy sessions—mostly trying to help Tony improve, but Rhodey has to admit they’ve been helping him to talk about some of what he’s gone through too—but now Tony seems to have set himself on a real path with clear goals.

Rhodey’s not complaining, it’s great to see that Tony seems to be looking forward to something, and thinking of the future in more terms than just “rebuilding everything Thanos wrecked” or “learning to be a normal human again.” Tony was always a forward-thinking person, to the point of being a little manic sometimes, and the return of that focus is just another good step for Tony.

But Tony’s gone into full-on “progress” mode, it seems. Rhodey woke up the day after telling Tony about his recovery to find Tony already up and surrounded by research on nerve damage and physical therapy, and he knew right then and there that this wasn’t something he was going to dissuade Tony from spending a ton of his time on.

That was one of the first things they needed to have a real, serious conversation about. Rhodey’s pretty sure there weren’t any lingering problems or hard feelings right after the revelation, but they needed more than a two minute conversation to really figure everything out and make sure they were comfortable with it. He sat Tony down and finally confessed all of his fears and anxieties and the heartbreaking moments of hope and disappointment when he would start to feel something, only for that feeling to inevitably fade, over the last month or so. Tony told him about all of the guilt weighing him down and how Rhodey, in a wheelchair that Tony felt he’d put him in, was ignoring his own issues to help Tony recover, which just made Tony feel worse.

That was definitely something they wouldn’t get over in a week, or even a month or a year. Tony’s
always had a tendency to hoard guilt and to take on more blame for things than he should, and Rhodey’s not going to get him to quit any time soon. But they can talk it out, and he can make sure Tony understands that Rhodey absolutely doesn’t blame him for anything that happened and never will, and that’s a start.

Meanwhile, Tony has gotten Rhodey started on intense, modified physical therapy programs that he’d found for people recovering from nerve damage and long-lasting leg injuries. He quickly built a physical prototype of the braces he’d shown to Rhodey that had started the whole discussion. They still have some bugs to be worked out, but it’s pretty incredible to be able to stand up and move in them at all, and Rhodey isn’t too proud to admit he cried a little when they first went on.

He isn’t supposed to be relying on them too much, not now that they know he’s recovering, so he’s restricted to using them for a few hours a day. The assisted movement is good for blood flow and stretching the atrophied muscles in his legs, and then he takes them off and begins exercises to rebuild that muscle strength. He still spends most of his time in his wheelchair, but knowing that he can get up and out of it a few hours a day is amazing.

They did discuss the possibility of sending him back to the hospital or bringing in doctors to consult on this, but eventually agreed that there probably isn’t much the medical professionals could do. This is all new territory; Rhodey’s muscles have atrophied enough at this point that regaining function shouldn’t be medically possible, but it seems whatever healing abilities Tony has are fixing the muscles along with the nerves. The braces are a revolutionary design, one doctors wouldn’t quite know how to work with. And above all, bringing in doctors now would mean telling other people about the cause of Rhodey’s healing.

That was an important conversation to have. One Rhodey was dreading a bit, knowing how Tony likes to throw himself into fires for other people when given the chance, but as it turns out, Tony readily agreed with him. Whatever healing Tony’s doing for Rhodey, he’s apparently doing it entirely subconsciously. It’s not something he knows how to replicate on purpose, it’s still technically an unknown and not exactly tested, and it seems to require physical contact over a long period of time. It’s that more than anything, Rhodey thinks, that’s making Tony so easily agree with him about keeping it a secret. Tony’s still uncomfortable with anyone but Rhodey touching him at all, much less staying in contact with him for a long time. Not only is it impractical to even picture trying to heal someone else the same way as Rhodey—Tony and Rhodey sleep together every night, that’s hours in close proximity and even physical contact that he couldn’t replicate during the day with anyone else—but it would be extremely uncomfortable for Tony, and he’s reluctant to be pushed into it.

Rhodey’s still worried about it, probably always will be. No matter what they do, sooner or later people will find out about it, or figure it out. Eventually Rhodey’s going to be healed and walking again, and people are going to question how that happened. He can only hope that by then, Tony has a better understanding of his powers and his emotions, and he can give an answer that he’s firm in and stand behind it.

All of those serious conversations, as it turns out, were just a prelude to this one, though. It’s only been a few days since the whole thing started with Rhodey’s revelation about his healing, but now Tony’s sitting Rhodey down for another important talk and from the look on his face, Rhodey can tell it’s a big one.

“I… want to get back in the suit again.”

There’s a long silence. Not uncomfortable, thankfully, because Rhodey is still trying to scrape together enough coherent thoughts to say something. But Tony speaks again before he can. “Iron
Man could be a help to people, I could do something for the reconstruction efforts. I don’t even have to be in the suit all the time, I could do it remotely.’”

Rhodey nods slowly, still thinking, and Tony continues. “And, you know, people are already asking what happened to Iron Man. It would probably… bolster their confidence or something. Right?”

“Yeah, Tony, it would,” Rhodey finally says, only because Tony’s speech is getting a little faster and Rhodey’s worried he’ll start thinking Rhodey’s judging or disapproving of him.

Also because it’s true, seeing Iron Man around would probably be a huge relief for a lot of people. But Rhodey can’t help but think about all the reasons it could be a bad idea. First and foremost… “I thought all the suits were gone. I mean, except the one you left for emergencies, but… Pepper took that one.” It hurts, just a little, to mention Pepper like that, in connection with how she died, sticking with the man she’d loved and defended even after his death. She’d died thinking Tony was gone forever and that hurt.

Tony shakes his head. “The lab’s on lockdown and all the suits that were in their pods are gone or on the way by now, the protocols would have had them self-destruct, but there was at least one I was working on that’s just out in the lab. I could probably break past the lockdown, now,” he gestures with his hand to emphasize that it would be his powers allowing him to break into the lab, then adds, “besides, it’s not like I forgot how to make one. It would take some time, but I could design a new one if I can’t get hold of one.”

Rhodey can’t help but smile at that, because it’s something Tony would have said years ago, too, and that’s a good thing. It’s also good to see Tony acknowledging that his mind is just as sharp as ever, and a good reminder that Tony is Iron Man, that the suit is just something that Tony makes and will always be dependent on the man himself.

Still… “Tony, you remember a while ago, after that guy from upstate came to ask you to leave with them?” Tony tenses a little at the reminder and his eyes flick away. Rhodey tries to keep his voice gentle, nonjudgmental, as he goes on. “You told me that you didn’t want to go back to being the Tony Stark that everyone expects too much of. And you had good reasons,” he adds earnestly.

“I remember,” Tony says quietly, but he doesn’t elaborate, so Rhodey does.

“You know that after everything, defeating Thanos, saving the world, and with pretty much everyone else gone… if you get back in the suit, the expectation is going to be higher than ever that you’ll step up to protect the planet.”

Tony nods. He looks down into his lap where his hands are fiddling with a crease in his pants, a nervous gesture that’s not new since his resurrection, but that Rhodey hasn’t seen in a while. Rhodey lets the silence stretch on, knowing that Tony’s thinking things through and needs a moment to structure whatever he’s going to say.

He doesn’t really want to dissuade Tony from getting back in the suit. Maybe it’s partly a selfish desire to see more emotional progress in Tony, but Rhodey is pretty sure that being Iron Man again will be a huge step in reconnecting to Tony’s past and his feelings, and it’ll be good for Tony. It’s also something that Rhodey doesn’t think Tony can really stay away from, the same way he couldn’t stay away from engineering and inventing. He might have kept himself out of the lab for a while after the invasion, but that was out of fear and apprehension, and the time since they’ve returned has only reinforced the fact that the desire to be in the lab was still there inside Tony all along.

But Rhodey feels he has a responsibility to help Tony make the best decision for himself, even if it means abstaining from resurrecting Iron Man for now. Tony has always had a tendency to rush into
things—a tendency that his death and resurrection have dulled, but certainly not destroyed—particularly when he thinks it’s something that will help other people, and he tends to forget little details, including his own needs, in the process. If Tony’s gotten it into his head that it will be good for the people to see him as Iron Man again, Rhodey can easily see him forgetting—or just choosing to put aside—his fears about being stretched too thin. Rhodey doesn’t want to see him stressed and trying to do too much, sacrificing his personal progress or emotional achievements for the public. It’ll only hurt everyone in the end, but mostly, it’ll hurt Tony, and Rhodey doesn’t want to let that happen.

Eventually, Tony takes a deep breath, sitting up straighter, eyes coming up to meet Rhodey’s again. “I know why you’re worried. And… I am too. You’re right, people are going to expect a lot if I do it, but… you were the one that told me that I only need to go back on my own terms. I can still stand up for myself. I know what I’m capable of and what I’m willing to do. I don’t need to give them an answer regarding the entire planet yet.”

He says it with such conviction that Rhodey has no choice but to believe him, not that he had any reason not to. “And,” Tony adds cautiously, “this, at least, getting back in the suit… I feel like it’s my responsibility. Whether I can really protect the whole world or not, it’s true that right now, I’m pretty much all we’ve got. I killed Thanos, I’m physically intact, and I’ve probably got a working suit somewhere. I feel like… I ought to be out there in it.”

That sparks something protective and worried in Rhodey. He takes a moment to think about how to phrase it—Tony’s new tendency to think for a long time before talking is really rubbing off on him—mostly because he doesn’t want to insult Tony. Tony’s perfectly capable of making his own decisions and protecting himself, and though Rhodey’s protective, it would be easy to step over that line into overbearing.

“You’re right,” is what he settles on to start with. “You can do it, and I know you can stand up for yourself. I know you know your own limits. And I certainly can’t say it would be bad for anyone to see you back as Iron Man again. But it worries me when you say that it’s your responsibility to be out there, because that sounds too close to the old Tony, at least to me. The Tony that did anything and everything anyone asked him and more, because he thought it was his responsibility, and ran himself into the ground. You know it’s my responsibility to watch your back, and I don’t want you going back out there just because you feel like you’re obligated to.”

Tony holds Rhodey’s gaze through his speech, and nods when he’s done. Rhodey knows he isn’t insulted by the protectiveness. There’s another moment of comfortable silence, and Rhodey knows that Tony’s truly contemplating it, which is gratifying. He trusts that Tony can make the right decision, can examine his own motivations well enough to know if he’s doing this because he feels like he has to.

The silence doesn’t last as long this time before Tony’s nodding again. “You have every right to worry. And maybe a part of me is doing this because I feel like I need to, but I also want to. I want this.”

Rhodey spends a few seconds just looking at Tony, examining his expression. The bright eyes and the glowing marks don’t take away from the determined, slightly stubborn expression that Rhodey’s more than familiar with, and Rhodey nods, sitting back. “Okay. I trust you, you know that. If this is really what you want… then let’s do it.”
Hope

Chapter Notes

Thank you all for your messages of support! I’m happy to report that the next chapter is once again written and can be posted tomorrow night once I’ve edited it :)

Stopped in front of the doors to another lab with Tony, Rhodey can’t help but be reminded of the last time. The feeling is different this time around, though. This time, the hesitation in Tony isn’t about his emotional state and the unknowns inside. Instead, it’s the unknowns surrounding Tony’s powers and how they’re going to get inside.

Tony designed the lockdown protocol himself. When his death was confirmed, his most incredible and dangerous tech couldn’t be allowed to get out, so it had to be destroyed. Nearly everything that qualified for that was kept inside this lab, Tony’s main private workspace. The vaults where the old Iron Legion and the various iterations of the Iron Man suits were all kept have been completely sealed off and the tech inside has self-destructed by now, with some kind of chemical combination that Rhodey’s not familiar with. Any technical plans Tony ever kept for the suits were purged by FRIDAY before she self-destructed as well.

The lab itself is sealed off too, but with a little less protection than the actual vaults. That’s what Rhodey and Tony are counting on right now. Though the doors are sealed under multiple layers of protection, there shouldn’t be anything else preventing them from entering. And though that door seal, created by Tony, should be enough to keep any normal human out—and hopefully even some non-humans—Tony’s no longer any normal human. He’s more powerful now than any person the past Tony had ever imagined might be trying to break in, and his powers should allow him to break through any physical barrier.

For the moment, Tony’s standing in front of what looks like a blank stretch of wall. That was part of the lockdown protocol; once the lab was sealed off, the doors would seal over and blend in with the wall, hiding where the entry to the lab used to be. Just another way to help keep out anyone who might come poking through the Tower after Tony’s death, looking to pilfer some of his world-changing designs.

There’s a silence as Tony contemplates the area of wall hiding the sealed doorway. He tilts his head, then steps forward to run one hand over the wall slowly. Rhodey just sits back and waits, knowing there’s nothing he can do to help this process. Eventually, Tony steps back and takes a deep breath, raising his hands, and Rhodey sits up straighter in anticipation.

Tony brings his hands together, palms facing the wall. He exhales, and as he does it, he pulls his hands apart like he’s physically pushing the doors open. Rhodey keeps his eyes on the wall; nothing happens for a second, and then there’s a ripple in the wall in front of Tony’s hands. The movement is disquieting, Rhodey’s mind wanting to reject seeing such a fluid movement from something he knows should be solid.

The ripple quickly becomes a dark spot, a sort of tear in the solid wall, which rapidly expands, the walls physically pulling themselves apart with the movement of Tony’s hands. Rhodey just stares, a bit in awe—he hasn’t been with Tony as he’s been working on building reconstruction in the past few weeks, and Tony doesn’t use his powers much when they’re just sitting and relaxing at home.
Seeing how much more comfortable he is now compared to months ago, and how easy it seems for him to do something like this now, really highlights how much Tony’s improved since his resurrection.

The whole affair is very quiet; the walls pull apart noiselessly, and Tony doesn’t make a sound except for the quiet breath he lets out as he does it. He doesn’t collapse or waver when he’s done, just turns to Rhodey with a satisfied half-smile and gestures to his handiwork.

“Nice job,” Rhodey comments, feeling like he needs to say something about that casual display of incredible power—he knows, with the level of sophistication of Tony’s protocols, that that was more complicated than just pulling apart some drywall or a metal door. Nevertheless, he somehow managed to pull away only whatever was enforcing the lockdown, leaving the old glass doors in their frames. Except for the absence of an AI to open the doors for them, it could be the lab a year ago.

This lab has a backup entry just like the small one they’ve been working in. Tony puts in his credentials the old-fashioned way and the doors slide open. When they walk in, the lights automatically come on, and Rhodey feels a wave of bittersweet nostalgia at the sights that greet him. This is where he used to find Tony most of the time, usually exhausted and pushing himself too far, surrounded by four or five long-cold cups of coffee as a testament to the hours he’d pushed himself beyond what he should, but always working along with music, happier here than anywhere else Rhodey ever knew him. Usually working on either his own suit, Rhodey’s, or occasionally something for one of the other Avengers.

The worktables and boxes of tools are the same as always, the spots where the bots usually stay are untouched—the bots are both downstairs right now, in the lab Tony and Rhodey have been using for SI—but the differences are still glaring. The alcoves along the walls where Tony used to store some Iron Man suits and a few iterations of other Avengers’ equipment are sealed off behind metal plates, their contents destroyed, the thick metal barriers reminding Rhodey of coffins for the things that Tony used to pour his heart and soul into. There’s a layer of dust settled on the normally pristine surfaces that’s dulling their usual shine, adding to the depressing feel of the place. There are little pieces of tech and tools scattered on the floors where they were knocked from the tables during the battles or the explosion of the Tower.

Still, Tony strides forward with confidence, weaving around the tables, kicking a few things out of the way to make room for Rhodey to wheel behind him. As they round a half-wall, Tony makes a triumphant sound. Rhodey pulls his chair up beside him and sees what he’s found: a nearly complete Iron Man suit, standing on its own, with a still-glowing reactor in its chest and its left arm disassembled and sitting on the table next to it.

“That saves some time,” Rhodey says, and when he looks up he spots a smile on Tony’s face, which warms him to his core. Tony can smile now, and he does, but it’s still rare, and it’s always a treat for Rhodey to see it.

“I was working on it before…” Tony hesitates, then finishes, “before everything went down in Germany. Some more remote features, a few upgrades, but it isn’t very different from the last one.” The one that was destroyed in Siberia. Rhodey remembers it, though he wishes he couldn’t—the burn marks, scratches, and dents all along every part of it, each one a testament to a blow to the man inside. The front was torn open by Vision when he removed Tony’s body, but when he’d brought the remains of the armor to Rhodey to ask what should be done with it, Rhodey could still see the horrible gash across the chest and the mangled remains of the reactor where Rogers’s shield had dug in. Where the killing blow had been dealt.
And bile had risen in his throat as he realized that while the shield, and the strength of the traitorous man behind it, had been the thing to dent the armor, the metal sitting in front of Rhodey at that moment was the thing that had actually killed Tony, pressed against his ribs until bones inevitably gave way to titanium, crushed his chest until there was no room for it to expand, pressed on him, unforgiving, until he gasped in his last breath. Through the sudden revulsion at the sight of it, Rhodey could barely draw in the breath necessary to tell Vision to get rid of it, incinerate it, melt it down and get its remains out of his sight.

It takes a moment for Rhodey to pull himself out of that memory. His heart is pounding just thinking about it, and he’s not sure if the sight of this intact suit is adding to his upset. A small, irrational part of him is panicking at the thought of Tony getting into this suit, considering what happened to him the last time. Which he knows is ridiculous, but that small part of him is the same part that wouldn’t fully accept Tony’s death, and it turned out to be right.

Maybe a bit of it is some panic regarding his own suit too. Rhodey’s last few interactions with any of these suits didn’t end too well, and hell, this might be another of those things he’s been repressing that he’ll eventually need to work on. Even the faraway idea that someday, if this healing of his legs continues, he’ll be able to get back in the War Machine suit again—the thought sends a spike of fear through him, which irritates him.

He’s dealt incredibly well with the injury, the invasion, and everything going on with Tony. He was trained to be able to deal with the worst possible situations, he’s seen missions go wrong before, he’s even had injuries before. None like this, but still, he knew the risks and he accepted the consequences. Even though he knows it doesn’t work like that, he can’t help but wish that all that conscious good work could stop his primal subconscious from freaking out. But he knows that all the logic in the world can’t soothe the instinctual fear at the thought of something that nearly killed him and did kill his best friend.

He looks to Tony both to calm himself and to gauge whether his little moment of panic was noticed, but evidently it wasn’t. Tony is staring at the suit, a little glassy-eyed himself, possibly thinking of some of the same things. That possibility is what brings Rhodey’s worry—his mother-hen instincts, a rueful part of him thinks in Tony’s voice—to the forefront, overtaking his own personal feelings about the moment and instead focusing on Tony. “You okay?” he says softly, not wanting to startle Tony but also not wanting to leave him to wallow in memories of the day he died, if that’s what he’s doing.

Tony blinks and looks over at him. His expression is hard to decipher, but there’s no sign of outright fear or panic. It seems to be more like sadness, grief, and it’s only when he recognizes the expression that Rhodey realizes how little he’s seen of it lately. Tony’s baseline level of grief when he was resurrected has since improved to something close to neutral; it’s just happened so slowly that Rhodey hadn’t really noticed the change. Now, it’s almost disconcerting to see that sadness back again, something he thought he’d gotten used to.

“What… remembering,” Tony says, and then sighs.

Rhodey hesitates before elaborating, “Siberia?”

Tony shakes his head. “No, not that. Just… when I was building this. Things were already falling apart, but I just… I used to think we could all do so much more. That we could be better, maybe, if I just… found the right balance, worked hard enough, put enough upgrades in the suit. When I was making this one, I just kept thinking of contingency plans. It didn’t used to be like that.”

The words make Rhodey’s heart ache for everything Tony’s lost, even before his death. He used to have such faith in the Avengers, and then that was broken down. By the others, by experience,
sometimes by Tony himself. It seems, now, like they were doomed from the start, but Rhodey knows that it took time for that optimism to fade. Hearing it directly from Tony is painful.

“It doesn’t have to be like that again,” Rhodey says. “Maybe it’s the same suit, but everything else is so different, you’re practically starting with a blank slate here. You can do whatever you want with this, Tony.”

Tony nods. “I know. I think it’s a given that it’ll be different this time.”

Before Rhodey can decide whether that’s snark or not, Tony steps forward, reaching for the suit. There’s no more AI running the interface, and Rhodey’s not sure if the implants Tony used to have are still there after the changes to his body, so the suit doesn’t open when he approaches it. Rhodey’s not sure how Tony’s planning to open it up.

But Tony reaches out and puts his hand over the reactor in the chest, and something changes. There’s a slight whine as the suit powers up, the faceplate glowing as it apparently charges just from the contact with Tony. “Woah,” is all Rhodey can say. “Did you mean to do that?”

Tony frowns. “Sort of. I… thought maybe I could activate it with my powers. This is… weird.” He tilts his head to one side, then the other, like he’s listening to something only he can hear. Rhodey can only see the back of his head and the arm that’s outstretched, but unless he’s imagining it, Tony’s suddenly glowing a little brighter.

Rhodey sits forward, concerned. “What’s happening?”

There’s no answer, but just as Rhodey puts his hands on his chair to move forward, Tony makes a sound he can’t decipher. “Wow. It’s like I can… integrate with the system, almost,” he says. Rhodey doesn’t relax, not sure if this is a good thing or not. Tony mumbles a few things that Rhodey can’t catch, then abruptly stiffens, muscles locking.

Rhodey opens his mouth to ask what’s wrong, then ends up shouting in alarm when Tony drops. The suit, still powered up, whirs and opens up, ready to receive its pilot, but Tony loses contact with it as he goes down, ending up in a heap on the floor between Rhodey and the suit.

Rhodey’s practically ready to throw himself out of his chair to make sure Tony’s okay, despite the past experience with the situation telling him that Tony’s probably fine, but this isn’t like the last couple times. Tony’s not out completely—he stirs almost immediately, muttering a slightly slurred “Rhodey?” and making a halfhearted effort to push himself up into a sitting position.

This, Rhodey can help with. He leans forward to get a grip under Tony’s uncoordinated arms and helps pull him up to sit down at Rhodey’s feet, leaning against his legs. They’ve been in this position before, but the familiarity does little to calm Rhodey’s racing heart. He’ll never be okay with seeing Tony suddenly drop like that.

He gives Tony a moment to compose himself and even out his strained breathing. When Tony reaches up and over his shoulder to grasp Rhodey’s hand, Rhodey considers him recovered enough to answer the obvious question. “What happened?” Wondering, clearly, if Tony suddenly regained some new emotional capability.

“Just… a lot of memories,” Tony says, and there’s an odd tone in his voice. When Rhodey makes a questioning noise, Tony pushes himself to stand, turning to face Rhodey, and Rhodey’s heart gives a happy lurch when he sees the broad smile blossoming on Tony’s face.

“I remembered how it used to be,” Tony explains, and Rhodey understands that he’s referring to
their conversation from just a few minutes ago. Apt, he thinks, that opening up the suit would have helped him remember exactly the things he was just talking about having forgotten. “Not that I ever forgot, exactly, but I remember the feeling the first time I flew. What it used to be like to work on the suit. It was always so exciting, all the possibilities, coming up with ideas and then putting them into a real, physical thing. It was true creation.”

The words might be a little flowery and philosophical, but sure enough, there’s a sparkle in Tony’s eyes that Rhodey remembers from the early days, when Tony could go on for hours about what he was going to do with the suit, and the way he’d look when he emerged from the lab after a day-long binge of working on it or building a new one. True creation, indeed. Over time, that excitement had given way to dread and hurt, to fears and the memory of mistakes, and it had worn Tony down. But in the beginning, it was all about the thrill of creation, of something new. The look in Tony’s eyes right now, the remembered feelings he’s regained… this is the Tony that wrecked an F-22 and laughed about it.

Rhodey couldn’t be happier to see its return.

“I built it to fix my mistakes, you know,” Tony says, and though the smile fades, a ghost of it remains in the lightness in Tony’s features. Rhodey knows this, so he just nods, waiting for him to continue. “In the beginning, it was about going to find my weapons, figure out where I’d gone so wrong and protect the people I put in danger. And that was always on my mind, but when I was actually building it, testing it… I nearly forgot. And when I flew that first time, I think I did forget, just for a minute. Forgot all my responsibilities, all my mistakes. For a minute, nothing mattered but that new feeling, that joy.”

“Is that what you’re feeling now? Joy?” Rhodey asks tentatively.

The shake of Tony’s head is understanding and apologetic. “I don’t think I’m there yet. I still don’t remember… happy. Not enough to feel it. But… the suit, it’s good. I think it’s going to be good for me. If nothing else, it’s reminding me why I wanted to be Iron Man in the first place.”

Tony glances back at the suit, standing open, waiting for him. “People always saw it as a weapon. They called it one, the government, the Avengers, the media, everyone. But it was never about that, not for me. It has weapons, sure. They’re necessary parts of it, but… that’s not the whole thing. It’s not what the suit is about. It’s about protecting other people, and showing that I’m there and I’m going to be held accountable for what I do, that I won’t forget the impact I make on people’s lives.”

“All of your own values, in other words,” Rhodey says with a fond smile.

Tony shrugs. “I guess. I am Iron Man, I meant it every time I’ve said it. The suit was never all of Iron Man. It’s a pure creative extension of myself. And having it back… it’s unlocking a lot of potential, I think. This is going to be good for me.”

Tony smiles one more time. “I might not feel joy yet, but what just happened… I think what it brought back might have been something like hope. And for the first time… I feel like I might actually be happy again someday.”
As promised, here’s another chapter in a day! Sadly the next chapter won’t be up tomorrow, I have to spend some time working on my mom’s Christmas present, which is a 20+ hour project that I’ve been pretty much neglecting. I’m very excited to write the next one though (another character will be coming in, might be obvious by the end of this one) and it’ll be soon!

Time is strange.

It’s been nearly three weeks since Rhodey revealed his healing to Tony. Just about the same amount of time he spent in the camp during the invasion, but this has gone by both slower and so much faster. Months have passed now since Tony’s resurrection, and it’s almost hard to believe sometimes.

Everything is changing, and settling. Rhodey has a routine of regular leg exercises now, building up strength naturally in the muscles he can just barely control. It’s a vast improvement over before, even over a few weeks ago, but it’s still difficult. He’s just a human, after all, and under a lot of stress. There are days he’s angry, frustrated with his slow progress, sulking and trying—sometimes failing—to hide it from Tony.

Tony’s been a godsend through it all. Rhodey gets a squirming, uncomfortable feeling in his gut whenever he finds himself thinking gratefully about how the changes to Tony have made him more patient, but it’s true. Not that the old Tony wouldn’t have done everything he could to help Rhodey recover through this, but he would have been running himself into the ground, hiding his guilt and trying to come up with tech that could force the recovery to go faster. Toss in Tony’s own personality flaws—there were plenty of them—and they’d have clashed, butted heads, probably hurt each other.

Instead, Tony is quietly supportive, never once complaining about any of Rhodey’s bad days, never striking back when Rhodey snaps at him. Which, of course, always makes Rhodey feel terrible; not that he wouldn’t have anyway for taking out his frustrations on Tony, who’s just trying to help, but the old Tony would likely have responded in kind, and they’d have gotten into an argument, then probably spent a while avoiding each other and cooling down.

Now, Tony just takes whatever Rhodey throws at him calmly, and Rhodey immediately feels terrible and apologizes, and Tony always forgives him, every time. It’s mature and simple and Rhodey hates himself a little for being grateful for it, because it’s not some amazing emotional development for the both of them, it’s because of Tony’s emotional deficit. Sure, Tony’s old tendency to lash out when he was hurt or upset wasn’t the best, but it was Tony and Rhodey feels like he shouldn’t be happy for its absence.

Still, those bad days are few and far between. Rhodey’s been doing remarkably well and he knows it; they both have. They can both sit down and talk about their feelings without it becoming awkward, and Rhodey’s progressing physically. He can just barely manage to stand now, with a lot of support. He can’t even think about trying to take a step yet, but considering that just a month ago standing was out of the question, he’s pretty damn overjoyed with this.
Tony spent the first day after going back into his lab taking apart and reworking the Iron Man suit that he’d found there. He’s able to “integrate” with the tech to an extent—at least that’s how he describes it—and control the suit from the outside the same way he could when there was an AI inside it. Tony’s always done nearly everything when it comes to actually piloting the suit, contrary to the beliefs of some of his former teammates, but FRIDAY, and JARVIS before her, used to be the ones to follow him if he stepped out, to open the suit up when he wanted to get inside it, and to control some of the auxiliary functions. Now, apparently, Tony can do most of that with just a thought. It doesn’t exactly freak Rhodey out—Tony was probably damn close to being able to do that with technology anyway—but it’s certainly something new. But Tony seems perfectly comfortable with it, so Rhodey is too.

After tinkering with it for a day, Tony took the suit out for a short test flight. Any vague, unformed fears Rhodey had had about whether Tony would be able to handle all the input or pilot the suit the way he used to were immediately dispelled. Tony’s flight, the way he moved in the suit, everything was smoother than Rhodey’s ever seen it. Completely natural, and when he landed and emerged from the suit, he had another real smile on his face.

He spent another day messing with some of the headsets that will allow him to control the armor remotely. He’d confessed to Rhody that while it’s amazing to be back in the suit again, he’d rather be physically present at SI most of the time, and mostly just piloting the suit remotely for things like building reconstruction. He also confessed that he’d like to stretch his new abilities a bit more, see how much control he can really have over the suit remotely without the aid of tech. With the tech as a backup ensuring that he’s not endangering anyone, neither of them could think of a reason not to. Of course, he’d spend some of his time physically present at remote sites, connecting with people and taking a direct role in the action.

Once he was sure he was comfortable piloting the suit, Tony immediately went to the local news to announce his intention to help out with the reconstruction. He and Rhodey had agreed that that was the best thing to do; after all, people were sure to notice Iron Man’s return the moment the suit took to the skies. Tony wanted to be transparent about what he could, letting the public know what he was doing and reassuring them that he was improving.

Even now, there are still displaced people, though the majority are due to property damage rather than inability to get home, with the few exceptions mainly being people from other countries. There’s a rare plane back in the air now, but it’s mostly supply delivery and as far as Rhodey’s aware, there haven’t been any cross-continental trips yet. With most people back home—whether their original homes or somewhere new and semi-permanent—the news stations have mostly moved on to organizational efforts, new government, and occasionally the kinds of things they used to report on in between. Inane everyday things, stories from random citizens, weather. The kinds of things that will bring a little bit of much-needed normalcy to people whose spirits have been beaten down by the constant tide of bad news, destruction, and the unending stress of rebuilding.

Predictably, as soon as Tony went to the news to announce that he was coming back as Iron Man, he was barraged with requests for help, interview requests, invitations to events and places, and question after question about himself, Thanos, his new appearance and powers, his plans for the future, even Rhodey. The mountain of requests and invitations from various outside sources came later, once Tony’s information had actually gone onto the news; the immediate questions and requests for further interviews came from the people right at the station where he’d gone to make this announcement. Thankfully, they’d decided beforehand that simply going there unannounced and letting the journalists know what to tell people would probably be a better idea than trying to call some sort of press conference.

Of course, he was asked about his future plans, and what Iron Man’s return would mean for the
future of superheroes and the planet. Rhodey, who didn’t go along, got all of this information secondhand from Tony later, but he trusts Tony’s recollection and confidence that he handled their questions with the usual amount of suave maneuvering. Avoiding giving a real answer with some vague words and deflection, and doing it so skillfully that those asking didn’t even realize what was done; that, Tony was taught from a young age. Tony was certainly right a while ago, when he told Rhodey that he’s still perfectly capable of handling the media.

And thankfully, the barebones version of media they have now is doing little more than just reporting straight facts and statements. If an announcement like this had been made before the invasion, there would be a thousand and one people picking apart Tony’s every word, every motion, trying to find hidden meanings in all of it. They’d obsess over the fact that he chose not to appear on camera to make his announcement. They’d speculate about everything and come up with a hundred different theories.

Instead, they simply reported exactly what Tony told them, which was that Iron Man was going be back out again, either with Tony inside, working alongside, or remotely piloting it. Requests began pouring in for his help immediately, and Rhodey quickly got Tony to agree to recruit a few willing SI people to take over creating some form of organization for requests for his time, reading each and deciding where he’d be best suited to go.

They set up some sort of a system and Tony started working around the city, and even outside of it, quickly. Naturally, along with his return as Iron Man—and in conjunction with the broad return of functioning internet for most people—he quickly became a major focus of the public. Crowds gather where he goes out to work a few times a week, and pictures and videos of him start circulating immediately.

Rhodey occasionally goes through some of the things online, curious, and smiles at what he sees. Iron Man cutting rubble into chunks with his repulsors; the suit on one end of a large steel girder, holding it up while Tony himself stands on the other end, lifting it with his powers; Tony in street clothes dusted with dirt and rubble, sitting with a construction crew and eating lunch. All things that will not only inspire the public, but give humanity to Tony’s image.

People are speculating, of course, over the internet—people will be people, after all. There are a dozen different working theories about Tony’s powers and what’s going on behind closed doors in the Tower. But now that Tony’s baseline expression has pretty much reverted to neutral, he no longer passes out after pushing himself to work too hard, and he smiles when it’s appropriate, Rhodey doesn’t have much cause to worry that people will find out about what’s going on with his emotions. There’s still an air of awe to everything Rhodey sees about him online and in photos, stopping people from questioning so much. It will fade with time, but for now it’s a good thing, helping to buffer any suspicions anyone might have about Tony while giving him a chance to recover further.

There are old photos out there, too, ones that people took shortly after the end of the invasion. These are fewer, and thankfully the scale of the destruction and what had just happened to Tony seems to be enough to excuse the terrible, grief-stricken expression he always wore back then. God, Rhodey hadn’t even remembered how bad it was, he’d become so used to it, but now that it’s faded, seeing it in photographic evidence makes him want to thank a deity he doesn’t believe in that Tony could ever recover from that. How he managed to keep going when he was unable to feel anything but grief is beyond Rhodey’s ability to imagine.

The other thing these old photos make obvious to Rhodey is how much Tony’s physical appearance has changed, too. What he thought he saw in Tony’s eyes a while back was real: Tony’s glow has definitely lessened. Diminished doesn’t seem to be the right word; Tony’s as ethereal and awe-
inspiring as ever, but there’s definitely a change to him. He no longer looks like he would light up a room in the dark, or like staring at him too long might cause blindness. Now he just looks like he’s covered in luminescent tattoos.

Though Tony’s now going out a few times a week to physically help with the reconstruction, most of his work is with SI, behind the scenes. They’re still sending out massive amounts of products and resources to the areas that need the most help, and they’re still trying to coordinate their national and international sites, bringing employees back into work and making sure their own families are taken care of before they ask anyone to start working for the good of others. However, around the globe, the response has been the same as here in New York. With or without Tony’s physical presence to inspire them, people everywhere are coming in to work, putting everything they have into helping others even when their own situations aren’t entirely stable yet.

Tony’s taken over as CEO, which for now mostly involves coordination of the different branches and executive decisions as to how best to divide up their resources and manpower. But Tony’s biggest impact is, of course, in the lab, where he’s working constantly to improve their tech, come up with new ideas that could help with the reconstruction, and find ways to conserve resources in manufacturing and distribution.

Rhodey’s happy to see Tony working so much, really stretching his imagination and his creative abilities. It’s clearly good for him, emotionally and socially. SI employees who work regularly with him are comfortable around him now where they weren’t at the beginning, and Rhodey knows Tony will soon be back to the front of magazines and newspapers, the face of tech innovation and the reconstruction efforts.

After months of working through it, being there every step of the way, Rhodey has naturally done a lot of thinking about the nature of Tony’s current issues. He’s come to the conclusion—knowing that it’s not a perfect example, but also that he can’t possibly truly understand what it’s like to be Tony, so a metaphor will have to do—that Tony’s emotional problems are something like depression. They’re varied and terrible and they want to drag him down from the inside, not only make him miserable but also make him feel like happiness isn’t achievable.

The other parallel to depression that seems glaringly obvious to Rhodey is that there’s not a simple fix to it. Rhodey’s been acting like somewhat of a therapist to Tony—and Tony to him as well—but in the end, it’s all up to Tony to pull himself out of this, and all Rhodey can do is provide as much support as possible and hope that he’s helping. He can’t really do anything to change their situation, and there’s no medication out there that could provide any help to Tony, so Tony’s left in the impossible situation of trying to recover emotions that he can’t feel. Trying to find his way out of a dark room when he can’t even see the door—when he’s not even sure the door exists.

Rhodey’s grateful every day that Tony seems to be finding that door on his own, because Rhodey has no clue how to show it to him. All he can do is sit back, be supportive, and thank everything that exists that Tony is showing such incredible improvement. His work with SI, the stabilization of his powers, and now being back in the suit, all of those things seem to be helping him to lift himself out of this, regain his emotions.

Rhodey’s resolved, of course, to keep an eye on him as he takes on more and more responsibility. Though working hard for the benefit of himself and others seems to be helping him, Rhodey can easily see that turning into old-Tony levels of heaped on responsibilities, too much work, sleepless nights and stress and a downslide into bad habits and worse feelings. But for now, they’re both riding a high of improvement.

It’s a day that Tony’s been out working alongside the headset-piloted suit, using his powers and his
tech in a beautifully integrated dance, while Rhodey has been in meetings in his stead all day, that
and in and out of the lab. His legs are aching—they tend to do that more and more now that he’s
working them so hard, an unfortunate side effect of returning muscle function but one he’ll gladly
take—and he’s excited when he finally returns to their private floor of the Tower.

He’s putting himself through a series of painful but ultimately satisfying stretches in his braces when
Tony comes home, greeting him with a smile before heading to the bathroom to rinse off the sweat of
a physically demanding day and the dust settled in his hair and on his clothes.

When Tony comes out, Rhodey is standing ready next to some of the equipment they’ve been using
for physical therapy. Following their usual routine, Tony adjusts the braces to provide minimal
support while they work through a few exercises. Rhodey notes with pride that the level that
constitutes ‘minimal support’ has been nudged down yet again, for the second time in just three days.

They move seamlessly through the exercises, Rhodey tiring fast, but not as fast as he did even just a
week ago. When they’re done, Rhodey moves to his place between two handrails, shifting most of
his weight to his arms in preparation for Tony to remove the braces completely. He’ll put as much of
his weight as possible on his own legs and work on just standing for as long as he can, and then
Tony will get him back into his chair.

Tony kneels down in front of him, tapping at the panel on the side of his leg to remove the braces,
but suddenly stops in the middle of what he’s doing.

Rhodey waits a beat, thinking for a second that maybe Tony’s coming up with a new idea or even
just feeling a sneeze coming on or something. But when he sees the tense set of Tony’s shoulders, he
goes on alert. “What’s wrong?”

Tony doesn’t look up at him or reply, but he jabs a few more buttons on the panel and Rhodey feels
the braces reengage, returning full support to him, and that’s answer enough. Tony straightens in
front of him and Rhodey shifts one foot back into an approximation of a fighting stance, not sure
exactly what he’s preparing for.

Tony’s staring at a point over Rhodey’s shoulder, but his eyes are unfocused, and Rhodey gets the
distinct feeling that he’s sensing something Rhodey can’t. Rhodey reaches forward to put a hand on
Tony’s arm, but before he can get there, there’s a soft sound in the room and Tony’s head whips
around to look. Less than a half second behind him, Rhodey reacts to the sound too, turning to face
the room just as a bright golden light erupts in the air several yards away.
Trouble

Chapter Notes

Early Christmas present for you all (though depending on what else I have to do and how fast it gets done, there may be another coming), the long-awaited beginning of real plot! Just a preview of serious things to come, and there’s still going to be plenty of fluff and such. I still have at least two more characters to bring in, one very soon ;)

Tony and Rhodey are rooted to the spot, staring at the place where golden light has sprouted in the middle of their living room. After a second of staring, he realizes the light isn’t one cohesive thing—it’s spitting golden sparks, reminding Rhodey of a firework going off.

As they watch, it expands, opening up into a circle. Rhodey has enough time to think not another fucking portal and then Tony is stepping in front of him, half shielding him with his own body. Rhodey’s too focused on the portal to give thought to any sort of amusement at Tony’s protective tendencies or disgruntlement at being defended like some damsel in distress.

There’s a second of delay and then a form appears in the center of the portal—Rhodey tenses further and sees Tony do the same in front of him. Whoever’s coming through, they seem to be shaped like a human, but that doesn’t mean they are.

The person comes through the portal fully, details solidifying, but Rhodey barely gets half a second to try to take the man in before Tony flings out an arm in front of him and in the space of a heartbeat, a shimmering, translucent blue barrier appears between them and the portal. Rhodey’s never seen anything like it, but he instantly knows that it came from Tony, not whoever is coming through the portal.

The newcomer stops short at the sight of it as the golden portal fades away behind him. In this high-pressure situation, Rhodey can’t take even a moment to be surprised at this new ability of Tony’s, though he wishes he had time to question Tony about it. Instead, he shifts a bit from behind Tony to get a better look at the man.

The barrier Tony created is giving everything a slight blue tint, but details are still clear. The man in front of them looks human, as far as Rhodey can tell, but then, so did Thor and Loki. He’s tall, with dark hair and styled facial hair to rival Tony’s, but his most immediately noteworthy feature is his choice of clothing: some kind of fancy tunic wrapped with leather straps and a long, ostentatious cloak combine to make him look like he stepped off the cover of a fantasy novel.

The man, or whatever he is, steps forward and gives Tony’s barrier an appraising look, arching an eyebrow. “Impressive,” he says. Rhodey notes the deep voice and apparent American accent, though he knows from experience that doesn’t mean anything in terms of him necessarily being a human.

The man turns his attention from the barrier to Tony, but when he does, his brow furrows and he puts his hands up in a gesture of surrender, backing up a step. Stuck behind him and boxed in by the support railings they use for his physical therapy, Rhodey can’t see Tony’s face, but he can imagine his expression. He certainly wouldn’t want to be staring down a resurrected, Infinity Stone-powered Tony Stark whose home had just been broken into.
Evidently the man realizes this, because he keeps his hands up as he says, “I’m not here to harm you. Either of you,” he adds, eyes flicking to Rhodey, who tries to adopt a menacing expression.

That’s assuming that he could harm Tony, Rhodey thinks, glancing over the new blue barrier. He narrows his eyes at the man, having a hard time believing that he’s here peacefully when he just violated their living space without warning.

Tony doesn’t respond directly to that, just demands, “Who are you?”

The man lowers his hands to his sides. “My name is Doctor Stephen Strange. I am one of the sorcerers of Kamar-Taj and the Sorcerer Supreme.”

Fancy titles, none of which mean anything to Rhodey. Or to Tony, if his stiff posture and still-raised hand are anything to go by. “What are you doing here?” Tony grits out, and Rhodey can’t help but glance at him, wishing he could see his face. The tightness in his tone could be attributed just to the presence of this stranger in their home unexpectedly, but Rhodey knows Tony, and there’s something else going on here.

“I’ve come to tell you of some matters I believe you need to be aware of, and to seek your assistance with a… potential problem.”

“Are you from Asgard?” Rhodey asks before Tony can respond. He certainly talks like one of them—if he is a human, he’s a pretentious one.

Strange frowns, looking at Rhodey, and the honest confusion that crosses his face convinces Rhodey of the truth of his answer. “No, I’m from Earth. Entirely human,” he says, gesturing vaguely to himself.

“Why are you here?” Tony repeats, voice still flat and cold.

“I told you, I came to—”

“I heard you,” Tony snaps, cutting off whatever Strange was about to say. “Make me aware of some things. Ask for my help. Why are you here, in my living room?”

Strange opens his mouth, then closes it, clearly wrong-footed, which pisses Rhodey off. He can’t imagine what would have made this man think that bursting in on them, unannounced, via a magical portal, would be received as anything but a threat and an invasion.

“I am used to operating in secrecy. I didn’t want to try just walking in through the front door, risking being seen by too many people, or being turned away at the front desk,” Strange finally says.

“Most people would take that risk,” Rhodey snaps, as irritated by the invasion of their home as Tony is. “You could have at least teleported in downstairs. Not ten feet away from us.”

“This is a matter of some importance,” Strange says with a frown, the sarcasm obvious in his tone. “I suppose I thought getting to you quickly was more important than being delayed by your security or thrown out because they believe me to be insane. If you knew what this was about, I think you’d agree with me.”

“Of course I know what this is about,” Tony snaps, which causes both Strange and Rhodey to look at him in surprise. This is news to Rhodey, but Tony clearly doesn’t know the guy, so he has no idea how Tony knows what this is. Unless he’s bluffing, but Rhodey doubts that. He’ll just have to wait and see—he trusts Tony, whatever it is that he’s doing. “Doesn’t mean you couldn’t have sent a letter ahead. Or knocked,” Tony says, voice still tight with whatever it is that’s freaking him out more
than the situation seems to warrant. It’s that that has Rhodey on edge more than Strange’s words or his appearance.

Strange tilts his head. “Well, I’m here, and if you know what it’s about, then you know it’s important. So please, take down your shield. I only came to talk to you. I have absolutely no desire to go up against you in a fight.”

That doesn’t mollify Rhodey—or Tony, judging by the stiffness in Tony’s body that doesn’t let up—but Tony does lower his hand, slowly, and the blue barrier fades away. After a few seconds’ pause and silent posturing between the two men, Tony steps forward, gesturing to one of the long curved sofas. Rhodey sees Strange glance at the equipment, at Rhodey’s chair nearby, and then at the braces on his legs as they move, but none of them say anything about it.

They move to sit, all three of them wound tight. Rhodey would feel more comfortable having a gun with him, but he’s aware that anyone calling themselves the Sorcerer Supreme—assuming that the title isn’t just a completely meaningless ego trip—is probably beyond being able to be harmed with simple bullets. And Rhodey trusts Tony to have his back in magical matters.

When Strange goes to sit down, his cloak floats upward without a breeze and settles behind him so that he doesn’t sit on it. Rhodey’s eyes track the movement, and almost as if the thing can see him watching it, it flutters. Strange, noting the movement, mutters, “Behave,” and it settles down. Another damn magical thing, and Rhodey can’t help but watch it, wanting to ask about it, but knowing there are more important things to be discussed.

“So, you said you know what this is about,” Strange starts as soon as they’ve all settled down. Rhodey can hear the question in it.

Tony just stares at Strange for a moment, and Rhodey takes the opportunity to look at Tony now that he can actually see his face. His jaw is set, as tense as the rest of his body, but his eyes have a wide, slightly wild look to them that Rhodey recognizes as fear, and it tilts Rhodey’s stomach. Before Rhodey can examine him further, he says, “I know what you’re carrying. I assume that’s why you’re here.”

Strange nods and picks up the heavy thing he’s been wearing around his neck, holding it up. It’s large, intricately carved, and Rhodey’s first impression is that it’s gaudy as hell and looks uncomfortable to wear. Clearly, however, from the way Strange is holding it up and Tony is looking at it like it might explode, it’s something important. An inkling of understanding and suspicion comes to Rhodey.

“This contains an Infinity Stone,” Strange says, “specifically the Time Stone.”

“Shit,” Rhodey bursts out. Tony’s eyes haven’t left the thing since Strange held it up, and Rhodey doesn’t like that.

“The sorcerers of Kamar-Taj are a group of magic users dedicated to protecting the Earth and guarding magical knowledge and relics. They’ve been keeping watch over this, what they call the Eye of Agamotto, for centuries.”

Tony, still watching the thing warily, doesn’t seem inclined to respond, so Rhodey does instead. “You’re underground? We’ve never heard of you.”

“Not exactly underground. There are places in the world where the locals at least know of our existence, even if they don’t know exactly what we are.” Strange says it with a rueful smile that speaks of personal experience, but Rhodey isn’t particularly interested in whatever memory he’s lost
Rhodey frowns, not sure if there’s supposed to be some sort of a reprimand in there regarding the Avengers or not. Strange has a slightly condescending attitude about him that irks Rhodey, but there are more important things at hand, and he can’t let that distract him. “So you protect the Stone that’s in there.” A thought comes to him. “Is that what Thanos was searching for—what was keeping him from just killing us all?”

“Yes,” Tony says, and Strange and Rhodey both turn to look at him. “It’s the last one. Thanos was searching for it, he knew it was on Earth but not where. That’s why they set up checkpoints and why they took people the way they did. They needed the opportunity to search for magical traces on every human before blindly killing them all. And Thanos assumed that if whoever had it stash it away before being brought to the camps and searched, the protections would weaken and he could find it later.” Tony shakes his head. “It was frustrating him, but he couldn’t pinpoint its location, not even with the other Stones. I couldn’t either, when I was in contact with the others, I knew it was on Earth but not where, like it was… cloaked.”

Strange frowns again. “Well yes, it’s kept under various magical protections. I would have assumed you knew that.” He says it like it’s obvious, but Rhodey’s confused. They clearly just learned about the existence of this group of sorcerers.

“How?” Tony asks, sharing a quick, confused glance with Rhodey.

Strange gestures to Tony. “I could feel your energy already examining mine before I even stepped through the portal. You were clearly ready for my arrival, you’re obviously in tune with movements on other planes of existence. Usually something unique to sorcerers, but with your new powers, I assumed it was because you’re aware of other magic users.”

Tony shakes his head quickly, leaning forward. His voice is as intense as the look in his eyes. “I barely know anything about magic. I knew you were coming because you’re carrying an Infinity Stone. As soon as you had intent to come here, I could feel it, because you’re so close to it.” When this only nets him a confused look from Strange, he sits up straighter. “You know how powerful it is, right? It knows what you’re doing, what you’re thinking. It’s sentient and it’s watching you.”

Tony looks just about on the edge of panic. Rhodey subtly lays a hand on his arm and he closes his eyes, sitting back again and taking a deep breath. Strange looks perhaps a bit unsettled, but he still manages to sit there calmly, watching them. “Why did you bring it here?” Tony asks when he’s resettled himself.

“I helped my fellow sorcerers hide it from Thanos, along with most of the rest of the magical relics we protect. But after he was gone, some other questions came up, questions I can’t answer. As far as I’m aware, you’re the authority on the Infinity Stones. I need your advice.”

“How did you keep everything from Thanos?” Tony asks. “I didn’t know there were magic users on Earth, at least… not organized ones. Not large groups of them.” Rhodey thinks of Maximoff. Not organized, indeed. “When I was in contact with the Stones, I could only feel that the Time Stone was on the planet, not any of the other relics you’re talking about. And I couldn’t tell that there were spells on it.”

Strange shakes his head, and Rhodey sees a familiar haunted expression overtake his face. “We hid, for the most part. There were… some disagreements about how to handle the situation. There were those among us who wanted to fight rather than hide, and in the end, they did. They died—we all knew they would. Their opinion, when the battles started, was that we were going to be overtaken
no matter what, and they thought we should go down fighting rather than hide. Normally I’d have agreed with them. But once I knew who Thanos was and that he was after the Infinity Stones, I knew the power and the importance of what we were protecting. I knew that if there was even the slightest chance that we could keep Thanos from getting his hands on what we had, then we had to do everything we could. And thanks to you,” he inclined his head to Tony, “we succeeded.”

Tony doesn’t respond, so Strange continues. “I mastered the basics of the mystical arts and then became the Sorcerer Supreme very quickly, and rather suddenly. There were some people at Kamar-Taj who were unhappy with it, to say the least, claiming that I hadn’t been studying magic nearly long enough to take on the role. But I was confident in my abilities, sure that if the raw talent was there, there was no need for long years of experience. However… what happened with Thanos made it clear that there was truth to what they said. I may be powerful, but I don’t know very much at all about this.” He indicates the pendant again. “Seeing as Thanos killed half a billion people and would have destroyed the planet just to find it, I figured I should come to you and find out more about it.”

He and Tony spend a long moment just staring at each other. Rhodey breaks the spell when he speaks up again. “Okay, so the invasion made you want to bring it to Tony, sure. But why now? It’s been months. You clearly know where we live. Why wait this long?”

Strange gives Tony another appraising look. “There are a lot of rumors about what, exactly, happened between you and Thanos, and not a lot of confirmed facts. You clearly took the rest of the Infinity Stones from him, you gained some of their powers, you killed him. But beyond that, I had no way of knowing exactly what you might have been turned into.” Rhodey suppresses the urge to flinch at the harsh words, knowing it was a fear of Tony’s—and possibly still is. He can’t help the tiny spark of anger at this stranger who didn’t have to face Thanos or live through the camps, barging into their home and having the nerve to tell Tony he might be a monster because of what Thanos did to him.

“I’ve been following the news, watching for signs of your movements,” Strange says. “Waiting to see exactly what you were, and what you were planning to do. If you decided to try to take over the world yourself, I don’t know if I’d have any chance of stopping you—not when you have the other Stones—but I could at least take this one back into hiding if it seemed like you were going to pick up where Thanos left off.” Rhodey narrows his eyes at that, not liking the direction this conversation is taking.

“But,” Strange continues, “you never made a single move that seemed like you were planning to hurt anyone. You were seen using the power of the Stones, sure, but just for rebuilding. And then, just recently, I started seeing stories about Iron Man coming back. I saw you in the suit on the news, and I figured that was proof enough that you’re still yourself. I considered it safe enough to seek you out.”

There’s a pause at the end of his speech, and then Tony says, “You’re wrong.” Strange tenses a little. “About the Stones,” Tony clarifies, seeing it, and Strange slowly relaxes again. “I don’t have them. When I was… fighting with Thanos,” he says slowly, and Rhodey can tell that he’s uncomfortable sharing more personal details of what was done to him than necessary, “I could feel them, their sentience, and how dangerous they were. So I destroyed them. The Time Stone was the only one Thanos didn’t have. You’re holding the only Infinity Stone that still exists.”

“Yet you’ve been using their powers,” Strange says, suspicion clear in his voice. “Not exactly theirs. They left a sort of… imprint of their powers on me. Something I’m able to access and use, but the Stones themselves are gone. It was the only way to get rid of them and be sure no one else could use them like Thanos did. Or use them at all. Not even me. I’d have been taken over.
They’re too powerful to try to control.”

Strange opens his mouth at that, hesitant. “I can use this one,” he says slowly. “I have, before.”

“You’ve used it?” Rhodey says, incredulous, and Strange puts a hand over the pendant almost protectively.

“At the time I first did, I didn’t know it was an Infinity Stone. It was just the Eye of Agamotto, a powerful relic that not many could harness the power of. I was… arrogant, and convinced I could do it. I could,” he says, matter-of-fact, but then his face darkens, “but trust me, I learned some valuable lessons in doing so. I don’t use it blithely.”

Rhodey has to hold back a snort at his use of was, as though he’s not still obviously an arrogant bastard, but again, more important things to focus on. “That doesn’t seem possible. How do we know you haven’t been taken over by it?”

Tony shakes his head. “If it were in control, he’d be using it all the time. And he’d never have come here. But if it’s already contained within another magical object, its reach might be lessened. And it could be… less volatile than some of them.”

“How is that?” Rhodey asks, remembering the way Tony talked about them on the night he was resurrected—like if he’d waited a moment longer to destroy them, he’d have been consumed by them the same way Thanos was. Rhodey has a hard time seeing this one as anything less than deadly and volatile.

“With the gauntlet, it was all of them together, sort of a mixed sentience. Together, they were more powerful, they… fed off of each other. But even then, I could tell there were differences. The Power Stone was easily the worst, in terms of corrupting its users, wanting violence and destruction. Soul was probably the calmest,” Tony says. “It didn’t really matter. With all of them together, they were too much for anyone to have control of. I had no choice but to destroy them. But if this one is contained, and less likely to influence its surroundings, it’s possible that it won’t corrupt anyone the same way the others did. You said it’s been around your sorcerers for centuries?” he asks Strange, who nods in confirmation. “Then, as long as it’s been used very sparingly, I’d say it’s not very active.”

Rhodey shakes his head at all of this. He needs to get to the heart of the matter. “Okay, but… why did you bring it here? What do you want Tony to do?”

Strange looks down at the thing. “After seeing what Thanos did… I can’t help but worry that the same thing will happen again, as long as this one is here. Even with all our protections in place, you said Thanos knew it was on this planet. If he knew, then others can find out too. I can’t let it bring someone like Thanos down on us again.”

He might be an arrogant sorcerer who broke into their home without warning with the expectation that they’d drop everything to talk to him, but Rhodey sees a common fear in him, and that goes a long way towards making Rhodey trust him. He wants to keep the world safe, to prevent another Thanos, and Rhodey can certainly relate.

Tony thinks for a moment, staring at the Eye where it rests against Strange’s chest. “How many other people know about it?” he finally asks.

“Only the sorcerers of Kamar-Taj should know of its existence,” Strange says, “and most of them don’t know it’s an Infinity Stone; just that it’s a powerful relic that I can control. I can only think of… four people still alive, myself included, who know exactly what it is, and only one other person
knew I was bringing it here today. I’d trust him with my life. I keep it under magical guard, even against other sorcerers, or on my person at all times, and it’s very well hidden.”

“Not well enough, if Thanos knew about it,” Rhodey says. “If you really want to keep the world safe, it needs to be destroyed, just like the others.”

Strange gives him an unreadable look and Rhodey stares back, challenging him. “If that was the best course of action, would you hand it over? Let Tony destroy it?”

Strange narrows his eyes at him, but he nods after a moment’s hesitation. “Yes. If we agreed that’s what’s best and I knew he could do it, I’d hand it over. I told you, I understand how dangerous it is. I don’t use it for fun, you know.”

Rhodey wants to say something back, but Tony is shaking his head again. “I don’t know that I could destroy it,” he says, then sighs when both Rhodey and Strange turn to look at him, surprised. “My powers came from the Infinity Stones, so I probably have at least something that could hope to match the power of the Time Stone, but that’s not how I got rid of the others. I had a connection with them because of Thanos, and I used that to turn them on each other when they were most active. I used their own power to create a sort of… implosion, and I don’t know that what they left in me is enough to do the same thing to this one.”

Tony pauses, staring once more at the Eye, then looks up to Strange. “If something happened, if we were sure it was active or threatening to bring someone else like Thanos down on us, I think I could do it, if I had to. But I’m still learning my abilities, strengthening my control. Honestly, if it’s a matter of when we destroy it, I’d feel more comfortable waiting until I’m more confident I can do it.”

Rhodey’s proud of him for accepting this uncertainty and knowing his limits, even if Strange looks a little skeptical. “Will you know? If it’s attracting someone else?” Strange asks.

“I’m not entirely sure. With the destruction Thanos caused around the galaxy looking for the Stones, I’d say there isn’t likely to be a contender any time soon, but that’s just a guess. I do know that Thanos didn’t always know it was here. It’s been here for centuries, but he only found out recently, as in within the last few years.”

Strange’s eyes widen at that, and Tony gives him a knowing look. “Based on what you said, I’d guess that’s when you first used it. From what I learned from my contact with them and Thanos, the more they’re used, the more of a… signal they send out. The more noticeable they are to others. I think, as long as you’re not using this one, it should be safe for a while.”

Strange nods, but then he puts a hand up to the Eye again and sits back, looking contemplative once more. “I can’t help but think about what exactly it does, how I’ve used it before, and what that could mean. Now, I’m not saying we go ahead and do this, understand, I’m just putting a theory out there.”

He waits for Tony and Rhodey to nod, which they do reluctantly, cautious. “It would be a pretty big leap,” Strange starts, “and a huge use of the Stone, which I know you just cautioned against. But… in theory, the Time Stone could be used to reverse everything Thanos did to the Earth.”

There’s an excited gleam in Strange’s eyes. “Picture the possibilities. Millions of lives that were lost, not to mention all the damage, all fixed. And again, in theory, it could potentially lead to a peaceful galaxy. While the Stone could reverse what was done to the planet, it couldn’t recreate the others. We could go back far enough to undo everything Thanos did, but he wouldn’t have any of the Stones.”

He looks back and forth from Rhodey to Tony, but stops short at the look on Tony’s face, and so
does Rhodey. The wild-eyed fear is back in Tony’s eyes, but it’s never been so intense. He’s glowing brighter than he was before, and his fists are clenched at his sides. He’s poised at the very edge of the couch like he might spring to his feet any second. He creates a picture that’s honestly terrifying, and Strange recoils a little—only Rhodey’s utter trust in Tony keeps him from doing the same.

“No,” Tony says, the one word ringing between them like a command. “Under no circumstances can that ever happen. Any of that. I don’t care what you’ve done with the Stone before; you cannot do that. Using that much power from an Infinity Stone, trying to change things that happened that involved the other Stones, and after so much time, after so much happened? Not only would it be volatile and completely unpredictable—seriously, you have no idea what would happen, for all you know trying to screw with it would somehow give Thanos control of the Stone—but using that much of the Stone’s power at once, it would enslave you to it. Whatever you’ve done with it before, it’s nothing compared to what you’re proposing. You’d be completely gone, taken over by the Stone’s will, its need for chaotic change.” Tony’s breathing hard, and Rhodey’s at least gratified to see that Strange’s attention is completely captured. “Tell me you understand.”

Strange nods, putting up a hand in surrender. “I do. I came to you because you know more about the Stones than I do. I may have used this one before, but you’re right, never to that extent, and I understand what you’re saying. It was just a thought. But you’re right, there are too many unpredictable variables. I can promise you I won’t try it.”

Tony sits back once more, letting out a breath and closing his eyes again. Rhodey can tell that the conversation is hitting him hard, and he doesn’t think being around the Stone is good for Tony. Tony forces his eyes open again, however, and addresses Strange once more. “I appreciate you coming to me. Letting me know about it. You didn’t have to do that, and I understand that I can’t tell you what to do. But you came for my advice, so here it is. If you want to keep it safe from others like Thanos, keep it hidden. Keep it protected, put even more spells on it, whatever it is you do. Make sure as few people know about it as possible, and don’t use it any more than absolutely necessary.”

Tony slumps back, looking exhausted, and it’s clear that the conversation is coming to an end. Strange clears his throat and then stands, straightening out his sleeves while his apparently magical cloak—Rhodey had nearly forgotten about it—settles itself, fluffing out around him, collar curling out.

Tony and Rhodey stand as well. Strange nods to Rhodey politely and turns to Tony again. “Well, thank you for the information. It’s good to know that there’s someone else out there looking out for everyone. We may find ourselves working together in the future, but for now, if it’s acceptable to you, I’ll go back to my people and make sure this,” he pats the Eye, “stays well protected. If something comes up that requires using it… I’ll inform you.”

Rhodey wishes they could have more of a guarantee about that, but he understands what Tony meant when he said they have no right to tell Strange how to handle his affairs. He really doesn’t want to fight over who gets to watch over the Infinity Stone, and from the look of Tony right now, Rhodey’s not sure he’d want that responsibility, anyway. He nods, though Strange really isn’t looking at him, and so does Tony.

“Thank you,” Tony says, but Strange doesn’t answer, already turning away. He puts his hands in the air and makes a circling motion, drawing forth another golden portal, then disappears through it without another word.
So, it’s once again been a long time, oops. I did release an entire new story in that time, but I’m sorry for not updating this one. I hope everyone remembers what happened during Strange’s visit, because this chapter is the immediate aftermath of that. The next one is a sort of fluffy interlude, and then the one after that (28) is one that I know a lot of people have been waiting for! You’ll be excited, I promise.

As soon as Strange disappears, Tony lets out a heavy breath and all the tension goes out of his body. He slumps against Rhodey, boneless, and Rhodey puts his arms around him as he lets out his own deep sigh.

“So. Not the kind of news I was prepared for today.” Rhodey says, testing the waters.

Tony snorts into his shoulder, but he sighs again and pushes himself upright. “I don’t know if it’s better or not that I know where it is now. Don’t get me wrong, it’s good to hear that there’s someone protecting it, someone who wants to keep it out of other people’s hands as much as we do. And it’s not like I’d forgotten about it, just…”

“Now you have to worry about it all the time?” Rhodey offers, and Tony nods.

“It makes me a little itchy to just let it leave, but I’m also sort of relieved,” Tony confesses. “I don’t like it being around me. I hate the feeling it gives me, and part of me is glad someone else is dealing with it for now. Is that bad?”

He looks to Rhodey, that familiar look that makes Rhodey’s chest ache, the one that says Tony is thinking the worst of himself and Rhodey’s the only one who has a hope of dissuading him. “It’s not bad, Tony. I could see how much it freaked you out before I even knew what it was. If Strange and his people have been protecting it this long, I think it’s safe to say they don’t have as strong a reaction to it.”

Tony makes a complicated face at that, and Rhodey grimaces, having an idea what Tony’s thinking. “Everything happens to you, doesn’t it?” he says gently.

Tony doesn’t smile, however, just looks at him. “I wouldn’t say that.” He doesn’t actually look down at Rhodey’s legs, but he doesn’t need to. There’s a moment of silence between them, not uncomfortable but not quite comfortable either. Rhodey knows very well that Tony still carries guilt about what happened to him, both before Thanos and after, and it’s something he might never let go of. It’ll take time, and Rhodey needs to give him that. He has some of his own regrets and guilt about what’s happened in Tony’s life, too, and Tony gives him the space and time to deal with it. Sometimes they just need to be left alone to feel things—he knows that, even if it’s hard to do.

Tony breaks the silence by voicing Rhodey’s next thought out loud. “The thing that worries me about that is that they won’t know if something happens.”

Rhodey frowns. “You think Strange won’t be able to sense changes in it like you would?”
“It’s hard to say. He’s used it before, he might know it even better than I do. I mean, the others were
dangerous, volatile… but maybe that was because of Thanos and the way he used them. Maybe I’m
just overly sensitive to them, paranoid because of what the others did.”

“No,” Rhodey shakes his head, “I don’t think you are. From what you said about that little scene on
the Helicarrier back during the Loki thing, and what it did to Ultron, hell, to Maximoff, the Mind
stone was definitely pretty damn volatile before Thanos got his hands on it.” Of course, Vision was
the exception to that, but Rhodey secretly thinks Tony has a hell of a lot to do with that.

This time it’s Tony shaking his head. “Thanos is the one who gave it to Loki in the first place; he
was behind the whole failed invasion. He’d already used it before all of that happened.”

That’s news to Rhodey. “How do you know?”

Tony grimaces, eyes far away. He looks like he’s lost in thought, or maybe memories, a look that
was familiar to Rhodey in the days immediately after his resurrection but not so much lately. “I…
knew things when I was connected to the stones. Thoughts, knowledge, that was just there, already
in my head, I didn’t even have to go looking for it. I could tell it was new, wasn’t from me, but I
didn’t know exactly where it was from, the stones themselves or Thanos.”

That doesn’t sound too reassuring, and the look on Tony’s face is putting Rhodey on edge. “What
kind of knowledge are we talking about?”

Tony looks at him and seems to snap back into focus, shaking his head. “Not—whatever you’re
thinking. Worrying about. I mean things like… the fact that the Time Stone was here on Earth. Other
details to do with the stones’ history, at least the recent history. I could sort of… see Ultron, and
Vision, from a different perspective than my own. It’s hard to explain. I could see where the stones
had been in the last few years, at least some of them, and I saw Thanos giving the Mind Stone to
Loki, telling him to go after the Earth to get the Tesseract back. It didn’t go back all that far, though,
which makes me think maybe what I was seeing was from Thanos, not the stones themselves.
They’re ancient, as in beyond what we can even comprehend. I don’t think I could handle seeing all
of their history at once.”

The thought of that is vast and uncomfortable, something Rhodey can’t really imagine. It brings up
yet another anxious wave of thoughts about the thousand ways Tony’s resurrection could have gone
horribly wrong. Thankfully, he’s distracted a moment later by his brain catching up to something else
Tony just said.

“Wait, wait. You said Thanos gave the scepter to Loki and told him to come here? Are we talking
mind control, like with Barton?” Loki’s a bastard, and certainly not to be trusted from the tales
Thor’s told, but if he really wasn’t responsible for the invasion the way they’d blamed him… Well,
maybe it doesn’t matter so much in the grand scheme of things, not after everything the Earth has
been through. What would they even do with the information? Still, it seems like something he ought
to know.

Tony shakes his head. “I don’t think it was full-on mind control the way it was with Barton. There
was certainly some form of coercion—at the very least, Loki looked like shit when he first showed
up here and some of the stuff I saw through the stones was… not good, to say the least. Thanos
found him when he was alone and vulnerable and he wasn’t kind to him.”

The statement hits a little too close to home for Rhodey, and he wonders if Tony is also seeing some
of the same parallels. “But it really doesn’t matter,” Tony says, echoing Rhodey’s earlier thought
unconsciously. “I saw some of the things Thanos did before he got to Earth, once he had the gauntlet
and most of the stones. Loki’s faked his death before, but I don’t think he faked that. He’s gone.”
Rhodey doesn’t exactly mourn the loss—he didn’t know Loki, never even came face to face with him, and despite the revelations of the last few minutes, he did wreck half of Manhattan and toss Tony out a window. But there’s a heaviness to his thoughts now, and he knows this is something he’ll have to reconcile at some point. Yet another life taken by Thanos. His only consolation in the moment is Tony sitting next to him, alive and relatively well.

They sit for a long while in silence, each lost in their thoughts. It’s comfortable enough, but Rhodey worries about Tony. When he starts thinking about Thanos and his resurrection, sometimes it makes him melancholy and apathetic and it scares Rhodey, because he’s never sure what to do to pull him out of it. Ideally, Tony should be in therapy—they both should—but not only is it hard to make that a priority right now, god knows he had a hell of a time trying (and failing) to persuade Tony to see a therapist in the past. And right now, with Tony still as new and strange and sometimes vulnerable as he is, it would be hard to find someone to trust with that.

So Rhodey does what he can. Distraction has proven an effective method in the past. “I need a snack,” he announces, pushing himself to his feet. He leaves the braces on even though he’s not supposed to wear them for too long at a time if he’s not doing his exercises. Tony follows him into the kitchen after a moment, smiling when Rhodey digs through the cabinet for something salty and nutritionally deficient to share between them.

His tactic works; Tony regains his usual life quickly, eventually coaxing Rhodey back up to do the workout they’d been starting when Strange had shown up. Rhodey needs him to do it, because after Strange’s impromptu visit and the bombshells he’d dropped, if it were up to Rhodey, he’d probably just skip it. Helping each other goes both ways.

Tony’s back to being too quiet by the time they’re preparing for bed that night, though. He’s staring off into the distance too much, not smiling the way he should, not even moving as much as he usually does. It’s how Tony acts now when he’s thinking hard, and eventually, Rhodey decides enough is enough.

“What’s up?” he asks when Tony comes out of the bathroom in his sleep clothes, eyes looking glazed over once more.

“What?” The look on Tony’s face is enough to tell Rhodey that he’s done the right thing in addressing this instead of leaving Tony to his thoughts.

“You’ve been brooding all night. Since Strange came by, really. I know he dropped a hell of a lot in your lap, but this is somber even for you. Talk to me.”

For a minute, Rhodey thinks he’s going to refuse. And he certainly has that right, but Rhodey knows it’s not healthy to bottle things up. He hopes he didn’t come on too strong, drive Tony away. Thankfully, Tony takes a deep breath, sinking down onto the edge of the bed. “Did I… do the right thing?”

Rhodey waits, not bothering to ask for clarification. Sure enough, Tony elaborates, “What I told Strange, about the Time Stone. About using it. Using it to reverse all of this—everything Thanos did. Everyone he killed. Was I right?”

“Of course you were,” Rhodey says immediately. “You said it yourself, there’s way too much risk. It could bring another Thanos down on our heads. It could screw everything up beyond repair. It could enslave whoever did it to the stone and end up, I don’t know, destroying the universe or something.” Rhodey tilts his head, carefully considering Tony. “You were firm in that before, and you were absolutely right. Where’s this coming from?”
Tony crosses his arms, hunching down. “I just… what if I was wrong? I mean, I know it’s possible, likely even, that things would go catastrophically wrong. But… what if they didn’t? What if I’m wrong, and it could really save everyone Thanos killed?”

“That’s a pretty infinitesimally small chance, Tony,” Rhodey says carefully.

“It worked for me,” Tony says, and it’s quiet, unsure.

Rhodey’s already shaking his head. “That was completely different. Thanos used all the stones, and he was just bringing back one person. What Strange was talking about, that’s millions of people, months worth of damage. It’s not the same. That’s not a risk anyone should be willing to take.”

A sigh. “Strange might have taken it, though, if I hadn’t interfered. I was the one who stopped him, and he listened to me. Am I becoming some kind of a dictator? Thinking that my opinions are automatically right because of what the stones did to me? Strange came to me because of my powers, not because of my—my wise judgment, or something. Why should I get to decide what happens to it?”

Rhodey reaches out, putting a hand on Tony’s arm, hating hearing him say these things. “Tony, that’s not what happened. You’re not a dictator. You’ve never acted like one before—okay, maybe you made some mistakes in the past, maybe you’ve been selfish and arrogant and naïve before—”

Tony gives him a look and Rhodey smiles sheepishly— “but you’ve always taken other people’s input into account. And if you’re asking yourself these questions now, then you have the awareness not to fall into that kind of trap. That should be proof enough that you aren’t putting yourself on a pedestal.”

Tony sits back and is quiet for a moment, considering that. “It feels selfish,” he finally says, “to sit here and talk about it like I’m unaffected. The power of the stones brought me back. I got my miracle, so now I’m free to sit here and deny that chance to everyone else. What right do I have to condemn them all to death?”

There’s a heavy weight in Rhodey’s chest, sadness and pain all in one. While he stands by Tony’s insistence on not using the Time Stone and he understands all the reasons it would be a terrible idea, there’s a sort of truth to what Tony’s saying. Rhodey thinks he’s wrong, but at the same time, he absolutely understands where he’s coming from.

And on top of it all is sharp guilt, because isn’t that exactly what Rhodey’s doing? He got his best friend back. He was willing to accept that use of the stones. If he’d somehow been given the option, back before Tony’s resurrection, to try to use the stones to bring him back or to leave him dead… knowing how it turned out, of course he’d agree to it, but even with no guarantees, he can’t say for sure that he wouldn’t have given in and done it. That he wouldn’t have been willing to risk everything for the chance to bring Tony back, to undo the injustice that was his premature death and to save himself from the imminent prospect of such a horribly lonely life.

And now that he got his miracle, as Tony called it, he’s sitting here and saying that no one else should get that chance. Is he being a dictator himself, trying to decide what’s best for everyone, as though his opinions are guaranteed to be righteous and correct?

While Rhodey’s battling the sudden tide of doubts, Tony speaks up again. “I’m compromised by what happened to me. Maybe I have new powers, but I’m not special. I don’t have any right to decide whether millions of people get another chance or not.”

That’s enough to dispel the fog of doubt and guilt, because it sounds dangerously close to Tony talking himself out of the good decision he made earlier, and that can’t happen. Rhodey knows very
well that Tony can get into his own head and turn himself around so much that he ends up following a bad decision down a worse path. Suddenly, the answer to his own question seems clear to Rhodey.

He puts a hand on Tony’s knee, drawing Tony’s gaze to him. “Listen to me, Tony. You didn’t choose to be brought back. You didn’t ask for this, and I know you never would have. There were too many ways it could have gone wrong. You’ve said yourself how insanely lucky it is that it worked out the way it did, and you wouldn’t be stupid enough to test that luck a second time.”

He remembers the way Tony looked in the first days after his resurrection, how he was stuck with grief as his only emotion, worried that he’d never feel anything else again. In some of those moments, Rhodey had privately wondered whether Tony would have been better off not coming back at all. He was grateful for his return, of course, and willing to work as hard as he needed to in order to help Tony recover, but he also knew that Tony would never have wanted that for himself. It’s those memories that give strength and conviction to Rhodey’s words now.

“It’s tragic that so many people died. It’s horrible, and it’s unfair, and we’re always going to wish it hadn’t happened. But you were right about the stones being too dangerous to mess with. Don’t ever doubt that. And this? This isn’t you being selfish, keeping your powers while denying life to others. This is you being responsible enough to recognize that what happened to you shouldn’t happen again, because there are a million ways it can go wrong. This is you taking responsibility for that choice, because there are people out there who would want to make the wrong one, and you know why that can’t happen. It’s a hell of a burden to bear, and I’m sorry that it has to be on your shoulders. I’m sorry that I can’t do more for you. But you’re doing the right thing.”

Tony gives him a tired, borderline tearful smile, then closes his eyes, swaying forward. Rhodey catches him gently around the shoulders, running a hand once over his hair affectionately, then easing him back. It’s been an exhausting day, and these heavy conversations always seem to take a lot out of Tony.

Rhodey goes about getting himself ready for bed, and by the time he comes back, Tony is already buried under the covers, hiding most of his glow in layers of blankets. Rhodey only gives him a fond smile, pulling himself into bed silently and settling down. He can only hope that the next few days are relatively uneventful, so they both have time to think things through and recover from this.

Rhodey’s just starting to drift off when Tony lets out a quiet breath beside him and shifts on the bed. “You do plenty for me, Rhodey,” he says suddenly. “You don’t ever need to apologize to me for not doing more. You—you keep me sane, and on track, and you have all the hope and the happiness where I don’t. I can’t imagine what that’s like, and I know I don’t always make it easy. Just… thank you. For everything.”

Rhodey smiles, twisting to put a hand over Tony’s. He doesn’t bother to open his eyes, just settles further into the pillow and squeezes Tony’s hand to let him know he heard him. He could make another impassioned speech about how much Tony helps him, or how proud he is of his recovery, but he doesn’t need to. He just whispers his response into the darkness. “Yeah, I love you too.”

Chapter End Notes

What Rhodey says to Tony here is partially based off a quote from Star Trek TOS, The Ultimate Computer. It’s actually a pretty dumb episode imo (a lot of them are but I still love TOS), but there’s a part that I’ve always liked, where Kirk is worrying about his
job being replaced by a computer. He tells McCoy he’s worried that he’s so jealous and proud that he’d stand in the way of innovation just because he’s afraid of becoming obsolete, and McCoy tells him, “Jim, if you have the awareness to ask yourself that question, you don’t need me to answer it for you.”
Starlight

Chapter Notes

This chapter is basically filler, but I needed to fit in some necessary “what’s happening in the world” sort of stuff. Along with world-type stuff, there’s some more individual Rhodey and Tony stuff (some fluff, some angst, the usual). I’m very excited about the next chapter and hoping to write it soon.

Things settle. It’s slow, and it’s not always great, but it happens.

Nearly six months pass after Thanos’s death, and in that time, a lot changes. A lot settles. The first months, consumed with recovery and gathering the remains of civilization, pass by, their work completed. In their place comes the endless rebuilding, the inevitable heavy weight of loss, the prospect of finding a new normal after every inch of the planet was so thoroughly changed.

Winter comes to the northern hemisphere. In what some call a miracle, others luck, what comes is one of the mildest winters in decades. It starts late, giving those who were still displaced after the invasion time to find adequate shelter. When it does arrive, the snow is light, the wind practically nonexistent. The sun stays out.

There are always exceptions, of course. In the US, half of Wisconsin gets buried under five feet of snow in November, and they spend a struggling week scrambling to find the equipment and personnel to clear the roads and get everything running again. Michigan sees three days of freezing rain that take down power lines all over the state, something their drastically reduced resources aren’t prepared for.

Northern Scotland is lost to the weather for almost a week in early December. When they dig themselves out, entire towns have been wiped out, small places that had suffered more drastically from the population loss and physical destruction. The weather warms in the south as it cools in the north, and Australia sees a wildfire rage through hundreds of acres of land. With less than half of their usual resources and people to combat it, they’re forced to watch it burn through places that had just been rebuilding.

But news isn’t all bad. People band together to deal with weather the same way they dealt with the immediate aftermath of the invasion. Everything Thanos did is still coloring everyone’s lives, and anyone claiming that humans don’t instinctively help each other would have a hard time in the face of the generosity and cooperation that people are still showing in spades even months after the end of the invasion.

That’s not to say that there aren’t those taking advantage of every situation they can. As society recovers, so does crime and greed. There are people out there who will loot abandoned houses, steal from shelters, and attack people in the streets, but the damage they can do is outweighed by the kindness others are willing to show. Money is back to going around pretty much everywhere by five months in, capitalism making its comeback. There are companies cutting corners to put out “helpful” products, taking advantage of the desperation still present everywhere to price as high as they can. But they never get a foothold, because there are too many others out there still giving back. Stark Industries leads by example, and when faced with their superpowered CEO, savior of the world and still giving back to the public in every way he can, it’s hard for anyone else to manipulate and take
advantage of others without their own shame bringing them down. Of course, the fact that it’s hard to compete with SI’s lower prices and larger impact helps significantly more than any moral arguments.

As December rolls in, the world adjusts around the holiday season. In the US, where Christmas was as much a corporate holiday as a religious celebration, it’s hard to picture things ever being the same as they once were. Still, people reinvent, they adapt. There aren’t a lot of holiday lights or trees going up where power grids are still recovering and thousands of people are still living in shelters or temporary homes, but people still find ways to give gifts, give thanks, show their joy. The religious hold services where and when they can, and see a tide of new people coming in, wanting to give their thanks for their continued life to anyone who might be listening. Communities that can’t afford the old extravagant parties and decorations hold gigantic potlucks, distributing food and blankets instead of less practical gifts, making sure that no one goes hungry or cold.

There are other unique problems that the invasion has brought up. Early in November, Stark Industries collaborates with governments all over the world—which are starting to get a real foothold again, recovering well and once again taking a larger role in the workings of many of the most populated areas—to launch a massive alien tech collection. They offer valuable incentives to anyone who brings in anything that was looted from the ships or the corpses of Thanos’s minions. By the time it gains any traction, there are plenty of black market sales going on—which is part of what prompted the program in the first place—but the market goes dry very fast when people realize they can get a hell of a lot more from the government or SI for their bits and pieces than they could get from anyone else.

People question, of course; they worry. Any organization collecting alien tech like that makes people nervous. The distrust that many people used to have for government is lesser now that most governments were decimated by the invasion and are being rebuilt from the ground up, but it’s still there. And though people respect SI, their fear of anything alien can overcome that. No one would accuse Tony to his face of hoarding alien tech or doing anything unsavory with it—and indeed, those who ask him about the program don’t try to—but they’re less hesitant about questioning a company. To combat it, the governments and SI are as transparent as possible, releasing lists of items gathered and how they’re handled, transported, and either destroyed or locked down.

There’s other alien tech out there, without a doubt. Organizations that had plans for it already are likely keeping what they have, unlike the random citizens who did most of the original collection and simply used what they picked up to trade for other things. Those organizations no doubt have stockpiles by the time the buyback program is launched. But their supply is cut off, and the program has the added benefit of public awareness. Anyone who wants to actually use any of the black market alien tech has to be careful, because every other person on the street is on the lookout for it.

The counts eventually come in. Every country, every city, every household is different in when and how they approach it, but eventually, the data all comes together. It’s broadcasted all over the world, and the world takes pause, not sure what to do with the information. The final counts: just over six hundred million dead or gone after the invasion. Just shy of ten percent of the population. Most of those were killed in the fighting, slaughtered by Thanos’s minions as the camps were emptied, or taken off planet, but there were plenty who died in the camps or in the weeks and months following the invasion, when shelter was scarce and resources practically nonexistent.

Considering what could have happened, some say, ten percent of the population isn’t that bad. Numbers like that are hard for the mind to comprehend, too large to really mean anything. But it isn’t difficult for people to find empathy, to see the smaller picture within the larger one. No one is unaffected. Even those few who were lucky enough to have kept their families together can’t look next door without seeing loss and devastation. No one quite knows what to do with the numbers, so they talk. They talk on the news, on the internet, in person, and as they’ve been doing all along, they
continue to heal.

As grief passes in stages, so does recovery from the invasion. The relief of Thanos’s death and the end of the invasion fades, though a profound gratitude will always be left behind. As life finds its new normal, fear is always lapping at its heels, trying to drag it down. People are afraid of another Thanos, of retaliation for killing the Titan, of another attack on the Earth when it’s at its most vulnerable.

It seems, for a while, like there’s a new proposal or push for superhero teams or planetary defenders every week. But proposals are as far as anyone knows how to go. The world doesn’t know who to look to now that most of its former heroes are dead.

Tony Stark, of course, the savior of the planet, is always first on everyone’s mind. But even those who practically worship him recognize that he is one man. Without a system, or even others to join in a team, the conversations never go far. Tony is asked about it, of course, but he deflects the questions expertly at every instance, and no one ever seems to notice until he’s gone that he never gave them an answer.

Tony will always be the one who ended the invasion and saved them all, but he’s also back to being the face of tech innovation and of Stark Industries. The world gets used to his altered appearance—eventually, it just becomes a part of him, no longer something novel. He doesn’t talk much about his powers, though plenty of people ask, but he’s seen using them a few times. Iron Man makes more appearances than Tony’s new powers, helping with the continued reconstruction, occasionally coming in for a daring rescue or to help in a local disaster.

James Rhodes is well known enough from his days as War Machine, and though he no longer dons the armor thanks to his injuries, he’s still somewhat of a celebrity at SI and around the world. They don’t tend to focus much on him, particularly when Tony is around—which he is perfectly fine with—but he does get attention, since he’s taken a high-up position at SI and everyone knows that he and Tony live together in Stark Tower.

For Rhodey, it’s practically normal. He might not be flying missions with Iron Man right now, but he’s always been at the edge of the spotlight, an occupational hazard when one’s best friend is Tony Stark. He doesn’t have Tony’s masterful skills with the press, but he knows his way around an interview and he’s fine with a little attention. He can use it to bring awareness to issues and pursue opportunities for SI. And sometimes, a camera in his face means one less on Tony.

Tony is doing well. He’s really getting back into being Iron Man, going out in the suit as much as he can. He’s spending a lot of his free time down in the lab again, tinkering with the suits and building new ones, though without some of the manic, anxious energy that he used to have. This seems to Rhodey to be purely about the joy of creation, even though Tony still says he can’t feel true joy or happiness.

Tony smiles regularly, not just the nice ones for the media—Rhodey doesn’t count those, he knows they’re not real—but genuine ones. It’s hard to say whether he smiles as much as he used to. In those last few miserable years before his death, he was so stressed and unhappy that he might very well smile more now than he did then. But it’s definitely muted now compared to his best times, the years before and even the first few after Afghanistan. He seems to be proud of his work with SI, but he doesn’t get excited about it the same way he would in the past. He clearly likes being in the suit, but he doesn’t quite pilot it with the same unrestrained freedom that he used to.

They still have their talks regularly. It’s a little more difficult now to parse out what exactly Tony’s feeling and what he’s still lacking. He smiles, he feels surprise and a sort of nostalgia and what he describes as “familiarity” with the bots and Rhodey, but he still says that he doesn’t feel happy.
Rhodey hasn’t had the courage to ask if what Tony’s looking for is unattainable, an idealistic notion of what he thinks happiness should be instead of what it actually is. Sometimes Rhodey can’t help but feel frustrated with Tony’s vague issues and his apparent unwillingness to really search for a solution. Other times, he’s ashamed of those thoughts, and reminds himself that he’s the one who keeps telling Tony not to push things, to let them come organically. Mostly, Rhodey just tries to be supportive, telling himself—rightfully—that Tony knows himself best, and just because he can’t describe what’s happening doesn’t mean he can’t handle it.

Rhodey knows very well he should be seeing a professional, should be encouraging Tony to see one too, but it’s hard for many reasons, for Tony and for himself. He trusts Tony, he knows him, and he knows that Tony trusts him too. If he were to suggest it, he wouldn’t want Tony to think he was trying to avoid listening to him or talking about his issues. On his own side, Rhodey himself isn’t sure he’d feel comfortable telling a stranger about his problems.

There’s the added issue that no one but Rhodey, Tony, and Rhodey’s mom knows about Tony’s emotional problems. He’s significantly better now, enough that if news did get out, it might not be quite the blow that it once would have been. But that wouldn’t stop it from being a terrible personal invasion. A therapist, in all likelihood, would be a complete professional, not telling anyone else what they learned about Tony Stark. But Rhodey just doesn’t feel like they can take that chance with a stranger, and he thinks Tony would probably agree.

On the physical side, Rhodey was right about Tony’s marks fading. The internet has noticed too, and though there are plenty of theories out there, no one really has an answer. Tony isn’t forthcoming about it; he doesn’t talk much about his powers, about the Infinity Stones or what Thanos did to him, and no one is really brave enough to ask him. But around the six month mark, Rhodey compares pictures taken over every week since the invasion ended, and he can tell that the marks have stopped fading.

They seem to have found a permanence on Tony’s skin. Instead of something bright shining from the surface, now they look like starlight under his skin in the daytime. At night, they glow just faintly enough to illuminate his immediate surroundings instead of an entire room. His eyes don’t look alien, not that they ever really did to Rhodey. Instead, they shine like moonlight reflected off of still water. In his more poetic moments, Rhodey thinks of the light as the soft illumination of Tony’s soul, something he’s always bared to the world but which most hadn’t taken the time to see before. He knows Tony would tease him for the flowery language, so he keeps that to himself.

He does ask Tony about it. He shows him the pictures, asks if Tony feels anything different in relation to the marks on his skin. Tony says that he’s never really felt them, they’re just there, but he thinks they respond to his powers and how they’re being used. Tony thinks that he might now be comfortable enough with his powers that everything inside him has settled, in a way.

At the very least, Tony does seem comfortable with his powers. They’re constantly growing; he works a little bit every day to get better precision and control. Since Strange’s visit and his first, instinctual barrier creation, he seems to have opened up a whole new area of abilities. He practices bringing up shields that seem to be practically impenetrable—Iron Man’s repulsors, electricity, fire, nothing makes a dent when he’s really concentrating. He begins branching out, learning to manipulate the shape and texture of objects. Rhodey watches it with a sort of proud fascination, absolutely sure in the knowledge that Tony would never test unpracticed abilities around Rhodey—or anyone else for that matter—and isn’t endangering anyone.

Strange keeps to his word and drops by a few times a month, mostly to giver reports on the Time Stone’s activity, but also to observe Tony’s powers and offer some of his own “advice.” Rhodey thinks he’s a pompous ass who likes to picture himself “mentoring” Tony even though Tony’s
Infinity Stone-based powers surely far surpass Strange’s own magic, but Tony takes it in stride. They do learn a little more about Strange, and Rhodey gains some more respect for him when he learns that he was a doctor, a man of science who initially shunned the idea of magic and who still likes to incorporate the sciences where he can. The three of them get into a few discussions—most of which turn heated, not necessarily angry or mean but just passionate and occasionally highly frustrated—about the intersection of magic and science and how scientific principles can—or cannot—be applied to Tony’s powers and the Stones.

It’s after the day that Strange tells them about some of his explorations of other dimensions and, along with it, other worlds, that Tony and Rhodey finally come to a discussion that Rhodey had known in the back of his mind was coming. Though he accepted Rhodey’s insistence that he was right about not using the Time Stone, Tony never truly let go of his fears that he could misuse the trust and power that he has over people. He also won’t ever drop the responsibility he puts on himself for everything Thanos destroyed and everything that was recovered.

Which is why Rhodey finds himself arguing with Tony one evening about the people who were taken off the planet in the invasion. Easily a third of the people that were passed through Thanos’s checkpoints, maybe even up to half of them, were carted off the planet by his soldiers to be sold as slaves. No doubt many of them are dead, but the majority are probably still out there, on other planets, likely living terrible lives.

Rhodey’s heart aches for them, but there’s nothing he can do about it. Tony, naturally, adds that guilt and grief to his own without a second thought, and as Tony tends to do, he involves himself way too quickly and too intensely in ideas for saving them, and he won’t be dissuaded easily. When Rhodey tries to point out the obvious problems, like actually getting to space, Tony just says that he’s sure he can figure it out. And Rhodey doesn’t doubt that he can, but that isn’t the point. When he tries to question how Tony plans to track down and rescue millions of humans, he doesn’t get a real answer.

But when he can see that Tony’s getting the idea too deep into his head, when Tony’s actually starting to think he should do this, Rhodey knows he has to interfere. Maybe he comes on too strong, maybe he’s a little too insensitive or insistent or frustrated, but they end up truly yelling at each other for the first time since Tony’s death and resurrection. It’s far from their worst fight ever, and their friendship is too strong to be broken apart or even cracked by something like this, but it’s still unpleasant.

They both know that Rhodey’s trying to look out for Tony. Tony knows Rhodey’s being more rational than he is, and Rhodey knows that Tony lashes out when he feels like he’s losing an argument, even more so when he feels like it’s some kind of a personal failing. Still, he doesn’t expect the response when he tells Tony that there’s nothing they can realistically do about the people who were taken off the planet, that they’re going to have to accept that loss. Tony is quiet and angry and guilty, but when he accuses Rhodey of sounding like Rogers, trying to write off innocent people to make himself feel better, it stings.

Rhodey knows he didn’t really mean it, but he doesn’t have a response in the moment. He just leaves, angry and hurt and wanting to be alone. He has a few brief moments of guilt, knowing that Tony was lashing out because he didn’t know how to handle the knowledge that millions of people were out there suffering and he couldn’t—or shouldn’t—help them. But Rhodey has feelings too, and though he knows Tony didn’t really mean it and will probably apologize later, it still hurts to be compared to Rogers. It’s not just what Tony said, the reminder of Rogers’s callous disregard for the lives lost directly because of his actions, but the fact that Rogers is the one who killed Tony, the ultimate betrayal of a so-called friend. Tony wasn’t making that comparison, but Rhodey does, and it hurts.
But when Tony finds him later in a living room a few floors down, climbs onto the couch to curl up at the opposite end from where Rhodey’s sitting, and explains to his own knees, contrite and genuinely apologetic, that he should never have said that and that he’s never once thought Rhodey would really act like Rogers, Rhodey can’t stay angry at him. The way he stares ahead, refusing to look at Rhodey, might seem to some people like a matter of pride, that Tony can’t look someone in the eye and apologize, but Rhodey knows Tony better than that. He knows it’s fear, fear that he’s screwed something up beyond repair, that he’s ruined their friendship, that now Rhodey will abandon him.

Which is out of proportion to the fight and it speaks a hell of a lot to Tony’s myriad of issues, but Rhodey melts in the face of it. He beckons where he knows Tony will see it and Tony immediately comes to him, leaning into him until he can muffle another quiet apology into Rhodey’s shoulder. And because Rhodey knows Tony so well, he doesn’t try to tell Tony that he accepts the apology or that he was never really that angry in the first place, because he won’t be believed. Instead, he just sighs, and squeezes Tony a little too tight, and asks him if he knows what a pain in the ass he is, and he feels Tony’s smile against his shoulder.

As the world settles, so do they.
It’s early January now. The coldest days are coming to them, but New York and the world have done a lot of healing in the past six months. Tony and Rhoded host a few more people than usual in the Tower, opening up space for anyone who doesn’t have decent enough housing to stay out of the cold and get some good meals, but for the most part, everyone is doing very well.

New Year’s was odd. With a lot of the day to day workings of life before the invasion back in place, New York City at the very least seemed like it could have celebrated practically the way it did before. As with every holiday that’s come so far since the end of the invasion, people came together with intensity, celebrating their life and all the things they’d never realized they should be grateful for.

But New York City, as much as it’s physically recovered, isn’t the same, and neither was the celebration. People gathered in Times Square, they cheered and they counted down the new year and they kissed on the stroke of midnight, there were cameras there and reporters smiling at the positivity. But there was no confetti, no commercialization, no jumbotrons advertising the newest movies or products or whatever. It was a very raw, organic celebration. Some of the skyscrapers that used to line the streets are gone now, the rubble cleared away but the holes where they used to be still clear evidence of the destruction.

The area Rhodey and Tony visited on their day off months ago, which has been left as is and officially turned into a memorial for the invasion, had more visitors than ever on the new year. People celebrated their lives, but they also remembered what was lost. Though some are no doubt still stuck in their grief, as a whole, the night seemed to put a lot to rest. People made a commitment to move forward.

Stark Industries keeps them both busy enough, though they both have other responsibilities on top of it. Tony is in the lab as much as he’s in the suit, and he keeps up with working on honing his abilities. He’s also got some sort of mad science project going on with Strange, trying to find better ways to measure activity from the Time Stone without risking poking at it.

Rhodey has his own projects in the lab, plus his physical therapy, which is coming along amazingly well. He can stand on his own now for a few seconds, even take a few very small, tentative steps without the support of his braces. Tony’s updated them several times, creating new programs that can adjust the level of support automatically, allowing him to keep them on most of the time now instead of having to use his chair.

He’s happy with his progress, he tries to keep any frustrations to a minimum, and he works hard without pushing himself too far. He’s far from completely recovered, but the progress he’s made, which he once thought would be impossible, is amazing. He’s gotten used to his wheelchair, and he doesn’t have any desire to forget the time he was in it, but the day he’s first able to stand on his own, he’s ecstatic. He sneaks away from Tony that afternoon so he can spend an hour lying on a couch downstairs, alternately trying to remember how to breathe like a person and sobbing into a pillow. So maybe he has a lot of pent-up emotions. When he does come back, Tony gives him a look that says he knows exactly what Rhodey was just doing, but isn’t going to push it.

It’s now a week and a half into January, a completely ordinary day, though lucky in that both Rhodey and Tony are in the Tower instead of out at meetings or, in Tony’s case, in the suit. They’re
upstairs for lunch when a call comes up from security, which is odd. The Tower gets plenty of visitors requesting to see Tony, from media to people from the government to random citizens who’ve trekked across states to try to see their savior face to face. But usually, security does a marvelous job of politely but firmly turning away most of them.

Not that Tony and Rhodey don’t want to see the public, or occasionally hear what even random people have to say to them, but they need their privacy. Having to turn away even the most well-intentioned people who try to ambush him in his home is something Tony’s dealt with his entire life. Many of the people who used to work that job for him for years and understood all the little intricacies of when it was and wasn’t appropriate to occasionally let someone through are gone now, so Rhodey assumes that’s what this is: a relatively new security person, possibly swayed by a pretty face or a sad story into calling up to ask if they could be sent up.

“Mr. Stark, Colonel Rhodes,” the man from downstairs says when they accept the call—despite the decimation of the military, most of the staff still insist on addressing Rhodey as Colonel—“there’s a, um… visitor here to see you?” The note of questioning in his voice is a little odd, though Rhodey chalks it up to him being unsure about bothering them.

“What is it?” Tony asks before Rhodey can.

There’s a pause and then an awkward throat clearing. “He… didn’t give his name,” the guard says, and Rhodey and Tony exchange a look.

Okay…” Rhodey says, trying not to sound rude, but honestly not sure what the problem is. “Why don’t you ask him?”

“Um, I can’t, sir, I’m sorry. I sent him up.”

Woah, wait, what?” A spike of alarm goes through Rhodey at that. What would have possessed security to send up someone who didn’t even give their name? It’s been months since he’s even thought of her, but Rhodey’s mind immediately goes to Maximoff, remembering the way she could turn people into puppets, how Tony looked haunted and jumped at shadows after whatever she did to him. Witnesses have confirmed that Thanos killed her, but what if there are others like her out there?

“Well, he was wearing a mask, but he’s worked with you before, uh…”

“What?” Rhodey’s already asking, but Tony steps back next to him and lets out a little gasp, turning to face where the elevator will let their guest off.

Rhodey honestly has no idea what’s going on. He wouldn’t; he didn’t work as closely with their guest as Tony did. When the elevator door opens and the kid Tony brought along in Germany steps out, dressed in the suit Tony gifted him sans mask, it still takes Rhodey half a second to place him. He didn’t really interact with the kid much, only saw him for the first time in Germany once the fighting started, and his memory of that fight is a little hazy anyway, after his injury.

But Tony was the one who went to recruit the kid in the first place, the one who researched him and spent hours studying his technique and built a fully functional suit for him before he ever even met him in person. And now it’s Tony who’s turning toward the kid, true astonishment on his face. “Peter!”

The kid looks sheepish as he takes a few more steps inside the suite. “Hey, Mr. Stark, um, Colonel Rhodes,” he nods to both of them. “I’m sorry for showing up without warning, you know, and I think I might have freaked out your security guy? But I thought if I showed up without my suit they
wouldn’t let me in, even if I told them I knew you, you know, they wouldn’t believe me, I mean I’m sure a ton of people say that, but I was sort of trying to still keep the whole secret identity thing so I wouldn’t tell him my name, uh—“

“Peter,” Tony cuts off the kid’s rambling, not unkindly, and crosses half the space between them; Rhodey follows, his braces adjusting as he puts more power into his stride to keep it smooth and keep up with Tony.

Tony looks like he’s going to go right up to the kid, but then he stops, hesitates, just a few steps from him. His body language turns unsure, and this time it only takes Rhodey a heartbeat to catch up. This is the first time since Rhodey’s mom that Tony’s met someone else who knew him personally—maybe Tony and Peter didn’t exactly get a chance to become close before Tony died, but they were certainly close enough for Tony to obviously care what this kid thinks of him. Rhodey knows very well that, as much as she tried to hide it from him, Tony could tell that Rhodey’s mother was wary of him, of the changes to him. And now Tony’s afraid that Peter will look at him the same way, like he’s a stranger wearing a familiar face.

Peter’s eyes flick between them when they both come to a stop. Rhodey considers trying to give him a significant look behind Tony’s back, but he doesn’t need to—evidently the kid can’t help himself, eager and earnest and absolutely genuine as he closes the distance and throws his arms around Tony. Tony barely hesitates for a second before he’s returning the hug, tension melting out of his body when he returns the embrace. Rhodey breathes an internal sigh of relief. Not just at the fact that this young kid, bright and innocent and absolutely deserving of the rest of his life, survived the invasion, but because this is exactly what Tony needs. Someone other than Rhodey who sees immediately that he’s the same person, who isn’t afraid of him, who will treat him the same as before.

The hug lingers, but eventually they break apart, Tony holding Peter’s shoulders and holding him at arm’s length, looking him over. “You’re okay?” he asks, and Rhodey wants to cheer at the real care and concern in his voice. One more mark in his book of positive emotional progress.

Peter nods. “Yeah, we just got back to the city, me and my aunt,” which answers Rhodey’s question about why he’s here now. “We were here during the invasion, but then we went out to stay with one of her friends after, to help them rebuild their neighborhood and stuff. They put up a new apartment building around where our old one was and we moved back in last week.”

Peter mirror’s Tony’s movements, looking him up and down as well. “Are you okay? I mean, you’re not—well—I mean you look fine, but you know, I just—” he’s stumbling over his words, which Rhodey thinks is almost endearing, but then his face screws up and he looks like he might cry suddenly, and Rhodey doesn’t know what to do.

He’s expecting the kid to have a breakdown in front of them, talk about the trauma that he must have gone through in the invasion. And Rhodey won’t blame him, but he also doesn’t really want that to be put on Tony, who has enough emotional baggage to deal with between him and Rhodey. Peter surprises both of them, though, when he takes a shaky breath and says, “I’m sorry.”

Rhodey actually steps forward to put a hand on Peter’s shoulder beside Tony’s, honestly confused and just a bit heartbroken over the despondent look on his face. The kid’s kicked puppy look could make anyone melt.

“What do you have to be sorry for?” Tony asks, the same confusion in his voice as Rhodey feels.

“I—I didn’t do enough, in Germany, you brought me to web them up and I got too close, just like you said I shouldn’t, then I got hurt and you sent me home, I should have stayed, I could have helped
you, I could have done something! But you made me leave, I left you, and then you got hurt, both of you,” he looks at Rhodey and then back to Tony, “and you—you died, because you went out there alone, I could have helped, I should have helped. And then after you died, when the aliens showed up… everyone went out to fight, that Vision guy and all these other people and I didn’t, I should have fought back, but I didn’t, I hid from them, I’m so sorry.”

Despite hesitating and tripping over his words, there’s an intensity and a maturity in Peter’s face, in what he says, that Rhodey knows is part of why Tony was willing to recruit someone so young in the first place. The invasion has surely aged him, like it has for all of them, but those traits were there before, no doubt. It wasn’t just that Tony needed his skills or that the kid was going to be putting himself in danger with or without Tony’s intervention. Rhodey sees now in Peter what he knows Tony saw back before Germany: the future of the Avengers, of superheroes in general. A truly kind, compassionate person who will work to protect people for all the right reasons and none of the wrong ones.

Tony doesn’t say anything immediately, just pulls Peter into another hug. This one is short, but Rhodey hears Peter mumble another apology. Tony shakes his head as he pulls away this time. “Come sit down with us, okay?” Tony gestures to one of the long couches, steering Peter toward it with a hand on his shoulder and with Rhodey trailing behind them, eyeing it and smiling to himself. Peter’s the first person besides Rhodey that Tony has felt comfortable touching for more than a moment, and it’s yet another victory.

When they’ve all settled onto the couch, Rhodey reaching down to cut power to his braces for the moment and Peter nervously picking at his fingers, Tony takes a deep breath. “Peter, listen. You don’t have anything to be sorry for. Everything you just said—none of that was your fault, your responsibility, or anything you did wrong. I’m the one who should be sorry, for involving you in the first place. Germany—that never should have happened. You shouldn’t have been there to get hurt in the first place. I know,” he holds up a hand, forestalling Peter when he opens his mouth, “you wanted to come, you made the decision and you fought. But I should have known there was no way to guarantee you stayed out of it. I should have known you’d end up in the fight, and I never should have put you in that position in the first place. I knew you wouldn’t be able to say no to me and I asked you to come anyway—that’s on me.”

Peter’s shaking his head, jumping in the moment Tony pauses for breath. “But Mr. Stark, you told me we were just there to talk to them, and to catch them if they wouldn’t listen to you. I know you weren’t expecting a fight, you even told me there shouldn’t be one, but then they fought anyway and they were hitting way harder than you said, I know you didn’t think that would happen.”

“Well, I should have,” Tony says. That’s familiar to Rhodey; Tony carries guilt and responsibility like no one else and he has a hard time letting it go. “I should have known, from how they’d acted before, from the… people who were involved, that it was going to turn into a fight. And no matter what ended up happening, you shouldn’t have been there in the first place. You’re right, I didn’t expect it to escalate the way it did, but that’s on me for not predicting it, and on them for doing it in the first place, okay? Not you.”

Peter nods, reluctantly, but before he can try to argue the point again, Tony continues. “And Siberia? Peter, I never would have wanted you to be there, you or anyone else. I’d never have been okay with that. That wasn’t just a fight, that wasn’t like Germany. I died, and that alone should tell you how dangerous it was. If you’d been there with me, you couldn’t have stopped them. You couldn’t have saved me, and if you’d died too? That would have been my fault, and I never would have forgiven myself for that.”
There’s a quiet intensity to Tony’s voice, the kind that draws anyone in, and sure enough, Peter seems absolutely captivated. “What would I have told your aunt if you’d been killed there? I couldn’t live with that. No one else could either. And Peter, best case scenario, even if you made it out, I still wouldn’t have. You think I would have wanted you to see that?”

Tony leaves it at that, Peter imagining watching him die, and that’s enough, but Rhodey knows how much more is in Tony’s mind. The awful truth of what happened in Siberia, what Tony saw. He never would have wanted Peter to see that video, or to see Tony like that in its aftermath, lost in his grief. Peter nods again, the reluctance gone this time, hopefully accepting what Tony’s telling him.

“As for the invasion,” Tony says firmly, “Thanos would have killed you. If you’d fought, you would have died, just like everyone else who did. I’m not faulting the people who did fight, that’s what they wanted to do, but they went into that knowing they were probably going to die. You’re too young for that.” When Peter frowns, an obstinate look appearing on his face, Tony adds, “not too young to make your own decisions, that’s not what I’m saying. But you’re too young to throw your life away in a hopeless fight.”

Peter nods again, but there’s still guilt etched on his face, so Rhodey speaks up. “Trust me, kid, from someone who’s experienced with fighting, and who was there when the invasion started? They knew they weren’t winning it. Vision knew he was going to his death when he fought Thanos. So did most of the soldiers out there. They went because it was their duty. And they weren’t wrong for that, but you weren’t wrong for staying out of it, either. Don’t take this the wrong way, but you wouldn’t have made a difference. You’d have just ended up dead, and the world would have been the same, and then when the invasion ended, you wouldn’t be here.”

He’s not necessarily trying to scare Peter, but maybe that’s what’s required. He doesn’t want to see him blaming himself, thinking he, a teenager, should have sacrificed his life in the initial invasion. Maybe a part of it is his selfish desire to have this kid stick around because of how good he obviously is for Tony, but most of it is just his instinctual desire to see this young kid, full of potential, not weighed down by life or death decisions and the idea that he should be dead.

Peter looks like he doesn’t quite know what to say, and Rhodey figures maybe it’s time to change the subject. “Is everyone around you okay? You mentioned your aunt.”

“Yeah,” Peter’s voice goes quiet. “We’re in a new place now, it’s pretty nice, you know, considering they built it really fast after the invasion. Our old place was pretty much destroyed.” He grimaces, and Rhodey can see the haunted look in his eyes, something terrible that no one so young should have to bear. “Most of the people we knew, our neighbors and—and the kids at my school, they didn’t make it.”

Rhodey closes his eyes for a moment and he hears Tony take a deep breath next to him. Peter’s too young, too innocent to know the pain they do, the terrible guilt and horror of knowing almost everyone you once knew is dead and you have to go on without them, rebuild your life.

“Where we lived, it got hit pretty bad in the first few days. There was a ton of damage. We went back, when the invasion ended, but… they were pulling bodies out of what was left of the buildings. There were dead people in the streets, just laying there, and May didn’t—didn’t want to deal with that. She didn’t want me to see it.”

Rhodey’s thought of it before, when he saw kids out on the streets since the invasion ended, and back in the camp during it. His thoughts are the same now. He can’t imagine being responsible for a kid through the invasion. And even when it ended, sights like that… the unavoidable death counts, scenes of destruction, the hardships of rebuilding. There would be no way to protect a kid from that.
“It wasn’t just the fighting,” Peter continues. “Where I lived, where most of the kids from my school lived nearby… most of them ended up in the same few camps, and they—” Peter’s breath hitches—“they got emptied early. They’re all gone.”

Tony reaches forward again to grasp Peter’s shoulder. There’s a moment of silent solidarity between all three of them, before Tony asks, “But you weren’t there?”

Peter shakes his head, taking a moment to swipe at his eyes. “I didn’t—um. May didn’t know about Spiderman. I never told her. I didn’t want to worry her, even when I went to Germany, you know, she didn’t know. I was trying to figure out a way to tell her. She’s always worried about me, and if she found out what I was doing…”

Peter sniffs, giving them a teary smile. “But as soon as the first portal appeared, that big one, I told her about it. When I saw it, I thought… I thought I was going to go fight. And I thought she should know. But as soon as I told her, she freaked out. She was so scared, for me, and for both of us, I think. The aliens started attacking and she made me promise not to go out there and try to fight them. And she was so scared… I couldn’t leave her, you know?”

Rhodey and Tony both nod. “So what did you do?”

“I promised her I wouldn’t fight, and we left. We wanted to get out, find somewhere safe, out of the city at least. A ton of people were trying to leave, and the roads were all being shut down by the military, if they weren’t already totally blocked by traffic, it was crazy. So we just packed a couple bags and I put on the suit, I was planning to just carry her across the city, get out as fast as possible. But then Karen told me about this safehouse, just outside the city. She said you owned it, that it was, like, crazy well protected and we’d be safe there, so we headed for it.”

Tony looks to Rhodey for a second, confusion on his face, but at Rhodey’s own shrug, he asks, “Who’s Karen?”

“Oh,” Peter looks at them, wide-eyed. “My, um… suit lady? The one in the Spiderman suit? She—she activated, I guess, when the portal opened, she said something about danger and emergency protocols and she opened up all these new protocols on my suit. Which, by the way, there’s so much stuff in there, Mr. Stark, thank you, I didn’t even know about it and Karen’s been walking me through it but I haven’t even gotten to half of it—” he has to pause to draw breath, now nearly giddy in his excitement, but then he smiles sheepishly and sits back a little. “Anyway, she didn’t have a name, so I called her Karen.”

Something in Rhodey’s heart simultaneously aches and swells with affection. Remembering JARVIS and FRIDAY, Tony’s children who sacrificed themselves for him, will always be painful. But knowing Tony coded another AI specifically for a kid he saw potential in, and that he left her a blank slate for Peter to work with, even up to naming her, that’s sweet. In a way, another one of Tony’s AI kids is living on, even if she was always meant for someone else.

Rhodey isn’t surprised, either, that Tony would have put an AI in Peter’s suit, or a ton of features and extra bits and pieces that he might have initially withheld, hidden away, but which would activate if there was an emergency. Rhodey knew about some of the safehouses Tony kept for himself, friends, and family, too, an idea he’d supposedly come up with after the Ultron disaster, something about Clint and a farm. If he hadn’t been stuck in a wheelchair with his best friend dead and aliens descending on them faster than they could hope to fight, he might have made his way to one of them, himself.

“So you stayed in one of the safehouses?” Rhodey asks, but Peter shakes his head.
“Karen directed us, and we tried to get there, but there was a blockade on the route and when we tried to go around it, we ended up stuck, with aliens in every direction. We had to sneak into another building so I could change out of the suit, stick it in my bag and hope no one searched it. May wanted me to leave it, but I didn’t want anyone getting hold of it…”

He looks to Tony, who just pats his shoulder in encouragement. “No one would have blamed you if you had. It was for your safety. But it sounds like it’s good you held onto it.”

“Yeah. We just sort of blended in with a crowd, and we all got moved into one of the camps. But we were halfway across the city by then, far from where we lived, and we mostly got left alone. It was this big gymnasium thing, they had showers and stuff, it wasn’t too bad. I mean, I heard that some other people… they were outside, or crammed in way too crowded. We saw some of the bodies that were left behind when we tried to go back home after it was all over.”

Yet more incredible luck. Rhodey supposes that everyone left alive now had some kind of good luck in the invasion—that’s why they’re alive. Even though it’s awful that Peter came back with his aunt and had to see some of what was left behind by the invasion, it sounds like he was in one of the better camps.

Rhodey leans forward. “You did good, really good,” he says, and the look on Peter’s face is suddenly so young and vulnerable that Rhodey’s chest tightens. “It was smart as hell to get out of there, to try to make it to the safehouse.”

Peter looks down for a moment, wringing his hands. “I felt… worthless, a little bit, for just running and hiding. All the military was out fighting, and there were superheroes and stuff out fighting, and even in our camp, there were a few people who tried to attack the aliens, and they got killed. There were only a few guards on us, but I sat there for a whole month, with the suit right in my bag. I could have put it on, fought the guards, I could have protected the people in our camp.”

“You’d have just been killed by other guards when they found out,” Tony says, and Peter nods.

“I know, and May made me promise, and I didn’t want to put her in danger, her or anyone else, you know? But I—I was relieved, too, because I was scared. I was scared of the aliens, and Thanos, they were killing everyone, and I didn’t want to die. I was scared of them and I was actually happy that May made me promise not to fight, because then I had an excuse to stay safe.”

“That’s good,” Rhodey says before Tony can. “Fear keeps you alive.”

“I felt like a coward,” Peter confesses.

Rhodey shakes his head. “You’re not a coward, Peter. Your fear was justified. You were outnumbered and outgunned, and you were right to keep yourself and your aunt safe. You were also right to be worried about endangering other people. I was in one of those camps, and you know what happened on the first day? A guy right near us tried to shoot one of the guards, and the bullet deflected off his armor and hit someone else. He got an innocent person killed, and all he accomplished was getting himself disintegrated, pissing off an alien, and making everyone around him panic even more. People got trampled that day, in part because of him.”

Rhodey has to pause for a moment, overcome by the memories of that day. He’s told Tony most of what happened to him in the camp, but it’s been a long time now since he’s talked about it. And it’s different, somehow, to be talking about it with someone else who was there that day, who experienced what it was like in the camps. Tony has enough horrifying memories to be dealing with, but this is one experience he doesn’t share with Rhodey. Rhodey takes a deep breath. “You absolutely did the right thing; you kept yourself alive, you kept your head down and stayed out of
trouble. Sometimes that’s the best thing to do. It doesn’t make you a coward.”

Peter finally looks up at both of them. “But you guys aren’t afraid of anything. You go out and fight and you’re not afraid.”

Rhodey’s gotten letters from kids, he’s been told he’s a role model and an inspiration before. But in the face of this kid, on the verge of becoming an adult, with superpowers to boot and honestly looking up to Tony and Rhodey, there’s a sense of immediate responsibility for him that leaves Rhodey at a bit of a loss.

He and Tony are both already shaking their heads, though, in response to Peter’s statement. “When I fell in the suit in Germany I was afraid,” Rhodey says to Peter’s wide eyes. “I thought I was going to die, and I was terrified. When Thanos came, I was plenty scared, too. I ended up in a camp just like you, and I didn’t fight then. I kept my head down just like you, I survived, and I was afraid the whole time.”

“I’ve been afraid of all kinds of things, even when I fight,” Tony says. “After the first New York invasion, after Loki, I had panic attacks, Peter. I had nightmares for years. I was always afraid they were coming back. Up until I died. And it turns out I was right.” Peter looks shocked at that.

“I was afraid in Siberia,” Tony adds quietly, “when I was laying there, freezing and injured, and I realized I was going to die. When I knew without a doubt that help wasn’t coming in time, and I was stuck in a dead suit, I was scared as hell. I didn’t want to die. No one does, and that doesn’t make you a coward. Rhodey was right; being afraid made you smart. Fear of death is what keeps us alive.”

Peter nods, eyes on the floor once again, and Rhodey thinks they’ve had enough intensely emotional conversations for now. “Are you staying here?” he asks, pulling both Peter and Tony out of whatever deep thoughts they’re lost in.

“Uh, yeah, May knows I was headed here, I told her I might be gone until tomorrow. I’ll text her, let her know I can stay, I mean, however long you want me to—?”

“Stay the night,” Tony says with a smile, standing up, and Peter and Rhodey follow him. They stretch and head into the kitchen, Tony asking Peter if he’s eaten.

They snack, then sit down to talk some more. Tony interrogates Peter about where they’re staying now, whether it’s safe, what’s happening around him, and how he’s been using the suit. Within minutes, he’s offering for Peter and May to move into the Tower, but Peter declines, polite and—maybe not so surprisingly—mature. “We’ve been helping out a lot in the neighborhood where we moved back, and I mean, they’re kind of depending on us. Plus May is making new friends there, and so am I, and there’s this family in the apartment below us with five kids who lost their dad, so I go and watch the kids a lot.”

Rhodey smiles and sees Tony do the same, feeling a swell of pride for this kid even though he barely knows him. He really is incredible. Tony tells him he understands, but that they’re welcome to visit any time, even bring those kids by. He tells Peter to come by the lab, which sparks a trip down to one of them that lasts hours, until Rhodey practically has to drag the two away from modifying Peter’s suit so they can all eat dinner.

There’s an uncomfortable moment after dinner when Peter finally brings up Tony’s appearance and his powers. Tony hesitates, and Rhodey watches him carefully, not sure what exactly he might want to tell to Peter. Peter’s already backtracking, trying to apologize for bringing it up, but Tony shakes his head and sits down with him again.
To Rhodey’s slight surprise, Tony tells him nearly everything. He doesn’t talk about the worst parts of his recovery, but he confesses his emotional state when he was resurrected, and where his powers came from. He talks about the emotions he’s gotten back and the ones he’s still hoping will come. He looks to Rhodey for permission before telling Peter about his unexpected healing abilities and the fact that Rhodey’s recovery is because of him.

True to the good nature that Rhodey’s already seen in him, Peter takes it all in stride. He doesn’t look disgusted or worried or afraid when Tony tells him about his problems, he just nods along, asks the right questions, and listens. Rhodey watches him like a hawk, a habit he can’t shake even with this amazing kid—Rhodey’s desire to protect Tony from any hurt, physical or emotional, is stronger than his immediate fondness for Peter—but there’s never cause for concern.

Rhodey does feel a slight pang at one point, watching how smoothly Peter takes this information, how comfortable he and Tony are around each other. He wishes his mother could have had the same reaction, for the sake of himself and Tony. But he has to accept that she and Peter are two different people, in different situations, who’ve known Tony differently and have different relationships with him. Tony is no doubt Peter’s first priority in this group, whereas Rhodey was his mother’s primary concern. And Tony is at a different point in his own recovery now, too. It’s easier to hear about the problems he’s now solved than to be faced with them directly. When they’d visited his mom, Tony still hadn’t even smiled since his death.

Peter watches Tony help Rhodey through his evening exercises. The scrutiny doesn’t really bother Rhodey, though the way Peter bounds around the two of them, asking questions about the equipment and the routine and how the braces work, borders on distracting. Thankfully, Tony’s still skilled at keeping up tech conversations while he works, and he and Peter launch into a discussion of the systems of the braces that lasts for most of the set.

They sit down to watch a movie at the end of the night, which ends up turning into a marathon. In the middle of the third one in the set, Rhodey gets up to wash out the empty popcorn bowl and sees that Peter and Tony have fallen asleep on the couch. Tony’s leaned back, head on the back of the couch, glowing just enough to combat the light from the screen. Peter’s just barely leaning into Tony’s side, legs curled up on the couch next to him and Tony’s arm over his shoulders.

Rhodey smiles fondly at the two of them, cleaning up the rest of the food and dishes that are scattered on the floor and table before coming back. When he sits down, slips the braces off his legs, and scoots himself over into his place on Tony’s other side, Tony sighs in his sleep and shifts, leaning over into Rhodey’s side while keeping his grip on the sleeping Peter. Rhodey props a pillow behind his back, puts his own arm over Tony’s shoulders, and leans back to sleep, looking down at the two of them.

They’re an odd bunch. The former War Machine, just learning to walk again, Iron Man as a glowing reincarnation of himself, and a kid wise beyond his years who can probably bench press a city bus, crammed into a gangly teenager’s body. Tomorrow, Peter will go back to his home, though Rhodey certainly hopes he visits as often as Tony clearly wants him to. All of their responsibilities and problems will return in the morning, but for right now, they make a strangely content little group. No matter their issues, Rhodey thinks, this could really be what family feels like.

Chapter End Notes

I snuck in another Star Trek quote, this time from one of the new movies. Hehe.
Rhodey wakes up with an ache in his back and a stiff neck that immediately makes him regret falling asleep on the couch. He tries not to curse out loud while he turns his head back and forth, pushing through the tight discomfort, trying to restore some range of motion.

His right arm has gone completely numb, Tony’s weight resting mostly on it. His right leg is also a bit numb and tingly, probably because it’s still healing and it doesn’t take much to disturb it. Rhodey cranes his neck—biting back another curse when he feels a few sharp cracks and pops—and sees that while Tony has more or less stayed put all night, just slumped down a little to rest more heavily on Rhodey, Peter has managed to wriggle his way down to curl up on the rest of the couch, just his head remaining on Tony’s lap and one arm draped over Tony’s knee.

Rhodey can’t help the rush of fond memories, long nights at MIT that ended with him waking in a very similar position, only with a teenage Tony drooling on him. Tony was a scrawny thing back then and Rhodey’s a lot older now—his stiff joints and numb extremities are a pointed reminder that falling asleep in strange places and positions should be left exclusively to the young. Still, he hardly regrets it.

He contemplates how to move without waking Tony or Peter for a minute and comes up with nothing. But now that he’s awake, his position is rapidly becoming unbearably uncomfortable. He’s also starting to notice that he’s on the wrong side of too hot where Tony’s pressed up against him,
and he has to pee. Moving is becoming a necessity.

Miraculously, he manages to squirm his way out from underneath Tony without waking him. He grabs the pillow that he’d been leaning on and shoves it behind Tony, trying to prop him up against the back of the couch. He doesn’t have much success, but the jostling doesn’t wake Tony, so he’ll take it.

He slips back into his braces, turning them on and thanking Tony’s quality designs for the fact that there’s practically no sound to risk waking the two sleepers. He takes a moment to stretch, shaking his now tingling right hand, and when he glances back at the couch, he sees that Peter’s eyes are open.

Peter blinks, looking around the room for a second like he’s trying to figure out where he is. Rhodey’s about to apologize for waking him, but then the hint of confusion on his face smooths out into recognition and he just turns his head back into Tony’s leg, curling up even tighter on the couch and renewing his grip on Tony’s knee, eyes closing again.

Rhodey doubts this kid would be so open if he were a little more awake, but he smiles just the same. He doesn’t really know Peter, but he can’t deny that he and Tony make a nice picture. Adorable, he’d call it, and he has to muffle a snicker into his hand when he pictures Tony’s face if he said that out loud.

He retreats into the bathroom, still moving stiffly but loosening up as he goes. When he’s done, he heads back into the kitchen. He quietly puts away the rest of the things from last night, then goes about making a large enough breakfast for two adults and a teenager who, if his metabolism is anything like the other superpowered people Rhodey’s met, can probably eat his way through half their kitchen in one sitting alone.

He glances at the clock and is surprised to note that it’s pretty late in the morning; despite how tired they were last night, he would have thought the less than ideal sleeping position would have woken him sooner. Sometimes Rhodey wonders if there’s something about Tony that soothes him to sleep, more than just the healing abilities. He wouldn’t be all that surprised.

When there’s bacon sizzling in the pan, filling the kitchen with delicious smells, and he still hasn’t seen or heard anything from the other two, Rhodey goes to investigate. Tony’s sitting more upright again, wide awake and smiling softly at him, while Peter’s still asleep. “Planning to skip breakfast?” Rhodey asks, raising an eyebrow.

“Didn’t want to wake him,” Tony says, a hand drifting down to brush lightly over Peter’s hair.

“’M awake,” Peter mumbles into Tony’s thigh, scrunching up his face. Rhodey has to resist the urge to laugh again. “I smell food,” Peter adds, now sounding a little more awake.

Peter opens his eyes and half rolls over, looking up to the ceiling and then to Tony above him. Rhodey can see the moment it registers where he is and who he’s been sleeping on; suddenly he sits bolt upright, hair a mess and clearly not entirely awake, but already stammering out, “Sorry, Mr. Stark, um, I didn’t—uh—”

Tony just moves to stretch out, rolling his shoulders and turning his head back and forth. Rhodey notes with a hint of good-natured jealousy that Tony doesn’t seem as stiff as Rhodey was—curse the benefits of magical resurrection. “It’s fine, kid,” Tony says, already moving to get up and meander into the kitchen. “I think we were all out pretty fast last night.”

Soon enough, they’re all settled in the kitchen, enjoying their breakfast. Rhodey was right about
Peter’s eating habits, and he silently reprimands himself when his mind immediately goes to the depressing thought that maintaining that must be difficult now, what with still-recovering food supplies. Not everything needs to be framed in terms of the invasion and its recovery, Rhodey tells himself, and he should be able to enjoy one morning without thinking about it.

Of course, everything does eventually go back to the invasion, to the reality of their lives. Near the end of breakfast, Peter’s asking—innocently, Rhodey knows, even if he’s internally cringing at the minefield Peter’s accidentally stumbled on—about the whole “superhero” situation.

Tony shakes his head when Peter asks. “There’s really not much to be done right now,” he says carefully. “Nearly everyone died in the invasion. I haven’t heard of… anyone else stepping up.” The pause is practically undetectable, but Rhodey knows Tony is thinking about Strange and his supposed group of sorcerers. Though they have potential as protectors of the planet, they don’t seem to want to be seen as superheroes. They clearly want their privacy and Tony is obviously going to respect that.

“As for us, you know, Rhodey’s barely walking,” Tony throws him a brief, sad smile, “and I’m still… figuring everything out. Emotionally, physically, whatever. I still don’t know the full extent of my abilities, still trying to figure out… who I am, where I fit.”

“Yeah,” Peter nods solemnly, and Rhodey gets the sense that he really does understand, if not all the depths of Tony’s situation, at least some of the nuances and difficulties. But then he’s going on. “But I’ve seen the stuff about Iron Man being back out.” It’s phrased like a question.

Rhodey’s not sure if he imagines the flicker of hesitance in Tony’s eyes. “I’m still Iron Man, I do still want to work in the suit. I’ll use it to help people where I can.”

“Right, and you were the best Avenger before—I mean, the, you know, the best known, um—” Peter stammers, flushing for a second at the amused look on Rhodey’s face, but then continues earnestly. “Everyone knows you, is what I mean. And maybe there’s not many of us, but we could form a team, show everyone we’re working together, and tell people we’re recruiting, you know? That might bring out anyone who survived the invasion but doesn’t know what to do now.”

“Woah, woah,” Rhodey puts his hands up, “We? You’re including yourself in this?”

Peter falters. “Well, yeah, um, I mean, Mr. Stark gave me the suit, and I—I helped in Germany, I thought I could be useful, if—if you want me…”

“Hey, I’m not saying you’re not capable,” Rhodey says, trying to erase the flash of hurt he sees in Peter’s expression. “Just… are you sure you want to get involved in this?”

It’s a bit of a loaded question and one that can be interpreted a lot of different ways, but Tony interrupts before Peter can answer him. “Have you talked to May about this?”

Peter sits back, enthusiasm a bit tempered now. “Yeah, we’ve talked about it. A lot. After the invasion was over and everything settled down, we… had a lot to talk about. I told her about Spiderman when everything was all happening, so there was no time to talk about it, and then we couldn’t exactly talk about it in the camp. So when we got out and got somewhere stable to stay, we, uh… talked. A lot.”

From Peter’s expression, Rhodey can tell that not all of the talking was good, but that’s probably a good thing. It means they really did have discussions about it, not just superficial platitudes or avoidance. Peter grimaces a little. “May doesn’t love it, she hates the idea of me putting myself in danger, but… she understands. I think she would have understood even before, but especially now…”
so many people are gone, it really puts things into perspective, you know? Any of us could die any
time.” Peter’s eyes suddenly widen as he realizes what he just said. “Oh, sorry, I didn’t mean—”

Tony waves him off, though, and after a wince, he reluctantly continues. “I just mean, I think May
understands now that I’m in danger anyway, no matter what I’m doing. And with the world the way
it is, I need to help, to do whatever I can. So she’s okay with whatever I choose to do. And I choose
this.”

There’s a strength of conviction in the words that sends a pang of bittersweet nostalgia through
Rhodey. There was a time that both he and Tony talked like that. They still have conviction, they still
want to do the right thing, but they’re both so tired now. The life they’ve chosen has beaten them
down, and Rhodey knows very well that it’s a realization that only comes with experience. There’s
no way he can convince Peter, who’s so young and innocent, who’s never felt the heavy weights
that Tony and Rhodey carry with them everywhere, that this life isn’t the one he wants.

He won’t be able to deter Peter from this path—nor should he, he thinks suddenly. Peter wants to
make this choice, just like Tony did years ago, just like Rhodey did when he joined the Air Force
and then again when he became War Machine. Part of life is making choices even when there’s no
way to be sure of the outcome, and Peter deserves that chance.

Tony’s smiling, but it’s a sad, complicated thing. He might very well be thinking some of the same
things as Rhodey. “You’ve got a good heart, Peter, and the best ideas. I admire that.”

Peter looks absolutely delighted at that. Tony mentions something Peter came up with last night in
their foray down to the lab, and they trail off into a long discussion of physics and the Spiderman suit
tech. Rhodey just sits back and relaxes, scooping the last of his eggs onto a piece of toast and
watching the animated conversation.

They could probably talk for hours more without so much as a break, but Peter’s phone chirps and
he pulls it out automatically, frowning at the message and then jumping up out of his chair. “Oh,
crap, I’m supposed to be back already, I was going to take those kids from downstairs out for ice
cream today so May can take Mrs. Buckley back to their old place to look for some of their dad’s
stuff…”

He’s looking apologetically back at Tony, but Tony just smiles and moves forward to pull him into
another short hug. “Go, I’m sure you can still get there on time. And even if you’re late, they’ll forget
all about it once they have ice cream.”

Peter chuckles as they separate. “When you get some time,” Tony tells him, “call the Tower and ask
for the R&D department head, I’ll let them know to expect it. I know you have a lot to do, but if you
can spare any time, you’d fit in great in the SI labs.”

“Woah, really?” Peter’s genuine, gleeful astonishment has Rhodey smiling.

“We can call it an internship, or something, since I’m not sure if I can legally hire you yet and you do
still need to go to college and actually train and all that—” Tony looks sternly at a suddenly
chagrined Peter, “once all the schools are back up and running. I know for a fact there are
universities back to normal operation that weren’t hit so hard in the invasion, so you’d better not keep
putting off your education, Pete, you’re way too smart for that, you hear me?”

“Yeah, sure, I hear you,” Peter says, “but I’m pretty sure I need to officially finish high school, and
you know, mine was kind of destroyed.” The reminder of what Peter said yesterday about most of
his classmates being dead dampens the mood a little.
“We’ll figure something out,” Tony says, and Rhodey smiles at the use of we, the way Tony’s already taking an almost parental responsibility for Peter. “There must be schools back open in the city. And even if there aren’t, there’s tons of online education we could get you enrolled in. I think it’s safe to say the invasion disrupted pretty much everyone’s education, so no college is going to look down on an alternative education or a gap. Now, go on, get out, don’t you deny ice cream to a bunch of kids,” Tony finishes with a smile, giving Peter a light push toward the doorway.

Peter bounces on his toes a little, hovering at the threshold of the room, before dashing back for one last, quick hug. Rhodey’s surprised when Peter lets go of Tony and comes for him, wrapping him up in a brief but powerful hug as well before running back to the doorway. “Thank you! I’ll call, May wants to see you too, I’m sorry I have to go so fast, bye!” He shouts the last few words, already running down the hall and out of sight.

Rhodey and Tony just stand in place for a moment after Peter’s gone, a bit bewildered and a bit overwhelmed. Rhodey had forgotten what a whirlwind of energy a teenage boy could be. He shakes his head fondly and moves to clean up the dishes from breakfast, and Tony soon joins him.

They work in a comfortable silence, but Rhodey eventually breaks it. “I know what you did there,” he says.

Tony looks over at him, questioning, but Rhodey can see the touch of apprehension as well. Tony’s afraid of being judged for this, of having this conversation at all. Rhodey has to remind himself not to be frustrated, that Tony still struggles with not only his emotional state, but with a slew of validation issues that he had long before Thanos resurrected him.

“I’m not saying the offer to work in the labs wasn’t genuine, hell, even I can see the kid is crazy smart and very… enthusiastic, but I know what the timing was about.” Rhodey gives him a knowing look. “You were distracting him from all that talk about forming a team.”

Tony lets out a breath. “I was.” He stares down at the counter, studying it intensely instead of looking at Rhodey. “Peter’s great, and he’s not wrong about showing a united front, bringing anyone who’s still alive out of the woodwork, but I’m just… I’m still not sure I’m ready for that.”

“He’s going to ask again, you know,” Rhodey warns.

“I know.”

Rhodey takes a deep breath before continuing. “And… I’m not trying to pressure you here, but this isn’t going to go away. I was serious before, when I said to take as much time as you need, and I still mean it. But I won’t deny that it’s going to get harder. Eventually, whether it’s in a week or a year, you’re going to have to make a decision. Either tell everyone you’re not going back to being a superhero, close the door for good… or leave it open, and if you do that, you know the expectations are going to come on full force. You’re going to be the new face of Earth’s defenders if you do it.”

Tony hangs his head. “I know.” There’s frustration in his voice. “That’s part of what makes it so hard. I hate that it’s all or nothing, that I either have to tell them all I’m quitting, giving up, that I’m not going back, or I have to be the protector of the planet.”

“It’s not ‘quitting’ or ‘giving up’ if you don’t want to subject yourself to that again,” Rhodey says quietly. “You’ve given plenty to defending everyone. You’re allowed to step back.”

Tony snorts humorlessly and finally looks over at Rhodey. “People won’t see it that way.”

“Is that what you’re afraid of? The public reaction?”
The frustration gives way to uncertainty. “No. I don’t think so. I don’t know, I guess. I’m still not sure what I think about it. Which is part of the problem. But I think right now… I don’t know, a selfish part of me just… doesn’t want things to change.”

The look he’s giving Rhodey, the uncertainty, the words he says, they all finally click in Rhodey’s mind. “Oh.” He can’t help the sadness coming up in his expression. Tony tries to look away from it, but Rhodey moves in to take hold of his shoulders. “Tones, you know I’m with you no matter what, right? Whatever you choose in this, whatever happens to me in the future, no matter whether our choices match up or not, I’ll still support you a hundred percent. I’ll still be behind you. And I’m sure as hell not going to leave you.”

The way Tony shudders a little and melts into Rhodey’s arms tells him he’s hit the nail on the head. “I know,” Tony says quietly, an attempt at reassuring Rhodey that Tony doesn’t doubt him. Rhodey appreciates the effort, even if he knows the fact that they’re having this conversation means it’s not quite true.

He doesn’t say any of that, knowing this isn’t a problem he can solve with words. He’ll just have to keep to his word, show Tony that he’ll stay with him no matter what. He can offer advice, he can try to help Tony see pros and cons and different perspectives, but in the end, he can’t make the decision for him. All he can do is stand by whatever decision Tony makes, trust him, and prove how much he loves him. All he can hope for is that Tony is sure about his own decisions and about Rhodey’s support. That’s all he needs.
Rhodey’s working through strengthening exercises, sweaty and breathing hard, when Tony comes in sporting a strange look. It takes Rhodey a minute to place it, only because it’s been so long since he’s seen anything like exasperation on Tony’s face.

“What’s up?” he asks, tone light, because while Tony looks a little annoyed and a little confused, it doesn’t seem too serious.

Tony stops, looking over where Rhodey’s working out with a small smile. Getting his legs back is a bitch of a hard job and obviously rewarding in its own right, but even if he weren’t slowly regaining his ability to walk unassisted, the way Tony is bolstered by his progress would be reward enough.

And he is making progress, a remarkable amount. He’s practically back to walking like a normal, if somewhat frail, person. He rarely wears his braces anymore, instead moving slowly but steadily on his own two feet. There’s a sense of pride with every step he takes on his own. That and an overwhelming, inexpressible gratitude to Tony, for making this possible. Both with his powers and his tech—even if he hadn’t been able to miraculously heal Rhodey the way he has, the braces would have allowed Rhodey to have nearly normal function again.

That alone would have been enough to earn Rhodey’s eternal gratitude, much less actually being healed. He doesn’t try to express that gratitude, though, except by continuing to support Tony and be there for him the way he has. He knows Tony would be uncomfortable with what he would see as undeserved gratitude. He wouldn’t know what to do with it and it would make him worry, question that everything Rhodey does for him is some sort of repayment rather than genuine friendship. Rhodey doesn’t need to put that burden on Tony.

Now, the smile as Tony looks him over fades, back into that strange expression he wore when he came into the room. He stands and watches Rhodey like he’s deciding what to say. Just as Rhodey starts to worry that he got it wrong, that this is more serious than he thought, Tony’s forehead wrinkles and he says, “We’re having a gala.”


“Yeah.” Tony makes a slightly displeased face. “After everything… Everyone needs a bit of normalcy, I guess. We’ve made so much progress, and the kinds of people who were always benefactors… it’s not like they aren’t donating plenty to the recovery efforts now, they always were, they needed to recover too, but. Well.”

“Money moves things along?” Rhodey asks wryly.
Tony grimaces. “Yeah, unfortunately, it’s true even when the entire world has gone to hell. The people with the most money have recovered the fastest, they’re getting the most resources, they’re back to their old lives. And they’re giving plenty to the people who still need it, I mean, most of them are, but I guess they wanted to do something that feels normal.”

“Or an excuse to dress up in fancy clothes and drink champagne.” Rhodey smiles at the thought, not really meaning it as a criticism. Sometimes people need that.

Tony shrugs. “Suppose so. But SI could always use the donations, and the publicity for some of the projects we’re working on. There are areas that need attention from more than just us and we can bring that attention with this.”

“You don’t have to defend this to me, I get it,” Rhodey says. “People want some more normalcy back in their lives, and SI needs their support. So let them have their fancy party, and at the end of the day, a bunch of people get help they need. There’s no downside to that.” He looks at Tony and frowns at the pinched look on his face. “What?”

“They want me to go.”

That’s not entirely surprising, but still, Tony hasn’t really been asked to appear in public or as the head of SI yet. He’s done it plenty, press conferences and news reports and everything under the sun to help get the company the funding and help it needs, report what they’re doing, and get their products out to where they’re needed. But there’s a definite drop in the number of requests for photoshoots, conference speeches, formal appearances, and the like.

Tony’s been vain in the past, but never exactly self-conscious about his looks. Rhodey supposes some of that might have been the simple fact that there was never any reason to be. Except as a gangly, slightly awkward-looking teenager at MIT, when he was too busy focusing on world-changing tech innovations and trying to blow up their dorm room every other week to really try to flirt with girls five years older than him, Tony’s rarely been described as anything but stunningly handsome. Rhodey used to tease him about the number of “world’s most eligible bachelor” type magazine articles he ended up in.

But now… this is something different. It’s not about whether his hair is perfect or he has a zit on his face or he’s been spending enough hours in the gym. The thing that defines his appearance now isn’t his styled goatee or the expensive tailored suits he wears. It’s the marks etched into his skin, the reminders of who he is to them all and what he can do. The physical evidence of Thanos’s interference; his death, his invasion, his resurrection of Tony and the reason for it: Steve’s betrayal. The downfall of Captain America and the Avengers, the end of the world. The month of suffering that touched every corner of the planet and the rebirth they all felt when it was over. It’s all written on Tony’s skin, there for everyone to see, and he knows it.

Rhodey mulls all of that over. He’s not sure what Tony’s thinking about it. He hasn’t seemed so bothered by his looks lately, he doesn’t seem to mind the inevitable staring so much. This could be some deep, philosophical crisis regarding people’s expectations of him and how he appears to the public, or it could just be slight exasperation over the fact that he’s being asked to dress up and go play nice with a bunch of other rich people so they’ll give his company what it needs to expand its impact.

“Do you want to go?” Rhodey settles on asking.

Tony makes a face. “I suppose I should. They seem to think it’ll be good for morale and encourage donations. It’s been a while since I’ve had to schmooze.” Not since before his resurrection. “Can you keep an eye on the status of the Hennepin project while I’m gone?”
Rhodey smiles. “Yeah, of course.” He can’t deny some relief; either Tony really isn’t bothered by the idea of going, or he’s successfully hiding it. One of the problems with recovering his emotions and sense of self is that he’s regaining his ability to keep things from Rhodey. Not that it’s bad, exactly—Tony deserves to have some secrets and Rhodey shouldn’t complain about him having a pretty fundamental aspect of humanity back—but it’s not fun to think that there might be hurts Tony’s hiding from him under the misguided impression that he shouldn’t be bothering him.

Five days later, Rhodey’s in nearly the same position when Tony comes home from the gala. Rhodey hadn’t been invited—not that he was the least bit upset about that, he’d never really liked that stuff and he had work to do anyway—so he’d stayed home and kept an eye on some of Tony’s projects, answering some of the calls he received through the night from various SI outposts, government liaisons, and other organizations SI has been working with.

Rhodey’s job with SI is still somewhat nebulous, but with the continuously changing demands on the company, it’s not a bad thing. Mostly, he keeps some kind of a leadership position, bringing together teams and organizing people and resources when necessary for new projects or opportunities. But he’s also right next to Tony most hours of the day, spends a lot of time in the lab with him, and Tony bounces ideas off of him a lot. It means he’s qualified enough to take over for Tony in the very short term—long enough for Tony to occasionally take a night off, go to a gala, be off working in the Iron Man suit without distractions, or just take a nap.

He’s been thinking about bringing someone new in for a while now, actually. Tony had Pepper as an assistant before for a lot of reasons, and contrary to many people’s belief, it wasn’t because he was a helpless rich kid who couldn’t even handle making his own coffee. He needed an assistant to help with the endless work, requests for his time, constantly changing plans, and his truly insane schedule. Of course, in the old-old days, he shirked a lot of deadlines and half of his last-second schedule changes were his own fault, but still, Pepper always handled everything marvelously.

Then SHIELD used Romanoff to get under his skin, and with Pepper promoted to a position she really deserved, Tony never felt like he could trust another person to be allowed to get that close to him. Instead, he added many of the administrative tasks that used to be Pepper’s to JARVIS’s workload. There were a few bugs to be worked out in the beginning, some difficulties with having an AI without an actual physical body be in charge of so many things for Tony, but they eventually worked it out. And when JARVIS was killed, FRIDAY took his place.

Tony still hasn’t ever mentioned activating another AI. He has worked with Peter to create some upgrades for Karen, the one in Peter’s suit, but Tony hasn’t shown any interest in raising another one for himself. With Pepper and now FRIDAY gone, SI growing bigger than ever, and even more responsibilities on Tony’s shoulders, it’s becoming a bit of an issue. Tony handles it all well enough right now, but it’s all going to catch up with him eventually. Rhodey doesn’t want to hurt him by bringing up the need for another assistant, AI or human, but he also doesn’t want to see Tony work himself back into the state he’d previously confessed to hating, where every day felt like catching up, too many responsibilities on his shoulders, exhausted and chasing an impossible goal.

Rhodey’s resigned himself to eventually asking about it, potentially pushing. For now, he’ll let things be. Let Tony build connections with people, particularly his own employees. Maybe they’ll have an SI party or something. If Tony does want another human assistant, it’s going to be someone from SI, someone thoroughly vetted, preferably someone that Tony and Rhodey already know. Rhodey moves through his exercises, thinking of some ways to get Tony more integrated with SI employees.

When Tony approaches him after the gala, still in his expensive tux, Rhodey’s immediately concerned. Tony doesn’t greet him, doesn’t smile at the sight of Rhodey’s working legs, and he’s got a look, one that Rhodey knows well. The one that means he’s found some new emotional obstacle...
Rhodey climbs out of the equipment he’s using, moving over to settle in one of the armchairs nearby. He’s sweaty and he probably smells, but this conversation looks like it can’t wait. Tony follows him silently and sinks into another chair, staring out at nothing and fiddling with his cufflinks.

“What’s wrong?” Rhodey asks. It’s a sadly familiar pattern now, when Tony’s struggling with something. Rhodey hates seeing him like this, but so far, they’ve got a good track record for working things out. He’s at least hopeful that he can help.

Tony takes a minute to think it over. He’s always like this in these situations; more reserved, slower to speak. It reminds Rhodey uncomfortably of the days immediately after his resurrection, but he tries not to ever let that discomfort show. He wouldn’t want Tony to see it and get the wrong impression, think he’s burdening him or something.

“There was a woman there,” Tony says, and then pauses. Rhodey stays silent. Though the opportunity for a joke is right there and in some circumstances could lighten the mood, he doesn’t think it would be the right approach here.

“Two, actually,” Tony eventually continues. “The first one was… an actress, I think she said, and now she’s running some humanitarian projects. She was gorgeous. And she… flirted with me.”

Tony says it like it’s unimaginable, and Rhodey doesn’t know why. “Did you think she wouldn’t?” he asks cautiously. “Because of your…” he trails off, but Tony clearly understands what he’s referring to and is already shaking his head.

“No, that’s not it. I mean, I’m sure they freak some people out, I’m sure there are people who think I look like an alien. But there are people who will hit on anyone with enough money.” Tony grimaces, then adds, “Not that I think she was doing that. I think she was genuinely attracted to me.”

Rhodey nods. “Okay. I mean… I’m not too surprised about that. So what’s bothering you about it?”

Tony opens his mouth, pauses, and closes it again. He frowns, face twisting. “I didn’t… feel anything. For her.”

“What do you mean?” Rhodey asks, leaning forward in his chair.

“I wasn’t attracted to her at all. I could see that she was beautiful, and she was interested, and she flirted with me, and I… felt nothing.”

“You mean…” Rhodey pauses, not sure how to phrase this. This is territory that they haven’t covered before, and Rhodey never really thought about it. As close as they are, it’s still just a touch awkward to discuss. “You mean a physical attraction? Sexual?”

If the look on Tony’s face is any indication, he also didn’t entirely think about what it would be like to talk about this with Rhodey and is feeling a little awkward himself. It makes Rhodey feel a little better, he supposes, knowing that he’s not the only one. He does feel like an idiot, though. He’s a grown man in his forties. He should be able to talk about this with his best friend without feeling like a kid sneaking looks at dirty magazines.

“Yes,” Tony says. “I just… it felt like there should have been something.”

Rhodey does frown at that. “I know you had a reputation before, Tony, but it’s not like you were attracted to every woman in the world. And you spent most of the last eight or so years with—in a single relationship.”
Tony can’t disguise his wince at that. Rhodey silently curses himself for bringing Pepper up, then again for refusing to say her name, like she’s a forbidden subject. They should be able to talk about her.

“It’s not that,” Tony says. “I know I don’t have to feel… lust for everyone. But this woman, I don’t know. She was attractive, she could hold a conversation, she was smart and pretty funny. I feel like… if it had been years ago, I would have felt something for her. I’m not saying I would have slept with her, but just… something.”

Rhodey tilts his head. “I get that, okay. But I mean… it’s not like you haven’t been pretty busy. Maybe you’re a bit too distracted for that kind of thing.” He opens his mouth and hesitates again, then shakes his head at himself for acting like an awkward teenager once more. “I sure haven’t had much of a sex drive in the past few years. Too much to do,” he confesses.

Tony does nod at that, but he still looks upset, so Rhodey leans forward again to catch his attention. “There’s something more to this.” It’s not really a question.

Tony looks away this time. “I guess… I just.” He shrugs, but the motion looks anything but casual. “What if… this means that I can’t—that I’ll never—love someone again?”

He looks over at Rhodey, heartbreakingly unsure. “You mean, a partner? Like… like Pepper?” Rhodey says quietly.

“I mean anyone. Any… love. What if it’s all gone?”

Rhodey sits back again, trying to decide what to address first. “That’s quite a jump, from a lack of lust to a lack of love completely.” he says slowly.

Tony just shrugs again. “Isn’t that how it works? You meet someone, you’re attracted, you get to know each other, then you fall in love.” There’s some sarcasm in the words, but he’s also partly serious.

Rhodey gives him an unimpressed look, and Tony does at least smile sheepishly. “You know very well that’s not always how it works. And I don’t think any progression of feelings is a straight line. Just because you’re not feeling attracted to someone right now doesn’t mean you’ll never fall in love again.”

Tony sighs. “Maybe. But that’s not… all.” He looks over at Rhodey, who just raises an eyebrow, waiting for him to continue. “The other woman I mentioned… Amanda Lee. I’ve met her before, her husband used to work for SI. She was there at the gala.”

Rhodey stays quiet, letting Tony think before he goes on. “Her husband died in one of the camps. It was… one of the worse ones. They didn’t have any supplies. They gave all of their food to the women and children. She barely made it out and he—he starved to death. Right in front of her.”

Rhodey takes a deep breath. He can imagine it all too well. He was lucky as hell in his own camp—he had such good people around him, they went out to explore early, they had the supplies to last them through most of the invasion without too much trouble. He knows others weren’t so lucky, he’s heard some of the stories firsthand by now.

“That’s terrible. I’m so sorry,” Rhodey says quietly.

Tony studies the floor. “I am too. And I told her that much. I like to think I felt sympathy for her, for her situation, and I’m sad to hear about her husband—I’d met him, he was a great guy—but I didn’t…” Tony lets out a frustrated breath. “I didn’t feel anything else for her. No… affection. No
“You don’t know her that well,” Rhodey tries to argue, but Tony shakes his head.

“It’s more the principle of the thing. I might not know her all that well, but I should feel something for her. I don’t… I know that before, before all this, I would have felt affection, maybe not love, exactly, but something positive. I always did, I know sometimes you told me I felt things too deeply, but it’s… who I was. And now… now it’s gone.”

Tony looks so lost and despondent, but Rhodey just… can’t see it that way. “Tony…” he starts, but then pauses, trying to figure out how best to say it.

Tony looks up at him. That absolute trust is back, that look that says Rhodey has the power to heal or break him in this moment. It’s terrifying, in a way, because Rhodey’s made mistakes before with Tony. He’s not perfect, and he’s petrified of saying something wrong, of doing damage he can’t undo.

But he has to try. He has to try to help Tony see what he sees. “Tony, if you’d told me this two weeks ago… well, I still wouldn’t have believed you, but now? Have you already forgotten about Peter?”

Tony blinks. “What about Peter?”

Rhodey shakes his head incredulously. “Come on. You barely know the kid, you’ve only met him a few times, and you’re already offering him a job, helping him with his education, offering a place to stay for his family. And not just that; you’re watching movies and working in the lab together and making the kid specially designed tech just for him? I’d say that’s affection. I’d say that’s love.”

Tony watches him, expression unreadable, so Rhodey continues. “And there’s me, too. You made those braces for me, you helped me find a place in SI now that the Force is gone. You’ve been helping me every step of the way, literally, you’re taking care of me and I know it’s not out of some obligation, don’t try and sell me that.” Tony’s lips twitch up at that, just for a second. “You told me once that you know I love you, that you remember loving me. Any maybe you don’t feel it a hundred percent yet, but I know you’re getting there.”

Tony nods, maybe a little reluctantly. “You think so?” If he’s trying to be casual, unaffected, he’s not succeeding. The soft tone and the way his eyes flick away for a moment betray how important this is to him.

“I know so,” Rhodey says. He puts as much confidence as possible into the words.

Tony smiles. It’s clear that he doesn’t believe it fully, but Rhodey hopes he’s helped. Or at least given him something to think about. “Okay,” Tony says, and he stands up from his chair. “I should go change, it’s late.”

“Yeah. I’ve got to shower.” Rhodey gestures to his sweaty workout clothes.

Tony just nods and moves to the door. Rhodey’s not sure how he feels about the outcome of the conversation. He wasn’t as convincing as he wanted to be, and he feels like he’s failed somehow, letting Tony walk away when he’s still clearly upset. But there isn’t much else he can do. This is something Tony has to believe on his own.

Tony pauses at the threshold of the room, though, and turns back to look at Rhodey. “Thank you,” he says, quietly, but it’s sincere and Rhodey smiles back softly. Tony leaves without saying anything else, and Rhodey feels a little lighter.
It’s a normal Tuesday when they get the call. Rhodey and Tony are in an office at the Tower, Rhodey in the middle of a conference call with some of the managers in Sweden and Tony going over the newest Starkpad plans. There are various screens up all over the room, and it’s a momentary shock when they all flash red simultaneously with an alert. Incoming call on one of the emergency lines.

Rhodey makes quick apologies to the others on his call. By the time he disconnects, Tony has already answered the emergency line. He’s pulling up screens and making notes while whoever’s on the other line outlines the situation.

Pennsylvania. The middle of a reconstruction project, trying to save a building on a hospital campus that took a lot of hits in the invasion. They’d been making steady progress on the others for the last few months, but they didn’t have enough manpower to do anything with this one until recently. Crews went in to start working on it last week, and a little over three hours ago, it collapsed.

Thirty people were inside at the time. Three got out just as the building went down, leaving twenty seven unaccounted for. The building is only partially collapsed, some of the structure intact, but it’s unstable as hell and anyone attempting to go in or get out could cause the rest of it to come down on whoever might still be alive inside.

They’re hauling in heavy equipment, there are emergency crews gathered, but progress is slow. They can’t send in rescue workers and create more casualties if the building isn’t safe, but at the rate they’re working, they’re not going to get help inside in time, not before the rest of it collapses.

What they need is heavyweight support in a lightweight package. Someone who can get there, who’s good enough to map out a safe route and maneuverable enough to get in and find any survivors, who can then stabilize the building from the inside long enough for them to get out, or for emergency crews to get in and get them out.

They need Iron Man.

And Tony answers the call without hesitation. Rhodey didn’t expect any different, despite Tony still not being sure about the whole superhero thing. He is sure about being Iron Man, about helping where he can. And when the call comes, Tony always steps up. His worries about being a superhero or part of a team are more philosophical, more about the idea of standing up to be seen as the Earth’s defender. No matter what he decides about that in the end, he was never going to ignore people who need his help.

So he suits up and leaves. Rhodey stays behind, in contact with him and with the police chief who’s been heading the operation. Rhodey can be a go-between for them, plus monitor what he can with Tony’s tech from home and give him updates that the police might not have. Tony doesn’t have an AI in his suit anymore and Rhodey supposes he’s the next best thing, not that he or Tony actually say that.

Tony gets there in record time, the very sight of Iron Man a boon to all of the people gathered outside. He touches down and is already bringing up holographic maps of the building in front of him, setting down pieces of tech that will project everything for the emergency crews, so they can have his updated information. Rhodey sees it all from three different views, having access to Tony’s suit cameras as well as video from one of the police cars and a news helicopter circling above.
Tony’s been getting updates—few though there are—even through the flight there, so he doesn’t need to catch up when he lands. Instead, he’s using the suit to scan the building immediately.

“Structural integrity is next to nothing,” he reports, and the emergency workers all respond with grim nods. They knew that; that’s why they haven’t entered the building yet. “Worst spots are here, here, and here,” Tony points and parts of the schematics in front of him light up red and orange. “Keep anyone away from the yellow zones, in case it comes down.” Yellow bleeds out around the red and orange, predicting patterns of building collapse and denoting danger zones for those too close to the building.

“These are the supports you’ve put in place?” Tony asks, as a series of purple markers pop up. He receives confirming nods and waves a hand. Three of the purple marks turn blue. “Shore up these here, it’ll keep the southern half from collapsing toward the other buildings when it does go. From what I’m seeing here, it’s coming down in the next thirty minutes no matter what we do—at this point it’s about controlling the fallout and getting as many people out as possible.”

There are more grim looks exchanged. The emergency crews know very well they might not be getting everyone out. It’s possible they might not get anyone out. But Tony, focused as ever in a crisis, is already moving on, scanning again. A series of green points appear on the map, scattered throughout.

“I’m reading twenty four life signs,” Tony reports. Even from the view through the suit’s cameras, Rhodey can see the grimaces on the faces of the police and EMS. “I’m sorry,” Tony takes the time to say before moving on. With twenty seven unaccounted for after the collapse, that means three people are already dead. Not entirely surprising, but unfortunate all the same. Rhodey supposes they should feel lucky that only three people died in the initial destruction, but that’s a small comfort to the friends and families of those three. Statistics don’t mean much to those who aren’t on their side.

“Most of them are within this area,” Tony gestures to where the majority of the green dots are clustered. “There’s a major weak point here,” he points to one of the red areas, right in the middle of a cluster of green dots. “I can find a path through, get in without disturbing anything. The harder part is getting out again without touching anything. I can use the suit to stabilize this point. If I do that, it should leave a safe enough path through here.” A white line winds around collapsed stairwells and destroyed walls, coming out on the northwestern side of the building.

Tony turns to address the gathered crews. “Get some people there, be prepared to pull them out as fast as possible and get them the hell away from here. I’m running simulations, but there’s always an element of unpredictability. Things will shift when I stabilize the weak area, and the place is already on the move. I’m saying thirty minutes, but it could come down any time. We need to get as many people out as we can, as fast as we can.”

“We’re on it, Mr. Stark,” one of the cops says, and then they’re all scattering. Some of them return to the map and plan with each other while others run back to their vehicles to set up on the northwestern side near where the survivors should be coming out. Tony turns his back on them and takes to the air, hovering in front of the building for a moment.

“Rhodey, I need you,” he says, switching over to their private channel.

“What can I do?” Rhodey’s already pulling the readings from Tony’s suit closer, surrounding himself with the same info Tony’s seeing.

“I need a way to communicate with anyone who’s not close to the weak point. They’re mostly on those bottom two floors, but they’re all over the place. While I’m setting up the support, we can send in a probe to find some of the others. I need you to guide them through the safest spots to where I
“On it,” Rhodey says. He pulls up a new screen, swiping live data from the continuous scans of the structure onto the sides of it, leaving the middle clear. A moment later, Tony’s suit cam shows him detaching the small probe from his arm. It hovers in front of him, waiting, still waiting for commands from Tony’s suit.

Its camera blinks to life and its systems data comes up on Rhodey’s new screen. It only takes a moment for Rhody to take it over, and then he’s putting his hands down on the holographic controls that have come up. “Okay, we’re online,” Rhodey says. From Tony’s cam, he sees the probe move up, down, and then turn and head toward the building. At the confirmation that Rhodey’s taken control, Tony flies after it.

They’re both seeing the same scans of the building. It’s half-collapsed, with the top five or six floors still intact but tilted, leaning on the structurally unstable wreckage below, where the lower floors went out from under it. Even the slightest shift in the weak points down below could cause the rest of it to come down, crushing anyone who’s still alive on the lower levels. Reverberations from damage done on the top floors could cause the same problem. All of that means that anyone moving in the building needs to be extremely careful.

The suit is incredibly maneuverable, thankfully. The hard part will be getting the survivors out. Tony and the probe can fly in through an upper level window and make their way through the building without having to touch much of anything. But the people below are going to have to walk, crawl, climb, and otherwise potentially fatally shift pieces of the unstable structure.

Tony manages to get down to the transition point, where the upper levels broke off from the lower and listed inward while the lower levels crumbled beneath them, without having to do much except carefully push open a few doors. Crawling over some of the debris is a little tougher, and there are times that he just can’t avoid putting the suit’s considerable weight on pieces of rubble. Rhodey holds his breath the entire time, watching every tiny shift through the suit’s and probe’s cameras, hoping that each second won’t be the one that sends the building crashing down before Tony can even find the survivors.

They’re most of the way down when Rhodey has to split off, sending the probe through what the scans have calculated is the safest route to the scattered smaller groups of people, while Tony continues on to the larger group. Rhodey focuses on his own task, but he keeps an eye on Tony’s screens too.

The probe is much smaller than Iron Man himself and a lot more maneuverable; because it can move faster, Rhodey’s the first one to find anyone. A group of five people, clustered together on the basement level. They’re huddled around each other, dirty and disheveled, in the rubble of the building around them, but they all look up as one when they hear the whirring of the probe entering through a hole in the wall and its light shines onto their faces.

“Help’s here,” Rhodey says through the speakers, “there are emergency crews outside and we’re trying to stabilize the building enough for you to get out. Is anyone hurt?”

There’s abject relief on all five faces. Some shake their heads, but one man grimaces. “Got my leg smashed by one of the machines when the floor tilted beneath us,” he croaks out. He turns to show his leg to the probe. Through the thick dust clogging the air, Rhodey can’t see much but a lot of blood. “I should be able to walk on it, though. With some help.”

The others are already nodding and offering to help him. Rhodey doesn’t even have to ask. “Okay then, let’s get up and moving. I need you to follow this probe, make your way over to where most of
the others are. We’re going to stabilize a weak point to create a path for everyone to get out. Can you do that?”

They’re all nodding, already getting to their feet, hauling up the injured man and putting his arms over two of his fellows’ shoulders. They take a few tentative steps forward as a test, made harder by the need to duck under hanging chunks of the ceiling, but they’re moving, and Rhodey will take it.

On the other side of his screens, Rhodey sees that Tony has also found the largest group of survivors. He’s instructing them, moving them into a large open area just past the weak spot he needs to stabilize. Said weak spot is a huge supporting beam, previously held up by one of the concrete pillars in the basement. The top half of the pillar broke off when the building collapsed and the beam is now tilted downward, resting on the remains of the pillar and a few precariously stacked pieces of machinery and hunks of rubble from the floors above. A large part of the weight of the intact floors above is resting on that unstable pile.

Tony’s moving into position just as Rhodey’s small group starts shuffling around, following the probe into the adjacent room and towards Tony, figuring out how to move while supporting their injured member. Iron Man positions himself to the side of one of the broken pieces the beam is resting on, preparing to take its weight onto himself. The suit can support the weight, but the difficulty is in how to go about it. He can’t risk trying to lift the beam back toward its original position. That could compromise the broken structure of the building further and send it all down on them. But he can’t keep it in position and take its weight onto the suit without taking its weight off of the rest of the pile it’s resting on, potentially creating more problems.

He tries to move slowly, putting one hand up to press against the bottom of the beam while he shifts toward the pile. The suit’s strengthening mechanisms engage, the arm of the suit thickening into something resembling a pillar and support structures coming out to extend between the arm and the body of the suit. He pushes upward just slightly, half an inch, just enough to take the weight of the beam onto the suit rather than the rubble it’s resting on.

There’s a groan from the building above and then a rumble. Gasps from the survivors in Tony’s area ring out as the rumbling turns into a dull thud, and something shifts above them and settles. A few small pieces of debris fall down from above them, and then a tense silence falls once more.

Through the speakers, Rhodey can hear Tony’s sigh of relief. He clicks open their private channel again. “Tony,” he says quietly, “if things go sideways, you think your powers will be of any help?”

There’s a pause. “I don’t know,” Tony replies, just as quietly, so none of the people gathered around can hear him through the suit. “I could create a shield, like I did when Strange first showed up, but that was more of an energy thing. No idea how it would work against the weight of a building.”

“You think there’s a chance?”

“…Not enough of one to bet these people’s lives on.” And that’s the end of that conversation. Tony would never bet innocent lives on powers he’s still not sure of.

Rhodey hears him take another fortifying breath, and then he’s shifting, moving to the side. The hand holding up the beam stays steady while the other comes up to take its place, a little further along the length of the beam. The strengthening mechanisms engage on that side, and then slowly disengage from the other arm. Slowly, very slowly, Tony inches along toward the pile, where he can truly take the weight of the beam.

When he’s nearly there, right in the middle of switching hands again, there’s another rumble. A cracking sound splits the air like a gunshot and there are screams from some of the people. “Tony!”
Rhodey shouts in alarm just as he sees the remains of the concrete pillar crack in half next to Tony, one half falling away to crash to the floor. The pile of rubble the beam has been resting on shifts, sliding toward where Iron Man is caught in the middle of switching hands as support.

“What the hell is going on?” one of the people in Rhodey’s small group shouts. They’ve stopped moving, crouching down with their hands over their heads as the building sounds like it’s falling apart around them.

A massive squealing groan of metal echoes across all of Rhodey’s feeds and the beam slides forward several inches, leaning further in toward the floor. Tony quickly puts his other hand back up and doubles down on the suit’s pressure against it, trying to keep it from moving more, but the movement of the beam and the suit has freed the rest of the unstable pile it was resting on. The pile collapses, directly toward Tony. A chunk of concrete the size of the Iron Man suit tilts alarmingly and slides on the mangled remains of whatever equipment it had been resting on, slamming into the suit with force.

Tony grunts from inside the suit. The strength of the armor keeps Tony from crumpling forward as he’s hit, and there’s a brief burst of light as some of the thrusters fire on his back, trying to keep the suit stabilized in its position. It’s not enough. The force of the piece of concrete slamming into the suit has its feet sliding backward on the floor nearly a foot. With the suit’s iron grip on the beam above, it pulls the beam along with him. The beam shifts, and so does everything on top of it.

The rumbling from above resumes, rapidly growing so loud that it becomes nothing but static through Rhodey’s speakers. He can see through both the suit’s cameras and the probe’s that the building is shaking violently, more debris raining down from above until the dust is so thick in the air that he can’t see anything through any of the cameras.

Desperate, he turns to the other screens, showing the outside of the hospital from the hovering helicopter and the police car. The emergency crews are stationed in groups around it, outside of the outlined danger zones that Tony’s tech had predicted, but they’re still rushing back at the sight of movement from the building.

“Mr. Stark? Colonel Rhodes? What’s happening?” Rhodey’s contact is shouting into their open line.

“I don’t know, I can’t see inside… I lost contact for the moment,” Rhodey reports. His voice remains calm, steadied by years of military training, but his heart is in his throat. “There’s too much dust and noise, I can’t hear or see anything inside. He was stabilizing that spot in the basement near most of the survivors and something shifted.”

There’s more movement from the building and several gasps come through the line open to the police. There’s still nothing but white noise and dust from Tony’s cameras or mic. Rhodey can do nothing but watch as half of the intact upper floors breaks off and comes down, collapsing down into the rest of the building. It seems to move in slow motion, breaking away from the rest and leaving clouds of dust behind in its shape, and yet it’s all over so fast.

There’s a moment of silence in the aftermath of the shift. Rhodey’s trying to get his lungs to work again. Everyone watches the other half of the top floors warily, waiting for them to come down too, but… they don’t. Everything is still.

The feed from the police car shows some of the cops running back to the map Tony had put up. “Scans are still showing twenty four life signs plus Iron Man!” one reports. Rhodey lets out a breath, pressing a hand against his chest. Unbelievably lucky.

The rumbling noise of the collapsing building dies down and Rhodey hears a cough from the suit’s speakers. “Tony?” he says, leaning forward in his seat, as if he can hear Tony better if he’s closer to
“I’m okay,” Tony says hoarsely from the other end. The dust is starting to clear a tiny bit in front of the front suit camera and now Rhodey can see the outline of the suit’s arms, still holding onto the beam with everything he’s got. Around him, there are more large chunks of concrete on the floor than before, things that fell from above when the other side of the building fell in. “Everyone’s okay, I think,” Tony reports, “just a lot of shit falling from the ceiling. I’ve got the damn thing stable now.”

“Shit,” Rhodey says with feeling, which earns a dry chuckle from Tony.

Rhodey turns to the other screen. The probe focuses in on his group of five, huddled together on the floor with their hands above their heads. “Hey, everything’s stabilized again. Is everyone okay?”

“Fuck,” one of them says, and several others echo the sentiment, but they all seem to be fine for the moment.

New scans are popping up on every screen available. The suit’s sensors are reevaluating the new damage to the building, new structural weak points, and changed pathways. The best way back to where Tony is hasn’t changed much, thankfully, and Rhodey guides his people to renew their journey.

Tony, meanwhile, has reopened communication with the emergency crews. “Good news, everyone is still okay for now,” he’s telling them. “Bad news, that was a major shift. The other half of the upper floors is more unstable than ever. There’s a huge crack going right down the middle of the damn thing, and gravity is pulling it down as we speak. Our remaining fifteen minute timeline has gone to about five, max.”

Tony takes a breath and Rhodey hears and sees the whir of the suit as it changes conformation. “I’m going to leave the suit to support the building here and start helping people clear a path out. We need to move them out ASAP. Anyone elsewhere in the building needs to get to me now. Prepare to start receiving people at the new location marked, and move everyone nonessential as far from the building as possible.”

Thankfully, the new location isn’t far from the old one. The emergency crews are already stationed close enough not to have to move any vehicles or heavy equipment again. The police scramble to follow Tony’s orders, moving everything they can back in case the destruction is more widespread than imagined.

The suit finishes its movements and spits Tony out. Rhodey sees him through the suit’s cameras as he lands on his feet, then presses a hand to his side where the concrete impacted him. His glowing marks make an eerie sight through the dust swirling in the air. He turns to face the people gathered near him. “Okay, we’re getting out of here. Anyone who’s paired, start getting up now. You’re going to follow the rest of us out as fast as you can. Anyone who’s not paired, come with me right now.” Earlier, Tony paired everyone injured who will need help moving with someone uninjured who could help them. The preparation is paying off now that they’re running out of time.

Rhodey loses sight of Tony, no camera on him as he moves out of the suit’s view, but he still has communication with him. “Have you got a decent path?” he asks over the private channel.

“I can make one,” Tony replies, his earpiece catching the words. “Saw the map before I got out of the suit. I’m going to clear what I can so they can get out faster. Straighter line.” Rhodey understands what Tony’s saying, why he got out of the suit instead of just directing people from inside it. Tony’s going to use his powers to help move them faster.
“Okay, be safe,” Rhodey tells him, then turns his attention back to his probe and his group. They’re quickly approaching the area where the suit is.

When the new calculations come up on Rhodey’s screen, however, an issue becomes apparent. “Hey, Tony?” he opens the public line, pulling the police and EMS leaders into this conversation. “We’ve got another problem. I’ve got my group of five following the probe back to your location now, but there are two more nearly at the opposite end of the building. They had an exit route before, out the other side, the probe was going to lead them there after it was done bringing my people to you. But the new shift closed off their route. There’s only one way through toward you now, and it’s a long path. There’s no way they’ll make it to you in time.”

“Damn,” one of the others says. “No way at all to protect them?”

“The suit could probably protect them well enough for emergency crews to dig them out, if it got to them before the building came down,” Tony says, but Rhodey can hear the regret in his voice.

“But it’s holding up the building,” one of the paramedics says, catching on. There are groans from the others on the line.

“Yeah,” Tony says. Rhodey can hear the pain in his voice. “If we get everyone here out, I can send the suit to them. But I can’t risk trying to move it until all these people are out. And with the state of the building…”

“It’s going to be a struggle just to get these people out in time,” Rhodey finishes.

“Damn. Is there anything we can do?” the police chief asks, but his tone tells Rhodey he already knows the answer.

Rhodey shakes his head, though no one can see him. “Anything you do from the outside could send the building down even sooner. It’s too risky. And the only way to them is from the other side of the building, where the rest are coming out now.”

“Oh, it’s grim, but it’s determined. These people know risk and they’re aware of the consequences. The job still needs doing. “Get as many out as you can.”

A cheer goes up among the crews when the first survivors emerge from the building. There are cops already rushing forward, guiding them toward waiting ambulances and medics. The sense of relief, the celebration that anyone made it at all, is palpable even to Rhodey, sitting in front of his screens back in New York.

He doesn’t see Tony from the helicopter’s camera, which he’s using to watch the survivors come out. Tony wouldn’t have wasted time coming out with the able-bodied, instead showing them the way as quickly as possible and going back to make sure the injured are getting the help they need.

On Rhodey’s other screen, the probe finally emerges into the main area where the suit is, with his group of five right behind it. They all rush forward, the two who aren’t supporting the man with the injured leg immediately going to the other injured and helping to speed them along. Tony comes back, stepping right into the probe’s view, grabbing onto a heavily limping woman and turning to help her companion drag her over the broken wall in their way.

“Tony, I’m going to send the probe over to those other two,” Rhodey tells him. He keeps this one on their private channel, coming through Tony’s earpiece rather than the probe’s speakers. He knows very well there’s little hope for the two trapped at the other end of the building, and he doesn’t want to get anyone’s hopes up. But he can’t just do nothing.
“Do it,” Tony says, already out of view of the probe’s cameras. Rhodey feeds new calculations into the probe and sends it in the opposite direction, back through the winding path his group of five took to get to Tony and over to the other end of the building. He’s less than halfway there, however, when the building starts shaking again, the rumbling coming back, louder than ever. The squeals of metal return and there are several heavy thuds. The air is becoming obscured with dust once more.

“It’s coming down!” Someone shouts over the open line, and there are yells from so many directions Rhodey can’t parse them all out.

“Shit!” he hears distinctly from Tony, then, “Come on, go! Get him out! No, I’ve got them, go!”

Despite everything in him that wants to shout, to make sure Tony’s okay, Rhodey stays silent. He can’t distract Tony, and there’s nothing he can do now. The probe keeps moving forward—it’s hopeless at this point to get the two people out, but maybe he can at least be with them at the moment of their death—but suddenly the camera feed goes off and Rhodey’s screen is reporting structural damage to the probe. It must have been hit by something.

The crashing of the rest of the building coming down is even more spectacular this time. A cloud goes up in all directions, out from the top and the bottom and every window, obscuring the sight of police and medics sprinting away from the building, dragging away the last of the survivors to emerge. The remainder of the top floors falls inward, collapsing down as it goes. Then, as the pieces hit the break point where the lower floors collapsed, what was left holding up the building is crushed beneath their weight. The dust cloud grows, so thick that the building can’t be seen for a moment.

Everyone collectively holds their breath, trying to see through the cloud. When it clears, what’s left is a gigantic pile of rubble, mostly contained within just a few pieces of the outer shell of a building. In some areas—the danger zones where Tony had told the crews to stay away—pieces of the building are spilling outward.

The feed from the helicopter moves over the entirety of the building, showing the destruction, then down to where the medics are treating what looks like at least twenty of the survivors. The feeds from Tony’s suit are nothing but static. With his heart once again trying to beat out of his chest, Rhodey opens the main line.

“How many got out?”

“We have twenty here,” someone reports.

“There was the two at the other end of the building that we were talking about. They can’t have made it out,” someone else says.

“That leaves two unaccounted for, plus Iron Man,” a third person announces. “Has anyone—”

His words are interrupted by a crash. Rhodey hears it over the line; thankfully, in that same moment, the helicopter feed zooms in on the area where the survivors had been emerging. There’s another crash and a chunk of a wall is blasted away, a red and gold arm emerging from the hole it left.

There are whoops and cheers from the crowd as the Iron Man suit emerges from the rubble. It’s looking pretty significantly worse for wear, dented and scraped and with a few parts hanging loosely by wires, but it’s intact and it goes stomping toward the gathered emergency crews.

“Tony, can you hear me?” Rhodey tries, looking at the static on his screen. The suit’s cameras must be busted, that or its transmitters, in which case Tony won’t be able to hear him either.

But there’s a crackle of static on Rhodey’s line a moment later, just as the suit walks up to one of the
unoccupied paramedics and stands in front of her. A cough, then, “Yeah, I’m here, I hear you,”
Tony says, and it echoes strangely. “Give me a minute.”

Rhodey understands what’s going on a second before it happens. The noises of celebration from the
crowd turn to shock when the Iron Man suit opens up and a half-conscious construction worker
comes tumbling out, into the waiting arms of two medics. They haul him up onto a stretcher,
immediately focused on him, while the rest of the crowd looks at the empty suit, exchanging
confused looks.

Rhodey opens the line to the police again. “Get someone back over there, I think you’re going to
need them,” he says.

Most people catch on at that, turning back to the remains of the building with hopeful expressions. A
few seconds later, there’s another shifting of the rubble and then more pieces are moving away, less
violently than when the suit had blasted them away but no less impressive for the shining blue barrier
that follows them out.

Tony emerges from the hole he’s created, the protective bubble of his powers dissipating from
around him as he finally makes it to safety. He’s supporting someone, one of their arms over his
shoulders as they limp along, cradling their other arm to their chest. Several medics rush forward and
take them from Tony, who follows them over to where the police chief is waiting.

Rhodey manages to get access to another police camera just as Tony reaches the gathered crowd,
thankfully, able to see Tony up close, reassure himself that he’s okay. Mostly okay, he amends,
looking at the way Tony’s still got one hand pressed protectively over his side and some of the
scrapes and cuts on his exposed skin.

The police chief shakes Tony’s hand firmly, thanking him profusely for his help. Tony thanks him
for the call in turn, but he’s subdued, and Rhodey knows exactly why.

“I’m sorry about those last two. The two we couldn’t get out,” he eventually says.

The chief takes a deep breath, letting it out slowly and closing his eyes for a moment. “It’s terrible
that someone didn’t make it. There are five people whose families are going to get the worst news of
their life today.” He says it in the plain, straightforward way that only someone with experience
delivering that kind of news can. “But Mr. Stark… we wouldn’t have gotten anyone out in time if it
weren’t for you. You saved every one of these people.” He gestures around them, to all of the
survivors being looked over by medics.

Tony nods, looking around, but Rhodey can see even through the less than stellar video that the
chief’s words haven’t really made anything better. “When you find out who they were… please let
me know. If they’re willing… I’d like to talk to the families.” Tony says quietly. This time, the chief
just nods.

Tony meanders through the crowd for a minute, receiving the thanks from emergency workers and
conscious survivors with grace. He makes his way back to the suit, and when he gets there, he looks
at it critically for a minute. “Feeds are down, must be damaged,” Rhodey says into his earpiece.

He sees Tony nod through the camera he’s watching from, and then Rhodey, and all the other people
watching Tony at this moment, get the privilege of seeing something pretty damn extraordinary.
Tony steps up in front of the suit and puts his hand against the reactor in the chest, closing his eyes.
For just a moment, his markings glow a little brighter, all the more obvious for the dust coating him
from head to toe, and then the reactor starts shining brightly beneath his hand, too. Arc-blue lines
spread over the suit, following the wiring, sparking along the places where it’s damaged, until the
light concentrates in those areas, and the suit repairs itself under Tony’s silent direction.

The repairs aren’t perfect, Rhodey knows. He can see on his feed—now back up and running—that there’s still damage to the suit, and the camera he’s looking through shows that the scrapes and some of the dents are still visible on the surface of the armor. But the dangling parts slot themselves back into place, the cameras come back to life, and the armor is certainly flightworthy.

Tony steps in when he’s done, the armor closing around him. Once he’s encased within in, where no one but Rhodey can hear him, he lets out an exhausted, defeated sigh, and Rhodey’s heart hurts for him. “Come on home,” he says quietly, and though Tony doesn’t respond, the armor take flight, hovering over the crowd for a moment.

Applause and a cheer go through the crowd, looking up at the Iron Man armor. Maybe just to maintain appearances, or maybe—Rhodey hopes—because he really understands how much these people appreciate him and enjoys it, Tony waves back at them, then turns and blasts into the sky.

He’s home pretty quickly. The sun is setting, a dozen brilliant colors reflecting off the shining panels of the suit as Tony steps out of it and gives Rhodey a hug, before moving to the bathroom to shower off the dust and grime clinging to him. Rhodey lets him go with a nod, figuring he’ll corner him after the shower. They’re going to have to talk after this, he knows.

When Tony’s done and changed back into his normal clothes, Rhodey sits down with him to look him over. The cuts and scrapes he’d seen through the police camera are already gone, he notes. Apparently Tony’s healing abilities aren’t just limited to slow rebuilding of damaged nerves. Tony pulls up his shirt so Rhodey can press over his side and reassure himself that there are no broken ribs. The long-suffering sigh he lets out as he does so brightens Rhodey’s mood considerably; if Tony’s feeling well enough for that, maybe things aren’t as bad as Rhodey feared.

Rhodey’s spared the pain of trying to come up with some way to ease into the necessary conversation by Tony jumping right into it. “I’m worried,” Tony confesses when they’re settled on the bed later, sitting side by side against the headboard.

“About what?”

“About me.” Tony leans his head back, looking up at the ceiling with a frown. “Today, I let those two people die.”

Rhodey’s already shaking his head vehemently, grabbing for Tony’s wrist. “You didn’t let anyone die. You did everything you could to save them. There was no possible way for you to get everyone out of there, not with how unstable the building was. Not with the way everything happened.”

Tony sighs. “I know. I’m not… blaming myself for the fact that they died. But I still made a choice. I made a lot of choices. I chose to take time to stabilize the building instead of getting people out as fast as possible. I sent you with that probe after that group of five. Once the first shift happened, I got out of the suit to clear a path faster, I made the people who could walk go first because they had the best chance of getting out if something happened sooner than we expected. When it all finally came down, I sent the suit after the one that couldn’t walk and I used my powers to protect myself and the other one who was left.”

Rhodey nods along with everything Tony says. “And all of those were the right decisions. Anyone would agree.”

“Yeah, but I didn’t…” Tony shifts like he’s uncomfortable, but Rhodey understands that this is a manifestation of frustration. He’s having trouble phrasing what he wants to say. Rhodey gives his
wrist a squeeze and he settles down, letting out a long breath. “I didn’t feel anything for them. I was sad, at the thought that those two wouldn’t make it. I felt grief for the ones who were already dead when we got there. But all the decisions I made, I made them based on… statistics, probabilities. They were cold and clinical. There was no… empathy.”

Rhodey studies the hand he’s holding on to. “See, you say that, but what you just described to me? That’s empathy. You were sad when you realized that people were dead, or were going to die. You felt grief for them. That seems like empathy to me.”

Tony doesn’t say anything to that, so Rhodey tries again. “Would you have made the same decisions before?”

Tony thinks about it for a minute. “Yes,” he finally says, and Rhodey knows that he believes it.

“Exactly. You made the same decisions, with the same information.”

Tony’s other hand taps nervously on his thigh. “I just… I feel like there’s something missing. I shouldn’t just feel sadness, or—or grief for other people. There should be some human connection there. Something, I don’t know how to describe it.”

Rhodey nods. “I’ve been thinking about that, actually. Ever since you told me about the gala, and how you were afraid you can’t love.”

Tony looks over to him, surprised, and Rhodey takes a moment to be sure of himself, organize his words, before speaking. “I’m not you. I can’t possibly know what it’s like to be you, to have woken up without most of my emotions and to be trying to get them back. But we have all these conversations about emotion, and sometimes… they really make me think.”

Rhodey pauses, but Tony just waits for him to think before he continues. “I think… that thinking about anything too hard will make you question it. Emotions are crazy. They’re practically impossible to figure out on a normal day, for a normal person. I think… don’t take this the wrong way, but sometimes I think you’re overthinking your own emotions.”

Tony, thankfully, doesn’t look offended, just confused. “What do you mean?”

Rhodey thinks about it for a moment, searching for a good explanation. “Say you asked me whether I love my mother. I’d say yes, of course I do. She’s my mom, she raised me, I love her with all my heart and I always will. But say you asked me why. How I know I love her. Say you were an alien with no concept of love whatsoever, and you asked me to describe it to you. I’m not sure I could do it.”

Tony tilts his head like he’s considering the scenario, but it’s clear he’s listening intently. “It’s hard as hell to break an emotion down to words,” Rhodey continues, “or somehow into individual, smaller feelings. If we’re talking about my mom, I can say things like ‘she raised me.’ But if you’re looking at it a different way, that could be interpreted as gratitude, not love. I could tell you that I care about what happens to her and I want to see her safe, but then, I would do the same for random strangers, people I’d never even met before.”

Tony nods, clearly seeing what Rhodey’s getting at. “Like I did today.”

“Yeah. And I could tell you that I feel something warm and nice when she’s around, that she makes me feel safe and good, and maybe that’s what constitutes love. I think that’s as good an explanation as any. But it’s not unique to me. Don’t you dare try and tell me you didn’t feel that way when Peter was here.”
Tony looks down at his lap again. “So you think… today, what I felt for those people… that was enough? That was empathy, love, whatever I need to make the right decisions?”

“I think that maybe you’re searching for something you’re never going to find. And I don’t mean to hurt you by saying that, I really don’t. But before, when you never would have thought twice about the fact that you experienced the full spectrum of human emotions, you didn’t really examine them all in this much detail. They were just there, a given. I think maybe now, you’re so worried about getting them back that you’re convincing yourself that there’s going to be some magical moment of realization or perfect feeling that’s going to make you sure about it. But I just… don’t think that’s how it works.”

Tony looks back up at him at that. There are unshed tears in his eyes and Rhodey’s heart seizes for a moment, worried that he’s hurt Tony, that he’s pushing him away, but then Tony leans into his side and turns his hand to grip Rhodey’s in return.

“I think maybe you’re right,” he whispers, and Rhodey can tell that it’s not an easy confession for him. “I’m just worried. How do I know for sure?”

“Maybe you won’t, not for a while. There’s nothing wrong with that. You’re still making the same decisions the old you would have.” Rhodey offers.

“I just… don’t want to turn into… someone without empathy. Turning people into statistics instead of civilians. Ignoring the casualties so I don’t have to feel guilty about them. Writing people off as collateral damage and then ignoring the fact that they were people.”

Rhodey extracts his arm to wrap it around Tony’s shoulders, pulling him even tighter against his side. “I get it, I do. Of course you don’t want to do any of that. But you’re not, Tony, that’s the point. The first thing you did when it was all over today was tell them you wanted to talk to the families. That alone is more than a lot of people would do.”

Tony takes a deep breath against him and lets it out, relaxing even more. “You really think I’m okay?”

“Absolutely,” Rhodey breathes conviction into the word.

“Okay.” Tony sits up again, moving to worm his way beneath the covers and lie down for real. “Thank you. Keep—keep watching me, okay? And give me time, to… to believe you.”

Rhodey moves under the blankets as well, nodding as he turns to wave the lights off. “Take all the time you need, Tones. I’ll be here.”
Loved

Chapter Notes

You didn’t really think I’d call a chapter “unloved” and then just leave it at that, did you? Prepare for some fluff. The next chapter is also fluff city, and then we get to the final major plot arc of the story (holy crap this story will, in fact, eventually be done!)

Rhodey can’t help but spend a lot of time over the next few weeks thinking about that conversation the night after Pennsylvania. Everything he said about love, he believed it, but he keeps going over it all in his head.

Some of it is personal. He wouldn’t say he’s having an existential crisis or anything so dramatic, but there’s been a lot of introspection involved in helping Tony navigate his way through all of this emotional territory since his resurrection.

At first, that wasn’t so hard, at least not in terms of how Rhodey felt about himself. It was hard on him emotionally, of course, to see Tony so despondent, to know that he couldn’t feel anything but grief. Rhodey hurt for him and he hated seeing his best friend, one of the only people he had left in the world, struggling like that.

But Rhodey did his best to be there for him, to help him through all of those initial issues with the simpler emotions like surprise and even hope. In a way, it actually bolstered Rhodey’s confidence in himself, his perception of himself. He felt like he was doing something good for Tony, like he could be an emotional role model in a way, and certainly a helpful guide.

But lately, Tony’s been improving so much that the water’s getting murkier. When he was just focused on getting Tony to smile once in a while, it didn’t seem so important to really look at his own emotions, the philosophy behind them, and how to define them. But that’s becoming more of a necessity now that they’re getting into the nebulous territory of things like love, and of course the ultimate goal, one Rhodey hasn’t even tried to touch in quite a while: happiness.

Like he told Tony after that building collapse, love is a hard thing to define. When he lies awake at night thinking about what love means, Rhodey’s concluded for certain that everyone experiences it differently. And there are different kinds of love, so many it’s impossible to even keep track of them all. Explaining it, trying to guide someone through it, seems next to impossible.

Sometimes, the crippling weight of what he’s trying to do threatens to drown him. Who is he to try and define what Tony’s feelings should be, how he should see the people in his life? Sure, Rhodey likes to think he’s a pretty emotionally stable guy and mature enough to deal with just about everything life’s thrown at him, but in the end, he’s just a human being. Flawed, like everyone else. Just a soldier who’s survived maybe one too many wars and is lucky enough to be here now. How could he possibly live up to the challenge of helping Tony Stark—Iron Man, savior of the planet—find peace?

But those moments of anxiety rarely last long. All he really has to do is look over at Tony, and his resolve is always a hundred times stronger than any doubt he could have. Tony’s a flawed human being too, and even with his alien powers and glowing marks and genius mind, it’s not hard for Rhodey to see the little brat he met at MIT, the teenager he held after his parents’ funeral, or the
smirking asshole who used to ditch Rhodey to go home with a model. Even a world-weary man, beaten down by life—and death—and surviving too many wars for someone who was never meant to be a soldier.

Tony told him, that night, to give him time to believe Rhodey’s words, his conviction that Tony is okay. And he’s trying his best to do that. He’s refraining from pushing Tony, from urging him to talk more or to behave any differently. Not that he would, anyway. He didn’t lie when he told Tony that he believes he’s fine, that he already feels love. He doesn’t need Tony to give a dramatic show of it.

But that doesn’t stop him from trying to think up new ways to help confirm it for Tony. He’s concluded that the best, easiest way to do that is to keep Tony in contact with people who love him back, equally but all in different ways. Rhodey himself fills a part of that role, and he certainly loves Tony enough for a hundred people, but diversity is always good.

The unfortunate part of that plan is that people who love Tony, truly and unconditionally, are in pretty short supply. The number of people that Rhodey’s truly trusted with Tony and his heart has always been depressingly small, and all the smaller for the betrayals that have left their scars on Tony and Rhodey both. People who abused that trust and made it all the harder to find someone Rhodey feels he could really rely on to care for Tony without any ulterior motive.

Since the invasion, with most of their close friends gone, that number is smaller than ever. Right now, it’s pretty much down to Rhodey and Peter. Peter’s aunt May is quickly making the list—she’s visited the Tower with Peter a few times now and it’s hard not to love her—but she’s not around all the time, and not enough yet for Rhodey to have that firm belief in her relationship with Tony.

Peter is great for Tony. The kid not only loves with the wholehearted innocence of the truly good, but he looks up to Tony too. They’re of a kind—that kind being nerds, not that Rhodey should be throwing stones from that particular glass house—and they can and do spend hours in the labs together. Peter has jumped into Tony’s modified “internship” with both feet and is as enthusiastic as any new engineer hired by SI.

Sometimes, Rhodey catches Tony just watching Peter, usually with some sort of a fond smile on his face. Occasionally, Tony realizes he’s being watched and finds something else to focus on, but not without sneaking a glance at Rhodey first. Rhodey’s delighted to see, on those occasions, that instead of any sort of shame or embarrassment over being a gigantic sap, Tony shares a soft, genuine smile with him. Accepting. The kind that means he’s starting to see what Rhodey was talking about when he said that Tony clearly loves Peter.

But, Rhodey decides, having more good people around Tony can’t hurt. Particularly the type of good that Peter is—young, earnest, incredibly sincere. Not that it has to be a teenager who looks up to Tony, but… maybe, Rhodey realizes one day, that’s exactly who else they need.

After his revelation, he spends four days devoting as much time as possible to his secret project. It’s not really that he’s trying to hide anything from Tony, but if this turns out well, it’ll be a nice surprise for him. And if it turns out badly, well, then Rhodey will have enough warning to find the right way to break the news. He’s certainly not going to keep it a secret—he’s had enough of those between him and Tony—but he’s not eager to potentially bring Tony news of yet another dead friend.

But the news is good. It takes some possibly illegal data searches with Tony’s personal tech—the stuff reserved for the Avengers and Tony himself, not distributed to the public or even to the government—plus a few phone calls where Rhodey pulls out a few trump cards, up to and including his military rank. The military might be nothing but a massive graveyard, but his title still carries weight with some people.
And he succeeds. With that flush of success bolstering him, on a Friday afternoon, Rhodey sets up what he needs and tells Tony that he needs him back home after his last meeting with SI. And not, he emphasizes, hidden down in the lab, but actually present. Tony’s used to Rhodey needing his time for SI projects or other ideas, sometimes for their personal mini therapy sessions, so he acquiesces without question.

When Tony comes home and into the lounge where Rhodey’s set up, it’s not to the meeting Rhodey knows he expects. Instead, Tony comes in to the beginning of a video call, a second genius teenager that Tony knows well appearing on the screen with a smile bright enough to light up a room.

“Tony!”

Tony’s stopped dead where he’s standing, mouth open in shock. But it’s a good shock, Rhodey can tell. The corners of his mouth are already turning up and when he takes a few precious seconds to glance at Rhodey, his expression is full of wonder. The look fills Rhodey’s heart, even when Tony turns away again, drawn toward the screen.

“Harley,” Tony says, his voice already scratchy with emotion. “You’re okay.” One of his hands twitches forward like he wants to reach through the screen, and Rhodey only wishes he could have gotten the kid here in person, but this will have to do.

The kid Tony met in Tennessee, the one who helped him through panic attacks and reminded him who he was without the suit, the one that Tony’s been raving about ever since, laughs on the other end of the line. “Yeah, I’m fine. Glad to see you too, you asshole. You know the next time someone tells me you’re dead, I don’t think I’m going to believe it.”

Tony laughs incredulously and Rhodey can’t help but join him. God, so many people would find that so insensitive, so many would never have said it in the first place, too worried about bringing up bad memories for Tony, tiptoeing around his feelings. But, Rhodey’s realizing, this is exactly what Tony needs right now. Exactly what Rhodey was hoping for. A new personality, a slice of normalcy that comes in a different package than Rhodey’s own serious efficiency or Peter’s polite enthusiasm.

“Rhodes,” Harley says, turning to acknowledge Rhodey with a nod. “Thanks for setting this up. Nice to finally meet you.”

Rhodey hears what’s unspoken and is warmed by the realization that Tony told Harley about him. He’s distracted by Tony’s eyes back on him, searching his face. “How did you—?” he whispers.

“ Took quite a bit of searching, and maybe a little bit of pulling rank,” Rhodey says, to a snort from Harley. “Finally got hold of a number for him the day before yesterday. We texted back and forth and set this up.”

“Thought it was some kind of dumb prank at first,” Harley admits. “But he convinced me. Asked if I could set up a video chat.”

Tony turns back to face the screen. “Is… everyone okay? Your sister, your mom?” It’s tentative, not wanting to ruin the mood. But Rhodey can tell that the same protective instincts that come out around Peter are here in force. Tony wants to make sure this kid is well taken care of.

Harley’s nodding, blowing out a breath. “Yeah, everyone’s fine. Like, just about everyone. Pretty sure that counts as a miracle.”

Tony and Rhodey just watch him with wide eyes as he continues. “It’s a pretty small town, you know? Middle of nowhere. The nearest big landing zone was hours away. Took them a long time to even get here after the invasion started.”
Rhodey nods. That does make sense; as large as Thanos’s army was, it took time for them to round up the whole population. Supposedly, there are tiny, remote places that were never even touched by the invasion, at least not directly. Everyone was affected by the massive loss of life, the inability to contact the rest of the world or bring in resources for a month, but the aliens might not have physically touched every corner of the planet. A small town like Rose Hill would hardly have been on the radar, definitely not a priority to empty out and look for the Time Stone.

“And when they finally did come… well, we lost a couple guys,” Harley says solemnly. “Old vets and stuff who wanted to try and defend the town. Even though we knew what had happened to everyone else who fought by then. I think maybe they just didn’t have much more to live for. Or maybe they didn’t want to take up resources that could go to the rest of us.” Harley shrugs, but he looks away, and he’s clearly affected by it.

“What happened to the rest of you?” Tony asks.

Harley looks back at him, and this time there’s a small smile on his face. “Lot of nuts in a town like ours. You know, tons of guns and stuff, paranoid about the government. A few people have these, like, Y2K bunkers below their houses. Supposed to be good enough to survive a nuclear war or whatever. So when the town was finally being approached, most of us went into them.”

“The whole town?” Rhodey asks, a little incredulous.

Harley shrugs again. “Small town. And we got lucky. The guys who owned them, they hid them well, and they were big, pretty well stocked. They fit a lot of people. And there were some people who stayed out, enough I guess I think maybe they just didn’t have much more to live for. Or maybe they didn’t want to take up resources that could go to the rest of us.” Harley shrugs, but he looks away, and he’s clearly affected by it.

Harley’s gaze turns distant for a moment, a look Rhodey knows well. “It wasn’t… great. We had food and stuff, but everyone was so scared… There were a bunch of kids, they were all freaking out. My sister couldn’t stop crying. Neither could my mom, actually. And we didn’t know if the aliens were looking for us, or how they might be able to find us. We were afraid to use the radios to talk to each other. We were afraid to even move most of the time. It was like the tornado drill from hell.”

There’s a strength beneath Harley’s words that Rhodey recognizes. He’s a hell of a lot like Tony, actually. Hiding real pain beneath flippant words and shrugs. Using sarcasm and nonchalant body language to try to deflect and keep people from recognizing that he feels things deeply.

Harley’s tone becomes a little lighter as he finishes. “Things got back on track pretty quick, though. Everything was pretty much intact when we came out. We lost a few people, but not many. We kinda just… went back to normal. Some people moved out, went to the bigger cities to help reconstruction or go be with their families, if they had any somewhere else. But most people stayed. We’ve been good.”

Tony smiles again at that. “That’s great. You have everything you need there?”

Harley gives him a look that says he’s judging Tony for trying to mother him long-distance, but it’s playful. “We’re fine, Tony. How are you guys? I’ve seen some stuff about Iron Man being out and about again. And I saw you releasing that new phone last week.”

“We’re doing pretty good,” Tony says with a smile. He starts talking about the new phone that came out, offering to send some to Harley and his family, and Rhodey understands something.

Tony’s not planning to tell him everything, not right now. There could be a complicated explanation
for it, but it could just come down to the fact that a video call isn’t ideal for dropping big news. This isn’t going to be like the day Peter first came to the Tower, when, to Rhodey’s surprise, Tony told him pretty much everything about his emotions, his recovery, his struggles.

It’s not a matter of trust, Rhodey’s sure. Tony knows Harley just as well as he did Peter on that first day he came by, possibly even better, and he has no reason not to trust the kid with that information the way he trusted Peter with it.

Tony hasn’t told Rhodey everything about his time in Tennessee, when the world briefly thought him dead (but not Rhodey, no, he always refused to accept it, barely accepted it when he actually saw Tony’s corpse with his own eyes, but this is not the time to think about that), but Rhodey knows that Harley helped Tony through at least one panic attack, saw Tony at one of his most vulnerable points. And rather than being ashamed, turning away from Harley because of it, he’d embraced it. Trusted the kid with everything he had.

It’s always been Tony’s way, one that’s come back to bite him in that ass more than once, but it’s too fundamental an aspect of Tony’s personality to desert him even in the face of life-changing—or even life-ending—betrayals. Sometimes, Rhodey thinks that’s why two of Tony’s most recently acquired allies have been teenagers. He wonders if Tony thinks, even subconsciously, that these kids are too young, too naive, to betray him; not experienced enough to fake their feelings for him, draw him in and then stab him in the back. It’s a depressing thought that Rhodey doesn’t particularly want to focus on.

Instead, he focuses in on the conversation itself—not the words being said, but the tone, the pace. The relaxed, fond look on Tony’s face. He’s seeing it more and more lately, around Peter, around Rhodey himself, in the lab when projects are going well or when he’s watching the bots. They haven’t explicitly talked about Tony’s emotional state and the ever-elusive happiness in at least a week, but damn if Rhodey doesn’t secretly think that Tony’s already achieved it, whether he knows it or not.

They talk for at least half an hour, Rhodey occasionally included in the conversation but mostly just sitting back and watching Tony, before Harley says he’s got somewhere he needs to be and reluctantly ends the call. Tony tells him to keep in touch, offers to bring him and his family to visit sometime, if they’re interested. Rhodey can tell that Harley’s more than interested, but in the manner classic to most teenage boys—Peter escapes the same thing only by virtue of being incredibly excitable and absolutely terrible at hiding it—pretends that he’s not practically salivating at the thought. He waves Tony and Rhodey off with another half-insult and an inside joke that Rhodey doesn’t understand, but smiles at nonetheless, just because of Tony’s reaction to it.

When the call is finished, Tony sinks into a chair. He leans his head back and closes his eyes, smiling. Rhodey moves over to rest a hand on his shoulder, not really concerned that anything’s wrong, but just wanting to share in the moment. Tony doesn’t bother to open his eyes, but he turns his head slightly toward Rhodey. “Thank you,” he whispers.

Rhodey doesn’t respond; he doesn’t need to. They stay in the same positions for a minute, basking in the sweet moment, before separating. Tony has work to finish down in the lab and Rhodey’s got paperwork he’s behind on. They go back to their day, and Rhodey can only hope Tony’s feeling a little lighter, same as him.

At the end of the day, Tony approaches him. They’re winding down anyway, apart tonight instead of together. It would have seemed impossible months ago, but slowly, they’ve become comfortable enough with their lives and their routines, such as they are, to have regular time to themselves. Spending every single moment together usually doesn’t bode well for even the closest of relationships, but in those first few months after the long invasion and Tony’s resurrection, Rhodey
could hardly stand to let Tony out of his sight for more than a few hours at a time, and only when it was absolutely necessary.

Now, it’s heartening to realize how much more comfortable they’ve become. With themselves, with their lives, with time apart. Rhodey no longer feels panic at the thought of Tony being out of his sight. He doesn’t worry that some unforeseen complication of his resurrection will take him out while Rhodey’s not there to help him, or that some new horror will descend on the Earth when they’re separated.

Not only has his own constant fear that Tony’s situation is unstable and could deteriorate any minute lessened, Rhodey realizes, but the same sentiment is reflected everywhere. The heightened state of fear and sick anticipation leftover from the invasion is fading, slowly but surely. The memory of the terror, the uncertainty, and the horror they’ve all been through will never completely leave those who experienced it, but it doesn’t dictate every moment like it once did. Rhodey’s ability to let Tony out of his sight is mirrored in parents who will let their children go back to school, or out to play at others’ houses, where months ago they could barely close their eyes for fear of losing them.

Tonight, Rhodey’s curled in a plushy chair in one of the more secluded lounges, reading. The tall bookshelves and the large windows looking out on the city make it a cozy little library. Rhodey’s often too busy to make use of it, but tonight he was determined to relax a little, away from distractions and worries. He’d purposely left his phone and tablet in another room.

Tony stands in the doorway for a while, just watching him, and Rhodey calmly finishes the page he’s on, comfortable enough with the silence and the relaxed way Tony’s leaning against the wall. When he does put the book aside and look up, Tony doesn’t bother moving for a moment, instead gazing out the windows at the setting sun and the city laid out before them.

He does look back to Rhodey eventually. “Thank you,” he says softly, “for today. I… needed that, I think. And Harley… it’s so good to know he’s okay.”

Okay in multiple ways, Rhodey knows. He was luckier with that call than he’d ever thought he would be. The entire time he spent looking for Harley, he’d known there was a decent chance the kid was dead, and he’d eventually have to bring that news to Tony. But not only is he alive, his family is too. Most of his town. No doubt he has some traumatizing memories to grapple with now, but he didn’t have to experience the intimate horrors of the camps or of watching his family be slaughtered. He’s still relatively untouched, innocent in this, and that has to be as much of a balm to Tony as it is to Rhodey.

Rhodey doesn’t try to put all of that into words, but he does nod. “It’s good to see a whole family still together. A whole town, even, that stayed relatively safe. I’m glad they’re doing well.”

Tony comes over, perching on the arm of Rhodey’s chair. Rhodey looks up at him, sensing that he has something else to say. Something he’s been working up to, if the distant look in eyes is anything to go by. Rhodey doesn’t push him. He’s plenty used to giving Tony the time he needs to think about what he wants to say when it’s something important to him.

And he’s always rewarded for it. “I think… I’m starting to believe you.” Tony admits, quiet in the stillness of the room.

Rhodey can’t help a sharp intake of breath at that. He knows what Tony means immediately, and the hope swelling in his chest might burst it.

Tony doesn’t look down at him, but he reaches down to hold out a hand, which Rhodey takes and squeezes tightly. Tony continues looking out the window, where the setting sun is painting the city’s
skyline in brilliant streaks of orange and red. “Talking to Harley today, and then thinking about him, his family, Peter, everyone I care about. You were right about me, about how I know about my feelings. I don’t need some magical moment. Looking at those kids, just thinking about them… I’m sure enough. I love them.”

Rhodey squeezes Tony’s hand even harder, to the point he might very well be causing pain, but Tony doesn’t pull away, just grips back. “That’s so good, Tony.” Rhodey doesn’t bother trying to hide the shaking in his voice. It’s some overwhelmed combination of relief, fondness, and plain joy. “I’m so glad.”

Tony looks down at his own knees and his voice is even softer when he adds, “I’m only sure because… I already felt it. It was there all along, I just needed help to recognize it. I know I love the kids because it’s the same thing I feel for you.”

He says it like a confession, like he’s uncertain about such a frank emotional talk, but Rhodey doesn’t care. To keep himself from doing something far more embarrassing, like bursting into tears right there, he yanks on Tony’s hand, pulling him over suddenly so that he tips off the arm of the chair and lands in Rhodey’s lap with a soft oof.

It’s not the most graceful landing and there’s some adjustment that nearly puts a sharp elbow into Rhodey’s gut, but the movement helps give Rhodey a moment to settle himself and be sure he’s not actually going to cry. Tony turns himself around so that he’s comfortably resting his weight on Rhodey and facing toward him, and Rhodey wraps his arms around Tony and practically crushes him with the force of his embrace.

Tony’s got one arm trapped between their chests, but he doesn’t make more than a cursory attempt to extract it, instead just twisting it to place his palm against Rhodey’s chest and leaning into the hug, wrapping his free arm around Rhodey’s shoulders and squeezing back just as tightly. “Love you too,” Rhodey whispers into Tony’s hair. Tony presses even harder into him in response.

Rhodey does eventually loosen his arms, if only to restore circulation, but Tony doesn’t move to climb off of him. He just shifts down by inches, setting his head down on Rhodey’s shoulder and breathing against his neck. Rhodey moves one hand up from Tony’s back to rest at the back of his head. They spend a long time like that, watching the sunset, resting against each other, feeling each other breathe. It’s peaceful, and though there are thousands more words Rhodey could be saying, he doesn’t. Their closeness, this moment, is enough.
Holy crap, we really are nearing the end of this story. After this last fluff (not the last fluff of the story, but the last fluff for now), it’s big major plot time!


Rhodey used to like the color scheme of his suit. He preferred it to Tony’s flashy red and gold, at least for himself. Iron Man suited Tony perfectly, and it would have been weird seeing him in anything but his ostentatious, famously recognizable suit. But Rhodey liked the sleek silver of the original model that he’d “stolen” from Tony back during the whole incident where he was dying. And he’d liked it even more when the Air Force—eventually with Tony’s blessing and input, after Hammer finally got what he deserved—redesigned it to be even more huge and hulking and dark. It was badass, he’d thought, though he kept that thought to himself for the sake of professionalism.

The thing standing before him now is a lot more similar to the first model than the War Machine he was used to before the invasion, but he can’t deny it still scares him. There’s no large shoulder-mounted gun; a lot of the weaponry is gone, in fact, and the entire thing is slimmer and sleeker than the old model Rhodey wore. It’s still bulkier than Tony’s—in part because of Rhodey’s different body type, but mostly because of the reinforced joints and spine that Tony couldn’t help but put in.

It’s a hell of a lot less physically intimidating than what Rhodey’s used to, but he can’t stop his heart from pounding. It’s not even as dark as the old one, a lot more bright silver than black and gray in the current design, and yet Rhodey can’t help but see a gaping chasm, a dark coffin perfectly sized for him.

Which is ridiculous, and he internally shakes himself, trying to berate his irrational fear into submission. Perhaps not so irrational, considering what happened last time… but it’s not going to happen again. Even if it does, Tony’s improvements would keep him from ending up in the same position.

Rhodey’s a soldier. An Avenger. He’s pushed himself through sheer terror before to do what needs to be done. He’s been broken down and rebuilt and come out all the stronger for it. He’s never been a coward, never shied away from what has to be done. He climbed his way through the ranks and earned his title. He stood in the faces of his superiors when Tony was missing and risked a hell of a lot more than a physical injury arguing for them to send him back out there. He’s put his life on the line for years, first for his country and then for the world. He can do this.

This should be a celebration. As far as they can tell, Rhodey is completely healed. After months of exercises to strengthen his legs and back, he can once again walk with a steady gait, without any support needed. He can stand and jump and squat and do all of the things he’d taken for granted before. They come as easily as they once did.

They wanted to be sure, of course. He and Tony had debated back and forth quite a bit about the merits of involving other people for absolute confirmation—after all, they’d chosen to go through this mostly alone, to protect themselves and their privacy. Mostly to protect Tony and his still-strange healing abilities.
They ended up talking with Strange about it. Rhodey could already tell during their few meetings, from the way Strange looked at him—him and his braces and his exercises and the way Tony clung to him—that he suspected something. Strange was still haughty and arrogant and damn if he wasn’t reminiscent of Tony—at least, the way Tony used to be, but with Tony’s emotional recovery, he’s seeming closer to his old snarky, sarcastic self all the time—and Rhodey sometimes hated how smug and obnoxious he could be, but he was a medical doctor before he was a powerful wizard and they could use his advice in both areas.

Unfortunately—though perhaps not unexpectedly—Strange didn’t have much to say about either point. He’s powerful, but not as powerful as the Infinity Stones, or the impression they left on Tony. Strange talked at length about some of the magical ways of disguising or working through an injury, but from what Rhodey could gather, none of those involved actually biologically healing the physical damage. Strange didn’t have any more insight into that part of Tony’s powers than Tony himself, and once Tony assured him that he had no plans to attempt to use something so uncertain on purpose, Strange didn’t have much else to offer on that front.

On the medical side, Strange also had little to say. He couldn’t really tell much without actual tests and equipment, and he’d never seen Rhodey’s original test results. He’d never met Rhodey before the injury or immediately after it. They included Strange in a discussion about the risks and possible consequences of going back in to a hospital, likely revealing Tony’s abilities to the doctors and possibly others too. In the end, they all agreed on three things: that the truth will get out to the public eventually, that doctors are hopefully trustworthy enough not to go blabbing to anyone and everyone, and that it’s probably better to know for sure.

So Rhodey had gone back to the neurologist he’d seen so many months ago. She was clearly surprised to see him back, and a hell of a lot more surprised to see him walking in, no trace of the paralysis he’d been struggling with the last time he’d seen her.

She dutifully repeated most of the same tests as before, and when they came back a few days later for the results, she eyed Tony without much subtlety while she explained that as far as they could tell, he was completely healed. Beyond healed, even; there was in fact no evidence to suggest that there had ever been damage in the first place. No scarring, no inflammation, no residual deposits of cell debris, nothing.

Before going, he and Tony had agreed on what to do in a number of likely scenarios they could come up with. This was one of them. And so they found themselves explaining a sanitized version of the truth to the doctor. Better to tell her that they suspected this was some unexpected side effect of Tony’s abilities—and firmly assert that it was not something he could do on purpose—than to leave her to come up with her own theories, possibly wildly inaccurate ones that, if they got out, could cause a lot of damage.

As professional as ever, she agreed that this certainly fell under protected health information, something she couldn’t be talking about to others unless they were directly involved in Rhodey’s care and needed to know. Even better, she quietly agreed that this was probably something best left out of his chart and records. There was no need to put that kind of speculation in writing.

She did want to see him again for follow-ups, to be sure nothing new was happening or was going to come of this. Rhodey agreed to come in once every six months for at least the next few years, if possible, and they parted ways amicably.

That night, Tony asked Rhodey if he wanted to get back in the suit again.

It was a heavy question, one Rhodey had been thinking about a lot. Thanks to his previous contemplation, it wasn’t really a surprise to be asked, and he didn’t need long to think about it. He
still wasn’t sure, but he didn’t need to sit down and talk through all of his fears and hopes and apprehensions with Tony. He just needed to tell him the truth: that he’d like to try.

It took Tony less than two weeks to create the sleek suit standing in front of Rhodey now. They’re out on the pad from which Tony usually launches Iron Man, with the familiar red and gold armor standing sentinel off to one side while Tony hovers behind Rhodey, trying to give him space to stare down this challenge.

Rhodey hasn’t had panic attacks or anything so serious since his minor freak out the day that Tony first got back into the suit. His heart races a little at the thought of getting back in any version of the suit that he nearly died in, sure, and that’s been happening more and more over the last week as the time to test it out has approached. But Rhodey’s not having flashbacks, he’s not waking up violently from nightmares, he’s not physically sick at the thought of it. He counts that as a win, even if it’s a small one, and hopes it means this is going to go well.

But that logic goes out the window when the armor opens up in front of him, revealing the space where Rhodey’s supposed to step in, let it close around him, a dark metal tomb that could malfunction in a thousand different ways, that could tip right off the platform and send him hurtling to the ground, trapped inside, blind, waiting for the impact, going out in a blazing crash and waking up with his whole life changed around him…

He takes a step back.

He doesn’t entirely lose himself. Time is moving a little funny, but his vision doesn’t gray out, his ears aren’t ringing. He’s perfectly aware of the feel of Tony grabbing his arm when he steps back. Tony takes a step forward to be right beside Rhodey, not yet trying to physically support him, but ready to if he needs to. Trying to give Rhodey support and space at the same time, to be a comforting presence without hurting Rhodey’s pride.

Rhodey closes his eyes and takes a few deep breaths, willing his heart to stop trying to fling itself out of his chest. He knows Tony can feel the anxiety radiating off of him, but he’s not embarrassed by it. He has plenty of reason to be anxious, and Tony’s been nothing but quietly supportive through all of this. Rhodey’s only true fear is that Tony will attribute some of his reluctance to him not trusting Tony’s tech, which is absolutely untrue. Rhodey trusts Tony with his life, his heart, his soul.

When he opens his eyes again, nothing has changed. The suit is still standing there, open and ready for him, expectant. Tony’s standing beside him, lightly gripping his arm, just waiting. Rhodey wants to push himself forward, to just jump in the deep end and get it over with, but he knows that’s not the right way to go about this. That would probably end in disaster. He needs to take it slow.

When he straightens, Tony’s grip on his arm tightens briefly and falls away. “You don’t have to do this now,” Tony says. Or at all, goes unspoken. There’s no particular tone to the words, no inflection, no expectations. Tony’s just reminding him of his options.

Rhodey nods. He knows that. He doesn’t need to do this, but he wants to. Not just for Tony’s sake, not just to be beside him in the suit, not just to prove something to himself or to try to get back something that he lost. He just… wants this. There was always a freedom and a joy to being in the suit, and he wants that again.

“I’m okay,” he says, and it comes out firm and sure, more so than he actually feels. He can feel Tony’s presence at his back, staying close just in case, as he steps forward. Just three steps, and he’s right in front of the open suit. It’s waiting for him, arms open, beckoning him inside.

He turns, and he’s facing Tony. Tony just watches him, steady as ever, and Rhodey’s more grateful
than he knows how to say that Tony isn’t pushing him or, alternately, rushing forward at the sight of his no doubt wide eyes, the sweat on his skin. Tony’s just letting him move, at his own pace, there to help him if he needs it or asks for it.

He forces in one more deep breath through a chest that doesn’t want to cooperate and steps backward.

The familiar sound of shifting metal surrounds him as he’s engulfed by the suit. The whole process takes a few seconds at most, but it feels like minutes or hours to Rhodey, who’s standing still, muscles locked in what he doesn’t want to admit is pure terror as he’s encased in unyielding metal.

The faceplate doesn’t close, thank god for small mercies, but the feeling of the rest of the suit closing around him is enough. The suit hides that fact that he’s shaking all over, legs turned to jelly, but he knows Tony can see that he’s practically gasping for air now. The irrational fear that somehow the suit will just twist itself out of shape right then and there, forcing his vulnerable flesh and bones into unnatural positions, or fling itself off the launch pad and down to the cement below with Rhodey trapped inside it, won’t leave him alone.

He’s about three seconds from calling the entire thing off, demanding the suit open up and let him out again so he can collapse face-first on the ground, probably, because his legs definitely won’t hold him up after this. Now his vision really is starting to go a little weird, tunneling on him, and he’s trying to draw in the breath to say that he was wrong, he can’t do this, this was a mistake.

But then there’s a warm touch on his face, Tony’s hands on him. And suddenly, the panic fades into the background. The fear that something catastrophically wrong will kill him before he even knows it dissipates, replaced by the firm trust he’s always had in Tony and his creations. It’s like the end of the invasion all over again, that first moment that Tony touched him and all his pain wanted to just melt away.

His heart is still racing and he’s sweaty and more than a little nauseous, but his vision clears and his resolve has come back with Tony’s proximity. Tony’s framing his face with both hands, stepping close and up on his toes to be face to face with Rhodey in the suit. “You can do this,” he whispers, and Rhodey lets out an explosive breath at the words.

Tony knows him so well, knows exactly what he needs, and Rhodey’s so grateful for it. Because if Tony had told him again that he didn’t need to do this, that he could call it off any time, he would have taken the out. But that quiet, sure faith in him, the declaration that he’s perfectly capable, yanks all his strength back to the surface where it belongs, forcefully pushing down the noxious, bubbling panic.

Tony leans in even closer, until their foreheads are touching, and they both close their eyes. “Okay?” Tony asks after a moment, and once again, there’s no judgment in it, no expectation of any particular answer. Just a question.

“Yeah,” Rhodey says, even though he’s not absolutely sure. But he might never be sure. He can’t stand around waiting for the anxiety to completely disappear, or it never will. The only way to fight this fear is to face it head on.

“Okay,” Tony breathes against him again, and then the touches disappear from his face. He doesn’t bother to open his eyes. He feels the cool spring air on his skin and listens to the sounds of the busy city below him, trying to immerse himself in the moment, to make his body and mind believe that this is like any of the hundred other times he stepped into this suit. Just another mission.

“Engaging heads-up display,” Tony’s voice says, a warning for Rhodey. Rhodey keeps his eyes
closed, but he hears and feels the click of the faceplate coming down. The world beyond his closed eyes goes dark, and then light again as the HUD lights up, and still he keeps his eyes closed. He can hear the echo of his own breathing in the small space between his face and the helmet, the air remaining cool thanks to the suit’s circulation systems, which helps to keep the claustrophobic feeling at bay.

His whole world is silent and still as he tries to convince himself that this is okay, not to freak out, and then Tony’s voice sounds in his ear, sharp and clear. “Connection’s looking great. How are we doing?”

Tony must have stepped into his own suit, talking over the comms. Rhodey knows he’s getting a readout of both of their vital signs right now, which means he undoubtedly sees the way Rhodey’s heart rate spikes when he forces himself to open his eyes.

The display is the same as always, all the same preferences forwarded from his old suit, the same data shown in the same places. The suit’s view of his surroundings is slightly different than what he sees with his own eyes, but the distortion is familiar.

The apprehension is still there, building up, greater than ever, threatening to drown him, or force him out of the suit. Trying to push himself past it, he focuses on the sight of Tony in his suit, standing in front of him. Despite the impassive face of Iron Man, Rhodey can see the same concern in the suit’s posture as there was in Tony’s body moments ago.

Belatedly, Rhodey realizes Tony asked him a question. “We’re good,” he tries, but his voice comes out tighter than he wanted and a bit hoarse, giving him away. Still, Tony doesn’t comment.

Rhodey clenches his fists at his side, determined to beat this. He can stand in a damn suit, they’re not even doing anything. The dark wave of terror at the thought of actually flying, putting himself in a position to fall again, is there, waiting to wash over him, but he stubbornly forges ahead.

Surprisingly, the act of clenching and releasing his fists helps. Feeling the intuitive, easy way the suit moves around him makes it feel a lot less like an unyielding metal coffin and more like something he’s in control of. He forces in another deep breath and consciously loosens his shoulders, then swings his arms back and forth and bends his knees. The smooth movements of the suit around him help to slow his racing heart and bring his breathing under control.

He can tell that Tony sees it, in the way Iron Man steps back and his posture relaxes as well. Rhodey doesn’t give himself time to overthink it, instead throwing himself into the next step before that tidal wave of terror can wash him away. “Let’s go.”

Tony doesn’t question it. He just activates his thrusters, hovering a foot or so above the ground for a minute before he slowly rises, looking down at Rhodey, waiting for him.

Rhodey activates his own thrusters, limbs locking for a second before he forces them to move, to adjust back into the position he knows so well, so that he can rise to meet Tony midair. And as he rises, flying above the platform and out into the open air, something shifts and realigns inside him.

The waves that were threatening to wash him away are nothing, he realizes, to the open expanse of air in front of him. The roughest seas don’t matter to a master of the skies, and that’s exactly what he is. That’s why he joined the Force, and that’s why he became War Machine. He’s always wanted to fly, and nothing can compare to this.

Every fear and misgiving he’s ever had fades away as he rises, past where Tony’s waiting for him, up until the Tower is dozens of feet below him. Iron Man comes up in his wake, but he’s looking up,
at the sky above him. Suddenly, he’s so incredibly light, free. The anxiety that had kept him paralyzed in the suit just seconds ago seems laughable now, and he doesn’t know how he could ever have feared getting back in the suit again.

Tony comes up to hover next to him, and Rhodey looks down at the ground, hundreds of feet below him. If the suit failed now, or opened up and dumped him out, he would probably die on impact. And yet… he doesn’t fear it, not in the least. He has every faith in Tony’s tech and his own ability.

He laughs, open and carefree, on the comm, and takes off. It doesn’t take more than a few seconds to reacquaint himself with the feeling of flying, the way he needs to move his body to arc through the air, to increase or decrease the power, to twist and turn. He makes a huge, swooping circle through the air, and when he comes back to fly in line with the horizon, Tony is next to him.

They don’t need to say anything else. It comes naturally to them, moving with each other in the sky. Rhodey’s the one person who’s always understood Tony’s need to fly, the freedom he feels in the skies, the wonders of the suit. Rhodey knows why Tony will never primarily think of the suit as a weapon, and it’s because of this.

They perform an aerial dance, looping around each other, climbing above layers of clouds to make gravity-defying arcs and then swooping low to dodge in and out of skyscrapers, chasing each other through the endless expanse of air that’s their own personal canvas, open to do whatever they want, to create their own masterpiece.

Everything falls away when they’re flying together. All of their responsibilities, all of their problems, disappear with the rush of the wind past their suits. They push themselves faster, harder, performing stunts midair just for the hell of it and testing every movement conceivable in the air.

And when they finally come back to the Tower and land, when the suits open up and spill them both out onto the platform, they’re both laughing, cackling like idiots, open and joyous and Rhodey just might have tears in his eyes. This was better than anything he could have imagined, and for the first time since the invasion started, there’s absolutely nothing on his mind but this. He can’t possibly express how grateful he is to be here, with Tony, flying together again, and even when they’re still laughing like maniacs, they fall into each other’s arms, embracing tightly enough to restrict the air needed for the sounds of their unrestrained joy.

They go back inside, windswept and still high on the unexpected success of the outing. Rhodey is overjoyed to know that he’s not afraid to be in the suit, that he’s still able to fully enjoy one of the greatest privileges of his life. And he knows that Tony was expecting to have to work a lot harder to get Rhodey into the suit, with the way he’d been so fearful before trying it. He must be relieved to see Rhodey so happy.

They both let out heavy breaths as they sink onto one of the long couches, relaxing back against it, both of them sprawled out casually. Rhodey’s face is starting to hurt from smiling so much, and just the thought of that makes him smile all the more. Tony looks over to him with a matching grin.

“We’re going to be all over the internet within the hour,” Rhodey says, but without much concern. He’s still too excited, floating on the amazing flight, to really care. It’ll bring up more problems soon, but not now.

Tony nods, though, and sits up. The smile falls from his face to be replaced by a neutral kind of anticipation. “Speaking of that.”

Rhodey sits up as well, feeling his own smile fading. “What’s up?” Tony doesn’t look particularly disturbed, so Rhodey tries not to let the good mood be brought down.

Rhodey sits up fully at that, a small smile reappearing on his face. “Yeah?”

Tony’s expression doesn’t give anything away, and Rhodey can’t honestly guess what the decision is. It’s clear that Tony loves the suit and is going to be in it no matter what, but he can do that independently, without being a superhero. He might be announcing this now because of the flight they just had, but that doesn’t tell Rhodey anything either. He could have decided that Iron Man should be used for anything and everything it can, including superhero work, but he just as well could have decided that he wants to keep that unrestrained freedom in the suit that comes with not being tied to serious responsibility for the planet.

It doesn’t matter, either way. Rhodey’s told him before that he’ll support whatever decision Tony makes, and he will. It might influence Rhodey’s ultimate decision—now that he knows he can be War Machine again, he’s also going to need to decide whether he wants to stand up as a protector of the Earth—but whether it does or not, Rhodey will still stand behind him.

Tony takes a deep breath and nods again. “Yeah, I—”

He breaks off, head tilting and eyes going distant with an expression Rhodey’s seen a few times now, like he’s sensing something Rhodey’s unaware of. Rhodey musters some annoyance for the interruption to their great day and their important conversation. He wonders why the hell Strange, who’s started at least calling ahead after the less than stellar reception he got the first time he showed up out of the blue, is suddenly forgetting that little rule they set.

Rhodey turns to ask Tony what he thinks is going on, but before he can, the golden portal sparks to life in front of them.
Rhodey’s annoyance with Strange’s impromptu visit vanishes instantly, along with any traces of his good mood, the moment he sees the look on his face.

Strange has the wide-eyed, shellshocked look of someone whose body is still in crisis mode but whose mind is stuck on a loop, unable to get past something terrible. He’s dressed in his usual eclectic outfit, but the sentient cloak on his shoulders is in constant, jerky motion as though it’s agitated, and something about Strange looks disheveled, in disarray.

Tony and Rhodey are both on their feet instantly, any evidence of their smiles from moments ago wiped off their faces. “What’s wrong?” Tony demands.

Strange looks shaken, and it fills Rhodey with foreboding. Strange never looks shaken. Even in the face of Tony’s strange and immense powers, or the responsibility of watching over an Infinity Stone, he’s always cool and collected. Rhodey’s suspected, in the past, that some of it is a façade that he feels he has to keep up to live up to the Sorcerer Supreme title, but still.

And Rhodey has a sinking feeling that he knows exactly what this visit is about. There’s only one thing he knows about that could have Strange looking so shaken, and that would have him coming to them.

“I don’t know what happened,” Strange manages. He’s panting like he’s run a marathon. “But we’ve got a big problem.”

Tony is tense, Rhodey can see it, but he keeps his calm. “The Stone?”

Strange nods, and the confirmation feels like it sends a bolt of lightning through Rhodey. Every muscle in his body is tense, he’s on alert. This is so far out of his league, and yet he knows Tony is about to be in the middle of it, and he’s going to be right there too whether either of them like it or not.

“What happened?” Rhodey and Tony ask at the same time. The situation is too serious to be amused at the way they echo each other.

Strange shakes his head and starts pacing, agitated. “I don’t know. I don’t understand what happened. We were working on new protection setups for the Sanctum. Magical warding. We’ve done it before, we’re always adding new spells and refreshing old ones. Some of the junior sorcerers were helping us with warding a few of the artifacts…”

“Artifacts like the Stone?” Tony says sharply.

Strange pauses in his pacing for a second to flash an annoyed look at Tony. “No. The juniors don’t
touch the Eye, no one but me and Wong touches it. It wasn’t even in the room they were working in, it was across the hall. The artifacts they were working with had nothing to do with it.”

Rhodey crosses his arms. “So then what happened?”

Strange finally stops his pacing and closes his eyes, putting a hand to his head. He looks incredibly weary suddenly. “I don’t know why, or how, but it activated. The Time Stone activated by itself while they were working in another room, and it started making a mess. Things flying off shelves, a power barrier, waves of energy.”

Strange sighs. Rhodey can hear the strain in it. “I was on the other side of the Sanctum. The first ones to notice it were some of the juniors. They didn’t know what it was. They thought it was just another relatively inert artifact, something they could deal with themselves. And they were worried that they’d caused it by doing something wrong. They didn’t want me to know if I didn’t have to.”

Rhodey sees where this is going, heart sinking at the thought. “So they tried to take care of it by themselves?”

Strange nods, and there’s a pinched, pained look on his face. Whatever their clashes of personality or his personal opinions on the use of the Infinity Stones, Strange is a good man who genuinely cares about his people, and Rhodey feels a pang of sympathetic pain at the thought of something terrible happening to his students.

“It completely consumed two of them, before I even knew anything was happening. The others came to get me as soon as they realized they were out of their depth, but… it’s too late for those first two.”

“What exactly happened to them?” Tony asks.

Strange shakes his head again. “We don’t know, and we won’t know until we can fix this. The Stone, it’s putting out some kind of… barrier, a practically solid wall of power that’s surrounding it, taking up most of the room it’s in. The two it got, they’re too close, they’re inside the room. Inside the barrier. We can’t get in and get them out without risking whoever goes in there.”

That doesn’t sound good at all. “What if they do something, make it worse?” Rhodey asks, but Strange resumes pacing once more, still shaking his head.

“We can just barely see them—at least, we could before the energy started expanding, pushing us out. They’re unconscious, as far as we can tell. Or dead.” Strange grimaces at that. “And based on what it did to Nadim… even if they regain consciousness, they won’t be in any position to be messing with the Stone.”

Tony’s jaw is clenched. He’s practically vibrating in place with anxious energy, so Rhodey speaks for him. “What did it do to who?”

“Nadim. One of the junior students. He was a little farther away when it happened, we managed to pull him back before the expansion, but the power had already reached him. The Stone got hold of him and…” Strange pauses, throat working, and Rhodey can suddenly see that this man, for all his bravado and his natural power, is unaccustomed to this. He’s not a soldier or a warrior, and though he was a doctor for many years, he’s not completely jaded. This is truly affecting him, and he’s lost in the face of it.

Strange’s expression hardens a heartbeat later, that vulnerability vanishing beneath the reserve strength that must have gotten him through the invasion. “He’s not dead, but he’d might as well be. Completely catatonic, lost inside himself. We tried reaching him in the Mirror Dimension, but there’s
nothing. He’s buried too deep. Whatever the Stone did to him, it destroyed his mind.”

Tony turns away, head down. Rhodey worries for him and wants to go and comfort him, but they don’t have the luxury of long emotional talks and coddling right now. They need to get a handle on this situation. Rhodey steps forward, catching the attention of Strange, who’d been watching Tony with concern and trepidation.

“Is it still expanding?”

“Not at the moment,” Strange says, flat and grim. “We’ve contained it with magical shielding.”

Rhodey eyes him. “I sense a ‘but’ in there.”

“But it’s stopped pushing back, at least as far as we can tell. It’s an Infinity Stone. If it really wants to do more, it will, and there’s no way in hell we’re stopping it. We’re telling ourselves we’ve got it contained for now, but the truth is it’s just… taking a rest. We’ve surrounded it like a pack of rabbits standing around a snake and told ourselves we’ve got it trapped, but the second it gets up and decides it wants to go again, we’re screwed. It could lash out at any one of us, or none of us. There’s no predicting what the snake will do.”

Rhodey makes an impatient noise. “The cryptic metaphors aren’t necessary.”

Strange glares at him and his cloak flutters angrily. “I don’t know how else to describe it. I was familiar enough with the Eye, but the truth is I barely know anything about the Stone itself. That consciousness you described when I first brought it here,” he looks to Tony, who’s still turned away, one hand now pressed to his head, “it was never very active, but now it is. This is something new to me, and I have no clue how to describe it, much less control it.”

Rhodey can tell how pissed Strange is about that and understands the frustration. He’s feeling plenty of his own. “I’m going to guess you can’t deactivate it. Force it back into that Eye thing, or whatever.”

Strange gives him a look that tells him exactly how stupid that suggestion is, but he had to ask. Had to be sure. “The Eye is gone,” Strange says. “When the Stone activated, the container disintegrated. The only way I could use its power without being destroyed by it was by doing so through a powerful magical container like the Eye. Now, I’d be lucky to touch it for a second without being killed.”

A bubble of frustrated panic wells up in Rhodey’s throat. He wasn’t prepared for this and he’s mad at himself for it, at Strange for bringing them this news, at everything right now. The unknown is making him angrier than he should be as he snaps, “You’re the goddamn Sorcerer Supreme. You can’t even touch the damn Stone?”

“IT’s an Infinity Stone,” Strange counters, haughty and defensive. His cloak twitches upward, mirroring his angry posture. “It’s older than we can comprehend, possibly older than the universe itself, and unimaginably powerful. Most people wouldn’t even have been able to handle using the Eye. I was one of the few that could.”

Rhodey bristles. “I don’t give a shit about your ego, Strange.” He strides forward to poke an angry finger into Strange’s chest, ignoring the way he puffs up and the corners of his cloak rise threateningly like they might slap Rhodey’s hand away, or strangle him. “This was your job! You told us you could keep the thing under control, you said you’d keep an eye on it, and now you come storming in saying it’s all gone to shit and you didn’t even see it coming?”
“I was keeping an eye on it!” Strange shouts. “We were trying to watch it, but we didn’t know what we were looking for! We don’t know anything about the Stones, how the hell are we supposed to predict what they’re doing? If anyone here was supposed to know what they were doing, it’s him!” Strange points to Tony, who’s retreated even farther away, near the windows, head bowed and back to them both, fists clenched at his sides.

Rhodey actually grabs Strange by the front of his fancy shirt. “Shut up,” he growls into Strange’s face. He opens his mouth to say something else, to tell Strange that he has no idea what Tony’s been through, to leave him the fuck alone, but he snarls instead when the cloak wraps around his arms and tries to pry them from its master.

He and Strange are struggling and snarling at each other. Rhodey yanks at his arms, trying to disentangle them from the damn cloak. He’s seriously considering throwing a punch into Strange’s face, the nerve of the asshole, and—

“Stop.”

It’s not particularly loud, or commanding, but it echoes in the room and Rhodey and Strange both freeze. The cloak lets go of Rhodey’s hands and he, in turn, releases his hold on Strange’s shirt. They step back from each other, both looking over toward the window. Tony still hasn’t turned toward them, but his head has come up, now looking out the window.

The tension fizzles out and in its place, intense embarrassment floods in. Rhodey should be more composed than this. He’s better than this, more disciplined. The soldier in him is mortified that he’d nearly gotten into a fistfight with a man who’s done nothing to him except to bring him unfortunate, anxiety-inducing news. Talk about shooting the messenger.

He glances at Strange despite the heat rising in his face. It’s not particularly gratifying that Strange looks just as embarrassed as he feels by their outburst. Even the cloak seems cowed, settling back down against Strange’s back like it’s nothing more than a dead piece of fabric.

Tony straightens where he’s standing, staring out at the city, and puts his hands behind his back. They’re not outright shaking, at least not that Rhodey can see, but Rhodey knows him, and he can see the tension in every line of his body. It just makes the shame even stronger. Rhodey should be supporting Tony here instead of picking fights with one of their few allies.

Strange takes a deep breath next to him, reaching down to brush imaginary dust from his clothes. “No one could have predicted this. But it doesn’t matter now. We need to do something about it.”

“What can we do?” Rhodey asks. “You said no one can even touch the Stone.”

He knows the answer. He’s not sure why he even asked, except maybe in some desperate hope that the answer might change, but it doesn’t.

“I can,” Tony says quietly, and finally turns to face them.

Rhodey almost recoils from what he sees. On the surface, Tony doesn’t seem very different. But Rhodey knows every inch of him. He knows every expression and nervous tic and movement Tony makes, and this… this is terrible. It’s like someone has turned back time nine months.

Realistically, he knows that Tony is just trying to keep the control that Rhodey had briefly lost. Tony’s trying to appear unaffected, but the forced blankness that’s not quite concealing real fear is painfully reminiscent of the way he looked right after the invasion, when he was so emotionally drained and deficient. It’s scary to see, particularly in this situation, when Tony’s going to have to
face this powerful unknown. An Infinity Stone, one of the things that changed him so deeply in the first place.

Despite the fear that Rhodey can see in him, Tony faces Strange with his shoulders back and his head held high. “What do you need me to do?”

Just like Rhodey’s earlier question, he knows that Tony already knows the answer. They all do. “We need you to destroy it,” Strange says. Then, bold but practical, “Can you do it?”

He has a right to ask. Tony had been unsure, when Strange first showed up to tell them about the Time Stone, whether it would be possible for him to match the power of the Stone and potentially contain or destroy it. He’d wanted to wait until he had a better handle on his powers, and he does now, but they haven’t talked about the Time Stone in quite a while. Rhodey has no idea whether Tony’s anywhere near comfortable with the idea of going up against it.

But they don’t have the luxury of more time to decide, and they all know it. Tony takes a deep breath and lets it out. “I don’t think I have a choice. I’m going to have to try.”

Strange nods curtly. He glances over to Rhodey, who moves back over to join Tony as he comes back to stand next to Strange. Gathered in a small circle again, the tension returns to build between them.

“Let’s go,” Tony says. Rhodey glances over at him, but he’s staring determinedly at Strange, who turns to open another golden portal.

For a moment, Rhodey is paralyzed with apprehension, looking through the portal Strange has opened. He can see a glimpse of a richly decorated room on the other side, part of his Sanctum, he assumes. Somewhere beyond that is the active Time Stone and a world of uncertainty and potential pain. Strange steps through the portal and Tony’s eyes flick over to Rhodey once before he moves to follow.

Rhodey glances over at Tony one more time, taking in the details of his face. For a split second, he’s overwhelmed by the thought that this could be the last time that he sees this Tony, the one he’s had to relearn over the last nine months. Who knows what waits on the other side of this portal, and whether it might change Tony yet again. But he refuses to entertain the idea, instead steeling his nerves and stepping through on Tony’s heels.
They step into the well-appointed room Rhodey had seen through the portal. It would probably be warm and cozy in other circumstances, with its dark woods and leather furniture, but Rhodey can’t appreciate it past the grim reason they’re here. There are signs, too, that something has happened here; books fallen off of shelves, papers out of place and scattered on the floor.

It’s eerily silent in the Sanctum. Rhodey doesn’t know where exactly it is, only that it’s in the city; Strange has mentioned it a few times, but never shared many details. Despite supposedly being in the middle of a crowded block, however, the sounds of the busy city are completely muted.

Even high in Stark Tower, if it’s quiet, Rhodey can usually hear the distant sounds of the traffic and crowds. Sometimes they’re soothing to him, and he suspects the same is occasionally true of Tony, particularly when he’s caught in memories of dark, cold space—or bright and scorching deserts—where he was completely alone. Or, lately, memories of a frozen bunker and uncooperative lungs, drifting off stuck inside a dead, cold suit. Dying, completely alone, betrayed and abandoned.

Rhodey also feels like there should be some noise in the Sanctum itself, maybe distant screams. It’s probably irrational—for one, he knows there’s not all that many sorcerers in Strange’s little group, unless he lied to them a lot in their previous discussions—but it just seems like there should be more physical evidence of the overwhelming problem that is the activated Time Stone.

The portal closes behind them, and Rhodey tries to ignore the slightly trapped feeling it gives him. From Tony’s nearly imperceptible fidget and backward glance, he feels the same way. Strange gives a cursory look around the room, maybe to make sure nothing else is out of place since he was last there, and turns to lead them deeper into the Sanctum.

They move through two more empty rooms before they come upon anyone else. Clustered in the corner of what looks like a small library are five people; three are relatively young, the other two closer to Rhodey and Tony’s age. All but one, one of the younger ones, are wearing similar outfits to Strange, and every one of them is absorbed in one of many thick, dusty-looking tomes scattered around the area where they’re sitting.

They’re intent on their work, but look up when Strange approaches. All of them, even the older ones, have the same wild, frightened look that had been on Strange’s face when he showed up in the Tower. Rhodey sees each of them look him and Tony over, and the lack of true surprise when they see Tony tells Rhodey that Strange already told them where he was going and who he was planning to ask for help when he left for the Tower.

“Anything?” Strange asks shortly, voice all business, and they all shake their heads, various expressions of disappointment and frustration blossoming on their faces.

“Nothing yet that would take less than a week to set up,” one of them reports. Rhodey assumes they’re trying to find some magical way to contain the Stone.

“Wong?” Strange says.

One of them gestures. “Still in the south wing, maintaining the barrier. He said not to disturb him unless we found something.”

Strange nods. Without saying anything else, he turns to leave the room with Rhodey and Tony following him. Rhodey feels the others’ eyes on them until they move around another corner.
The destruction they’d seen in the first room gets worse as they move further in. More things are scattered around, here and there even a few tables and shelves are knocked over, as though there was an earthquake in the Sanctum and they’re moving toward the epicenter. More worrying is the way Tony is becoming more and more tense and visibly uncomfortable as they move.

They slip silently past a group in another room. The way Strange stiffens as he walks by makes Rhodey curious enough to look over, and he sees several people clustered around what looks like a couch turned hastily into a bed. He can’t see much of whoever is lying on it, but the people standing around look nothing short of despondent. A girl near the occupant’s head is openly crying. Rhodey realizes with a jolt that this is probably the kid whose mind was destroyed by the Stone, and he looks away guiltily, feeling like he’s intruding on something he shouldn’t be seeing.

As they move, Rhodey starts to get an itching feeling, like electricity crawling across his skin, and is just wondering whether he’s imagining it when they turn a final corner and see it. Not the Stone itself—that’s hidden from sight behind another wall—but the edges of the barrier that the sorcerers have put up to contain the Stone and its effects.

The barrier is a bright orange, lighting up the room. It gives a wavy quality to everything beyond it, so it’s difficult to make out details, but Rhodey thinks he can see a desk and some chairs on the other side of the room, contained behind the barrier, as well as the doorway into the room that the Time Stone is sitting in.

As he watches, the view beyond the barrier ripples, like a pulse of energy has moved through the space behind it. Rhodey glances over to Strange, concerned, but Strange is watching the barrier too, and his grim expression hasn’t changed. Rhodey assumes this must have been happening before.

Rhodey’s gaze moves over to Tony, who’s watching the barrier like he’s staring death in the face. Now, Rhodey can see him shaking, his whole body vibrating with tension. He desperately wants to reach out, to say something, but Tony swallows and visibly steels himself, then moves forward.

He walks up to the barrier and raises a hand. It could be a trick of the light, the orange glow coming from the barrier, but Rhodey could swear that Tony’s marks stand out brighter than before against his skin when he reaches for the barrier. Rhodey’s seized by the sudden urge to run forward and yank Tony’s hand away, keep him from touching the thing, but he fights it back. He can’t afford to do that.

Tony lays his palm flat against the barrier and tilts his head in that way that says he’s using his powers to reach out and feel something that Rhodey can’t see. A moment later, he yanks his hand back with a gasp like he’s been burned and stumbles back a step.

Rhodey does move forward this time, grabbing Tony by the shoulders to steady him. Tony leans into him, chest heaving, shaking worse than ever, still watching the barrier with wide eyes, and Rhodey hates every second of it. Strange, who’s been watching them sharply, steps toward them, opening his mouth.

Before he can say anything, Tony gulps in a breath and turns to him. “Get me out of here,” he says. Strange jerks his head back like he can’t believe what he’s hearing. “What?”

“Open a portal, back to the Tower, out of the building, anywhere, just not here,” Tony says, the words spilling from him almost too fast to understand.

Strange’s incredulity is turning to anger. “You said you could destroy it—you said you’d try!”
Rhodey is ready to defend Tony, but he doesn’t need to. “Not in five minutes,” Tony says, “That’s not seriously what you were expecting, were you? We need to clear the building, we need to plan this. I needed to come here first to get an impression. I wasn’t just going to go straight for it unless your barrier was actively breaking down. It’s not, so now we need to plan.”

Strange looks relieved at Tony’s words, but still defensive. “We can do that here. I need to be here if something happens—”

“No,” Tony says sharply, cutting him off. Tony steps forward and grabs Strange’s shirt in a parallel to Rhodey’s argument a few short minutes ago; this time, however, Tony’s frantic, not angry, and neither Strange nor his cloak retaliate. Strange just looks mildly shocked. “If I stay here, something is going to happen,” Tony manages, “do you understand me? It’s already reacting to my presence, I’m going to set it off, you need to get me out of here.”

Realization dawns on Strange’s face and he nods. “Give me one minute,” he says, turning to dash into another room, apparently to take care of something before they leave.

Rhodey turns to Tony when he’s gone. “Are you okay?” It’s a stupid question, Tony’s clearly not okay, but it might prompt a real answer from him.

Tony shudders, but he stands straight on his own. “No. But I’ll be… better when we can get out of here. I’ll—explain it when we’re out of here. Not here.”

He’s still on edge, jittery in his movements and the way his eyes dart around the room, never leaving the barrier for more than a few seconds at a time. He stares at the thing like he can see the Time Stone beyond the wall separating them from the next room. With his powers, maybe he can.

Strange, thankfully, returns quickly. He’s holding a tablet under one arm, and the other he offers to Rhodey and Tony, holding something in his open hand. Rhodey reaches out to take a small earpiece, a communicator, and nods when he understands. “We’ll be able to keep contact with everyone here who’s watching it,” Strange says as Rhodey and Tony put in their earpieces.

Strange turns to wave his hands in the air again, summoning another portal, and they all step through. Rhodey can’t help but be grateful for Tony’s insistence that they leave; the moment he steps back into the open, airy living room of their suite in the Tower, it feels like a compressive weight’s been lifted off of him. He takes a deep breath and lets it out slowly, savoring the light feeling returning to his limbs. He hadn’t realized how much being near the Stone was affecting him, too.

Strange is already rounding on Tony the moment the portal closes behind them. “You want to explain what that was all about?”

Tony’s hunched forward slightly, staring at his hands with an unreadable expression, but he straightens at Strange’s words. In a mirror of Strange’s visit to them earlier, he starts pacing back and forth, agitated.

“The Stone is completely uncontrolled. I could feel it even through the barrier you put up. When I touched the barrier… a hundred times worse. Whatever was holding it back, what was there when you brought it before, it’s gone.” The words are practically spilling from Tony, tumbling over one another as though he can’t possibly get them out fast enough. “It used to have control... suppressants. The other Stones. The Eye, whatever. Now it’s all gone.”

“Whoa, slow down,” Rhodey says, putting his hands up. Tony stops his pacing with visible effort and watches him. “Are you saying the other Stones used to control this one’s power?”
Tony’s face twists, a familiar expression of frustration when he doesn’t know how to explain himself. “Not control. Not really. But the Stones… they existed in a balance, with each other. They didn’t control each other, but maybe… tempered. Not the right word, I don’t know how to explain it. But now, with the other ones gone… it’s totally out of control, it’s almost… lashing out.” His speech is still fast, disjointed. It makes Rhodey nervous.

“Lashing out…” Strange frowns. “It’s angry?”

“Yes and no. It’s simpler than that… and infinitely more complicated. There’s a consciousness inside the Stone, that is the Stone, but it doesn’t have emotions like we do. I can’t explain it. I don’t know if I even understand it. I just know that now, with the others gone… there’s nothing that’s going to put it back down, that’ll settle it. You were right. It has to be destroyed.”

There’s an ominous pause after that. They’d known it was coming, after all—Strange showed up specifically asking Tony to destroy it—but it’s still foreboding to hear it laid out like that.

“I still don’t understand,” Strange says. “You’re saying this is all happening because the others are gone, but… that was nearly a year ago. Why now? We didn’t do anything to set it off. No one was touching it. If it’s reacting to the destruction of the others, why wait this long?”

Tony shakes his head. “No idea. Well… no conclusive evidence. You weren’t touching it, but you were using a lot of magic nearby. It could have reacted to that.”

Strange opens his mouth like maybe he’s going to defend himself and his people, but Tony waves a hand at him and he stays silent. “It could have been the Eye,” Tony says, “contained in a magical artifact like that, maybe it kept the backlash from the destruction of the other Stones from happening until now. Or… you said it yourself, the Stones are older than we can even imagine. Nine months is nothing to it. Maybe it just took that long to react.”

Tony resumes his pacing. He’s still tense, agitated, but he’s settling into damage control mode, regaining some of the calm that always gets him through tough situations. “It doesn’t really matter either way. Whatever set it off, it’s active, and there’s no hope of containing it. It’s going to expand, cause widespread destruction. Eventually, it could overtake the whole planet. It’s just a matter of when and how fast. It needs to be destroyed.”

The clear-cut statement of the problem finally pushes the last of the uncertain anxiety out of Rhodey’s mind. In its place comes the steel and calm logic that have always made Rhodey a great soldier and leader. They have a clear mission ahead of them.

“How can you do it?” Strange asks again.

Tony takes a deep breath. “I think so.” At the look on Strange’s face, he adds, “You’re not going to get any more than that, unless you want me to lie, but I do think I can do it. I certainly have the best chance, and it needs to be done.”

Tony waits for Strange’s nod—reluctant, maybe, but there—before he continues. “It seemed stable for the moment, when I touched it. That could change any time, but for now, I feel safe enough taking some time to try and move people away. We need to clear the area—as far as possible—in case there’s backlash from destroying the Stone, or it takes a fight that causes collateral damage. I don’t want anyone in the immediate area.”

He doesn’t bother saying anything about the possibility that he can’t destroy it. Rhodey knows why. If Tony fails, there’s no amount of magical damage control that will help.
“Some sorcerers will have to stay, to try and maintain the barrier around it. We might be able to help keep damage to a minimum,” Strange says, and Tony nods.

“And you’re kidding yourself if you think I’m not going to be there with you,” Rhodey says. Strange looks like he wants to argue with that—not without reason, Rhodey can acknowledge, he has no magical abilities whatsoever and is utterly useless in this except as moral support for Tony, but that’s not going to stop him—but Rhodey just looks to Tony.

Tony locks eyes with him for a long moment, and there’s a world of emotion in his face. He and Rhodey have a silent conversation in the space of a heartbeat, and when it’s over, Tony nods. “Yeah,” he breathes, and that’s the end of that discussion.

Rhodey finds himself falling to parade rest automatically, pulling them back into the moment. “What do you need us to do?”

Tony blinks himself back to the present and turns to Strange. “Organize your people. Get everyone out who’s not going to be directly contributing to magical protection. If they can do it quickly and safely, get the rest of your magical artifacts out too. We don’t need any ammunition or surprises if things go sideways. Strengthen the barrier you have and set up a second one outside of that as a backup—can you do that?”

Strange nods, and Tony turns to Rhodey. “I need every contact you’ve got. We need to alert the government.”


Tony doesn’t even pause. “Don’t be stupid. We’re dealing with an Infinity Stone here, something that has the potential to wipe out the planet, or at the very least a few city blocks. We can’t guarantee your barriers will hold. We need to evacuate civilians, clear the area. We can’t do that without talking to the government.”

Obstinate, Strange crosses his arms. “I’m not letting the government anywhere near the Sanctum. Our order has always kept to the shadows, and we’ve done that for a reason. I can’t let our safety be compromised.”

“The Stone compromised your safety already,” Rhodey counters.

“Magical damage can be repaired. But knowledge can’t be taken back,” Strange says grimly. “I won’t let the whole world be made aware of the Sanctum and my people.”

Tony makes an exasperated noise. “They don’t need to know everything. If you’re that insistent, then we won’t tell them anything about the Sanctum. We won’t tell them who you are. You don’t even have to be there if you don’t want to. I’ll tell them we located the Stone and it’s been set off and they need to stay away for their own safety.”

Strange doesn’t look convinced. “Even if you do, there’ll be investigations, later. Questions asked. And even before it happens… telling the government will slow things down, not speed them up. We need to take care of this as soon as possible and you want to wait for a bunch of bureaucrats to give their approval? We don’t have time for that.”

It’s Rhodey who speaks up this time. “What we don’t have time for is your conspiracy theories,” he says firmly. When Strange just looks offended, Rhodey forces himself to soften his voice and try a different tactic, appealing to reason. “I understand where you’re coming from, I really do. You want to protect your people. I get that. But your order is supposed to be about protecting civilians, the rest
of the people out there, from magical threats, and that’s exactly what this is.”

Strange still looks like he wants to argue, so Rhodey keeps trying. “And we’re not talking about the old government here. We’re not talking about paper-pushers who’ve never actually seen real life before, or decades of red tape and idiotic regulations in place. Thanos destroyed that old government, and the one we have now, we had to build from the ground up. Sure, we used a lot of the same systems, but the people there have seen war. They saw the invasion, they remember it. They’re not going to mess with an Infinity Stone. They’re going to defer to us, and they’re a hell of a lot more flexible than the old government would have been.”

He finally seems to be getting through to Strange. “We need their cooperation,” Tony says, “and we need to let them know. This affects everyone, and they have a right to know what we’re going to try to do. I won’t hide this from people.”

Strange looks between the two of them for a moment and then sighs. “Fine. I can see I’m not going to stop you from telling them. I still don’t like it, mind, but I’ll do it.”

“You don’t have to be there,” Rhodey offers. “We don’t have to tell them about any of you.”

Strange shakes his head. “On the contrary, you’re going to have to tell them something. The less you give them, the more they’re going to go digging when it’s all over. Someone has to go to them and talk about this. If I do it, if I reveal myself to them… I can keep the rest of the Sanctum and the Order safe. I’m willing to make that sacrifice.”

Rhodey fights not to make a face at that. He finds it hard to see Strange telling the government that he’s a powerful sorcerer a “sacrifice,” particularly when faced with what Tony’s about to do. But Rhodey also acknowledges that he’s not one of Strange’s people, he doesn’t know anything about magic, and there are probably things he doesn’t understand about the situation, so he stays silent and just tries to be happy that Strange is agreeing with them, however reluctantly.

“Okay,” Tony says, “we need to get on this as soon as possible. Talk to your people, Strange, while Rhodey and I get hold of whoever we need to in the government. We’ll set up a meeting. I promise we won’t let it take too long—this isn’t going to turn into a debate. We don’t have time for that. But start moving your people out, whoever can get out. If at all possible, I’d like a few hours at least to clear everyone as far away as possible and set up as many protections as we can.”

“Right, I’ll let you know on the communicators if anything happens with the Stone,” Strange says, and promptly turns his back to them.

Tony turns to Rhodey. “Let’s get this done.”
They have an emergency meeting set up within half an hour. It speaks to what Rhody said about the flexibility of the new government that there aren’t too many preemptive questions. That, or it’s just the leftover fear of the Infinity Stones and deep respect for Tony, but Rhody will take it either way. All they have to say is that they found the last Infinity Stone and that it’s active and dangerous, and they’re promised an emergency meeting at a newly reconstructed building near the Tower in an hour.

It’s to their luck, in some way, that there’s a lot of governmental organization still happening within the city itself, despite it not being the capitol of the state. There are plenty of people there in person when Rhody, Tony, and Strange arrive, every one of them looking grim and nervous. Rhody’s thankful that Tony’s presence still carries enough weight to silence everyone in the room, despite how much he can see that most of them are itching to start questioning the trio.

Despite Strange’s fears and Rhody’s unspoken apprehensions, the meeting goes smoothly. Tony starts by giving a very brief summary of the Infinity Stones, reminding everyone that Thanos had all but one at the time of his death, all of which Tony destroyed when he killed Thanos. He mentions that Thanos had been searching the Earth for the very last one, but had never found it.

They’d discussed this beforehand—Rhody and Tony realized, when they talked about it on the way to the meeting, that Tony had never really explained in any public manner what the Infinity Stones were or how they were destroyed with Thanos. There are a lot of rumors out there about how it happened, but very few people know the whole truth. They’d agreed that there’s no reason the government needs the details, but the officials and the public do need confirmation that the one now active and causing problems is the very last one, and that Tony himself destroyed the others. Tony doesn’t give details, he doesn’t explain how he destroyed the others, only that he did it. Thankfully, that’s enough for them.

Strange then steps forward. He introduces himself by his real name and leaves out the Sorcerer Supreme title, simply saying that he’s a magic user and former physician. He tells the assembly a shortened, slightly altered version of the same story he told Rhody and Tony during their first meeting. This time he spins it a bit, making it sound like he stumbled across ancient magical secrets on his own and became an entirely self-taught sorcerer.

He glosses over how, exactly, he came by the Time Stone, and doesn’t mention that he has used its power before. He doesn’t bother explaining anything about the Eye or how it worked. He only says that he came across a powerful magical artifact that he only later realized was an Infinity Stone and came to understand that he needed to protect it. He tells them how he hid himself and the Stone during the invasion, hoping that someone would defeat Thanos before he was discovered.

The assembly seems reluctant to question Tony or Strange, which works somewhat in their favor. After Strange’s speech, however, someone is bold enough to ask when it was that Tony found out about the Stone. Rhody is grateful to Strange when he answers instead of Tony, drawing the responsibility onto himself.
“I approached Mr. Stark several months ago. I felt that he was the best authority, as much as there can be one, on the Infinity Stones, and I wanted to be sure that I had it under adequate protection. I didn’t offer it to him to keep or tell him much about myself—I still didn’t know him, at that point, and couldn’t be sure how much I could trust him. I simply told him of its existence, that I had it under magical protection, and promised to come to him if anything odd happened with the Stone. We parted ways after that.” Strange doesn’t mention the multiple meetings they had in the interim, or how he and Tony were trying to work out ways to study the Stone or measure its power output. “When it… became active today, I immediately came to him.”

“How did it become active?” someone shouts out. The tension in the room is palpable.

“We don’t know,” Tony says. “As far as we can tell, there’s nothing that should have set it off. It’s an Infinity Stone, it’s unpredictable. What we do know is that it’s active, and it’s not going to deactivate. We need to destroy it.”

There’s a tense silence that stretches on. Rhodey knows what’s coming, but he also knows that no one wants to be the one to say it. Finally, someone speaks up. “Mr. Stark, how sure are you that you can destroy it?”

Tony could lie, but Rhodey knows he won’t. He could also tell the plain truth, but he won’t do that either, because that would cause a panic, and he needs these people to believe in him. Instead, with the suave confidence of the businessman and media darling he was raised to be, Tony talks around the problem. “I am one hundred percent sure that if we don’t destroy it, it will eventually break the magical protections we currently have set up, and it will destroy everything in its path. It could, conceivably, wipe us all out. The entire planet.”

Tangible fear travels through the room at that pronouncement. “My abilities were born from the other Infinity Stones. I have power from them, and because of that, I have some protection from the one that’s left,” Tony says. “I have the best chance of destroying it, and I will put everything I have into making sure that happens.”

“Is there no way to contain it? A safer route than just trying to destroy it?” someone asks. “What if it can’t be destroyed?”

Strange speaks up. “It’s too volatile to be contained. It has to be destroyed.”

No one looks much convinced by that, so Tony pulls out the trump card Rhodey knows he’s been holding. The fear that all three of them have had since the day Strange arrived to tell them about the Time Stone. “Having it here on Earth at all is dangerous. Even if it were possible to contain it rather than destroy it, it’s active right now. It’s sending out waves of energy as we speak, and they could be traveling far past our planet. If we don’t destroy it now, we risk it bringing another Thanos down on our heads.”

If it was quiet before, it’s numbing now. The silence that falls in the room is devastating. With everything that’s happened since the invasion, sometimes it feels like a lifetime ago that Thanos was coming down on them. But nine months really isn’t very much time at all. That visceral fear that the invasion struck into everyone in the room, however much it had started to settle over the months of rebuilding, comes back in an instant when Tony talks about the threat of someone else like Thanos.

Someone actually steps forward, toward them all. All eyes in the room are on the man when he approaches. His eyes are wide with the true fear that, before the invasion, Rhodey had rarely seen in anyone in this country. He stands in front of Tony and looks into his eyes. “Then do whatever it takes. Destroy it however you can. And whatever you need us to do… we’ll do it.”
Rhodey sends a cursory glance around the room, just enough to see the heads nodding in agreement and reassure himself that there isn’t going to be any argument about this. Tony has swayed them.

The next twenty minutes are a rapid-fire planning session for civilian evacuations in a five-block radius around the Sanctum. The wide area is a safety net in case of damage when Tony tries to destroy the Stone, but it’s also additional protection for Strange. Rhodey knows, because it means that they don’t have to give anyone the exact location of the Sanctum, only a map of which areas to evacuate. Tony just tells them to clear everyone out as soon as possible, while Strange sets up communication so that he can give directions and, hopefully, let them know when it’s all over so that people can come back.

They agree that it’s going to take a minimum of six hours to clear that area, even though it’s relatively small. With no warning, it’s going to be difficult to clear large buildings in the city. It would be easier if they were simply moving people to shelter as they would in an attack or weather event, but in this case, they’re trying to actually get everyone out. No one can shelter in place in this case, and this isn’t exactly a circumstance that comes up a lot. New York City doesn’t tend to get hit by hurricanes, and its people don’t have major evacuation routes planned.

Still, the new government, small as it still is, rallies quickly. There might not be a National Guard anymore, but there are plenty of firefighters and other public service workers who can be called in on an emergency basis. A decent amount of the police force was decimated by the invasion along with the military, but that structure has recovered quickly out of necessity, and they’re brought in to help as well.

Briefly, when he has a moment, Rhodey takes Strange aside to ask what’s going to happen when police try to clear the Sanctum, but Strange gives him a secretive little smile. “The Sanctum is under many more magical protections than you know. They’re going to stand in the doorway and think they’re moving through an empty warehouse, while really they’ll be turning around and walking themselves out.”

Rhodey’s reluctantly impressed at that. Enough that he doesn’t bother questioning the morality of something like that—secret order of magic users or not, that’s messing with people’s minds in some way and Rhodey’s uncomfortable with the idea on principle. But now’s not the time to get into that debate.

Strange spends the rest of the next few hours on his tablet and his communicator, organizing his people. They’re setting up additional barriers and protections, moving the injured and the students who won’t be helping out with the rest of the evacuated civilians. While he handles those logistics, Rhodey and Tony talk to government people when needed and, in Tony’s case, sneak off to sit down and gather energy for the coming fight.

There’s two hours left until the evacuation should be finished—and they’re thankfully on schedule with that—when Rhodey notices that Tony has been gone for quite a while. He excuses himself and makes his way through the halls, peering into rooms, looking for Tony.

He finds him in a small conference room on the third floor. There’s not much of a view out the window, but Tony’s staring out it anyway. Rhodey has a feeling he’s not seeing much of anything. Rhodey doesn’t announce his approach, but he knows Tony has noticed his entry.

“How are you feeling?” Rhodey asks.

Tony turns around, and as soon as he sees his face, Rhodey is moving over to put his hands on Tony’s shoulders, pulling him in against his chest. Tony goes willingly, putting his head down on Rhodey’s shoulder. He doesn’t relax into his arms, though.
“I know that look,” Rhodey says softly, pushing Tony back by the shoulders to look at his face. “That’s usually the ‘having trouble figuring out an emotion’ look.”

Tony takes a deep breath and lets it out slowly, closing his eyes. “I’m scared, Rhodey.” He gives a humorless, heart-wrenching smile and opens his eyes again. “Not an emotion I’ve ever had much trouble with.”

Rhodey hesitates a moment, sifting through options, deciding how to respond to that. None of his reassurances will make a difference here, and Tony doesn’t want empty words. He decides to push a little. “Yeah? And how about hope for the future, optimism that this will turn out?”

Tony gives a dry huff of breath and looks away. “Having a little more trouble with that,” he whispers.

It’s just the two of them here. If Tony can’t be genuine around Rhodey, he can’t do it around anyone. Rhodey will always be willing to take on that burden, and he knows that it gives him leeway to ask the question that he finally can, now that they’re alone. “Do you think you can’t do it?”

“I don’t know,” Tony confesses. “I destroyed the others. I used their own power to do it, but they left some of that in me, and I’ve been getting better at it all the time, more powerful. I healed you without even realizing I was doing it. I think…” He takes a shaky breath, but he’s gaining confidence as he speaks. “I’m going to give it my all, no matter what that means. If I fail, I fail the whole world. I won’t let that happen.”

There’s a conviction in the words that Rhodey really believes. “Are you worried you’ll die destroying it?”

He barely gets the words out; they lodge in his throat and sit heavy in his heart. Until now, he hasn’t let himself truly acknowledge that very real possibility.

Tony looks at him, open and genuine. “I might,” he says, and it’s not for him. It’s for Rhodey. It’s a warning and an apology and a hundred other things that Rhodey’s not equipped to handle.

Rhodey can’t respond. He knows Tony sees the tears in his eyes, and he doesn’t try to fight them. It’s just the two of them here.

It’s Tony who breaks the silence again, looking away with a sigh. “I’m not afraid of dying.”

Rhodey makes a noise at that. “I’ve done it once already, after all,” Tony says, but neither of them smile. It’s not a joke. “My time was over in Siberia. Everything since then… it’s a second life that I didn’t earn. If I die doing this, maybe it’s setting something right. Bringing a balance back to the universe.”

“Don’t,” Rhodey chokes out, and Tony turns back to him, real surprise on his face. “Don’t say that. You didn’t… your time wasn’t over in Siberia. You never should have died there. Don’t tell me you wish you hadn’t been brought back.”

“No,” Tony says quickly, “I don’t regret it. I’m not trying to die again. Don’t… I didn’t mean to make you think that. I’m going to fight to keep living, and I’m not going into this hoping I die. I’m just… trying to say that dying isn’t the worst thing that could happen.”

That lightens some of the crushing fear in Rhodey’s chest, but he’s still confused and worried. “What’s worse than that?” he asks, even though he knows the answer. “What are you afraid of?”

Tony looks away again, unable to hold his gaze. “What happened to me the first time… that was
with one Stone missing. What if…” his voice drops down to a whisper, so small Rhodey almost can’t hear it. “What if this just completes it? What if after it’s all over, I’m back to… that?”

“Then we’ll figure it out,” Rhodey says firmly, and Tony looks back to him, painfully unsure. “We worked through it this time. We can do it again.”

“It took you nearly a year just to make me see that I can love someone again,” Tony says. “You wouldn’t want to go through all that again.”

Rhodey takes him by the shoulders again. He’s both warmed and heartbroken at the way Tony’s testing him, trying to see how much it’ll take to make Rhodey abandon him. “Don’t tell me what I want, Tony. What I want is you, with me, whatever that means. I’ll work with you on it for another nine years if that’s what it takes.”

Something flickers in Tony’s eyes, the real source of his fear. “What if this time… it’s permanent? What if I can’t get it back?”

“Then we’ll figure that out too,” Rhodey says. It’s all he can offer, because he can’t let himself think about that scenario. Truthfully, he’s absolutely terrified of that. He had hope this time, through all of Tony’s recovery, because he could look forward to clear points in Tony’s emotional recovery. That was what he’d used to keep himself going and to motivate Tony when he couldn’t feel anything but despair over his own situation.

The idea of Tony, back the state he’d been in right after the invasion, but with no recovery possible… that’s horrifying. Rhodey has thought, in the past, that he would never wish that state on anyone, and that if he hadn’t recovered his emotions, Tony would probably have preferred death over being stuck like that.

But now, Rhodey can’t say that. He can’t let that despair overtake him. In truth, though the possibility is there and hovering on the edges of his mind, terrifying him, he doesn’t think it’s all that likely. It seems more probable that, if something should go wrong, Tony will end up dead. He’s not sure whether that’s better or worse.

Either way, that’s also not something to bring up right now. Rhodey forces all the terror of those possibilities from his mind and instead pulls Tony in for another hug. He gives him the only thing he can right now. “We’ll figure it out, okay? No matter what happens. I’m not leaving you.”

Tony pulls back and looks into his eyes for a long moment, searching for something. Whatever it is he finds, he must accept it, because he eventually steps back. He nods, apparently to himself, and turns to head back toward the door, to go back to the controlled chaos downstairs. “Thanks, Rhodey,” he says at the doorway.

“Yeah,” Rhodey says, watching him go, but he’s left with a strange feeling. It’s not just the crippling fear of losing Tony—that’s been with him since Strange showed up in the Tower with news of the Time Stone’s activation—or the worry for all the people that they’re trying to protect with this desperate stunt. It’s something else, but he can’t quite place it.

The feeling swells again an hour later. They’ve been gathered in the assembly hall from earlier, each deep in separate conversations with various government officials. It’s now less than an hour until the area will be completely cleared and Tony, Strange, and Rhodey can move in to try to destroy the Stone. Rhodey’s glad that he’s been kept busy by the various inquiries from government people. Otherwise, he might be overwhelmed by what they’re about to do.

He sees Tony finish up a conversation and approach Strange. Rhodey’s been keeping an eye on him,
trying not to hover but wanting to be there if Tony needs anything. His eyes narrow when he sees Tony pull Strange away for what looks like a private talk. It’s possible that Tony’s just discussing logistics or something magical, but he’s been sure to include Rhodey in all of those conversations so far, no matter how little Rhodey can contribute. The itching feeling at the back of his neck compels Rhodey to follow them, ignoring the squirming bit of guilt in his stomach over the idea.

He comes on the room they’ve gone into fairly quickly, down an empty hallway. They didn’t bother to close the door. Rhodey just walks up and stands outside, next to the door. He debates with himself over whether to just go in, but then Strange is speaking.

“What’s this about?”

There’s a pause and then Tony’s voice. “You know what needs to be done here. You understand how dangerous the Stone is. It has to be destroyed, no matter what.”

“I’m not planning to try and stop you, if that’s what you’re worried about,” Strange says.

A sigh. “That’s not what I mean. I mean… you’ll do whatever it takes.”

“Of course I will.”

“Then I need you to promise me something.” The feeling of foreboding in Rhodey’s gut comes back full force. He has an idea of what’s coming, and he doesn’t like it.

“What?” Strange says. It’s little comfort to Rhodey that there’s some trepidation in Strange’s voice too.

“To destroy the Stone, I’m going to have to touch it. To intertwine its powers with mine. There’s going to be a moment, assuming I can get that far, where the Stone is a part of me.” There’s a pause in which Rhodey holds his breath in the hall. “I need you to promise me that if that moment comes, and I’m failing… if I’m holding the Stone, but I’m losing to it… you have to kill me.”

Rhodey can’t just listen in anymore. He moves to stand in the doorway. Strange’s back is to him, blocking his view of Tony. If either of them has realized that he’s now standing in the room, they don’t acknowledge it.

“You think I can do that?” Strange asks, tone carefully neutral.

“The Stone will be vulnerable in that moment, when it’s a part of me. Your magic could be enough to do it. And if you’re talking about killing another person… I think if you have to, if that’s what it takes to get rid of the Stone, you’ll do it.”

Rhodey can’t help the sharp intake of breath at that. Strange whirls around, raising an eyebrow at him, but the movement puts Tony in Rhodey’s sight and that’s who Rhodey is looking at.

Tony doesn’t look surprised to see Rhodey there. Rhodey’s not sure if he’d known the entire time, or was just expecting that he might be followed. He meets Rhodey’s gaze with a steadfast, challenging look. “Tell me I’m wrong.”

Rhodey wants to argue. He wants to hate the idea. But he can’t.

He thinks about the Infinity Stones, and Tony’s powers. About Tony’s determination to do the right thing, all his life. Whether it was as Iron Man or just as a man, even when it was naively repeating his father’s mantra that making weapons was saving the country and the world, Tony’s always wanted to do what was right for people, to keep them safe. Of course he would do anything it takes
to destroy the last Infinity Stone. Up to and including sacrificing himself.

He’s not wrong in this. It needs to be done, the Stone needs to be destroyed, and Tony’s the one who has the best shot. If he refuses to try, they’ll all die. And if he tries, and fails, they’ll all die. He’s not wrong to say that if it looks like he’s losing, he should be sacrificed in an attempt to destroy the Stone, even if Rhodey hates it.

And Rhodey knows why Tony asked Strange. He knows that he couldn’t do it. All he has to do is think back to the times when he’d briefly, selfishly, but truthfully thought to himself that if there were somehow a way to go back and save some of the millions who died in the invasion, but it required sacrificing Tony, Rhodey wouldn’t do it. He can tell himself that the scenario doesn’t matter because it’s unrealistic anyway, or that he would refuse because there’s too many unknowns, but the truth is, he’s just plain not willing to give up Tony. He couldn’t bring himself to kill Tony. There’s no way.

So he looks Tony in the eye and he tells him the truth, as much as it hurts. “No. You’re not wrong. And we both know I couldn’t do it. So it has to be Strange.”

Strange looks like he’s impressed against his will, but thankfully doesn’t comment. Maybe he can sense the gravity of the moment between Rhodey and Tony, or maybe he just doesn’t have anything else to say.

“Okay,” Tony finally says, moving back toward the door, “we’ve got about half an hour until…” Rhodey knows he’s not imagining the fear that he can hear in the pause. “Until it’s time to go.” Tony finishes, glancing back at Strange. “Don’t forget what we just talked about.”

“Let’s hope there’s no need to remember it,” Strange mutters as he brushes past them and out the door.

They move back out into the main hall. Maybe Rhodey’s imagining it, but the mood is even more tense than when they left five minutes ago. Everyone knows what’s coming.

The next twenty minutes pass by in a blur, and before he knows it, Rhodey’s being approached, Tony and Strange called over. “We’ve finished clearing the area,” a man reports. “Everything’s ready to go whenever you are.”

All eyes turn to Tony. Tony doesn’t fall under the pressure. He doesn’t look to Rhodey for help or to Strange in firm reminder. He just straightens up, raising his head high. He’s making this choice, and if this is the end, he’s going to it with dignity.

“Then it’s time to go.”
The Beginning

Chapter Notes

I would say the cliffhangers are almost over, but there’s two more chapters after this one that will have them. The good news is that the next one is written and waiting to be edited, and I hope to be able to continue writing a lot over the next week or so, so hopefully at the very least I’ll get through all of the cliffhanger chapters and this big plot arc before I need to take another break. I’d like to finish this story before I take Step 2, but if it’s not all written by a few weeks before the exam (which is near the end of June) then that won’t be happening.

The politicians and emergency workers and other officials gathered in the room fall silent and respectful when Strange opens one last portal. Rhodey can see the Sanctum through it, but it’s not the room they left from, with the orange glow of the barrier. It looks more like the entryway they’d first arrived in earlier.

Rhodey forces himself not to look around as they all move through this last portal. The silent vigil is meant to show gravity and respect to them and their task, but Rhodey can’t help but think of a funeral. He wonders how many people in the room think they’re going to their deaths. He wonders how much faith they really have in Tony to deal with this. How much their fear of the invasion and Thanos and the Infinity Stones might override that.

It doesn’t matter. Rhodey has faith in Tony. And he trusts, now, that Tony has faith in himself.

They step through and the portal closes behind them. It’s still silent in the Sanctum; nothing seems to have changed, but Rhodey can sense a tension and anticipation in the air that wasn’t there a few hours ago.

Maybe it’s just the magic buzzing through the air. They only turn one corner before they’re met with a large golden barrier. It extends through the room they’ve stepped into and intersects the walls, presumably stretching into the adjoining rooms as well. Rhodey pictures it being a giant dome, a bubble sitting over where the Stone is. There are two sorcerers in this room, holding their glowing hands out to the barrier. They nod at Strange, then at Tony and Rhodey, as the trio enters the room. No one speaks.

Strange walks up to the barrier and puts a hand out, sweeping it to the side like he’s parting a curtain. A space opens in the golden shield and rapidly expands until there’s a doorway-sized hole. Strange motions for them to step through, and despite his grim expression, there’s something dramatic in the gesture that almost makes Rhodey want to smile. Almost.

Tony steps through the hole first, Rhodey close behind him. Strange moves through and drops his hand, and the barrier reforms behind him. They still don’t say anything, silently following Strange as he leads them through the maze of rooms, back to the inner barrier.

Everything is the same, as far as Rhodey can tell. The orange inner barrier doesn’t seem to have moved. Rhodey wants to assume that’s a good thing, that the Stone’s power is still contained within it, but he really has no idea.
The only change to the room is the man standing in it, holding both palms out to the barrier. From his relaxed stance, speaking of experience, and the fact that Strange has clearly trusted him with this first line of defense, Rhodey assumes this is Wong, the oft-mentioned expert who works alongside Strange.

They don’t have time for introductions or pleasantries. Maybe after this is over, Rhodey finds himself absently thinking, and then clings to that thought, forcing himself to believe that there’s going to be an after.

Strange does move over to Wong’s side briefly, leaning down to whisper something in his ear. They exchange a few low, muttered words that Rhodey doesn’t bother trying to listen in on. He trusts that Strange isn’t planning to abandon them or turn on them. He’s more focused on Tony, who’s once again watching the barrier like it might attack him at any moment, but this time with some of that fear contained behind an iron-hard mask.

Strange finishes his short conversation and moves back over to Tony and Rhodey. “This is it. Are you ready?”

Tony doesn’t bother speaking, he just nods. Strange doesn’t look to Rhodey for confirmation—the question wasn’t for him, anyway. Tony’s the one who matters here.

Strange moves to the barrier and beckons them over. “I can’t just open it up like the other one, that would compromise it. If we’re in physical contact, I can get us all through without having to actually tear open the shield.”

Rhodey cautiously places a hand on Strange’s shoulder and Tony does the same on his other side when Rhodey gets a short nod. They move toward the barrier, and it feels like standing on a precipice. Rhodey’s heart is pounding. As Strange begins to walk into the barrier, Rhodey suddenly wishes desperately that he could look over at Tony, but he’s on the other side of Strange and blocked from view. Before he can do anything more, they’re all stepping through.

It feels like he’s walking into a sheet of jelly. The magical barrier feels cool and strangely solid against him. He follows Strange’s lead, feeling the pull on his hand where it rests on Strange’s shoulder, but for a moment, as the barrier seems to push back against him, he doubts that he will get through. It blocks his air, presses on his ears until they’re full of static, it fills his vision and he instinctively closes his eyes against it, and for a second, a part of his mind panics, wants to pull back. But then it parts like a wave, sliding smoothly around him, and he’s through.

At first, he thinks the barrier hasn’t completely retreated. His eyes are still closed in the first second, but there’s a rushing, almost roaring sound in his ears like he’s standing alone on a flat plain in the middle of a windstorm. It takes a heartbeat to realize that it’s not the barrier making the sound.

His eyes are opening in the next second, and he immediately has to squint them nearly closed again. Everything is green. Bright, swirling green, and within the inner barrier he can see, and feel, the pulsations of the Time Stone’s power. They tingle across is his skin and settle somewhere in the back of his head, like half-forgotten memories.

He becomes aware of movement out of the corner of his eye and turns, seeing Tony drop his hand from Strange’s shoulder. Tony looks at the doorway into the room where the Time Stone sits and moves toward it. With the near-overwhelming feeling of the Stone around them, it feels like Rhodey is slow, slow to think and slow to move, and by the time he thinks to take his hand off Strange’s shoulder and move to follow Tony, Strange has a hand out, grasping Rhodey’s arm.
“Stay close to me!” Strange says, and though it’s nearly a shout, Rhodey barely hears it over the sounds in the air. He nods, even though Strange isn’t looking at him, and when Strange releases his arm and moves to follow Tony through the doorway, Rhodey sticks close to him.

Every step feels like a struggle, with the effects of the Stone all around them. It’s like wading through waist-deep water, but they make it. When they finally get through the doorway, Rhodey can only stop and stare.

The details of the room they’re in are lost to the bright green glow. Here, the waves of power from the Stone are visible in the very air itself, as wisps of light that dart back and forth, forming and reforming, swirling patterns that move too fast to track in the eddies of the Stone’s flow. The Stone itself is too bright to look at directly. All Rhodey can see, up on a pedestal in the middle of the room, is a bright green light that burns his eyes.

They all stand at the edge of the room, staring, and the moment seems to stretch on into eternity. The only thing that exists in that moment is the room they’re in, the Time Stone, and the three of them. Apt, maybe, for this all-powerful object that can bend and warp time itself.

Then Tony takes a step forward. It’s hard to tell, but he seems to move more easily in the room than Rhodey and Strange can. He doesn’t get far; he’s taken two steps toward the Stone when suddenly, the green lights floating in the room, previously swirling randomly, coalesce and dive for Tony like they’re alive. Alive and angry.

Tony retaliates immediately. Before Rhodey even realizes he’s being attacked, he has his own bright blue shield up, surrounding himself, protecting him from the near-solid green lights that stretch toward him from every direction, reaching out like they want nothing more than to wrap around him. Rhodey has no idea what exactly it means, but he can tell that it would not be good for those lights to touch Tony.

There’s a battle happening right in front of him and Rhodey can’t do anything but stand back and watch. Strange stands still as well, perhaps knowing there’s nothing he can really do against the power of an Infinity Stone. Maybe he’s just afraid of distracting Tony.

For a moment, Tony seems to be locked in place, but then he moves forward. His blue barrier, bright enough to be seen through the green that tints the entire room, pulses just like the Stone itself, and slowly, inexorably, he moves toward the Stone.

His blue light stretches in front of him, extending a few feet out ahead of Tony’s actual body. It’s the edge of that barrier that Rhodey watches as it inches closer and closer to the bright light on the pedestal where the Stone sits. It pushes forward, Rhodey holding his breath watching it, and then it touches the Stone.

The response is immediate. Green arcs of light and power lash out from the Stone itself in all directions. Everything in the room seems to pulse at once, and suddenly there’s a weight crushing Rhodey from every direction. The pressure in the air is changing and he can’t breathe, can’t hear, his vision is tunneling…

Distantly, he hears a human voice, raised in alarm. Then the pressure on him lessens, and he gulps in a huge breath, regaining his senses. Strange is standing in front of him, arms out, orange circles in front of his hands. He looks to be creating a shield of his own, protecting himself and Rhodey from the wild anger of the Stone.

Strange’s light is feebly sparking against the onslaught from the Stone, but it’s working. Rhodey can breathe, at least, and he no longer feels like he’s being crushed. Strange half-turns to look over his
shoulder at Rhodey, checking to be sure that he’s okay. “Stay behind me!” he shouts, and the sound barely reaches Rhodey’s ears.

Despite the overwhelming power of the Stone and the fact that Strange is clearly struggling just to protect the two of them, Rhodey is relieved that he doesn’t try to get out, or to get Rhodey out. He’s not going to leave Tony, no matter what.

Rhodey can’t even see Strange’s shield itself. He can only estimate where it must be because of the way the Time Stone’s reaching arms keep stopping in midair, not coming any closer. As Rhodey watches, though, he becomes uncomfortably aware that the green tendrils are coming closer and closer. They lash against what must be Strange’s barrier and bounce back, but each time, they’re a few inches closer to where Rhodey and Strange stand. Strange is losing the battle.

He opens his mouth—to do what, he’s not sure, maybe to yell encouragement or a warning to Strange—but before he can do more, the shield wavers enough that one of the coiling ropes of the Stone’s power reaches through, straight for Rhodey.

He doesn’t have the time to do anything more than tense in anticipation. He’s not sure what he’s expecting, maybe for the solid-looking, glowing green thing to physically hit him, but it doesn’t. It rushes toward him and makes contact with his side, and he’s not sure what happens after that.

He’s lying in a bed that’s supposed to be nothing but impersonal, temporary, but that’s become home for the last week. It takes him less time each morning to remember where he is, who he’s with, and that the invasion is over and Thanos is dead, but… he still can’t believe it. At night, he stares at the ceiling and tries to come to terms with the fact that it all ended so quickly, that so much can change so fast.

He never really got a chance to deal with that in the camps. There was too much to do. Too much to focus on, having to protect his people, to worry about just getting through another day. There was always a clear and specific goal, even if it was something as simple as “distribute rations for the next three days” or “set up a new bathroom schedule.” At least there was a focus.

Now, he feels cut adrift. He’s more grateful than he can express to have Tony back with him, and for the invasion to be over, but he doesn’t know where to go from here. Tony’s difficulty with emotions is strange and unfamiliar, and there’s too much of that in the world now. He’s trying so hard to be an anchor for Tony, but he’s not sure what to anchor himself to.

Rhodey gasps.

He’s closing in on the Falcon, attention almost entirely on the man ahead of him. He always devotes a portion of his attention to the monitors on his screen and the chatter on the comms. The kid Tony brought along went down and Tony was out of it for a minute, but he’s heading back now.

He’s worried about Tony. He’s been taking too much on, lately. Rhodey still feels bad about how he’s distanced himself from his best friend lately. There’s just been so much going on, and Tony hasn’t exactly made it easy. After Ultron, he pulled back from not just the team, but from his friends, his family. Not that that’s an excuse. It’s par for the course when it comes to loving Tony Stark and Rhodey should have anticipated it. Instead, he’d let himself ignore Tony when Tony needed him.

That guilt has been sitting with him since Tony approached him about the Accords. He’s never liked Ross, and he knows Tony hates the man’s slimy, conniving guts. To see him working so closely with him—not by choice, but by necessity, Rhodey knows—and to see how worn down he is, it hurts. Tony believes in these Accords, not just because of his own often misplaced guilt, but because he understands the true power that superheroes wield and the need for structured responsibility and
To see the clear evidence that not only does Tony’s supposed “team”—the ones who Rhodey had trusted to be taking care of Tony when Rhodey was busy—clearly not support him, but they don’t even seem to trust him in the least... It pisses him off.

He’s getting closer to Sam, almost within range. He could shoot him from here, easily, but he’s not trying to kill the man. He needs to be closer to make the precise shot that will force him to the ground without actually hurting him.

He doesn’t even know what happens. One second, the Falcon is turning in midair, a sharp maneuver for sure but one Rhodey can easily follow. Before he has time to register it, there’s a flashing red warning in the middle of his screen, and then it feels like the world explodes.

He feels like he’s been kicked in the chest. He coughs and tries to remember how to breathe, wondering what the hell happened, forcing his eyes open. Everything hurts and it takes a few seconds to understand why everything is dark in front of him. When he does, he’s seized by a terror so overwhelming, he can’t even get a sound out.

His suit is dead. The HUD is down, dark. The only thing he can see is a tiny glimpse of spinning blue sky through the eye holes of the mask. He’s in freefall, in a dead suit.

He was easily a few hundred feet up. There’s not a single spark, not a peep from his suit or his comm. Everything is fried, and he’s falling.

He’s going to die.

Rhodey doubles over, eyes wide. The arc of magic didn’t hit him like he expected; it’s sinking through his side, phasing through his body. It seems to be moving slowly, incredibly slowly, but he’s lost all sense of time.

It’s great to work as a team. Rhodey’s always blended well into teams of all kinds, and he’s thrived on being in the Air Force, knowing that his brothers in arms always have his back. Admittedly, he’s thought before that Tony wouldn’t do so well in the same environment.

Not for the reasons others would expect—that he’s arrogant, or selfish, or any of the negative personality traits the media loves to tout, whether they’re true or exaggerated or completely false—but for the way he grew up. Rich, famous, a prodigy, with distant parents. Tony has a hard time trusting that anyone would ever watch his back without expecting some kind of tangible reward. He’s been forced to be suspicious of everyone in his life.

Rhodey likes what he sees with the Avengers. Sure, they snipe and piss each other off and have little quarrels, but any group of people will do that. There are a few more concerning things, things that put Rhodey on edge, but they rarely last and they’re eclipsed by the rest, the good feelings. Tony works amazingly well with the other Avengers, particularly in the field. They’re a seamless team, and Rhodey feels privileged to join them when he can.

It’s a small mission, really doesn’t require all of them, but everyone was in town for once and what the hell, why not. With a situation like this, one can never be too careful.

Or too gleeful. “Mad scientist!” Tony crows over the comms as he flies, dodging trees with a natural grace that’s practically obscene.

“Mad scientist,” Barton echoes, laughing. “Brilliant, though. You think if he was two steps further from crazy, you’d hire him, Stark?”
“Are you kidding?” Tony says. “You’ve got to be certifiably insane to work at Stark Industries. At least, to work in R&D you do.”

“But usually not homicidal,” Banner’s words are dry, but Rhodey can hear the hint of sarcasm. He’s watching the mission from the jet, not wanting to bring the Hulk out unless it’s necessary. So far, the rest of them have everything well in hand. Their target might think he’s running from Iron Man, but he’s running straight to War Machine and the Black Widow.

“So how do you tell the difference?” Barton asks.

“That’s a company secret,” Tony replies. “But I might consider sharing if you make me a batch of that lamb stew you made for Natasha last week and let me keep it all for myself.”

“Focus, people,” Rogers’s voice comes, but there’s clear amusement in it.

“I’m plenty focused!” Tony says, “In fact, I can—” His voice cuts off as a strange sound echoes over the line, and then he swears, quietly.

“You just hit a tree, didn’t you,” Romanoff says, and Rhodey laughs even as he readies his repulsors, seeing the target coming through the forest toward them.

There’s a voice, shouting over the roaring of the Time Stone’s power and the rushing in Rhodey’s ears, but he can’t make it out.

“No.”

“Rhodey…”

“Whatever it is, no. I guarantee it. No to the first thr—no, four ideas. No to the first four.”

Tony’s eyes light up with a familiar mischief. “So that’s a yes to idea number five?”

Rhodey knows he can’t actually change Tony’s mind if he’s set on something. He could try to offer advice, but while Tony readily listens to him when it comes to life-changing and very serious matters, on the little ones his advice is often soundly ignored.

“Depends,” he says, trying and failing to disguise a smile. “How much is she going to hate it?”

Tony sits back. “I’m wounded by your assumption that Pepper would hate any of my Christmas gift. She’s loved the other ones.”

“She bought those for herself, with your money. They weren’t really your gifts.”

“And? Now I’m saving her the hassle of having to buy it herself. I’m giving her two gifts, really.”

Rhodey shakes his head fondly, thinking about some of the truly ridiculous things Tony’s tried to give him over the years. “Just… please don’t buy her an island. Or a yacht. Or anything too over the top. That’s not what she wants from you.”

Tony thinks about that for a second. “I need to get her something big enough to represent how much I love her. And what’s the point in being a billionaire if you can’t buy someone an island every once in a while?” He’s trying to tease, but there’s a glimpse of something there. A raw vulnerability that Tony rarely shows.

Rhodey doesn’t push it. Tony will just withdraw. Instead, he just laughs and picks his fork back up, returning to his food. “No islands.”
“Okay, no islands,” Tony promises, eyes sparkling. Way too easily, but Rhodey knows he’s not winning this battle. A part of him can’t wait to see what kind of monstrosity Tony comes up with. The intersection of Tony’s socially challenged brain and nearly unlimited bank account can be a dangerous thing.

Something withdraws, pulls back. Rhodey gasps; he hadn’t even realized that he was breathless, muscles paralyzed by the power surging through him. He stumbles a step forward and is vaguely proud that he manages to right himself before crashing into Strange from behind.

Strange is panting—Rhodey can’t hear it but he can see the rapid movement of his chest—and his arms are shaking as he holds them up, but his shield has strengthened enough to keep the Stone away from them again. All of the tendrils of power have retreated once more, back to bouncing ineffectively off the barrier.

Strange turns, looking back over his shoulder at Rhodey again. “You okay?”

Rhodey nods, belatedly realizing that he’s holding a hand over his side where the power touched him and, judging by how he feels, he’s probably pale and sweating and looking like he’s three seconds from falling over. “What the hell was that?” he shouts.

“That was time, Colonel,” Strange yells back. “That was one small glimpse of the power of the Time Stone.” Suddenly, Rhodey wonders if Strange was struck by the same thing, whether he reexperienced memories of his own. And if so, what they were.

There’s something brighter than all the other bright light at the edge of his vision, beyond Strange. Rhodey shifts to see, refocusing on Tony, heart in his throat. He wonders if Tony can feel, or see, any of this.

Tony’s own shield is brighter and stronger than Strange’s; born from the other Infinity Stones and their power, and apparently able to combat the power of one of them. He’s standing directly in front of the pedestal that holds the Stone now, his own shield completely surrounding it and himself.

Incredibly, the Stone’s bright light has dimmed. Rhodey can see the outline of the physical thing now, not just a glow outlining it. In turn, Tony is blindingly bright, glowing as much as the day he was resurrected. Maybe even more. He also seems to be pulsing with power, the same way the Stone is, and it pulls something heavy in Rhodey’s gut. He has no idea what it means, but it doesn’t feel good, and he can do nothing to help.

Tony reaches for the Stone. It’s like he’s moving in slow motion, or maybe it’s Rhodey. It’s hard to tell what the hell is happening when apparently time itself is being screwed with. Over it all, he’s acutely aware of Strange’s shielding and the way the Time Stone could easily shred them both if Strange slips up. Tony’s hand reaches forward, closer, his fingertips inches from the Stone.

He makes contact.

The sudden increase in the intensity of the Stone’s assault on them when Tony had started moving toward it, Rhodey now realizes, was nothing. The moment Tony touches the Stone, it lashes out with something akin to an explosion.

Rhodey and Strange are nearly helpless against this new wave of power. By some miracle, Strange keeps his shield up in front of them both, but they’re being physically pushed back. Rhodey feels his feet sliding on the floor and reaches over to put a hand on Strange’s shoulder, trying to stabilize him. He can tell that Strange is rapidly tiring. They won’t last long against this. Tony needs to work fast.
He tries to look forward, to check on Tony, but there’s so much swirling light in the room that he can barely see. The physical impact of the Stone’s power is throwing things around the room, pieces of paper and debris swirling around like they’re in the middle of a tornado.

Just as it starts to clear enough for Rhodey to see Tony’s bright blue form through the mess, he feels Strange start to slip. Letting out a curse that’s swallowed up by the roaring noises in the room, Rhodey puts his other hand up, shifting to try and brace Strange from the back, but it’s too late.

Everything happens at once. There’s a surge from the Stone. Strange’s arms tremble one last time and fall, exhausted. There’s a split second delay and then the shield in front of them falls apart. The power of the Stone surges forward, knocking both of them off of their feet and throwing them backward until they hit the wall.

Rhodey’s back protests the impact with the wall, but the pain is muted behind the press of the Time Stone that he can feel at the edges of his mind. It’s an overwhelming power, one there’s no chance that he can resist. He looks up and gets a glimpse of Tony, at the center of the room and holding one hand out, the Stone sitting in his palm.

And just before the pressure of the Stone invades his mind, the swirling lights and rushing air in the room clear enough for him to see Tony open his mouth and scream.
Time

Chapter Notes

This chapter contains a very graphic description of a death that might disturb some people. I based it off of something I’ve actually seen in the ER. If you don’t want to read it, after the first paragraph of italics, skip the next section of text until you get to the second paragraph of italics. You won’t miss anything vital to the plot, you’ll get the general idea from the other scenes that happen before and after that part.

“Mr. Stark!”

It’s Peter, running toward the two of them enthusiastically. Rhodey always enjoys seeing the kid. He’s so young, bright and full of energy, idealistic but not truly naïve. He’s everything the future should be.

Tony sees it too, Rhodey knows he does. When Tony looks at him, he sees the future of superheroes, someone good enough to someday replace him. Peter gives Tony hope that one day he can give up Iron Man and actually rest, instead of being forced to go out fighting.

God knows Tony deserves it.

Peter practically launches himself at Tony, who returns the hug, laughing freely. “Hey, Peter.”

Rhodey turns sparkling eyes to May, who’s standing back on their porch and watching with the same fond look Rhodey knows is on his own face. They’ve all become part of the same family in the last few months.

Both Rhodey and Tony felt bad, being away so long. Peter and Tony texted back and forth, they all did, but Tony’s been so busy that there’s barely even been time for that. Peter’s doing a marvelous job in his place at SI and he’s been reporting on some of his projects, but with Tony and Rhodey away in another country for the last month and a half, working on negotiations for expansions, it’s been hard to really keep up with each other.

At least they’re back in time for Peter’s graduation. Tony’s met most of Peter’s close friends from school by now—both the ones that know about Spiderman and a few who don’t—in some capacity, but most of Peter’s classmates haven’t actually gotten to see Tony Stark in person.

Rhodey knows—and suspects Tony knows too—that Peter just might be looking forward to rubbing it in some of his classmates’ faces that he does, in fact, know Tony Stark personally enough for the man to show up at his high school graduation, that he hasn’t been lying or exaggerating this whole time. Peter’s not petty, exactly, but Rhodey can hardly deny him the opportunity to prove it to some of the students who’ve been teasing him.

During a snag in the negotiations, Rhodey had started to think they’d be forced to stay another few weeks and would miss the celebration. Peter would understand and Tony would go out of his way to make it up to him, but it would still suck. And then, after Peter really did get over the disappointment, he would mercilessly utilize Tony’s continued guilt to get things out of him—not maliciously so much as mischievously, probably egged on by Harley, who’s become fast friends with Peter and is
more often than not the reason behind the two of them getting into trouble.

Peter has a lethal kicked-puppy face and Tony has zero willpower against it. Rhodey’s a little harder to manipulate, having spent his adult life around Tony, but even he can be taken in sometimes. The result is that whenever Tony can be made to feel the least bit like he owes Peter something, the kid can milk it for all it’s worth.

“I’m so glad you’re back,” Peter muffles into Tony’s shoulder and Tony chuckles, warmth in his eyes as he pushes Peter back and heads toward the house with an arm wrapped around his shoulders.

“Me too, kid.”

Rhodey and Tony both greet May; she’s just as happy to see them both, just more restrained about it. Not just for the fact that their timely return means they’ll make it to Peter’s graduation and subsequent party, but also because she likes both of them. They’ve both been spending more time around her lately. She’s a wonderful woman, hard-working and strong-willed and so incredibly loving to Peter.

They settle on the couch inside, trading stories of their month away from each other. Rhodey shares the tale of a particularly embarrassing mishap caused by a language barrier in Sweden, which sets May and Peter laughing so hard that they spill a glass of juice on the floor. Peter, in turn, starts a twenty minute step-by-step explanation of how he came up with the latest variation on a building scanner he’s been working on developing with a group in R&D.

May talks about some of the charity work she’s been doing around town, as well as her actual work, and Tony shares an old story about trying to partner with a Japanese company when he was in his twenties. Peter, snickering, tells them about how he turned in a genetics project in which he was supposed to use a research database and algorithm to determine which of his genes came from his biological mother, which he used May for instead, and his teacher didn’t even notice.

They all laugh at that one. Tony has a faraway look in his eyes and Rhodey thinks about the Starks, and all that he knew about their relationship when they were kids at MIT. Tony had always resented his father, in more ways than one, though Rhodey supposes he should thank Howard for giving Tony some of his brains, at least. Most of Tony’s good qualities, Rhodey knows, came from Maria, from his compassion to his warm brown eyes.

A spike of pain goes through Rhodey’s head and he grimaces, letting out a grunt as his hand shoots up to his head. The other three don’t even seem to notice, carrying on their conversation like nothing has happened. That doesn’t seem right… but Rhodey can hardly think through the headache.

Something is wrong, not just with his head, but with the picture here. It’s like there’s something important that he’s forgotten to do, something nagging at the back of his head that he can’t quite place. If only the pain would go away, he could think…

He’s being pushed against the wall by an unseen force, like one of those rides at the fair where it spins hard enough to press everyone up against the walls and allow the bottom to drop out beneath their feet. There’s someone yelling in the background, somewhere behind him. The voice sounds urgent, worried, but he can’t make out the words. He can barely hear it, in fact, past a different, higher sound, one that hurts his ears and heart in equal measure. The sound of someone screaming.

Oh, god. This can’t be happening.

Rhodey comes to a hard landing, the armor already splitting open to dump him on the ground as it comes in. He stumbles out, unsteady from more than just the rough descent. There’s a wound in his
side that’s bleeding freely and aching, but he barely feels it past the horror spreading through his body.

He can’t see much of the kid. All he can see is Tony, still half in his armor, hunched over and holding Peter tight to him. One of Tony’s feet sits at an unnatural angle and Rhodey knows the ankle is broken. There are open wounds on his hands and the arm that’s not still encased in armor.

And he’s covered in blood, god, so much blood.

Most of it isn’t his own.

“Tony?” Rhodey tries, approaching like he’s sneaking up on a wounded animal. From the noise that Tony makes, that’s not too far off.

He can still only see part of Peter’s body. The arm and leg that are sticking out of Tony’s hold are still, way too still.

Tony lets out another low, wretched sound. “I was too far away,” he rasps through a throat that sounds like he’s been screaming. Rhodey can still hear echoes of the desperate sound he’d made over the comms.

“I was too far, I couldn’t… I didn’t…” Tony moans again, a horrible sound that Rhodey hopes to whatever god there is he never has to hear again. “The suit was running out of power, I couldn’t get enough to the thrusters…”

It seems impossible. Ridiculous. The kid… this is Spiderman, he defies gravity every day. He swings from buildings, he climbs walls without any support. He can hang upside down from the ceiling without any trouble. And any time he falls, he can always catch himself.

But there’s no way for an unconscious person to web themselves a convenient landing pad. And even with an emergency parachute in the suit, once that’s been deployed once and the strings are sliced from the suit, it’s gone. Tony has worked to protect the kid from everything imaginable, but when a fight lasts six hours and the enemies don’t seem to stop coming, when all of the usual devices and half the emergency measures have already been used up, it just isn’t enough. Nothing could be.

Rhodey comes closer. He falls to his knees beside them, and Tony leans back just enough for Rhodey to see the broken figure he’s holding.

Parker landed face down, headfirst. His mask had been torn off during the fight, not that it would have been enough to protect him from a dead fall onto concrete at terminal velocity. Tony has turned him over, but Rhodey only knows it because of the position of his arms and legs.

He feels almost detached, looking at it. Like it can’t be a human. It can’t be, because human skulls aren’t shaped like that. What’s left of the head isn’t round anymore. It’s not cracked like an egg, like one might expect. The skull is no doubt in pieces, but the tissues surrounding it have kept everything together for the most part, instead stretching to accommodate the oval shape it’s been forced into. Elongated and flattened along one side.

What used to be the facial features are distorted by the change in shape and the impact. Everything has been pushed to the side. The part that must have made contact with the pavement is a mass of red, skin torn open and scraped away, specific features indistinguishable because of the destruction of the skin and the force of the hit. The other side of the face is astonishingly intact, but pushed and pulled into a shape that a face should never be in. The mouth stretches too far beyond the nose, which is distorted in a way it shouldn’t be. The eye seems to sit at the wrong angle, looking out from
far too close to the ear.

There is a wound, above the part of the face that was destroyed. An area where the skin has been torn open enough to accommodate the changes in the shape of the broken skull. The hairline is no longer straight or in the right place, and the hair is soaked and matted down with blood. Dripping down the ruined part of the face and onto Tony’s lap, mixed in with the blood, is something gelatinous and whitish. There are clumps of it here and there in the pools of blood on the road, surprisingly liquid. Brain matter. If the mangled remains of the head weren’t enough to confirm death, the limp, utterly loose way it moves on the clearly broken neck when Tony shifts would be.

It doesn’t seem like this can be a person, much less a person Rhodey knows. Knew. A child, practically. A genius, a good person, someone fiercely loved by the broken men now staring at the shattered shell of his body. It doesn’t seem possible that what made Peter himself, the parts that thought up incredible inventions in the lab with Tony and helped plan with them in the middle of battle just minutes ago, are now splattered on the pavement and leaking from his smashed skull, impossible to put back together.

Rhodey’s in shock. He isn’t processing it. Tony, on the other hand, is overwhelmed by his grief. Lost it in. He gasps in a breath and raises his head, and what Rhodey sees sends him stumbling back, landing on his ass in a puddle of Peter’s blood and brains.

Tony’s eyes are dead. Rhodey’s seen the look before, in a seventeen year old kid whose parents were killed after Tony’s parting gift to them was another argument. But back then, Tony hadn’t had the experiences he has now. He wasn’t so beaten down by life and tragedy and loss and grief. He was lost, yes, but Rhodey was there to help him find his way back. Tony had always blamed himself in part for his parents’ deaths, but he didn’t feel truly responsible for them.

This? Tony felt responsible for this. He had taken Peter under his wing. He’d brought him into this fight. He’d upgraded his gear and invited him into his lab and his home and his heart. Tony loved this kid with everything he had, as much as he could ever love any son of his own, and this has destroyed him.

There’s no coming back from this.

He’s not sure if it’s the shock or his own injuries, but Rhodey fades out.

Someone is cursing in front of him. He can barely hear it over the background noises and the screaming, Christ, the screaming. Whoever it is, they’re yelling something repeatedly, swearing between repetitions of the word. There are arms waving, something orange sparking at the fingertips. It’s being overwhelmed each time, by green. So much green. Just before he’s overtaken by the green again, he realizes it’s his name being shouted.

“Ready?” Rhodey asks, smiling as Tony comes into the room laden with snacks.

“Yep.” Tony dumps his armful of treats onto the couch and then plops down next to them, immediately pressing himself against Rhodey’s side, underneath the arm already raised in invitation.

It’s rare that they get a day off like this. They both need it. When they’re away on business, they do try to take some time to see the sights, but there’s a difference between tourism and true relaxation. They don’t often get time to just sit in one place, eating bad food and doing absolutely nothing.

Tony’s lined up a movie marathon and Rhodey has every intention for both of them to fall asleep here.
They don’t pay all that much attention to the movies. They’re all ones they’ve seen before—that’s the point of tonight. Nothing that really requires that much attention or effort, not even the effort to follow the plot of a movie. They just let them roll, snacking and laughing and talking to each other about nothing important.

Work is not mentioned. Projects and worries and responsibilities are all on hold. Barring absolute disaster, everyone has been warned not to mess with them today. They’ve already had a lengthy breakfast that has yet to be cleaned up and then spent hours off reading or playing games or just napping in the sun like a cat—Rhodey may have snapped a picture of that one to use as future blackmail.

Tony glows softly in his hold. A little brighter than normal, partly accentuated by the darkened room, but mostly just because he’s happy where he is. Rhodey knows that it happens when Tony’s really feeling happy, and he always has to suppress a fond smile when he knows it’s because of him.

There are no world-ending problems that come up. They’re never interrupted. They finish four of the five movies they have planned, though they pay little attention to any of them. They mostly just cuddle on the couch and go through two entire bags of chips, plus most of the candy Tony’s brought and two thirds of the popcorn.

Tony falls asleep leaning against him, his legs stretched out over the rest of couch. There are wrappers scattered on the floor that crinkle when Rhodey shifts his legs apart, sprawling out more comfortably. He doesn’t care right now; they’ll clean them up tomorrow.

If he could bottle this feeling of contentment and true happiness, he’d be richer than Tony. Not that he needs to be. Having the feeling, even for a moment, is more than enough.

Sleep comes easy.

He’s sliding down the wall by inches. The power pushing against him, overwhelming and awful and shoving its way inside him, twisting through his body and mind, is sparkling, being pushed away for seconds at a time, its hold loosening incrementally. It’s hard to think, hard to do anything, but he thinks, maybe, there’s someone else there, fighting against the living, writhing thing that has a hold on him.

He approaches the figure on the bed slowly, the same way he’s done every time for the last seven months. He’s not really sure why he does. No one else bothers, by now. The staff move in and out comfortably.

Rhodey knows they’re doing their jobs well, but he hates the pitying looks they give him. He hates the sympathy they have, the gentle way they handle Tony. For all that their care and concern might be real, and truly come from a good place in their hearts, they don’t really understand. They don’t know him. They didn’t know Tony.

They don’t understand what he’s lost.

He hates himself a little more every time he comes here, but he knows he’ll never stop coming. He’ll never stop wishing for a change, and he’ll never stop punishing himself when that change doesn’t come.

It’s destroying him and he knows it. He’s lost weight. He’s lost interest in work, and his other activities, and life in general. His friends are concerned. Even the kids, who know Tony and who understand, are concerned about him. They come and visit too, and they’re just as devastated, but they’re not being consumed by their grief and their guilt.
Rhodey’s always been a well-balanced person. He should be able to get over this. He should be able to move on. But there’s something holding him back that isn’t afflicting the kids.

He promised Tony. He made a promise, and he can’t bring himself to give up on that, even when he knows, deep down, that he already broke it long ago.

A nurse enters the room behind him and he steps to the side to let her work. Even though he’s been coming for months, it always takes him a few minutes to work up the courage to come closer. The staff all know it by now. They’re used to working around him and they no longer bother to ask him if he needs anything.

The nurse offers food. Tony watches her movements blankly, takes the offered food and eats it mechanically.

It’s the word to describe everything Tony does these days. He exercises when he’s prompted, he goes in and out of his room, he even does chores around the facility. He goes to the bathroom on his own, he showers and brushes his own teeth and dresses himself. He eats what’s put in front of him, and the facility provides a wide variety of excellent food, though Tony doesn’t seem to notice or care about the differences between any of the items. The staff took away his 24 hour sitter a week after his arrival, concluding that he wasn’t at risk of flight or suicide. He’s not a danger to himself or anyone else.

But he hasn’t spoken a word in seven months. He looks at people who talk to him, but he doesn’t seem to differentiate between them. He clearly hears them, because he can follow commands, but he never really responds. They’ve put a pen and paper in his hands. He can copy a clock and a square and write his name when he’s prompted, but anything he draws freehand is just random scribbles. His movements are purposeless, and he quickly sets it aside when he’s not asked to write or draw anything in particular.

Tony doesn’t seem to recognize Rhodey. That might be the worst thing about all of this, though Rhodey sometimes finds himself thinking that if Tony did recognize him, he might not be able to handle it. To deal with the judgement, the feeling that Tony knows what a disappointment Rhodey is, knows that he broke his promise.

When the nurse leaves, Rhodey has finally gathered enough courage to approach the bed. He kneels first, in front of Tony. Tony watches him with the same blank, electric blue stare he’s worn for the past seven months. “Hey, Tony,” Rhodey says. His voice breaks. They both ignore it.

Tony doesn’t respond. He never responds.

Rhodey sits with him for an hour today. He tells him how the kids and the company are doing. He tells an old story from MIT, one he’s pretty sure he hasn’t yet retold here in this room.

Tony gets up at one point to go into the bathroom, right in the middle of Rhodey’s stream of consciousness. Rhodey has no idea if Tony really listens to anything he says.

But he has to try. He can’t ever stop trying.

He pauses in his story, waits for Tony to finish in the bathroom. Tony comes right back to the bed and sits back in his place, looking over at Rhodey, and Rhodey starts up where he left off.

His grief chokes him as he goes on, and he can’t bring himself to finish. He cuts the story short, leaving off the ending he’s been building up to. Tony doesn’t notice or care.

Rhodey slips off the bed to sit on the floor. It feels like he shouldn’t be sitting so close to Tony. He
shouldn’t be invading his space in any manner when he’s like this, when there’s no way he can consent to any kind of contact.

Rhodey promised Tony that they’d figure things out no matter what. For the first month, he really believed it. He tried and tried, fueled by the idea that he would eventually get through, that something would change.

By the third month, that confidence was lost. By the fifth, any spark of hope had been crushed.

He promised Tony he’d help him.

He lied.

Rhodey puts his head in his hands and he cries. Tony stares straight ahead.

More yelling. *He doesn’t know what’s happening, but he completes his slide down the wall, feet hitting the floor. They don’t hold him up; he collapses, brought down by the power tearing through him. It feels like his entire body might burn from the inside out.*

Something sparks in the air. *There are multiple voices yelling now, from behind and from in front of him. The voices behind him reach a pitch, then form a strange unison. There’s a percussive thump to the air that barely penetrates through the roaring sounds, and suddenly the yelling behind him is muffled.*

In return, the voice in front of him grows even louder. *Or maybe closer. He becomes aware that his eyes are closed, but he can’t seem to force them open. The voice in front of him sounds familiar, but he can’t place it. He’s still too disoriented from the power that’s tearing him apart, body and mind. It starts to feel like the power has always been his reality. Everything but this has ceased to exist, but there’s still a voice yelling, a word he should know, no… a name, his name, it’s his—*

“Rhodes!”

“Jim!”

Rhodey gasps in a breath and his eyes open along with it.

Everything comes back to him at once, things had been forced out by the power of the Time Stone. He still feels dizzy and disoriented and the things he just saw are still swirling in his head, but he remembers who he is, where he is, what he’s doing, and who’s been yelling his name for who knows how long.

Strange is kneeling next to him. He was thrown back against the wall too, but he must be more resistant to the effects of the Stone, that or he had some residual protections around himself, because he’s kept his head enough to fight back. His hands are back up, though he looks like he’s barely managing it, and his orange shield is back in place, surrounding them both.

Rhodey thinks it’s a miracle that he’s managed to regain control, but as he gets his breath back and his head stops spinning so much, he looks around and notices something else.

The fury of the Stone is fading away. In the same moment that he notices it, he becomes aware that Tony has stopped screaming. Rhodey shifts, trying to peer through the swirling green energy to see Tony.

The green is dying down, retreating. Strange’s shield flickers a few more times, losing what last strength Strange has been managing to force into it, but it doesn’t matter. The green energy of the
Time Stone is moving away from them, no longer filling the room. It’s contracting, slowing down.

Strange’s arms fall when the shield blinks out and he slumps to the floor. At the same time, Rhodey is gathering his strength, trying to push himself up on shaky legs. The Stone’s energy is coalescing into a human shape, and Rhodey knows what’s in the center of that. Tony has managed to get this far. He’s containing the Stone’s energy, drawing it into himself, trying to use it to destroy the Stone.

Rhodey manages to push himself up to a kneeling position and has to stop to catch his breath. He gathers his strength and forces himself to his feet, stumbling a step over to where Strange is. Clumsily, he shoves his hands under Strange’s arms and helps to haul him to his feet.

They stand, clutching each other. Either of them might fall without support. Strange seems just as shaky as Rhodey is, and he knows the Stone managed to attack them both. Distantly, he wonders what Strange saw.

They watch what’s happening in the center of the room with wide eyes. The bright power of the Stone is gone from the air. Along with it, the room has gone quiet, the rushing sounds of the Stone’s power gone. The sudden silence sets a ringing in Rhodey’s ears.

Tony stands alone in the center of the room, his hand still held out. The Stone sits in his palm, still glowing green but no more brightly than Tony himself. Tony’s marks are glowing, strong, but they’re changing. The usual blue covers Tony’s body, but there’s bright green crawling its way up his arm from where the Stone sits in his palm. It doesn’t take over Tony’s blue markings, but it intertwines with them, scrawling over his body, creating a swirling mix that’s almost too much to look at.

The lines finish covering Tony and everything stops. It’s now deafeningly silent in the room. Tony stands in the middle, not moving. There’s no way to tell what’s happening. Whether Tony is being taken over by the Stone or fighting it. Whether he’s winning or losing.

They watch him for what could be seconds or hours. There’s still no movement, no change. Eventually, Strange moves. He lets go of Rhodey, standing on his own, and raises his shaking hands once more. Rhodey finds it hard to believe he has any magical reserves to call on.

“Destroy it,” Strange says, and his voice is hoarse from yelling over the earlier noise in the room, but it now rings out loudly in the silence.

Tony doesn’t move. He doesn’t react at all.

“Destroy it!” Strange repeats. “Stark. Tony!”

When there’s still no reaction, Strange moves again. He shifts himself into a sturdier stance and holds his hands out in the now-familiar pose that means he’s going for a spell.

It’s not a shield he’s planning. Rhodey looks over, he sees the look on Strange’s face, and he understands. Strange thinks Tony is losing. That his unresponsiveness means he’s been taken over by the Stone. He’s taking advantage of the moment, the only chance he might get to fulfill the promise he made to Tony earlier.

Rhodey had promised himself he wouldn’t interfere. He let Tony ask Strange, let Strange make that promise, because he knows what’s at stake. He knows that there’s no way to be absolutely sure if Tony is losing to the Stone until it’s too late. This could be their only chance, and it could last seconds or less.

But he can’t do it right now. He doesn’t know how he knows. Maybe he doesn’t. Maybe it’s blind
faith—or blind stupidity. He lurches over a step and flings his arms out, pushing Strange’s hands away. “No, stop!”

Whatever spell Strange was about to start fizzles out. He turns blazing eyes to Rhodey. “What are you doing?”

Rhodey doesn’t have time for explanations or arguments. “Just… wait.” He doesn’t try to say more, just turns away from Strange, facing Tony.

He approaches Tony. This could get him killed, but it doesn’t matter. He has to try. If it kills him, then Strange will kill Tony—assuming he can—and it’ll be over anyway.

Rhodey comes to a stop several feet from Tony. Tony’s standing with his side facing Rhodey, looking down into his outstretched hand, where the Time Stone sits. Up close, the seemingly static lines of power on his skin, both blue and green, are moving as if they’re alive.

Rhodey could yell. He could try and grab him, he could scream or hit him or try to take the Stone, though that last one would probably kill him. He doesn’t do any of that. He opens his mouth, and only one thing comes out, a near-silent whisper, barely a breath.

“Tony.”

Tony’s head snaps to the side. Bright and glowing, more intense than the day he was resurrected, Tony’s eyes fix on Rhodey. He doesn’t move otherwise, and he doesn’t say anything, but he stares. Rhodey can’t make out the features of his eyes through the glow, can’t see the irises or pupils or anything but light. Yet, still, he somehow knows Tony’s seeing him.

He has no idea how long they stand there. Time doesn’t seem to exist. The green on Tony’s body, so unnatural next to the blue Rhodey has gotten used to, keeps shifting out of sync with the blue, like it’s breathing in a rhythm that doesn’t match Tony’s.

Something dims out of the corner of his eye. The Stone, sitting in Tony’s palm. Rhodey wants to look down at it, to see what’s happening, but he doesn’t. He’s fixed on Tony, stuck staring into his eyes as if mesmerized.

Tony blinks once.

In the next heartbeat, less than a second, the Time Stone shatters in his hand, and the world goes white.
It feels like waking up from a coma.

Everything seems fuzzy and groggy. There’s no real form to anything. Memories don’t exist, just vague feelings, floating in a blank, meaningless pool.

Things do eventually come back, slowly filtering in. Awareness of the world, of existence. Of his name, and a blurred understanding of the place and time.

Memories start coming back, but there’s something wrong with them. They float loosely in the soup that seems to be his mind, not sure where to fit together. As details sharpen and fade once more, they only bring more confusion, because they’re not right. They overlap, contradict each other. Something is wrong with them. Or maybe the problem is with him.

There’s no real awareness of the passage of time, but at some point, things do come together. Memories become more solid, more real. There’s an understanding that those contradictory images are foreign; he didn’t really, truly experience them. There was an outside influence involved.

Stone.

The word should mean more than it does. Things still haven’t completely slotted into place. The term just brings a fuzzy sense of urgency and anxiety, but nothing he can really pinpoint yet.

More things shift and realign. More recent memories solidify. Time Stone, his mind supplies, and with it, a rush of adrenaline sends him gasping awake.

He’s lying on his back on the floor, sprawled out like he’d been flung there. He’s staring at the ceiling of the Sanctum in New York City. Whatever happened, he can’t have lost too much time, because there are still papers drifting around, slowly floating to the floor, and it’s silent in the room.

When his lungs remember how to work and he’s pulled in a few desperate breaths, he manages to shift a little. His whole body flares with a dull pain, like he overworked every muscle he owns. He bites off a groan and turns his head to the side.

It looks like the room exploded. Everything in sight has been thrown back against the walls, furniture toppled over, books scattered and torn. He sees that he was lucky; a large shelf has landed inches from his arm. It could have crushed him.

He looks to his other side, his head still hurting too much to try lifting it up. Strange is lying on the ground a few feet away from him. He looks to be unconscious, sprawled as haphazardly as Rhodey is, but then he stirs, groaning, and coughs a few times. He must have been flung, same as Rhodey, when the Stone exploded, when Tony—

Tony.

Another surge of adrenaline gives him new strength. He sits up in a flash, gasping in another breath, which immediately sets him coughing thanks to the heavy dust clogging the air. What focus he can spare beyond trying to pull air into his lungs immediately goes to Tony.
Tony’s standing in the same place in the center of the room. His hand is still outstretched, but the Time Stone no longer sits in it. Tony’s glowing even brighter than the day he was resurrected, enough to blur the details of his features, but his markings are entirely his own. The green power of the Time Stone is gone, no longer swirling its way around his skin.

The rush of energy fades quickly and Rhodey falls back onto an elbow, coughing, trying to keep his eyes on Tony. Next to him, Strange turns over, makes a brief effort to push himself up, and slumps back to the floor. His cloak wriggles its way out from underneath him, attempting to pull him up, but it’s unsuccessful. He must be exhausted.

There’s a sound behind them. A voice, then multiple. Someone gives an order of some kind. Rhodey, still dazed and trying to keep his scattered focus on Tony, can’t make out what’s being said.

He does notice when someone else comes into the room. Whoever it is pauses in the doorway, perhaps looking at Tony, but then moves forward to kneel by Strange’s side. Wong.

Wong mutters something to Strange that Rhodey can’t quite make out, then helps him to his feet. Strange staggers and leans into him, but he manages to stay upright. The pair shuffle over to where Rhodey is lying and Wong helps him stand up on wobbly legs as well. “You okay?” Wong asks, and Rhodey nods. His head feels too loose on his neck, like he can’t quite support it.

Wong throws several concerned glances at Tony, but seems reluctant to approach him. Strange is barely standing, leaning heavily on Wong, looking like he might fall asleep on his feet any second, but he frowns and mumbles something about the barrier and the explosion.

“There was a wave of power, something like an explosion, yes,” Wong says. “It shredded the first barrier, knocked us all down. Wrecked the outer shield too, but by then it was just a shockwave, nothing dangerous about it. When it passed, there was no more trace of the Stone’s influence. I had the outer barrier put back up for now, just in case, but…”

He pauses, and they all look over to the center of the room, where Tony is still standing in silence, unmoving. It’s unnerving and Rhodey would be approaching him if he thought his legs would hold him up.

“No traces left?” Strange asks in a near whisper.

“Not as far as I can tell,” Wong confirms.

Then, as they watch, something changes. It’s subtle at first, enough that Rhodey knows something is different but can’t pinpoint what. Slowly, he realizes that Tony’s glow is fading. It’s dimming, settling back into his skin the way it had gradually over the last nine months, but all at once this time. They all stand frozen in place, watching.

And then Tony wavers.

It’s a small movement, but it’s enough. Rhodey knows what’s coming, and he manages to corral enough strength to move away from Wong’s supportive hold and stumble across the room. He wishes he could run, but his legs aren’t quite up for that. They’re barely keeping him upright.

He gets there just in time to catch Tony as he collapses, but Tony’s weight sends them both to the floor in a less than graceful heap. Wong is rushing after them a moment later, Strange coming up behind him, supported by his cloak. Rhodey ignores them both, focused on Tony.

Tony’s breathing, that’s the first thing he notices, and he could faint with the relief. He presses lightly shaking fingers to Tony’s neck and feels a strong, steady pulse, watching the even rise and fall of his
Tony’s thoroughly unconscious, but he seems to be okay, at least physically.

Strange kneels next to him and confirms the same thing, performing a cursory examination that Rhodey doesn’t really bother to follow along with. Strange pulls back, disappears, and at some point other hands come by, brushing Rhodey’s shoulders, pressing against Tony’s wrists and over his chest.

Rhodey feels disconnected. Vaguely, he’s aware that he’s still shaky and exhausted and messed up from whatever the Time Stone did to him. He feels like he’s floating in a fog, where nothing exists but him and Tony, Tony’s slow, steady breathing and Tony’s glowing marks—settled now from the blinding light they emitted a few minutes ago, but still brighter than they were hours ago. They seem to have stopped fading. Rhodey doesn’t have the energy to wonder what that means.

Someone shakes him, and it pulls him out of the fog just a bit. Dazed, he looks over, to see Strange hovering over him, brows drawn together in concern. Strange is saying something, but it doesn’t register. “What?” Rhodey asks. His tongue feels too big for his mouth.

He blinks, trying to shake himself a little more awake. Tony shifts in his arms—no, is shifted, someone is trying to move him, take him away. Rhodey’s grip on him tightens automatically, and Strange says something softly to whoever it is. The pull on Tony stops for the moment. Strange seems to have regained a lot of energy, Rhodey vaguely notes. He has no idea how long he’s been on the floor.

“Let us take him somewhere comfortable to rest,” Strange says gently, when Rhodey forces himself to focus.

Rhodey takes a moment to process the words, and then Tony is being tugged from his grip once more. He doesn’t fight it this time, but he frowns, his eyes drooping against his will. “M’not leaving him,” he mutters, hoping Strange won’t force it. He couldn’t fight it right now and he knows it.

Thankfully, Strange doesn’t seem to object. “You don’t have to.” He’s still speaking in that soft tone, oddly soothing. It’s weird, for someone who’s mostly been nothing but a snarky asshole or the serious, businesslike Sorcerer Supreme to them both. A disconnected part of Rhodey’s mind wonders whether it’s his doctor voice, the one he uses for hysterical patients, or maybe frightened children. He doesn’t seem like the type to have a great bedside manner. “But let us move you both somewhere besides the floor.” Strange argues. “Somewhere you can lie down. And I should examine him.”

That wakes Rhodey up a little more. “Is he okay?” he asks, forcing his eyes open and shifting on the floor, sitting up straighter. He hadn’t realized how much he was slumping down.

“Right now I don’t know much more than you. He’s breathing, his vitals seem stable. I need more time and…” Strange smiles ruefully, “more energy to examine him further. That fight took a lot out of me.”

Rhodey lets out a soft huff of breath at that. “Me too,” he mumbles, “and I didn’t even do anything.”

Strange holds a hand out and Rhodey grasps it, allowing Strange to haul him to his feet. He sways unsteadily for a moment, but he blinks the spots out of his eyes and manages to stay up. His eyes go to where two of Strange’s people are carrying Tony out of the room. “I don’t know,” Strange says quietly, “I have a feeling you did quite a lot.”

Rhodey remembers it clearly, the moment he said Tony’s name, just before the Stone shattered. Tony had looked right at him, but he has no idea if the subsequent destruction of the Stone was a
coincidence or not. He’d like to think that he had some influence on Tony, but he highly doubts he really has the capability to affect something so monumental.

His body doesn’t seem to be responding to his brain fast enough. He tries to walk in the direction they’re taking Tony, not wanting to let him out of his sight, but his legs don’t move. Instead, he just sort of leans in that direction, and Strange’s arm goes around his back to support him. “Come on,” Strange says, leading Rhodey out of the room, following Tony.

Rhodey’s mind drifts during the journey, but it does clear a bit, bringing back some of his strength and focus. At the very least, he might get a few more minutes of consciousness before he crashes. He concentrates on getting his feet under him a little more, so that Strange is assisting him more than dragging him along.

They move through a few rooms whose details Rhodey isn’t aware enough to take in. He does wake up even more, though, when they finally come into what looks like a modified lounge, with several small, plain beds along the walls between plushy chairs, more bookshelves, and a loveseat. Tony has been settled on one of the beds. The two who carried him in are standing a few feet back from the bed, looking nervous and a little lost.

“Go and help Wong with cleanup, see what he needs you to do,” Strange tells them. They look grateful for the direction and quickly slip out of the room.

Strange starts to steer Rhodey toward one of the unoccupied beds, but Rhodey makes a small noise of protest and Strange, sighing, instead helps him sit on the edge of Tony’s. Rhodey’s eyes want to close against his will again, but he forces them open and looks Tony over.

Nothing seems to have changed; Tony’s lying still, breathing slowly. He looks peaceful, or at least neutral. It reminds Rhodey a lot of those first few nights after the invasion, watching Tony sleep in their hotel room and hoping that he wasn’t lying about being able to work through Tony’s emotional difficulties.

And all at once, he feels like he’s suffocating under the memories of the visions the Time Stone had forced on him. Potential futures? Worries that had been buried in the back of his mind? Some of them were good, but the bad ones were so bad.

He shudders involuntarily, and Strange notices. There are hands on his shoulders, offering support, but he shakes his head, trying to communicate that it’s not a physical problem ailing him.

Rhodey manages a deep breath and looks up at Strange, who’s watching him with concern. “Did you—” he tries, then stops and swallows, grimacing at his dry throat and hoarse voice. “When the Stone… when your shield fell, did you… see anything?”

Understanding dawns in Strange’s eyes. A moment of grave understanding passes between them, and Strange nods solemnly. “I did.”

“What did you see?” Rhodey’s not sure if he should be asking. What he saw… if Strange asked, he’s not sure he could tell him. It’s private, and terrible.

Strange looks away. “A lot. I’d used the Stone before, experienced its power, but this was… nothing like that. This was a dozen existences all crammed into my head at once. I saw my past, and the ways it could have gone wrong. I saw my future. I saw… a lot.”

He doesn’t seem able to articulate it beyond that, or maybe he just doesn’t want to. Rhodey can certainly relate. “Sorry,” he offers. Strange doesn’t respond to that, staring off into the distance for a
moment before shaking himself back to reality.

“I need to go and talk to my people, make sure the Sanctum is clear, and tell the government we’ve succeeded. I’ll be back, alright? Give me a few minutes.”

Rhodey nods, but he blindly puts a hand out behind him to hover protectively over Tony’s chest. Before he can ask, Strange makes a face again and reaches for his ear. “My communicator got fried,” he says, and Rhodey realizes he’s still wearing his, too. He reaches up and pulls it out of his own ear. It’s dark, not visibly damaged but clearly dead.

“I’ll have someone stay outside the door, okay?” Strange offers, and Rhodey nods. “Let them know if anything changes.” With that, he turns and hurries out the door. Rhodey doesn’t have it in him to be worried, or annoyed at the sudden disappearance, or anything other than grateful for the fact that Strange is going to take care of informing the right people that they succeeded, plus clearing the Sanctum and the surrounding area and then letting citizens move back in.

He drifts once more. He keeps one hand on Tony’s wrist, feeling his pulse, more for his own comfort than because he expects anything to change.

With no one in the room and Tony unconscious, there’s nothing to stop the memories of those visions from overwhelming him again. There were good things; coming home to May’s smile and Peter’s joy, cuddling up with Tony for a relaxing night. But the others… Peter’s mangled corpse and Tony’s dead eyes. Tony, blank and staring, unresponsive to Rhodey, sitting mindlessly in some care facility for the rest of his life.

With Tony lying on the bed in front of him now, physically okay but his mental state completely uncertain, the fear is sharp and real. The vision he had swirls in his mind, sending the taste of bile into the back of his throat. It’s a painfully real possibility. He thinks of the conversation they had hours before, where Tony confessed his fear of regressing emotionally. His terror that the Time Stone would erase all of his progress, sending him back to the state he was in after his resurrection; or, worse, eliminate his emotions altogether, this time permanently.

For all his bravado earlier, Rhodey has no idea what to do if that happens. He remembers his promise to Tony, how firmly he’d believed what he’d said, that they would figure it out no matter what, that he’ll wait years for Tony to recover if that’s what it takes. But the thoughts are acrid now, tainted by the memory of that vision. It was so real, so true, and it hurts. After seven months, he’d given up hope. And he’d felt the despair, the surety that it really was permanent. He can’t deny that it’s possible. That it could be real.

He’s shaken out of his despair when Strange returns, though he doesn’t realize it until there’s a hand on his shoulder. He jerks in surprise, blinking startled eyes open. They’d closed without his permission, again.

Strange thankfully doesn’t comment on it this time, knowing that Rhodey needs to hear the news. “Every trace of the Stone is gone,” he reports immediately, and Rhodey sighs in abject relief, slumping down briefly before straightening again. “We cleared the Sanctum, no serious damage, just things knocked over from the force of the shockwave. We sent some people out into the surrounding blocks—no damage there, either. I informed the officials that we were successful, that the Stone is destroyed.”

Rhodey hesitates, not wanting to ask but needing to know. “What did you tell them about Tony?”

Strange looks down at where Tony is lying. “I told them that he destroyed the Stone, that he appears to be physically intact but that he’s out of commission for the moment and his status is uncertain. I
told them to respect his privacy, that we’re taking care of him and we’ll report any pertinent changes, but otherwise that we’re not to be disturbed for a while.”

Rhodey closes his eyes again, this time in gratitude. “Thank you.” It comes out as a whisper. When he forces his eyes open again, Strange nods.

Rhodey swallows. “And… Tony?”

Strange holds his gaze for a second, two, and then looks down to Tony. He moves to sit on the edge of the bed next to Rhodey. He reaches a hand toward Tony, then pauses, draws it back a few inches. He looks over to Rhodey. “May I?”

Rhodey’s breath catches. He wants to protest. He wants to say something, to explain that he shouldn’t be looked to like this, he can’t live up to answering for Tony, to be the person that people look to when Tony isn’t available.

And yet… he is. He has been for the last nine months. The only thing holding him back now is his fear of Tony’s state, and of the visions that he had. And he knows, if Tony had to choose someone to do this, to decide for him when he can’t, it would be Rhodey.

So he doesn’t say anything. He just tries his best to keep the terror out of his eyes and he nods his consent.

Strange shifts, holding both hands out. They glow slightly, and he moves them slowly over Tony’s body, down to his legs and back up, hovering over his head for just a bit longer than anywhere else. Strange frowns, face pinched, but Rhodey can’t tell if it’s because of what he’s feeling or just from the effort of the magic.

Finally, the glow around Strange’s hands fades and he opens his eyes. “Well?” Rhodey asks instantly, a part of him not wanting to hear the verdict, but the rest of him clamoring to know.

Strange shakes his head, and Rhodey’s stomach drops. “He’s not…?” he manages, his voice little more than a croak.

Strange’s head snaps up at his devastated tone, eyes widening. “No! No,” he says, and Rhodey puts a hand over his chest. Shit. His heart can’t handle the strain of this, still pounding away.

Strange shakes his head again. “I can’t tell.”

“You can’t—what?”

“I can’t tell,” Strange repeats. “He has barriers around his consciousness. His powers are stronger than any of my abilities. I knew that already. I wasn’t lying when I told him that I had no desire to ever go up against him in a fight. I know I’d lose. I suppose I was hoping they’d be down now, in this state, or he’d recognize me as an ally, my sensing spell as benign, and let me in. But no luck.”

Rhodey glances down at Tony and back up. “So you can’t tell anything?”

Strange sighs. “I can tell that he has shielding around himself that’s made of the remnants of the Infinity Stones… including the Time Stone.” Rhodey’s eyes widen. “It’s not the Stones themselves, but rather something unique to Tony that was created using their power. Whatever there was of the Time Stone is gone, but some of its power is a part of him now. I can’t really tell you any more than that.”

Rhodey thinks back to the moments before the Stone was destroyed. “You thought it had corrupted
Strange grimaces. “I did. Honestly, even knowing that he destroyed the others… I’ve used the Stone before. I’ve felt just a fraction of its power, and that was enough to overwhelm me. I didn’t really believe that he could do it. I don’t know how you knew, but I thought it had taken him over, that I would have to try and kill him.”

“I didn’t,” Rhodey confesses in a whisper, eyes on Tony. “I didn’t know. I told myself I wouldn’t interfere if it came to that, but in the moment, I just couldn’t let you do it without trying to get through to him. I’d like to think some part of me knew something, but I think I was just scared that he was still in there and you would kill him. I just… didn’t want to watch him die.”

“Well, thank you,” Strange says, and Rhodey looks over to him, surprised. He gives a halfhearted smile. “There’s no point in obsessing over what might have happened. You were right, whether you were sure or not. Hell, I wasn’t any more certain than you were. For what it’s worth… I’m glad you stopped me.”

Rhodey doesn’t have anything more to say to that. He just looks back down at Tony, throat tight with emotion, with worry. “He was worried,” he bursts out. Strange looks over to him, but he keeps his eyes on Tony’s face. “He was worried that the Stone would… take away what makes him himself. That it would destroy his humanity.” They’d never told Strange about Tony’s issues with emotions. He doesn’t need to go into it now; Strange will understand well enough.

“I’m sorry,” is Strange’s answer. “I can’t get past his own mental barriers. Until he wakes up, there’s no way to know.”

Rhodey nods, turning his head to hide the tears in his eyes. It’s the answer he expected, if not the one he wanted. He at least appreciates that Strange said *until he wakes* instead of *if he wakes*. For all they both know, Tony could be in a coma. Maybe he’ll never wake up. But Rhodey can’t let himself think that way.

They sit in silence for a minute more, neither one sure of what to say to ease the pain of the moment. Everything hinges on Tony. Strange will move on no matter what, he has his own people to attend to, but this will affect him permanently. As for Rhodey… his future, his whole world is lying on the bed in front of him. If the worst comes to pass, he’ll move on from there, he’ll have no choice. But for now, he can do nothing but watch and wait.

Strange gets up at one point. Rhodey ignores him, assuming he’s going to talk more to his people, but then there’s a shuffling sound in the room and the low screeching of furniture being dragged over wood. He rouses enough to look over and sees that Strange is pulling one of the other beds over, pushing it up next to Tony’s.

Strange is back at his side an instant later; Rhodey wonders why he would bother using magic to travel such a short distance, then realizes that Strange didn’t use magic at all—it’s Rhodey’s perception of time that’s off. He’s losing time, eyes drooping again, his body folding under exhaustion that’s finally, truly catching up with him. “Why don’t you lie down,” Strange says, hands back on his shoulders. “You can stay with him, but I think you really need some rest.”

Rhodey nods blankly, letting himself be pulled up and maneuvered onto the other bed. He collapses down onto the pillow, on top of the blankets, not caring that he’s still wearing his shoes and belt and jacket. He rallies enough strength to scoot closer to Tony’s bed, reaching out a hand to place over Tony’s chest.

There are more things he wants to say to Strange. He wants to stay awake, to watch Tony for any
signs of change, or at least to tell Strange to wake him if anything happens. There are government officials he’s going to need to deal with. He has more questions about the Time Stone and what Strange can feel on Tony, but his eyes are heavy and before he can even open his mouth to form a sentence, the soft embrace of the pillow and the gentle rise of Tony’s chest under his hand pull him under.

Chapter End Notes

Everyone will be happy to know that the next chapter is written, just needs editing. I have an exam tomorrow afternoon, and then it's time for intensive studying for boards, but I'd like to get this story done. Only four more chapters after this!
Rhodey wakes with a start, jolting out of sleep with the taste of blood in his mouth, the feel of it on his hands. His heart is racing and he’s sweating. He’s still seeing remnants of the nightmare, vision, whatever the hell it was, and it keeps him disoriented for a minute.

He’s lying facedown on an unfamiliar bed, fully clothed and on top of the blankets, one arm clutching a worn pillow to his chest and the other stretched out to his side, fisted in soft material and resting on something warm and… moving?

Tony. Right. The last few hours come flooding back and Rhodey lets out an explosive breath, slumping back down to the bed and trying to convince his racing heart to calm the fuck down. The Time Stone, active, tearing through his head, and then Tony, covering in its swirling green power, looking at Rhodey before shattering the Stone. Strange and his people bringing them in to this back room to rest. The pervasive exhaustion pulling Rhodey under despite his desire to stay awake.

The exhaustion is still there. He has no idea how long he’s been asleep, but the quality of the light coming in through the window doesn’t seem to have changed at all. Judging by the crappy quality of the nap and the way he woke, it probably hasn’t been long. Despairingly, he wonders how long it’s going to be before he can rest peacefully after this. The end of the invasion didn’t set all that many nightmares on him—the day of Tony’s resurrection had a lot more good going for it than bad—but it took weeks in the camps to stop dreaming of falling, jerking awake expecting to hit the ground.

He supposes it will depend on the man next to him. He blinks the remnants of sleep out of his eyes and looks over to Tony. Tony hasn’t moved, lying in the exact same position, still breathing quietly and nothing more, not a twitch. His soft glow hasn’t changed and his face is still slack, expressionless. Rhodey can only hope that if he’s dreaming, it’s peaceful.

Tony could wake any moment… or never. And if he does, he might not be himself. A flash of a vision, a future that could still come to be, sends another violent shudder through his body. He curls up a moment later, stifling a groan at the flare of pain in sore muscles and the psychological pain of the visceral memory of a blank and unresponsive Tony and the knowledge that it could still happen.

Apparently some noise does escape him, because there’s a head peeking around the doorway, concern on a young face. “Sir? Are you okay?”

Rhodey pushes himself up to sit on the bed and turns to fully face the sorcerer, trying to reassure them that he’s good. Going by the increased concern on the kid’s face, turning to look at him was a bad idea. “I’m fine,” Rhodey says, then immediately shakes his head at his hoarse croak of a voice. Definitely not adding to his attempt at reassurance.
He considers trying a smile, then figures he’ll fail at that too. Distraction it is. “Where’d Strange go?”

“Oh, he’s… cleaning up the Relic Room, with Wong, they’re bringing all the other stuff back in… do you want me to get him?”

Rhodey shakes his head. “No, that’s okay.” He glances over at Tony’s still form. “Nothing’s changed.”

The kid doesn’t look convinced, but he nods, at least. “Okay. Can I get anything for you?”

Rhodey starts to shake his head, then swallows and makes a face. “Some water?”


Rhodey sits up fully, straightening his wrinkled, bunched shirts and moving to lean up against the wall behind the head of the bed, in a position to relax and keep an eye on Tony at the same time. The kid comes back with a glass of water, clearly sneaking curious looks at Tony, but politely retreats back to his spot outside the door as soon as he hands over the glass, leaving Rhodey to his thoughts.

His thoughts aren’t good, and he finds himself almost wishing for the company to return. He tries to distract himself by wondering what Strange is doing, what kind of magical relics might have been stored in the Sanctum. How Strange is going to have to adjust to the loss of the Time Stone.

Those thoughts lead him down a path into whether their activity destroying the Stone might have sent out a signal that could attract others to the Earth. Before he knows it, he’s picturing another, even stronger Thanos coming to decimate the planet, and realizes that he’s clenching his fists and breathing hard again.

He forces himself to sit back and take in a few long, steadying breaths. Distractions aren’t working. He doesn’t know what else to do. He needs something to focus on to keep the memories of his Infinity Stone-induced horrific visions at bay. He forces himself to take deep, slow breaths, counting to ten between each inhale and exhale, focusing on his senses; the light behind his closed eyes from the window in the room, the pleasantly warm air in the Sanctum. The smell of leather and old paper that seems very apt for a group of wizards. The soft sound of a sigh and a slight rustling movement next to him.

His eyes snap open.

Tony is stirring. His arms are moving on the sheets, fingers twitching. One of his knees bends slightly and relaxes again. His brows draw down, a frown pulling at his face, and he turns his head an inch to the side. He’s waking up.

Rhodey is next to him in an instant, grabbing onto one of his hands and trying his best not to crush it in his desperate grip. “Tony?” It comes out as just a whisper again, like before the Stone was destroyed. He can’t manage anything more, chest too tight, heart in his throat.

Tony makes a soft sound, turning his head toward Rhodey, and blinks glowing blue eyes open.

He forces them again a second later, squinting against the light, but Rhodey has enough time to see that it’s not like earlier. The details are back in his eyes, their electric blue settled back to something just a touch brighter than it was days ago. He wants to breathe a sigh of relief, but his chest doesn’t seem to want to move, forcing him to hold his breath.

Tony takes a moment, opening and closing his eyes a few more times and then bringing a hand up to rub over them, the corners of his mouth pulling down again. When he lowers his hand, he pries open
his eyes with visible effort and looks over to Rhodey.

There’s no recognition in his face, and Rhodey’s body goes cold and still. He can’t manage a sound, even as Tony’s eyes roam over him blankly, not really seeing him. Not knowing who he is. Tony scrunches his face up, something confused and maybe upset overtaking his features as he slowly pushes himself into a sitting position, looking blearily around the room.

Rhodey’s stiff and slow with horror, not reacting in time. Belatedly, after Tony’s already sitting up on his own, Rhodey’s hand comes out to hover a few inches from him, hesitating. He can’t think of anything but that vision. Tony in that facility, the way Rhodey had felt like he shouldn’t touch Tony in that state. Tony has never liked to be touched without warning or permission, except by people he really knows and trusts. And though their friendship was always strong enough for Rhodey to feel comfortable touching him, that surety disappears in an instant when Tony is altered, when he can’t even recognize a friend.

Tears are pressing at the back of his eyes, but then Tony is turning to look at him again, frowning, once again bringing his hands up to press his palms into his eyes, shaking his head like he’s trying to dislodge something. When he drops his hands with another unhappy sound, his eyes look clearer, sharper.

His gaze fixes on Rhodey, looking at him rather than through him, and something lurches hard in Rhodey’s chest. Tony blinks at him a few times, then opens his mouth.

“Rhodey?”

Breath he’s been unconsciously holding rushes out of him in a gasp that’s two steps away from a sob. “Tony?”

“Rhodey,” Tony repeats, reaching a hand out to hover between them. “Are you okay?”

Rhodey grabs the reaching hand, blinking against tears, unable to speak. Instead, he yanks Tony into an embrace, and the arms that immediately wrap around his back have him burying his face in Tony’s shoulder, trying his best not to let out the sobs—or maybe the scream—building in his chest.

He recognizes him. Tony knows who he is. The overwhelming fear, the absolute horror is draining out of him and it’s leaving something shaky and vulnerable and raw behind.

“I’m so sorry,” Tony says, and Rhodey pushes him back, scrubbing at the tears on his face to regard him with open astonishment.

“What on Earth are you sorry for?”

“For putting you in danger,” Tony replies easily, and ignores the way Rhodey shakes his head. “You shouldn’t have been so close, god, you were right there when I… you could have been killed.”

And Strange would have killed you if I hadn’t been there, Rhodey wants to say, but now isn’t the time to bring that up. He shakes his head. “Tony, you couldn’t have kept me out of there except by force, and I know you wouldn’t have done that. It was my choice to be there. I’m behind you no matter what, you know that.”

Tony smiles at him. It’s small and tired, but at that moment, it’s the brightest, best thing Rhodey’s ever seen. Suddenly, instead of the terrible futures the Stone showed him, his mind is full of other memories.

Falling to his knees on the desert sand. “Next time you ride with me, okay?”
Replacing the smoking core of the reactor, worry heavy in his heart. “You don’t have to do this alone.”

Absolute trust beneath the exasperation as they sneak onto the oil tanker. “Stay on my six, cover high, and don’t shoot me in the back.”

Laughing in his suit despite the situation at Tony’s ridiculous joke as they fly, perfectly in tune with each other. “You had to make it weird.”

They’ve always had each other’s backs and that will never change. Screw whatever awful scenes the Time Stone tried to force into his mind. He’ll never give up on Tony, and Tony will never give up on him.

Rhodey takes another deep breath and lets it out, centering himself. Tony’s watching him attentively, waiting. “So what happened?” Rhodey finally asks.

Tony’s eyes go unfocused, staring across the room as he no doubt remembers being in that room, holding the Stone in his hand. “I knew I was there to destroy it. I’m not sure how. Maybe the traces of the other ones in me. I was always connected to it, in a way.”

Rhodey nods. “You took in some of its power?” When Tony looks at him, surprised, he gives him a half smile. “Strange tried to examine you while you were out, to figure out if you were okay. He couldn’t get past some kind of barrier you have around your mind, he said it was made with your powers. All he could tell me was that it was made from traces of all of the Stones, Time included.”

Tony nods distantly. “I couldn’t destroy it on my own. I didn’t really go in thinking I could, but it was confirmed the second the Stone tried to attack me. It took everything I had just to get close enough to touch it. Once I did… there was no way I could destroy it without using its own power against it.”

“Like the others.”

“And that was hard. That was the hardest part, trying to imbibe some of its power without letting it overtake me.”

Rhodey frowns at that. He waits for more, but Tony stays silent. “So how did you do it?” he asks when it seems like Tony isn’t going to continue on his own.

Tony looks at him. “I don’t know. I did it, I managed to let the Stone’s power in and then stop it, but I was… stuck. I got to a sort of balance between my power and the Stone’s, but I couldn’t push back enough to actually take control and destroy it. I was stuck, putting all my energy into keeping it where it was. It eventually would have worn me down, but then… you.”

Rhodey blinks. “Me?”

“I… heard you,” Tony says, and a bright warmth fills Rhodey’s whole body to the point that he thinks he might burst with it. “Your voice, I heard it, and it was enough… pulled me back, it was enough for me to fight back. Once I got control of the power I’d let in, it wasn’t hard to turn it against the Stone.”

Rhodey bites the inside of his cheek hard, determined not to cry. When he’s just shy of drawing blood, he feels safe enough to look over at Tony’s face again, and sees that Tony’s holding back a smile that Rhodey knows very well. Tony’s laughing at him, the asshole, and Rhodey shoves him just hard enough that Tony has to put a hand out to catch himself on the bed.
“You ass,” Rhodey says.

“Sap,” Tony fires back, no longer fighting the laugh. He does catch Rhodey’s eye again, though, completely serious underneath the laughter. “I wasn’t lying,” he says quietly.

At least the teasing has pushed back the embarrassing urge to cry. “I know.” He opens his mouth to say more, but they’re interrupted by a knock on the doorframe.

Strange is standing there, smirking at the both of them. Rhodey fights down a flush, wondering how long he’s been there, listening in. Strange’s eyes move over Rhodey and settle on Tony. “Clearly you’re feeling back to normal,” he says, but there’s a question in it.

Tony nods. “I’m… fine, amazingly.” He moves to slide to the edge of the bed and hop off. Rhodey does the same, watching him carefully, but he seems perfectly steady on his feet. “I assume I’m going to need to make some announcements.”

Strange moves a few steps into the room, stopping a polite distance from Tony. “I’ve already talked to the government. You were out at the time, so they’re going to want to know that you’re okay, yes, and that’s probably best coming directly from you. But I already updated them on the Stone’s destruction. My people made sure there were no problems in the building or outside. Civilians are already being moved back in.”

Tony blinks, looking surprised. “How long was I out?”

He looks to Rhodey, but Rhodey can only shrug. He was pretty out of it himself after the Stone was destroyed, and he’s not sure how long he was asleep after they were moved into this room.

Strange answers for him. “Not quite two hours.” Strange gets a satisfied little smile at the shock on their faces. “My people move quickly.”

Tony inclines his head. “Sure do, wow. I… thank you. I’ll head over soon, to let them know I’m okay, if there’s nothing else you need from me right now.”

Strange’s smile is replaced by something more serious, and he holds a hand out for Tony to shake. “Thank you.” Strange says solemnly. “Without you… we couldn’t have dealt with that. If I, or any of my order, can ever do anything more for you, don’t hesitate to ask.”

Tony gives him a serious nod at that. Strange moves to shake Rhodey’s hand as well, thanking him too. An understanding passes between them in the moment, Strange’s thanks for Rhodey’s interference in that vital moment, and Rhodey’s gratitude for Strange’s support in the aftermath.

True to his word, Tony makes his way out of the Sanctum—stopping to personally check in on and thank every one of Strange’s people for their support with the barriers—and back to the building where they’d planned and met with officials earlier. When they enter, there’s a wave of cheers and applause from the people gathered inside. People clap Rhodey on the back as he moves along beside Tony. The relief on everyone’s faces reminds him of the hours immediately after the invasion ended; thankfully, this time, things are better organized.

Tony declines to give any major speeches or press conferences. He promises to announce something to the public tomorrow, but cites his exhaustion after fighting the Time Stone, and the way everyone immediately backs off is almost comical. Tony has every ounce of respect anyone in the room could ever give him, and after reassuring all of them that he’s okay and that all of the Infinity Stones really are destroyed, he and Rhodey leave with a smile, heading back to the Tower.

When they get up to their floor, Rhodey lets out an incredulous laugh at the sight of the Iron Man
and War Machine armors standing outside on the launch pad. “I can’t believe that was today,” he says when Tony’s hand lands tentatively on his arm. The sun is setting now, long shadows stretching away from the armors, but it’s still the same sun that they flew under earlier today, laughing and carefree.

Tony is looking distant again, but there’s a smile on his face now. “Yeah. Seems like longer. It’s hard to believe all of that just took a few hours.” It really is. It felt like lifetimes, between the anxious planning, the approach, the battle with the Stone itself, and the aftermath.

They settle on the couch, deep exhaustion pulling them both down. Tony presses against Rhodey’s side as he so often does now, and Rhodey smiles, putting an arm over his shoulders. They just sit for a while, relaxing, not doing anything. It almost feels strange to be still, to have nothing to worry about. The Time Stone is gone. Tony is safe and stable beside him. It’s incredible.

It didn’t come without a price. The kid whose mind was destroyed by the active Stone, and the two who’d been stuck inside the inner barrier—Rhodey realizes that he never saw them. They must have been out of sight from where they’d approached the Stone. He wonders if Strange did that on purpose, to keep them focused, to eliminate distractions. Those young sorcerers shouldn’t be forgotten even in the face of their triumph against the Stone, but there’s no doubt that only three casualties is really a best-case scenario. It’s little comfort to those three and their families and friends, and Rhodey will be sure to go back and find out what happened to them. Still, they have every right to be happy with their success now. To relax.

Just as Rhodey’s starting to nod off, Tony lets out a deep sigh beside him and sits up a little more, catching his attention. “Earlier… we got interrupted—” Rhodey snorts at the understatement—“but I was going to tell you, I made a decision about, you know, the future.”

“Yeah?” Rhodey sits up and pulls back to look shrewdly at Tony. “And has that changed?”

Tony knows what he’s asking. “No,” he says, and Rhodey believes him without question. “What happened with the Stone… it didn’t change anything. I’d already made up my mind before it happened.”

Rhodey nods. “And?”

Tony takes a deep breath. “I’m going to do it. Put Iron Man out there, protect the planet. Form a new team, like they’ve all been asking.”

Rhodey takes a moment to process, then nods. Tony continues on, not waiting for his input. “I think my place has always been protecting the world. I always felt fulfilled doing it, even when there were… other things. Distractions.”

Tony makes a face at that and so does Rhodey. He thinks of the Avengers, all of the guilt and the broken trust. He thinks of Ultron and Tony’s fears. He thinks about the disaster that was the Accords. And yet, through all of it, Tony never stopped protecting people. He was always willing to throw himself in front of threats, and it was never just about punishing himself for his past mistakes.

“Over the last few months, I thought about it a lot. I was free of that responsibility the whole time, I was going out in the suit but without actually promising myself to situations that might come up, without promising to be a superhero. And I just… felt like something was missing, like there was something else I should be doing. I want to do this.”

He sounds certain, and Rhodey smiles at him. Yet there’s something else there, an undercurrent of discontent that Rhodey can sense. “What’s bothering you?”
Tony looks at him sharply, then gives him a wry smile. “Let me guess, I have a look?”

Rhodey laughs. “Damn right you do. Don’t think you can hide anything from me.”

Tony chuckles, but sobergs quickly, looking away. One of his hands clenches over his thigh, the other coming up to press over his chest. Rhodey’s level of concern skyrockets immediately. “Tony?”

“When I was in contact with the Stone, sharing its power,” Tony says quietly, nearly whispering, “I saw... things. The future, but... a thousand different versions of it. Different ways it could go, and most of them... they weren’t good.”

Rhodey’s breath catches. It makes sense, that Tony would have seen something similar to Rhodey and Strange. What they saw was probably just a taste of whatever the Stone was inflicting on Tony. He thinks back to the four incredibly real, deeply emotional scenes that had been crammed into his head. He can’t imagine seeing hundreds, thousands.

“I know they can’t all happen. Maybe none of them will. But I can’t help being afraid of them. Of what might happen, now that I’ve seen it,” Tony confesses.

Rhodey nods, but Tony’s not looking at him. Rhodey thinks about how to approach this, but before he can put too much thought into it, he’s already talking. “I saw things too.”

Tony looks over to him, surprised. “Not as many as you,” Rhodey says, “but the visions I had... they were so real. They were terrifying.” He doesn’t have to exaggerate the emotion in his voice.

Tony reaches out first this time, taking his hand and gripping it tightly. “What did you see?”

It’s not easy to get the words out, but Rhodey does it. “You and me, two different scenarios. One where we were just relaxing, having a day off. It was nice. We were really happy. But the other one... you weren’t yourself. You were stuck in some kind of nursing home, and you... didn’t recognize me.” His voice breaks on the last sentence, and Tony squeezes his hand, swallowing hard.

“And...” Rhodey hesitates, wondering if he should say it, if it’ll hurt Tony more to hear it, then decides not to hide anything. “And I saw Peter. Again, two different visions. One where we were going to his graduation.” Tony gives a tiny smile at that, but it fades into horror at Rhodey’s next words. “And one where he died. In battle. We were right there, and we couldn’t save him.”

He can’t give any more details. There are tears threatening to fall again, and Tony doesn’t look any different. “I saw the same thing.” Tony whispers, and Rhodey jerks, surprised. “Maybe not exactly the same, but that was one of them. More than one, actually. Peter dying. Harley, too. And you. God, you died so many times, and most of them were my fault.”

Tony folds forward on a pained noise, and Rhodey draws him into his arms, one hand stroking through his hair, the other rubbing soothingly over his back. “I’m so sorry,” Rhodey whispers as Tony leans into his comforting embrace. “I’m sorry that you had to see that, to feel it.” He keeps up his motions for several long minutes, calming Tony, and when he speaks up again, his voice is stronger. “But Tony, you can’t let any of that influence you.”

Tony presses his forehead into Rhodey’s chest in answer. Rhodey understands the hesitance, but he can’t let this drag Tony down. “Look at me,” he says, and Tony does, leaning back to fix despairing eyes on him. “Anything we saw, it doesn’t matter.”

Tony looks away again. “It’s still possible, all of it,” he says, but Rhodey shakes his head. He realized something minutes ago and he’s determined to make Tony see it.
“Anything is possible, yeah. There are countless potential futures for us, but nothing the Stone showed you is any more likely than anything else. No, listen to me,” he demands when Tony’s eyes drop, and he waits until they rise to meet his own again before continuing. “The Stone couldn’t have predicted anything beyond its own destruction. Everything it showed us, all of that was based on a future that the Stone could see, one where it still existed. You destroyed it. That makes everything you saw through it invalid.”

Something sparks in Tony’s eyes at that. “I changed it.”

Rhodey nods fervently. “It might have been an Infinity Stone, but it was limited too. It could only predict what it could see. Now that you’ve destroyed it, everything is different. You already created a reality that’s totally different from any of the futures it could see: one where it doesn’t exist.”

Tony takes a moment to process that, then smiles broadly. “You’re right.” He lets out a breath of a laugh and leans over to pull Rhodey back into another hug. “Thank you,” he whispers, all the intensity in the world in those two words.

“You’re welcome. Always.”

They realize quickly that they’re both utterly exhausted, far too much to stay up any longer. Though the sun is barely setting, they head to bed, grudgingly taking the time to shower after acknowledging that they’re both covered in dust and grime. Rhodey’s clothes are filthy and he strips them off with relish before stepping under a blissfully hot spray that nearly puts him to sleep right there in the shower.

When he comes out, Tony is in shorts and a soft shirt that he often sleeps in, and something catches Rhodey’s eye. Tony’s marks are just barely showing through the fabric, where they hadn’t the last time Tony wore this shirt. It’s not very noticeable, but it reminds Rhodey that there’s been a slight change, and he doesn’t think it will upset Tony to point it out. “You’re glowing more than before.”

Tony looks down at his own hands and nods. “I am.”

“Do you think it’s going to change?”

Tony settles on the bed, thinking about that. Rhodey puts his things away, moving slowly around the room, sleep pulling at him. By the time he climbs into bed, Tony has an answer for him.

“I think, now that all the Stones are gone, I’ve pretty much found my permanent state. My powers are settled. I guess everything’s a little stronger now because I added the energy of the Time Stone, but I still feel pretty much the same. I don’t think there are going to be any new surprises.”

Rhodey nods, eyes already closing against his will as he slumps down against the pillows. A yawn cracks his jaw and he chuckles when he hears Tony echo it. “Good,” he says sleepily, “no more surprises.”

“I’m good with that,” Tony says next to him, into the darkness. “I’m fine with who I am. I just want to live my life and put my powers to the best use possible.”

Rhodey smiles, fighting off the pull of sleep just long enough to stretch a hand over to rest on Tony’s chest. Mirroring his position from earlier in the Sanctum, but so much better now, knowing Tony is okay. “We can do that.”
The Future

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Tony sighs, leaning forward on his elbows. “It’s not that simple.”

“Nothing is,” Peter counters. “Doesn’t mean it’s not right.”

It’s been nearly eleven months since Tony’s resurrection, Thanos’s death, and the end of the invasion. The world is coming up on the anniversary of the day Thanos invaded—not that that’s a date anyone really wants to remember, or is ever going to forget. It’s already been declared a day of mourning and remembrance around the world.

The other anniversary, just over a month later, is the one everyone’s looking forward to. It’s being called a lot of different things by a lot of different people, the world as of yet unable to settle on a single name for it. Most of them make Tony either blush or roll his eyes. Rhodey’s just hoping they decide on one by the time the date actually comes.

The destruction of the Time Stone has brought a lot of changes to the world. Surprisingly, most of them have been good. The very first thing that needed to happen was Tony’s press conference the day after it happened—not just to announce that he was fine, but to explain what had happened in the first place.

New York citizens were wondering why they’d been evacuated from the city in a rush, only to be told they could return a few hours later, coming back to homes and offices and stores where other than a few things knocked down, nothing seemed to be any different.

The news spread fast thanks to the internet. The officials leading the evacuation had done a good job of deflecting questions, but people came to their own conclusions, and rumors were immediately flying in every direction, some of them surprisingly close to the truth, others wildly inaccurate. People had questions, and they wanted answers, and at first, the only person who could really provide them was unconscious and potentially in no mental state to be addressing anyone.

And while the government was beyond grateful to Tony for his intervention and willing to give him the privacy he requested for one night, Rhodey and Tony both knew that it couldn’t last. The morning after the incident with the Time Stone, Tony appeared before the public to give what turned out to be one of his most memorable speeches yet.

They hadn’t discussed it much beforehand; Tony was feeling plenty confident and Rhody trusted completely that Tony knew what he was doing. Still, he was surprised when Tony gave details to the public—a lot of details.

Two of the only things he kept completely to himself were his emotional journey and his unintentional healing of Rhodey. He didn’t mention War Machine at all, in fact, though Rhodey was there in the audience for support and though there were already a lot of videos and questions out there concerning their test flight the morning before the Stone activated. Tony was able to avoid that subject easily, however, thanks to the much more important and interesting topic of the Infinity Stones.

Tony told them a lot. He started with an apology. An apology for not telling everyone the details
sooner, for not explaining everything that had happened, for not giving this knowledge and potential closure to the people who’d been through hell at Thanos’s hands. He didn’t make excuses or go over the top; he stated absolutely truthfully that he’d had a very long, very complicated recovery from Thanos and that he hadn’t fully been able to devote himself to serving the people until recently.

Then, he started at the beginning. And not the beginning Rhodey had been expecting, not his unwilling rebirth into a drastically changed world. He started in a bunker in Siberia.

He didn’t tell them what he saw in that bunker. He didn’t reveal the true extent of Rogers’s betrayal. In fact, he said very little about Rogers, only that they’d fought, and that while Tony had been holding back out of a desire not to do too much damage to someone who was once a friend, Rogers hadn’t done the same. He even, in a concession to Rogers that Rhodey didn’t think the bastard deserved, said that Rogers likely didn’t mean for things to go so badly, that they’d both been caught up in the emotions of the moment and it had all gotten out of hand unbelievably quickly.

Tony didn’t go into the details of dying. Rhodey wasn’t sure if it was more for himself or for the people, but he was glad. He didn’t want to hear it, didn’t want to imagine it. But Tony did talk about how much he regretted at the moment of his death; that things had gone so wrong, not just with Rogers but with the Avengers in general, with the world’s trust in them. He regretted that he hadn’t done enough to protect the world or to make it ready for what he’d known for years was coming. He didn’t take undue responsibility for Thanos and the invasion, but he told the world how much he truly wished that he could have protected them.

His explanation of his resurrection was somewhat detached. Rhodey suspected it was partly to distance himself from the trauma of it all, and partly an effect of editing out the emotional aspects. Still, he told the assembled reporters what they’d come to hear, what they really wanted to know, what they’d been trying to find out for months.

He began with a simple explanation, but one, Rhodey quickly realized, that most people simply didn’t have. Even if rumors sprinkled with bits of truth had spread enough for most people to know the term *Infinity Stone* and understand that they had something to do with the invasion, most people didn’t even really know what they were, or why Thanos wanted them. So that’s where Tony started.

He gave a quick overview of each of the Stones and their powers, what they did. He mentioned that the Tesseract had been on Earth before it was moved back to Asgard, that it was involved in the original New York invasion so long ago. He talked about the Mind Stone, how it first appeared in Loki’s scepter during that invasion and later became a part of Vision. He briefly mentioned the strange incident that Thor had been involved in with the Reality Stone. The Soul Stone and the Power Stone, thankfully, had never been on Earth, but Tony offered a simplified explanation of their nature and how Thanos acquired them both.

And then he moved on to the Time Stone. He didn’t implicate Strange or his order. He didn’t even mention Strange, in fact, leaving the man to decide how much of his own privacy he wanted to keep. Tony avoided the subject of the sorcerers, but he didn’t lie. He told the crowd that the Time Stone had been well-hidden on Earth, that Thanos had been searching for it in order to complete his collection, that that was why the invasion lasted so long, why the people were kept in camps and funneled into checkpoints, so that Thanos’s minions could search for traces of the Stone.

Rhodey expected him to skim around the fact that he’d known of the Time Stone’s existence and whereabouts before the incident the day before. He didn’t. He told the reporters and cameras without shame that he’d become aware of the Time Stone’s location months before, that he was aware of the threat it posed, but that he wasn’t entirely sure of his ability to combat it at the time.

That indecision, he said, became irrelevant the day before, when the Stone activated unexpectedly.
From there, Tony didn’t have to do much except report the truth—with Strange and the details of the Sanctum smoothly edited out, of course—and give a timeline to the events of the day before. He said that he became aware of the Time Stone’s activity—not outright lying, but not correcting the crowd’s inference that he discovered it independently—then went to see it and realized that it was volatile and had to be destroyed. He subsequently alerted the government, had the immediate area evacuated in case of damages, and then faced off against the last Infinity Stone.

He didn’t tell his audience, the world, about the soul-crushing fear and hopelessness born from the visions that the Time Stone gave him. He didn’t talk about the uncertainty, the fear that he would fail and the Earth could be destroyed. He obviously didn’t mention his worries about reverting emotionally to the state he’d been in immediately after the invasion. He glossed over the moments where it was unclear if he would be taken over by the Stone. Ever in the limelight, Tony Stark put up the front he’d been forced to hide behind since he could walk, and he told the world confidently that he’d destroyed the Time Stone, finally setting the Earth free of the burden of the Infinity Stones.

The assembled reporters stood in silent awe throughout his speech. The moment it ended, he was obscured in a sea of flashing bulbs, microphones and cameras thrust in his face, drowning in shouted, intermixing questions. He calmly pushed them all aside, making his way through the crowd and back to Rhodey, ready to head home. He’d said his piece.

Of course, humanity seems to think meetings make the world keep spinning, and there were many more to come. Tony had covered a lot of the most important things in that one press conference, but there was definitely more to be addressed.

After a long discussion, Rhodey was able to convince Tony that he wanted to come back as War Machine, to work with Tony, to be a part of the superhero scene again. Tony, of course, was worried that Rhodey’s unfailing loyalty to him would lead him to follow somewhere he wasn’t really willing to go. Rhodey, in turn, discovered the frustration of convincing Tony that he really could make his own decisions, and yes, those decisions could be different than Tony’s, he was perfectly comfortable with that. It just so happened that right then, his desires aligned perfectly with Tony’s. He really did want to get back in the suit, and not just as a solo operative or hell, for the fun of it. He enjoyed helping people. He wanted to use the suit for a higher good.

It really wasn’t just about following Tony, watching his back, making sure he stayed safe. It wasn’t even about having a partner who could watch his own back in turn or who could keep up with and support him. He’d signed on with the Air Force to protect his country, to dedicate his life—and potentially risk it—to protect people. When he’d first become War Machine, it had just been an extension of that. Whether he worked with the Force or the Avengers, he was always putting the suit to the best use. He wanted that again.

So Tony appeared before the press again a few days later, this time with Rhodey at his side instead of out in the crowd. They’d debated back and forth about whether to get out ahead of the questions regarding Rhodey’s health, and in the end, decided that they were perfectly within their rights to keep some things to themselves. They didn’t need to share. Not many people knew the true extent of Rhodey’s original injuries; most would just assume that they hadn’t been as bad as they appeared and that he’d healed naturally. The only person outside their circle of trusted friends and allies who definitely knew the truth about Tony’s healing ability was the doctor who’d tested Rhodey. They would just have to hope that she wouldn’t go selling the info to the press, but even if she did, it would be one rumor.

Rumors would come up anyway. In the old days, there were constant rumors and conspiracy theories and wild stories about anything and everything the Avengers did, particularly Tony. Tony always knew how to handle them—usually by ignoring them—and it was no different this time. So they
Rhodey addressed the pictures and videos of him and Tony flying over the city. He talked briefly about his work as War Machine with the Air Force and the Avengers and why he now wanted to come back, to work in the suit to protect and defend the people, wherever and however they wanted him.

Tony took over from there. With Rhodey’s announcement of his intention to return as War Machine, and with just enough dramatics to send an intense wave of pleasant nostalgia through Rhodey, Tony told the people that he considered his recovery from the invasion and his resurrection complete, and that he now intended to step up as a protector of the planet once more.

There was an outbreak of applause at that. When it died out, Tony sobered, and took a minute for something that he and Rhodey hadn’t planned for, but which Rhodey was grateful for. He talked about the Accords, and the formation of the original Avengers. He didn’t linger on their mistakes or appoint blame, but he assumed a responsibility that would set a precedent for the future.

He said that the Avengers, as much as they were a nice ideal, were never practical. A team coming together to fight an alien invasion is great, but if they actually want to do good for the world, they need to be available all the time. They need to be present, and approachable, and most of all, they can’t only be reactionary. The Accords, unfinished and flawed as they were, were a desperate attempt to do damage control long after things had gotten out of hand.

With that, Tony said, he intended to create a new team. It might take some time, it would be difficult, and it might be small at first, but he promised that it would grow organically, unlike the original Avengers. It wouldn’t be composed of people with horribly clashing personalities trying to set aside their grievances for the sake of world-ending threats. It would be good people, who wanted to be there, who were thoroughly trained and highly regulated, and most of all, who would listen to the people they were supposed to be protecting.

He intended to drop the name of the Avengers altogether. Not just for the sake of the point he’d made about being a preventive and protective team rather than just damage control, but also because there was too much history with the Avengers. Too many bad memories for everyone. Too much of a negative impact on the world. Tony and Rhodey planned to start over, and they wanted a clean record. As a favor to them for offering to take up the role once more even after everything they’d been through, they were asking the world to give them that second chance, that clean slate.

And the world did not disappoint. Within a week of the announcement, governments all over the world were bringing forth proposals for team structuring and a new agreement, adjacent to but still different from the Accords. Avoiding that name the same way Tony asked the world to avoid the name of the Avengers, in order to start over, to do something new. To let everything that happened before the invasion fade away into memory.

The rebuilt UN consolidated the many ideas into one version of a document, with room to be amended significantly and to have separate arrangements with each participating country. They presented it to Tony and Rhodey at a widely publicized meeting. Not only did Tony and Rhodey accept it with thanks and make good strides toward peace and cooperation with a majority of the world in one meeting, but to their delight, the general public’s reaction to the entire thing was incredibly favorable.
There would be problems. There were already, within days, but this time they went in understanding that, and prepared to deal with it. There were avenues open to discuss and change anything they needed to. It was all a work in progress, with no specific deadlines, no serious threats hanging over their heads. One of the benefits, such as they were, of the invasion and the way it decimated power structures all around the planet; there was a lot of flexibility and compassion in new governments, and a lot less political posturing. After dealing with the old Accords, with Ross trying to use them for his own agenda and even a number of the people within the UN making everything into personal battles, it was freeing.

Within two weeks of the proposal of the new documents, Tony and Rhodey had to set up two additional public announcements, though both came with long and serious conversations beforehand.

The first was Strange. They’d been in contact since the destruction of the Time Stone, Strange’s people still looking to be absolutely sure there were no traces of it left and no new surprises to be worried about. Tony, ever compassionate, wanted to be sure that they were all taken care of, particularly the three who were attacked by the Stone before Tony’s intervention.

The poor kid whose mind had been torn apart was beyond help, but thankfully, it seemed there was still something left of the other two, though it was locked pretty deep into their minds. Strange and Wong were planning some intense magical and medical therapy for them, which Tony and Rhodey were happy to support and help with. It would be a very long and extremely difficult road, but they might recover completely someday. Tony was also curious about Strange’s order and magic in general, though Strange could be standoffish and was certainly very protective of his secrets. Still, in his gratitude to Tony, he was willing to share a few things.

Strange approached them the day after the UN meeting, to their surprise, to submit his candidacy for their new superhero group. Tony looked shocked at that. Rhodey was definitely surprised as well, and perhaps more suspicious than he should have been.

Strange told them that he’d previously dedicated himself to the protection of the Time Stone, but now that it was destroyed, he had more time to devote to other things. He still had every intention of keeping his group of sorcerers a secret, and he still needed to spend the majority of his time focusing on his duties as the Sorcerer Supreme—whatever those were, he refused to go into specifics.

But, he said, he’d already revealed himself to the government before they destroyed the Time Stone, and he knew the questions were coming. He wanted to get out in front of them, and he’d might as well do that at the same time he started working with Tony and Rhodey on their new team.

That set off some warning bells in Rhodey’s mind, and he knew it did for Tony, too. Strange had proven himself trustworthy and Rhodey was trying to stop being automatically suspicious of his motives, but he also didn’t want the man to feel unnecessarily indebted to them. No one should be risking their life to protect the planet for the wrong reasons.

Tony spoke up before Rhodey could, saying exactly what Rhodey had been thinking. He took a moment to figure out exactly how to phrase it, probably not wanting to insult Strange, but eventually came right out with their main concern. He told Strange that if he wanted it, Tony could help keep the government off his back. That he shouldn’t be joining their team only as some sort of self-sacrifice to keep the rest of his order safe from scrutiny.

Tony would know, after the years of doing the right thing in part for the wrong reasons, motivated by his guilt. Letting people walk all over him because he felt it was some kind of twisted penance to the people he hadn’t been able to protect.

Some of Strange’s haughty demeanor had softened at Tony’s words. He turned more open and
honest than Rhodey had yet seen when he told them that it wasn’t just about that. Being a sorcerer, taking on that responsibility, he’d felt fulfilled when protecting people from magical threats, even when they weren’t aware of them. He’d done the same as a doctor; though Rhodey suspected from the way he talked about it that he had quite the ego as a physician, there was no denying that he’d dedicated his life to helping people long before he’d gotten into magic.

Regaining a little of his usual attitude, he then said that he could hardly let just Tony and Rhodey alone determine the future of superheroes and the protection of the world, at which they laughed. He also admitted that it would be nice to be able to coordinate with them. He would appreciate the backup in certain situations. And in return, they could use his help in magical matters—not just threats, but also for things like figuring out how to train new recruits with magical abilities or to protect magical creatures, artifacts, or young kids from themselves and others.

Rhodey couldn’t help the bitter flood of memories at that. Tony, terrified of himself after Ultron. Confessing to Rhodey months after the fact the vision he’d had in that base, never having connected it to Maximoff, just blaming himself and his long-standing, untreated yet stubbornly unacknowledged PTSD. Flinching away from every sign of her magic. Waking breathless and terrified from nightmares for months afterward. The disaster in Lagos and the look in Tony’s eyes when he saw the news, Rhodey knowing that he was hating himself for not saying something sooner, even though he knew very well he wouldn’t have been listened to. How nice it would have been to have someone experienced in magic—and actually responsible—there to control Maximoff.

There was no way to tell whether Tony was thinking of the same things, but he readily agreed. He happily gave Strange access to the living document they were in the process of developing and told him to look it over and get back to them, which he did swiftly. The next morning, they were announcing Dr. Stephen Strange as an experienced magic user and the first addition to their superhero team.

They knew that people would eventually make the connection, so as he’d done with the government on the day of the battle with the Time Stone, Strange got out ahead of the rumors once again. He made a short speech thanking Tony and Rhodey for their work pioneering a new, responsible system, praising their dedication to the people. He talked about his own expertise with magic, giving a similar altered story to the one he’d previously given to the government, hiding the existence of his order. He confirmed that he was the one who’d previously been in charge of watching over the ancient magical protections on the Time Stone, and that he’d promptly contacted Tony for assistance when the Stone activated. He thanked Tony again for his destruction of the Stone and said, with sincerity that impressed Rhodey, that he would be honored to use his talents to protect the world and to work alongside Tony and Rhodey.

The public reception to him was cautious, but overall positive. He was an unknown, but Tony’s easy acceptance of him gave him a lot of credit with the people. There were questions, of course, most of which he wasn’t willing to answer, but they knew that trust would be built gradually. They accepted that Strange would need to build rapport with the public over time, and for now, willingness to give him a chance was all they could ask people for.

Peter was the next to approach them. He was a problem that Tony had, thankfully, already anticipated and was working on. Naturally, he wanted to fight with them. He wanted to join them, to be a full member of the team. As he rightfully pointed out, it had kind of been his idea in the first place—he was the first to suggest, the morning after he appeared at the Tower, that they could form a new team and send out an open invitation to others.

But he was still a minor. Mistakes in their past made the argument harder, though Rhodey was happy to see that Tony handled it with grace. As they knew he would, Peter argued that Tony had already
taken him to Germany to fight the Avengers; Tony countered that Peter was never supposed to actually be fighting there, and yet he’d gotten hurt anyway and Tony felt awful about it.

Peter reminded them that he’d already spoken to May about the whole superhero thing and she was okay with it, that he was already operating solo as Spiderman—very successfully—and that Tony had given him the upgraded suit and his blessing to work as Spiderman in the city. Tony tried explaining that it was different, that defending his own city from petty crime and having backup available at a moment’s notice was not the same as being on a team that could be called anywhere at any time to deal with world-changing events and much more serious, violent situations. Situations where he’d be one of the people others depended on, where police and government officials would ask for his advice and do whatever he told them, where he’d be putting a lot more at risk. Tony said that he’d given Peter the upgraded suit to protect him, not to encourage him to get into even more danger, and reminded him that the extensive features of the suit were supposed to be withheld until he was better trained, that they’d only activated as an emergency measure because of the invasion.

Rhodey was nodding along, agreeing with every point Tony made and thinking they were really making progress, but then Peter pulled out the big guns: guilt. Quietly, head down and picking at one of his sleeves, Peter asked if Tony really thought he couldn’t do it, that he didn’t deserve to have the suit.

As long as Rhodey had known him, Tony had been supportive of everyone around him. Even as a young man it was clear, and the tendency only grew as he got older. Whether he admitted it or not, he’d become a father figure to more than one kid, and even if it was subconscious, he always went out of his way to not screw up that role.

One of Tony’s biggest fears was turning out like his own father. He didn’t want to be distant, cold, unloving. Whether Howard had actually loved Tony or not, he certainly didn’t show it, and that left an impact. Tony grew up constantly wishing for his father’s attention and approval, but always feeling like he fell short. He grew up feeling like a disappointment, and though Tony did avoidance like the best of them, he was mature enough to recognize that it had screwed him up badly. He would never intentionally inflict that on a child.

So he caved. Not entirely, and not necessarily even in a bad way, but he softened immediately. He told Peter in no uncertain terms that he’d never thought Peter was undeserving or unworthy—that’s why he’d made him the suit to begin with. He admitted that Peter was competent and incredibly smart, talented, and mature beyond his years. Tony told him, not in those exact words but clear in his meaning, that Peter was the future of superheroes that Tony had always envisioned.

And then, treating Peter like the adult he obviously wanted to be, Tony was honest. He laid out the myriad of legal issues involved with signing a minor onto something like their team. He confessed that it could get Peter, Tony, Rhodey, even May into trouble and that the rules would all be different. He warned Peter of the increased danger of his identity being revealed, the intense scrutiny he would be under if he joined an official team instead of remaining solo and local. He outlined some of the vastly increased responsibilities Peter would have under a system like that.

He put his own fears on the table. Despite knowing what Peter had gone through in the invasion, Tony still wanted to protect the innocence he saw in him. There were things he simply hadn’t experienced that he probably would if he joined them, and Tony wanted to warn him. Even knowing that he couldn’t fully impress the true knowledge and understanding of the consequences of this life on Peter, he still tried his best.

Tony described some of the terrorists who’d held him in Afghanistan, and how they’d died when Tony escaped. Those were the first people he had ever actually killed—his weapons may have been
used to kill thousands, but he’d never been the one to pull the trigger before. He described the months after his return, when he would wake up hearing their screams, smelling their burnt flesh. Despite knowing they were terrorists and even though he was defending his own life, they still stuck with him. He told Peter that he wasn’t trying to turn him away, but warn him.

Tony told Peter about the Avengers. About how they’d started, about how much hope he’d had at the beginning. How great the idea was, and how it turned sour so slowly that he didn’t even know it was happening. He talked about the weight of their mistakes, the grief building up on him. He told Peter—and by extension Rhodey, who’d never actually heard the details of the story—about Charlie Spencer’s mother approaching him after his speech at MIT.

Some things would be different with the new system, he promised. He was determined to have structure in place. One person would never be allowed to be so run down, to be walked all over by the rest of the team, to be put down and yet put in charge of everything, to be solely responsible for PR and damage control and reparations to the people they hurt. They would be a real team and everyone would be supported.

But some things would never change. If he chose to join them, it was inevitable. Mistakes would happen. Damage would happen. At some point, there would be people Peter couldn’t save, and those people wouldn’t care that he tried his best, or that he was truly sorry. Many of them wouldn’t even care that he would be reviewed, retrained if necessary, that the new system would guarantee a review and improvement process, that nothing would ever be written off as “collateral damage” and ignored. They wouldn’t care. They would approach Peter, they would blame him. They might never stop blaming him. They might hate him. He might hear things that would truly hurt him, things he would never be able to brush off or forget.

Tony didn’t set out to scare him away from the group, only to be honest with him, and he sandwiched in some happier truths. He told Peter that he was a great kid with a good heart, that he was clearly dedicated to helping people. He talked about some of the successful Avengers missions and how great he’d felt in their aftermath. He talked about how freeing it was to work on his and Rhodey’s suits and to know that he was protecting innocent people with every improvement he made.

And he finished with an assessment on another level. Whatever he decided, Tony said, Peter needed to think of the consequences in every aspect of his life. This would take a lot of time. It would require a lot of dedication, not just in hard work that he put in, but in lost opportunities. He would miss things. He wouldn’t be able to spend as much time with his friends, and keeping a relationship could be next to impossible. There would be things he’d never be able to tell anyone—secrets he would be required to keep from everyone, even his closest friends. And though Tony would always be sure that both of them were taken care of financially, there was no way to make up for the added worry, the stress he would be putting on May when he was injured or away for long periods of time or heading into volatile and dangerous situations.

And whatever he chose in the end, there were things that Tony was determined he wouldn’t miss out on. Peter would go to college, Tony told him sternly, he would not do nothing with his intelligence and his non-superhuman skills. He would have hobbies outside of superheroing—Tony would make sure of it. And that might be difficult to balance.

In the end, Tony said, it really was his decision. They would be able to deal with him being a minor, though he might have to accept certain limitations no matter what, but it could be done. It was all the other things that Tony wanted to be sure he understood. Tony invited him to ask more questions, to talk to Rhodey or Strange—Stephen, as he was quickly becoming—or anyone else he felt he needed to. Tony even offered to set him up with a lawyer if he wanted to talk confidentially about some of
the legal aspects of the whole thing.

Whatever his decision, it would not be made rashly. Tony guaranteed that. He overloaded Peter with information and options, and then he sent him away, and told him that he wouldn’t accept any official decision for at least a week. He would answer calls, he’d see Peter in the lab if he felt like coming over, he’d talk more about it or answer questions or help with whatever Peter needed, but he would not accept an actual decision until at least seven days had passed.

And in a true display of maturity, Peter waited for ten. He took advantage of Tony’s offers, all of them. Tony told Rhodey two days later that he’d sent two lawyers to Peter’s house at his request—one for him and one for May—to talk to them both about whatever they wanted regarding the entire thing. Peter called back and had long discussions with Tony. He asked questions, some of them pretty heavy, but he listened attentively to the answers and even when it was painful, even when he didn’t like the answers, he considered everything Tony told him.

Peter talked to Stephen—about what, Rhodey still doesn’t know, their conversation was private, though it left Stephen looking at Peter with a little less annoyance and a little more respect, so he assumes it was good—and to Rhodey as well. He talked to Rhodey several times, actually. The first talk was mostly Rhodey reassuring him that Tony really did believe in him and meant everything good he’d said, that he saw Peter as a worthy successor to Iron Man’s superhero role and that he believed Peter deserved the suit he’d built.

The second was a more serious conversation about the emotional scars of being a superhero and dealing with disturbing things like Thanos. They sat down and talked about the invasion and the camps. Rhodey knew Peter had likely come to him for this as a second choice because Tony hadn’t been in the camps and couldn’t share the experience, but still, he was honored. Peter asked him about how he’d dealt with helping Tony recover while trying to overcome his own injuries and the trauma from the invasion.

Rhodey felt something unexpectedly soft and vulnerable in his chest at the realization that he trusted Peter with that information. Peter had snuck up on him, starting more as “Tony’s kid” in a less than literal sense, but he’d become Rhodey’s too. More than just a friend and ally, and more than someone Rhodey felt responsible for the way he always had with soldiers under his command. More personal than that. Rhodey already knew that he loved the kid, but it was more abstract before that moment.

Their last conversation came at day eight, a day after Tony’s required waiting period had passed. Peter burst into the lab where Rhodey was working alone, jittery and anxious, and Rhodey had immediately assumed he’d come looking for Tony, but he was wrong. He told the kid that Tony was out at the moment and Peter nodded, saying he knew, that was why he’d come. So, private conversation it was. Something he didn’t want Tony to hear.

Rhodey tried to ask what was wrong, but before he could even get the sentence out, Peter was talking, fast and agitated, pacing back and forth. He was talking so fast, tripping over his words and stuttering out restarted sentences, that it was nearly impossible to follow, but after a moment, Rhodey got the gist of it. Peter was going to say no, he’d decided not to do it, and he didn’t know how to tell Tony.

It took some doing, but Rhodey got Peter to calm down, to settle on a bench with a glass of water—more as a tactic to force his hands to keep still than to actually give him something to drink, but hey, it worked—and talk to him.

It was shockingly similar to many of Rhodey’s conversations with Tony. Peter hadn’t even known them that long, certainly not long enough for Tony to really influence his behavior to that degree, and
yet Peter could easily have been his son in blood. They carried the same tendency toward guilt, the same intense awareness of other people’s emotions and simultaneous inability to really deal with them, the self-flagellation (though Tony’s tended to be hidden underneath a falsely narcissistic exterior, a product of growing up in the media spotlight), even some of the same nervous habits.

It meant it wasn’t too hard to get to the root of Peter’s problems, but at the same time, it meant Rhodey had to be acutely aware that this wasn’t Tony, that he couldn’t just treat them the exact same way. Still, he couldn’t help but see the similarities.

Peter had been talking to everyone he could, including the friends who knew about Spiderman. He’d been evaluating his role in the city, his school, his future. As promised, he was really thinking about it, and he’d decided that he didn’t want to put his friends and family through that, that he should stay local where he could devote everything he had to his people instead of spreading himself thin, abandoning his city to run off in the larger world.

They had a lot to talk about. Rhodey didn’t want to interfere in his decision, but he needed to understand Peter’s thought process. He didn’t necessarily disagree; Peter had good points and Rhodey was happy, actually. This meant that Peter would stay safer, that he would have an easier time finishing his school, that he would get the support that he needed through these important years of his life from family and friends.

But he wanted to be sure Peter understood that joining their team wouldn’t be “abandoning” his city. That he could define how much he wanted to do, where he wanted to go. While there might be stipulations and requirements, particularly on him because he was so young, he would never be forced into anything he didn’t actually want. Peter nodded along, but he stayed firm in his stance.

So they came to the real issue. Peter was afraid of telling Tony. Rather, he was afraid of rejecting Tony. Rhodey almost wanted to weep for this kid who cared so much about Tony that he was afraid of hurting him by declining his offer to join the team, even despite all of Tony’s warnings and worries about Peter if he did join.

Rhodey couldn’t erase his worries completely. All he could really do was tell him that he knew Tony, that he could guarantee that whatever Peter decided, Tony would be behind him. That Tony’s support and Tony’s love for him would never diminish or disappear just because Peter didn’t want to be a part of their team. Nothing would change. They would still work together in the lab. Tony, Rhodey, even Stephen and whoever else might join them in the future, would be there to support him as Spiderman and back him up if he needed it. His position at SI would stay the same. Tony would still devote just as much time to him personally, to making sure he got through college, to taking care of May.

He knew he’d hit the nail on the head when Peter nodded and fell silent, eyes suspiciously wet. He was trying to stay strong and Rhodey secretly hoped he would. He was confident in taking care of Tony, but he didn’t really know how to deal with a crying Peter.

Thankfully, he’d apparently done enough, because Peter thanked him with a hug and disappeared for two more days. Then, when he came back at day ten, he surprised the hell out of Rhodey by firmly accepting a place on Tony’s team.

Tony didn’t fight him or question him. After the waiting period he’d imposed and the conversations they’d had, he showed his faith in Peter by trusting that he’d made a well-thought out decision. That afternoon, Tony took him before the committee that had been formed to work on their not-Accords to get the ball rolling on working out the details of how Peter’s inclusion on the team would work.

Peter approached Rhodey later, slightly sheepish but still confident in his decision, and Rhodey took
the opportunity to tell him that he didn’t require an explanation. Like Tony, he trusted that Peter made the best decision for himself, even if he’d been thinking something else a few days prior.

But Peter wanted to explain anyway. He said that he’d really thought, two days before, that he should stay solo, that that was the best decision for him. He’d been worried about telling Tony, about letting him down, but Rhodey had talked him away from that, convinced him that Tony really would be proud of him no matter what he did.

Which freed him to consider other things. Despite knowing that they were an important part of his life, Peter’s friends and family couldn’t dictate how he chose to live it, and in the end, he’d reconsidered how it would affect him personally. While he was proud of the work he did locally, he felt that he had a larger purpose—his words, a little idealistic for Rhodey, but he didn’t begrudge Peter that, no kid that young should be as jaded as Rhodey himself—and he wanted to make as big an impact as he could. He felt that if he chose to step back, he would hate seeing the rest of them out working in the world without him. So he’d changed his mind.

Rhodey was proud of him. So was Tony. He’d made a mature choice, considered all the options, and most importantly, he made it himself. He took advice from others, he listened to them, but in the end, he made the choice on his own. None of them could ask for more.

Still, Rhodey came close to regretting it three days later. They’d barely finished announcing Spiderman as the newest addition to their team when they had a call from their other genius kid, and Rhodey knew trouble was on the horizon the moment Tony answered the call.

Harley and Peter are the same age and they share the same good heart and devotion to Tony. Tony introduced them to each other a week after the Time Stone was destroyed, and they’d become fast friends. Seeing how close they were becoming, Rhodey refused to think of any of the visions the Stone gave him—they still haunt him, sometimes, even months later—and instead prepared himself for the world of trouble the two would get into together.

So far, they hadn’t gotten the chance to meet in person, though Harley and his family were supposed to be coming over on the anniversary of the end of the invasion. But they talked plenty, and Harley had picked up the unfortunate habit of taking freedoms and privileges that Tony had granted to Peter for himself.

Which made for an hour-long argument over a video call when Harley, citing Peter’s inclusion onto the team, wanted to join for himself. He wasn’t superpowered, but he was a genius and already a brilliant engineer and Tony had, in fact, been talking to him about trying out a suit of his own. Now he wanted to expedite that process.

Tony didn’t employ the same arguments as with Peter. He didn’t give him quite the same leeway, not because he trusted Harley any less, but because he was in a different position. Peter was already involved in the life. He was already an established hero, and he’d worked through a lot of the initial issues on his own, before Tony had even met him. He already had an understanding that, for all of Harley’s genius and his experience with Tony and his eagerness to learn, Harley just didn’t have.

So Tony was firmer in his denial this time. He refused to let Harley guilt him or persuade him. He didn’t shut him down completely, however. It wasn’t just that he didn’t want to crush the kid’s hopes, Rhodey knew, but also that he saw real potential in him—he just needed more time to develop it. Harley was clearly disgruntled, but he perked up at Tony’s promise to start seriously talking about training with one of the suits. Tony warned that they would absolutely need to have a long conversation about it that would include Harley’s mother, no arguments, which silenced some of Harley’s complaints and tempered the mischievous enthusiasm in his eyes. Rhodey had to hold back a snort at that.
All of it has brought them here, now, sitting around a conference table at the Tower and arguing about the future of the project.

A few days after the official addition of Spiderman onto the team, the public apparently decided on a name for them. They hadn’t meant to leave it to the people so much as it had just been the least of their concerns when they were working through so many other issues. But in the end, they waited so long that the internet had chosen a name for them, and it stuck.

Rhodey can’t complain, really. They’re being called the Sentinels, and the name evokes the exact image Tony wanted when he asked the world not to call them the Avengers, to let them start over and create a new structure that would protect the Earth rather than just avenge it. The idea of sentinels of the planet, a group of people always watching, ready to defend against any threat, is just what they need.

So they embraced the name and adopted it for themselves. They’ve gotten surprisingly far on the documentation, though there’s still months or more of work to do. But they have a structure in place, something concrete that they presented to the public for the first time two weeks ago, and the response has been excellent.

And not just the response from the public. Since their presentation of the first draft of the International Defense Acts, they’ve been contacted regarding more than twenty emerging superheroes around the globe.

Tony predicted that it would take a while before someone was bold enough to approach them, and that once they proved with the first person that they could live up to their word and do things well, more would come out of the woodwork. He wasn’t really wrong, except on the timeline. Apparently, his status with the world is even better than he thought. Even reluctant, hidden Enhanced people evidently trust that Tony is setting up a good system here, and they want to join him.

Or maybe the invasion just kicked them into gear, and now they feel like they need to defend their planet. Whatever their motivation, interest is a hell of a lot bigger than they thought, earlier than they were prepared for.

A few of the proposed additions are already working together. There’s a group of four in Finland who were apparently a sort of local legend and well-kept secret up to now. They came forward as a group, announcing their desire to keep working together—and independently from others—at the same time that they gave their interest in being a part of the global network Tony and his team are trying to create.

Which is exactly what they want. One single team was never practical for a number of reasons. Now, when they’re hoping to bring together dozens of people, even hundreds, it’s clearly not going to be one group under a single person’s leadership. Their aim is to have teams scattered around the globe, functioning more or less independently, but following a universal set of rules and protocols, sharing protections, keeping each other safe, acting as backup when necessary, and sharing information. Going about their usual business, in other words, but with cooperation enough that should another global threat arise, they’re ready to work together to protect the planet.

The new additions have enthusiastically taken to working with the UN and the IDA council. They’re already suggesting changes and bringing up issues that the US-based heroes wouldn’t have even thought of. This is exactly why they need so much diversity in their groups.

It can and will cause problems, they know. There are going to be clashes, and they’re prepared for
that. What they weren’t prepared for—and Rhodey knows now that it was stupid not to have devoted more time and attention to the possibility, when they’ve already dealt with it twice over just on their end—was the sheer number of underage heroes coming forward.

They’ve had eight different minors come to the UN to express interest in the IDA, four from the US. Two of them have opted to remain masked, like Spiderman, but disclosed their status as minors. For one of them, it was obvious—the boy has barely reached puberty and has yet to hit a serious growth spurt—but it was still appreciated that they told the truth about their ages. Altogether, the eight kids range in age from twelve to seventeen.

Rhodey has a feeling he’s not the only one who might have a heart attack over the whole thing. They’re all concerned, they all want to protect these kids. A part of Rhodey wants to keep them all out, though he knows that’s not only impractical, but unfair.

Peter can certainly see it from their perspective, and that’s what’s brought them to their current argument. Tony sighs again and thunks his head down onto the table. Peter presses what he sees as an advantage, rather than waiting for Tony to gather his strength. “They deserve to be able to make the same decision I did.”

“You’re sixteen, Peter,” Rhodey says. “There’s a big difference between you and someone who hasn’t even finished middle school.”

This time it’s Peter’s turn to sigh. “I know, but we don’t get to choose when we get our powers. That puts a responsibility on us that we can’t avoid no matter how old we are. Shouldn’t everyone who has to deal with superpowers get to choose what to do with them?”

“Of course you should, but there’s a difference between getting to keep your independence and going out on missions. That Santos girl is twelve! She hasn’t even hit puberty!”

“And she protected fifty people through the invasion,” Peter counters. “She kept them alive, she drained her own energy to support them.”

“Which is great, but surviving through one horrible tragedy that young doesn’t mean you should be encouraged to throw yourself into more,” Tony says. He sounds tired. “If anything, she deserves a break. To never have to go through something like that again.”

“Not everyone gets a choice in that,” Stephen says, and Rhodey sends him a glare that says he’s being entirely unhelpful. He puts his hands up in surrender.

“We can’t keep them from being superheroes,” Peter says, looking at Tony. “Didn’t you once tell May that you gave me the suit because it was the best way to keep me safe?”

Tony looks conflicted, and Stephen steps in. “He isn’t wrong, you know.” Rhodey makes an annoyed sound, but Stephen ignores him this time. “Young kids, with powers they don’t fully understand, they need training. They need structure, they need to be taught control. It might be a good idea to supervise them in some capacity.”

Peter narrows his eyes. “You mean they need to be watched? Spied on?”

“Of course not.” Stephen looks like he’s trying not to roll his eyes, and Rhodey stifles a smile. Stephen respects Peter, but he’s not great with people in general and definitely not with kids. “But they need direction, and we can provide that. What better way to learn than surrounded by your peers and experienced mentors?”

“We can’t be putting all these kids in danger,” Rhodey says.
Tony nods. “Rhodey’s right. I know you’re going to be working with us in the field, Peter, but we
know you. We’ve worked together before. We don’t know any of these kids, and if there are this
many already, there’s going to be more. I won’t sign off on kids, kids I don’t even know, joining a
team where they might get killed.”

He holds up a hand when Peter opens his mouth, asking for silence while he continues. “But it’s not
one or the other, here. We can compromise. Stephen’s right that these kids need training, and we can
do that. And while we do it, we can start the process of getting them to work together, evaluating
their skills, seeing how they’d do in the field.”

“You’re suggesting we set up a training program,” Rhodey says, and Tony steeples his hands,
leaning forward over the table as he thinks.

“Different locations, different experts. It would be best if they could rotate around, to be able to work
with each other and with a lot of the different full members. They can work out how much time to
spend on an individual basis. I don’t want to interfere with anyone’s education, or their family. They
should be able to stay at home if they want to. But we know there are kids who don’t have family, or
come from places where they can’t get the kind of education they could here. We could create an
integrated program for them.”

“Like some kind of superhero boarding school?” Stephen says, and though he sounds a bit skeptical,
Tony nods enthusiastically.

“And we’re not just talking about the kids here. Maybe they need a little more time, but anyone who
wants to join the program, who’s relatively new to being a superhero and who doesn’t have an
established team, they should train first too before they’re let into the field.”

Rhodey does agree with that. “Everyone should be integrated into a team and train for some kind of
probationary period before they do real work in the field.”

Tony smiles. “And if we start with the kids now, by the time they’re adults, they’ll be used to each
other. We’ll have teams ready-made.” At Peter’s look, he adds, “I’m not saying they all need to be
kept out of the field until they turn eighteen. But we should be sure they’ve trained together, that they
can work with each other and with us. And whatever their skills are… some of them do need to wait.
I can’t put a twelve year old on a battlefield. I can’t do it.”

Peter sits back at that. Rhodey can tell that he still wants to argue for the youngest of them, but
apparently he’s seen that Tony won’t budge on it. That, or he’s decided to try again another time.

“I think it’s a good idea,” Stephen says, breaking the tension of the moment. “But there are going to
be a lot of details to work out.”

Tony nods and straightens in his seat, and all of them follow suit automatically. “Then let’s start
working them out. I want something to present to the UN by next week. And they’re going to want
an answer on the new guy from Germany by tomorrow.”

They get to work.

Chapter End Notes

I’m not a comics person, I’m MCU-only, and listen, everything is taken. Every name
under the sun has been used in marvel, in the comics or movies or both. I’d already planned the story and decided on the name long before I found out that Sentinels were already a thing, so please forgive me for using the same name as the mutant killing robot things from X-Men. Oops.

I’m excited about the next chapter (second to last, holy crap!) It’s been a long time coming, and I know a lot of you have been asking about it for a while. It was actually originally chapter 41, but then I decided that I wanted the stuff from this chapter cemented before that one happens, and I wanted it as close to the end as possible.
As we approach the end, here’s a chapter I know many people have been waiting for! With boards coming up (well, the practical exam happened last week, but the more important, more difficult exam is in less than a week) it might be a bit of a wait for the very last chapter, but I hope this keeps everyone satisfied in the meantime.

They drive one of Tony’s ridiculously expensive cars up to a towering, foreboding set of fences. Rhodey takes one look at the coils of barbed wire along the top, far above them, and looks away again, a tingling feeling running through his body.

He’s never been inside a prison before, either as a prisoner or a visitor. Never had any reason to. Though he can admit that American prisons, even while they’re rife with problems internally and externally, certainly aren’t the horror stories that exist in some other countries. It’s those that flash through Rhodey’s mind as they pass between the outer fences. Even though they’re on an open road and could turn around at any moment, there’s still a trapped feeling closing in on him.

Soldiers always liked to exchange stories and rumors. Some of them were false, just bullshitting, because of course they did that. But some of them were true, and those were some of the worst ones. Every airman leaving the country was always aware of the possibility of a crash or a mission gone wrong or some other worst-case scenario that could land them in a foreign prison. Or, the ultimate nightmare, as a POW.

Airmen had it worse, too, Rhodey always thought. That fear of being constrained, trapped. Maybe they squashed themselves into tiny cockpits and put heavy, constricting masks over their faces and subjected their bodies to extreme forces that threatened to snuff them out. But all of that was willing, thrilling even, and the reward was well worth it. Being in the air was freedom, a freedom that most people never got to experience, and after knowing what it was like, pilots always found being grounded to be frustrating.

They could have flown the suits here, Rhodey knows. Even despite the usual safety precautions and regulations that would have to be set aside for them to do it, he has no doubt it would be taken care of. But Tony said he wanted to drive, and that was the end of the discussion. Rhodey hadn’t pushed, or even asked why. It didn’t matter, and if Tony really wanted to tell him, he’d tell him.

Rhodey personally would have preferred to fly the suit in, if only to shorten the travel time. And maybe, he thinks as he looks up at the imposing guard towers, to feel like he has an easy escape route. But this is more for Tony than for him, so whatever Tony wants, they’ll do. Some of this is for him too, no doubt, but he’s not planning to do much today. He’d originally had every intention of coming back if he really has more he wants to say after today, though now that he’s realizing the effect being here is having on him, perhaps he won’t be coming back.

He’s not entirely sure what Tony is planning here. He hadn’t asked about the details, and they didn’t talk much about it. Tony just approached him a few days ago to say that he was planning to come here, and then quietly asked if Rhodey would come, too. Rhodey would have asked to come along anyway if Tony hadn’t beat him to it, but it wasn’t necessary, so Rhodey didn’t say anything more about it, just agreed with a smile. Tony might want him here as moral support, as backup, or even to
hold him back if anything should happen, Rhodey has no idea. He’ll just have to find out.

They pull up to a gatehouse. The guard inside leans out to talk to them, takes one look at Tony, and presses something that opens the gate without a word. Rhodey has no doubt that he’s ignoring some kind of protocols by just letting them through immediately, but it’s not really unexpected. Tony gets a lot of special treatment these days—even more than he used to, when he was only a famous billionaire, or even when he was only a famous billionaire and Iron Man—and besides, his identity is pretty obvious. It’s not as though anyone could successfully impersonate Tony now.

The guard watches them with wide eyes as they drive past. Tony gives him a polite nod and Rhodey tries to flash a grateful smile, though he’s not sure the guard even sees him past Tony. They follow a straight road that passes between another set of fences, with another gate that’s automatically opened for them. When the road diverges with a sign pointing visitors to a small lot off to the side, Tony follows it and parks, and they climb out, stretching cramped limbs after the five hour drive upstate.

The bright, clean, modern silver and red of Tony’s expensive car strikes an odd contrast against the bleak gray building. They’re parked in front of a squat outcropping of the massive, dark block that is the prison. The walls are all the same; dirty, scuffed, depressing. Standing so close, the building looks taller, wider. More intimidating. He supposes that’s the point.

By the time they’re done shaking out tired legs and have started forward, there are two guards and a man in a suit coming out to meet them. The guards don’t say anything, though they eye Tony with undisguised curiosity and awe, as is usual now for people who see Tony up close for the first time. Even wearing relatively casual clothes and standing in the direct sunlight, his bright eyes and the patterns on his skin are quite a sight. A picture can’t really do him justice.

The man in the suit shakes Tony’s hand, then Rhodey’s, introducing himself as Doctor Mirsky. He must be the one Tony spoke to when he arranged this visit. Rhodey was never part of that conversation, and Tony didn’t talk much about it, so Rhodey just goes with the flow now.

They follow Mirsky and the guards inside, bypassing the metal detectors and other guards to go through a side door in what passes for a lobby. Tony being who he is definitely has some perks, Rhodey thinks as they wind through a few identical grimy hallways. From getting through the outside gates quickly to getting a pass on the usual searches and procedures. It’s nice not to have to try to explain—or argue to keep—the repulsor watches that he knows he and Tony are both wearing.

Mirsky leads them into an office that’s clean and efficient but surprisingly warm and lived-in. There are two fairly plushy chairs in front of a wide metal desk. The surface of the desk is littered with the same barely-organized chaos Rhodey expects out of just about every working professional. Mirsky takes a seat in the chair behind the desk as Rhodey’s eyes travel over the documents and other pieces of paper tacked up on the walls behind it. There are informational flyers, lists of prison rules and procedures, and recommendations for health screenings, but there are also handwritten notes and pictures of Mirsky with various people, from prisoners to a pair of identical twin boys that can only be his kids. Rhodey smiles at that one.

Rhodey and Tony both settle into the chairs in front of the desk, looking around with interest, before Tony turns his attention back to the doctor. “Thank you for making time for us,” he says, inclining his head. “I know you said it’s been a busy week for you.”

Mirsky gives him a smile, and now that Rhodey is looking, it does seem a little strained. “Oh, you’re more than welcome. It’s an honor to have you both here.” He looks over to Rhodey, who’s flattered, if a little surprised, by the easy inclusion. “Besides, you stopping by will give the gentlemen in the break room something more interesting to talk about for a while, so I can hardly complain.”
Tony chuckles at that. “Well then, I guess you’re welcome.” His smile fades. “As for why we’re here…”

Mirsky’s mood dims a bit too. “Yes. We can talk here, privately, before we move out into the prisoners’ areas. We have rooms where you’ll be able to talk without being interrupted when you’re ready.”

Tony nods. “Sounds good. I know you weren’t able to tell me much over the phone, so I’d like to know more about what’s going to happen moving forward, if you can tell me.”

“Of course, so long as you understand I can’t talk about anything that would compromise doctor-patient confidentiality.” At Tony’s easy nod, Mirsky shuffles a few papers around on his desk, pulling out a worn black notebook and opening it up. “Where do you want to start?”

Tony glances over at Rhodey with a small, slightly sheepish smile. “At the beginning, if you don’t mind. I didn’t get a chance to talk to Rhodes here about… anything, really, before we came.”

“Oh, of course!” Mirsky turns his attention to Rhodey. “Well, as you must be aware, given that you’re here, we’ve been holding Rogers, Romanoff, and Barton here since they were driven out of the farmlands where they were working. Since we didn’t get a chance to speak over the phone, I’m the official prison psychiatrist, but I also have some law training, and following the invasion, a lot people have been taking on new, less… well-defined roles, you could say.”

Rhodey raises an eyebrow. “One psychiatrist for the whole prison?” If that’s the case, he can see why he’d be busy.

Mirsky gives him a small smile. “Only a small portion of the inmates receive regular counseling or treatment. None of them are required to see me, except for an initial evaluation when they first get here, just to be sure they’re not suicidal or an active danger to others.”

_Active danger_ must be relative, Rhodey thinks, given that it’s a prison, but he gets the doctor’s meaning. “So what kind of ‘new roles’ are you taking on now?”

“Right now, it’s mostly to do with the three you’re here to see. They’re a fairly special case.”

Rhodey frowns at that. “What’s the situation with them?”

Mirsky lets out a sigh. He looks weary. Rhodey can’t imagine having his job, spending his days having to play the neutral, compassionate party to violent criminals and people whose dark thoughts and inner demons are probably some of the worst out there.

“Everything was thrown into chaos with the invasion,” Mirsky says, and Rhodey and Tony both nod along. They know that all too well. “Most prisons were used as holding areas during it. They’re already designed exactly for that, after all. But when it happened, the doors were opened, the guards and visitors and random civilians were all mixed in too. I was here, in this one, actually.”

His eyes go unfocused, losing himself deep into memories that Rhodey can only imagine. “People got killed here. It was… terrible, what happened to some of them in the first few days. But for the most part, everyone was afraid enough of the aliens not to cause too much trouble. We were all trying to survive. Then, when it was all over… everyone left. No one was going to waste their time trying to keep criminals in prison when they had their own families to find, their own homes to go back to.”

Mirsky shakes his head and some of the businesslike tone returns to his voice. “After the invasion was over, as I’m sure you know, there wasn’t a lot of emphasis put on things like the criminal justice
system. Eventually, people got nervous about them being out, and efforts were made to round up the worst offenders. Murderers, rapists, other violent crimes. People with life sentences and things like that.”

Rhodey knows where this is going. “But not so much the lesser crimes?”

“Not so much. We didn’t have the manpower or the structures in place anymore to deal with the volume of incarcerated people that we used to. Even now, we’ve had to make some changes. This used to be only a men’s prison, but there were so few inmates left at the women’s prison a few hours away—women don’t often tend to be violent offenders—that we brought them here for the sake of reducing the necessary staff. Even before the invasion, prisons were already overcrowded and often understaffed anyway. And we’re still not back up to where we used to be. So most of the smaller things, like drug crimes and theft and white-collar crime, they were just… let go. I suppose there must still be criminal records out there for those people, but no one is really going to make the effort to put them back in prison.”

Mirsky sits back in his chair. “Some of the gray areas came with people who were in the middle of trials or convictions. Just like the prisons, the judicial system was pretty devastated by the invasion and they weren’t exactly a priority during the first months of recovery. People who were in jail awaiting trials went home after the invasion, and very few of them have actually been called forward to complete those trials.”

Tony sighs. “Which doesn’t exactly make a trial for Rogers or the others a high priority either.”

“Exactly. They’ve committed crimes, no doubt about it, but they still have a right to a fair trial. If they were normal people, like all the others, they’d have just been let go, sent home after the invasion with the hope that they would come back for their trials when the time came. It’s not an ideal system by any means, but it was the best we could do at the time.”

Rhodey hates the thought of it, even though he knows very well it’s not what actually happened. “But that wasn’t really possible with them, was it?”

Mirsky shakes his head. “No. Because of their… involvement, because of who they are, they had to be dealt with immediately. People were out for blood. They definitely weren’t the only case of that—there was certainly some ‘vigilante justice’ going on in the first weeks after the invasion, when everything was in chaos and people were taking the law into their own hands—but they’re well-known, and this was a big crowd we were talking about. The whole world knows their names, their faces. And a pretty significant number of people blamed them for what happened with Thanos, and… what happened to you.” He looks at Tony.

Rhodey snorts inelegantly, and Mirsky’s eyes go to him. “Sorry. I just—go on.”

Mirsky watches him for a moment, and Rhodey tries not to shift under the gaze, wondering what the psychiatrist is thinking about his reaction to that. Rhodey’s never claimed to be a perfect person, nor an objective one. Tony is his priority, and he has a hard time conceding that the three assholes who betrayed him and, in Rogers’s case, murdered him, deserve anything other than some hastily enacted vigilante justice.

Mirsky doesn’t comment, just gives him an understanding, almost sympathetic look. “There was nowhere for them to go immediately, no prison or anything like that, so they went to work in the rural areas. You know that,” he inclines his head to both of them, “I’m aware that you were updated when they were finally moved here. By the time the crowds got wind of where they were and started seeking them out, we were already getting the prisons back up and running, at least at low efficiency, just to house the worst of the criminals that we’d picked back up.”
Rhodey nods. “And now?”

“Whatever has happened, they still deserve to have a fair trial. The circumstances have necessitated their incarceration until that point, that’s why they’ve been here—for their own safety as much as for anyone else’s. But the world is recovering nicely, things are practically back to normal in our system, and the time is approaching for them to actually go up before a judge.”

That sparks something in Rhodey’s chest. “You mean there’s a chance they go free?”

Mirsky’s expression twists into something complicated. “That, I doubt. Now, I’m not a lawyer, and I’m not trying to act as judge and jury here. It’s not my place to pass judgement or give opinions about that. When I said I had some law training, I meant that I’m acting as a sort of manager of all of this as we approach the time for them to potentially go to trial. When that time comes, I certainly won’t be their legal representation. And I can’t speak for their judge.”

He sighs again and straightens up in his chair. “But there are things we have to take into consideration. Their history, their skillsets—traditionally, that would make them a significant flight risk, and it might be enough to stop them ever getting parole. If we’re talking conviction here, I do think I can say with certainty that they’re not going to end up declared innocent. They’re going up for things that happened before the invasion, and there’s video evidence of all of it. No one is doubting that they actually committed the crimes in question. There’s also talk about putting Rogers and Romanoff up for that disaster with SHIELD years ago—there was a Congressional hearing, but there was never really a real trial of any kind for that, and Rogers didn’t even show up to the hearing. A lot of people died as a result of that info release.”

Tony frowns. “Can they even be put on trial for something that long ago?”

“There’s no statute of limitations on murder. And even if it wasn’t their intention, prosecution could easily push for second-degree murder in a lot of those cases. Now, with everything that happened to the government, I doubt anything like treason will be coming up, for putting US secrets out on the internet like that, but the prosecution will argue that the people who lost their lives as a result deserve justice.”

Rhodey agrees with that wholeheartedly. “And the more recent stuff?”

“Most of it concerns what happened just before the invasion. If we’re talking about the potential for parole or a lighter sentence than life, Barton is the most likely to get that. He didn’t actually kill anyone or even really hurt anyone in Germany, he wasn’t in Russia or Romania or Nigeria, and he wasn’t involved in the SHIELD info dump. His biggest crimes, at least the ones we have clear proof of, are pretty major property destruction at that airport in Germany and aiding and abetting wanted criminals.”

Rhodey opens his mouth to mention him attacking Vision at the Compound with Wanda, but then remembers that most people don’t know about that. With everything happening so fast afterward, and then Tony dying, and the invasion, it never really went public that that happened. Before he can decide whether or not to bring it up now, Mirsky is going on.

“But even if he ends up with a lighter sentence, there are other things to take into consideration. Like I said, they’re here now more for their own safety than anyone else’s. The world is recovering, yeah, and people aren’t as angry as they used to be, but all it takes is five minutes of searching on the internet to figure out that the mobs will be forming again if any of them are let out. People wouldn’t take well to someone being out on the streets who was involved in killing the…” he gestures awkwardly to Tony, “savior of the world.”
Tony makes a face. “Barton didn’t kill me. Neither did Romanoff.” He catches Rhodey’s sharp gaze and holds a hand up. “I’m not saying they shouldn’t face consequences for what they did do, just that if we’re talking about my death, that was only Rogers.” And Barnes, but that doesn’t matter now. Barnes is dead.

Mirsky shakes his head. “Nuance rarely matters when it comes to public opinion. They all followed Rogers willingly, they all fought against you. They were a team, and that means the people consider them all equally guilty of any and all crimes committed by any one of them. Even if he wasn’t directly involved, the public considers Barton guilty of murdering you, and if he’s let out, they’ll likely kill him for it.”

The grim way he says it makes Rhodey think that he’s disgusted by the idea. It’s admirable, that the doctor can have morals like that, and he supposes that it should be expected from a third party. Hell, maybe it should be expected from Rhodey, but he won’t apologize for its absence in his own mind. He doesn’t have mercy left in his heart for any of them, no matter what they are or aren’t actually guilty of. He can still see Tony’s cold, broken corpse clearly in his mind, and it doesn’t matter that Tony’s sitting alive and well next to him now. Someone should pay for that.

Tony shifts in his seat, crossing his arms. “So you think, even if they’re not found guilty of the worst crimes, they’ll end up back in prison for their own protection?”

“Like I said, I can’t make any guarantees. But from what I’m hearing from various angles as we talk about getting them to trial, I think the most likely scenario is they end up staying right here. Even if a judge is inclined to give any of them a lesser sentence, they’ll probably be motivated to keep it to life in order to avoid the possibility of them getting killed in the streets.”

There’s a moment of silence at that, all of them lost in their thoughts, then Mirsky shifts in his seat. “But either way, that’s still months off at the very least, maybe longer. It’s going to take a long time to get everything organized enough to even think about holding a real trial. It would be an international affair, and that will take a lot more organization than any simple US-based trial. For now, you can go and see them, if you still want to.”

Tony takes a deep breath and stands, Rhodey right behind him. “Yeah. Let’s go.”

Mirsky leads them out and back down some of the bland hallways. They pass through several secure points where the doors have to be opened by guards, but they never actually go through any of the cell blocks. They don’t see any of the prisoners except through a few thick glass windows that look out onto common areas. “We have several private interview rooms set up. We had each of them pulled out of their cells when you arrived, so you can talk to whoever you’d like, in whichever order you want.”

They finally come to a stop at the end of a hallway full of numbered gray doors. There’s a guard at the end of the hall, standing in front of an electronic panel that will unlock each of the doors. “Barton is in room six, Romanoff is in seven, Rogers in eight. You’re free to go in whenever you’d like. Just signal to the guard when you’re going to enter so the door can be unlocked. Once you’re inside, just hit the blue button next to the door if you want to leave, you’ll hear the door unlock.”

Tony and Rhodey nod their thanks and move to shake hands with the doctor. “I’ll be in my office, let someone know if you have any more questions for me. I have your number, Mr. Stark, so I’ll try to keep you updated when I know more. Oh, and I’m required to tell you, you’ll be alone in the interview rooms, but there are audio and video recordings active in every room.”

From the tone of his voice and the look on his face, Rhodey can tell that Mirsky knows the truth. That there’s likely to be a convenient malfunction of their recording equipment just as Rhodey and
Tony go in. He doubts any of them will be punished for it, or even questioned about it, but Mirsky’s done his job in informing them. Tony gives him a smile. “Thank you for everything.” Mirsky nods and leaves them alone in the hallway save for the guard at the end.

Tony walks straight to the closest door, number six, without hesitation. When Rhodey has joined him, he takes a deep, steadying breath that only Rhodey is close enough to hear and turns to give the guard a thumbs-up. There’s a low buzz and a click as the door in front of them unlocks, and Tony yanks it open, holding it open for Rhodey to step through and then following him in.

The room is square, painted gray and white, and as bland as the rest of the prison. The walls are completely bare except for the camera in the corner. A green light at the side of the camera goes out as soon as Tony steps in behind Rhodey, and Rhodey knows Tony’s gauntlet is cutting off the feed, keeping them from being recorded.

There’s nothing in the room except the low metal table, bolted to the floor. There are two chairs in front of it on the side facing the door where Rhoady and Tony just entered. On the other side, occupying the last chair and chained to both the floor and the table, is Clint Barton.

The last time Rhodey saw him was at the airport in Germany, before he was injured. He hadn’t paid much attention then to Barton’s presence, except to wonder what the hell Rogers was thinking dragging him into the fight, and what the fuck Barton himself was thinking, coming back to that whole mess when he was peacefully retired, out.

Barton was a moron, for sure, and Rhodey had already had a tirade in mind hours after he woke up in the hospital, exactly what he was planning to say to the idiot who abandoned his family to help Rogers defend a terrorist. But the invasion changed everything. It put all of that by the wayside. After it was over, Rhodey was too focused on Tony to spare much thought to any of them, and when he did, it was usually about Rogers.

Tony hasn’t talked much about what happened to them, but Rhodey knows that he learned some things from his connection to Thanos through the Stones, however brief it was. He told Rhodey long ago that Thanos had the remaining Avengers strung up for the cruel amusement of his underlings and as a symbol of his victory over the Earth. Rhodey knows they were tortured by the aliens for most or all of the weeks-long invasion. And he knows what happened to Barton’s family just before Tony was resurrected. Not the details—Tony didn’t share more than the basics, looking haunted, and Rhodey can admit to himself that he doesn’t really want to know—but this was Thanos, and it was a demonstration of his power, crushing the bit of defiance that Barton had dared to show. Rhodey can imagine how horrifying it must have been.

He can tell the second he lays eyes on Barton that all of his worst thoughts about what happened to Laura and the children are true, and it destroyed Clint. The man’s eyes are dead. His whole posture speaks of defeat and indifference. This is a man whose entire life has been ruined, who has nothing else to live for and doesn’t care what happens to him now.

It doesn’t change what happened. It doesn’t change the fact that Barton left his wife and kids for no good reason, that he chose Rogers and that little HYDRA witch Maximoff over his own family. It doesn’t change the fact that he was wrong, or that Rhodey was injured and Tony died in part because of his actions. But Rhodey knows that nothing he could say or do would devastate Barton as much as what’s already happened.

He’s still not feeling particularly kind. He’s not going to forgive any of them for what happened, not just during the fight over the Accords, but before that too. For the way they treated Tony, dismissed him and rejected him and yet took his money, his time, his heart, everything he gave them freely, and crushed it with their sneering comments, their scorn and derision, and their indifference to his own
struggles. The way they blamed him for everything under the sun, held his past against him while insisting that he forgive others—like Maximoff—for their own transgressions. The way they looked at him with suspicion for formerly being a legal weapons designer, yet demanded that he provide them with their own weapons and gear—things they used against him in the end. Rhodey will never forgive any of that.

And yet, he also knows that Barton never set out to be a villain. Whether he turned into one or not, it wasn’t his intention, and though that means nothing when it comes to the outcome, what it does mean is that Barton is already wrecked by the knowledge that the worst things that ever happened to him were his own fault. He couldn’t have stopped Thanos or the invasion, and he couldn’t have stopped Rogers from going off the rails and fighting against Tony, but he could have been somewhere else. He could have stayed with his family, in a safe, peaceful retirement.

And if he’d stayed, he might have been able to protect them. With his skills, he could have disappeared, kept his family in hiding. They might have been able to avoid being rounded up at all, the way the people in Harley’s town had. And even if they hadn’t, Barton could have protected them in the camps, assuming he wasn’t recognized as an Avenger and hauled off, and Rhodey knows that he was a spy, he could have done it.

Even in the situation he was in, there’s no way he hasn’t been punishing himself every day since it happened for fighting, for showing the defiance that goaded Thanos into slaughtering his family in front of him. Rhodey can acknowledge, even through his anger, that he can hardly think of anything worse than having that happen, only for Tony to kill Thanos and end the invasion right afterward. To have the whole world celebrating, when Barton had just lost his entire world.

It doesn’t soften Rhodey’s anger. It doesn’t even really provoke that much pity out of him, but there’s a tiny spark of it. Enough that he will grant Barton one single mercy: he won’t hurt him further by pointing out the obvious. He won’t remind him of what happened, or that he could have stopped it, that what happened to his family was his own fault. He’ll let Tony say his piece, whatever it is he wants to accomplish here, and then he’ll leave.

He really doesn’t have anything else to give to Barton, or to take from him. He’s ready to close the door on him.

Barton watches them come into the room, not even shifting in his seat. His eyes move over Rhodey, and Rhodey sees the slightest spark of something in them, just enough to overcome the dead, glazed look. Surprise, maybe. Then they move to Tony, and the surprise strengthens, becomes real.

“You’re really… alive,” Barton says as Tony and Rhodey take their seats. His voice is low, hoarse, and Rhodey can tell that it’s from disuse.

“You thought I wasn’t?” Tony asks. His voice is completely neutral, and Rhodey resists the urge to look over at him, see the look on his face. He’s honestly not sure what Tony’s feeling, or what he wants out of this visit.

Barton’s eyes dim once more and he gives an aborted shrug. “I wasn’t sure… I was pretty fucked up when it… all happened. Didn’t know if… it was real. Or if you survived the fight.”

There’s a moment’s pause while Tony thinks about that. “We’ve been on the news plenty of times since then.”

Barton doesn’t bother shrugging this time, just says in his flat, dead voice, “Don’t really watch it. No reason to.”
Rhodey thinks about what Mirsky said to them earlier, and reassesses his opinion on the whole thing. If they really want to punish Barton after he goes to trial, they’ll send him back here, to prison, for the rest of his life, and Barton will spend the rest of his days punishing himself. Living in misery. Letting him out would be granting him freedom, but not for the reason any judge would think. If they let him go, the mobs will come after him, and Rhodey realizes that the biggest mercy they could grant him now is death.

It doesn’t make Rhodey feel any better. It just creates some twisted, dark sort of pitiful mourning inside him. He wants people who make mistakes, particularly when those mistakes hurt other people, to face consequences. He wants justice for Tony, and vengeance against the people who hurt him. But he can still recognize how terrible it is that someone who could have been a good man has been so thoroughly destroyed. Barton’s a shell of who he once was.

They all sit in silence for a minute. Rhodey is lost in his dark thoughts, and Barton just sits there, dead eyes looking at them both, not moving. He doesn’t seem inclined to ask them anything. Curiosity has probably been stomped out of him along with joy and life.

Finally, Tony leans forward and sighs, glancing down at the table before looking back up. “Whatever else happened, Clint, I’m sorry about your family. I never would have wished that on them, or on you.”

Rhodey leans back in his chair, watching Barton carefully. The apology from Tony isn’t so much an olive branch as just something Tony needed to say, Rhodey knows. He also knows that it doesn’t really matter how Barton takes it. Tony’s said what he wanted to say here and that’s all that matters. Still, Rhodey cares about the reaction to Tony’s words. Were the circumstances different, he knows very well that Barton could have been throwing the apology back in Tony’s face. Has done exactly that, in the past. Tony told Rhodey what Barton said on the Raft and it’s another thing that Rhodey won’t ever forgive him for. But he’s willing to put it all aside for Tony’s sake, at least for now, depending on how Barton reacts this time.

There’s finally some real emotion in Barton’s expression, but it’s nothing more than deep grief. It reminds Rhodey uncomfortably sharply of Tony in the days after the invasion, when he was incapable of feeling anything but sadness and grief. An unsettling, unwelcome thought forces its way into Rhodey’s mind; the thought that unlike Tony, Barton has no one behind him, supporting him through this. There’s no recovery in sight for him.

Barton’s throat works a few times. There are tears in his eyes, but he doesn’t bother looking away, trying to hide them. Finally, he opens his mouth, hesitates, closes it, then opens it again and croaks out a single question. “Could you have brought them back?”

By now, Rhodey knows Tony’s sense of responsibility when it comes to his powers well enough to know that he won’t lie. He won’t sugarcoat things or tell Barton what he wants to hear.

“I don’t know,” Tony says. “I have no idea if I could have done it. But I would never have tried. There are too many variables. Too many things that could go wrong.”

Rhodey thinks back to the discussion he and Tony had on such a similar topic, what feels like years ago, after Strange first visited. Tony was so unsure back then, worried that he was trying to be a dictator, that it was wrong of him to tell Strange not to use the Time Stone to try and save any of the people who died in or after the invasion. Now, he sits in front of Barton and says that he would never try to bring back his family with absolute calm and confidence. Rhodey can’t help but be proud of the change.

He’s not sure what reaction he expects out of Barton. Anger maybe, or a justification of why Tony
should try anyway. But there’s none of that. Barton just stares at him, that grief almost too much to look at. Tears finally fall, but no one reacts to them. Eventually, Barton just gives a single, agonized nod and turns his head away.

They have nothing more to offer each other and they all know it. Without having to speak, or even look at each other, Tony and Rhodey both push their chairs back and stand. Tony moves to the wall and pushes the button. There’s a second’s pause and then they hear the buzz and click of the door being unlocked. No one says anything more. Tony and Rhodey don’t look back at Barton.

When they emerge out into the hallway, Tony gives the guard another nod. Rhodey doesn’t bother looking over, too focused on Tony. He can only hope that whatever he wanted out of that conversation with Barton, he got it, because Rhodey knows they won’t be going back in. Tony’s expression is unreadable, but when he glances over at Rhodey, he gives a small, sad smile, and Rhodey tries to look reassuring in return.

Tony moves to the next door over without pausing, turning once more to nod to the guard so that he’ll let them in. Once again, Tony pulls the door open and waits for Rhodey to go in first.

The room is identical to the one next door. Rhodey once again glances up to see the light on the camera go out, then turns his attention to Romanoff.

She sitting in the same place Barton was, chained to the floor by her ankles and to the table by her wrists. She doesn’t wear the devastated, destroyed look that Barton had. Her eyes are as bright as ever, intelligent, calculating, watching their every movement as they walk into the room and sit down.

At the same time, she looks worse than Barton, in a way. Natasha Romanoff, the Black Widow, ever versatile, always playing both sides. She always had an out, a plan, and despite Rhodey’s desire to see her punished for what she’s done, it still seems wrong to see her subdued, in chains. The oversized jumpsuit she’s wearing hides the curves that she usually uses to distract or coerce. Her usually vibrant hair is lank, unstyled, tangled around her head, and the color has faded a bit—Rhodey always suspected that she dyed it. Even her nails are dull and chipped, her hands limp on the table, dwarfed by the cuffs and chains she wears.

She watches them with something bordering on suspicion for several minutes. This time, Tony doesn’t say anything, waiting for her to make the first move. Rhodey wonders, suddenly, if this visit for Tony is about proving something to himself. Unlike Barton, Tony has always had a real beef with Romanoff. She was the one who supposedly wrote that bullshit “report” that SHIELD used to turn Rogers against Tony from the beginning, and to manipulate Tony into giving everything to the Avengers in an attempt to be accepted, to be worthy of them.

Romanoff constantly wiggled her way into Tony’s good graces, underneath his masks and his shields, and she used it against him time and time again. Rhodey knows that Tony is frustrated with himself for constantly falling for it, even if he won’t admit it. For allowing Natasha to dictate the terms of every interaction between them. All she ever had to do was say the right few words, or just stay silent and listen, and Tony would spill all his secrets to her.

Rhodey suspects that’s why he’s silent now. He’s finally proving to himself and to her that he’s past needing her approval. They stare each other down for several long minutes—Rhodey might as well not be in the room—but finally, she looks away, eyes flicking to the side.

Rhodey resists the urge to smile. It’s unbecoming to be taking pleasure in her discomfort when she’s like this. But he can’t resist the urge to be petty in the privacy of his own thoughts. He’d never liked her much, always feeling like he had to be on edge around her. He was shrewd enough to recognize
that her buddying up to him could easily have just been an attempt to get something to use against him. And though Rhodey was confident enough in himself to be polite and even friendly to her without revealing too much, Tony struggled with that, and she used it to every advantage she had.

Rhodey’s been protecting Tony from people who want to manipulate him from the time he was a scrawny teenager at MIT. And though Tony hasn’t always made it easy, and Rhodey has had some failures along the way—Stane being the most notable—Rhodey has never stopped considering it his duty. So he lets himself take his perverse pleasure, now, in feeling this victory over someone who tried to hurt Tony, who made that job harder for Rhodey.

“What do you want?” Romanoff finally asks, and any slight guilt Rhodey had felt over his internal gloating evaporates at her tone. It’s acidic, and it couldn’t be clearer that she’s thinking along the same lines Rhodey was: that this is a game, and she’s lost.

Tony, bless his ridiculous heart, has never been much into playing these sorts of games. Oh, he can go to bat with the best of them when he needs to, but he’s never wanted it. Even as he navigated his way through the minefield that was the business world and being a celebrity with a natural, practiced ease, what he always craved was the simplicity of trust. The one thing he rarely got, sadly. For a long time, Rhodey was one of the only people that Tony felt he could actually trust—for a short time, he was the only one, and though he took to the challenge gladly and likes to think he was there for Tony, he’d always hated how unfair it was. That someone as deeply loving, emotional, and tactile as Tony was cursed to constantly be surrounded by people he could never trust.

Tony doesn’t bite back now. He remains calm, unaffected, as he contemplates Romanoff from his place across the table from her. His eyes travel over her face, but he doesn’t look down to her chained hands or the identification tag on her prison jumpsuit. “I don’t know,” he says. The same thing he said to Barton, but this time, the meaning is vastly different.

Her eyes go back to his face, lips pursed, and Rhodey realizes that Tony’s thrown her off. She doesn’t know how to react, because she doesn’t know what to do with Tony’s genuine answer. The spy, always playing both sides, always hiding under a mask, is lost in the face of someone who isn’t trying to play her or hide from her.

Tony sighs. “I suppose I just wanted to know… was it me?” When she just stares at him, he elaborates. “When you turned on us, in Germany. I know you know that signing those Accords was the right thing to do and why. I know that you understood the importance of them, and how precarious our situation was. I know that you knew the consequences before you did what you did. I know that whatever you tried to sell me about Steve not stopping, it was crap and we both know it. You could have stopped Steve. He listened to you, unlike me. And even if he didn’t, you and T’Challa could have brought him in with minimal violence.”

“He would never stop when it came to Barnes,” Romanoff counters. “and he’d have gone through me. I had to—”

“Don’t,” Tony interrupts sharply, raising his voice for the first time, “lie to me.” She recoils slightly in the face of his immediate anger, and for her, that’s saying something. Tony’s voice drops again as he continues, but the anger doesn’t evaporate. “You’re right that he’d have burned the world down with a smile for Barnes. But he had Barnes. You could have convinced him to stop, don’t try to lie to my face and say you couldn’t. That’s not what this is about—that’s not what’s in question here.”

She watches him warily when he takes a breath, sitting back a little and centering himself. “What I want to know is why you turned. I know it wasn’t just that you liked Steve that much. You don’t have that much loyalty to any one person.”
That strikes a chord. Romanoff tenses, and real anger blazes in her eyes. “I can make mistakes,” she bites out. “I’m human too.”

Tony inclines his head. “You are. Maybe not as much as you’d like to be, but you are. But don’t kid yourself, because you’re not kidding me; any ability to really be loyal to someone, through good and bad and even situations that might compromise your own freedom, was beat out of you a long time ago. I don’t pretend to understand what you’ve been through, but I think I finally understand the impact it had on you. You never would have chosen Steve just because you liked him or believed in him that much. But there’s a chance you could have done it for the opposite reason—because you didn’t like me. Because you’ve always hated that you couldn’t get me completely under your control like you could Steve, that I never trusted you a hundred percent. So was it that? Did you turn on me because you really hated me that much? Or was it your pathological need to play both sides, your inability to pick a stance and stick with it without trying to create an out for yourself?”

Tony’s words are biting and borderline cruel, but Rhodey can’t feel anything but satisfaction. Romanoff was the first of any of them to have Tony’s trust, and to throw away that precious gift. Rhodey never really forgave her for what she did when Tony was dying, even if she was ordered into the position by SHIELD. Slithering into Tony’s life when he was at his most vulnerable, goading him into self-destructing, trying to drive a wedge between him and Rhodey and Pepper, all while her boss was holding something that could have taken away the symptoms that were keeping Tony from thinking his way out of the situation.

And even after that, Tony kept going back to her, kept trusting her, even when she didn’t deserve it. He always seemed to see something in her that Rhodey didn’t, and he always got burned. It’s satisfying to see that Tony’s finally done, that he’s refusing to give way or to accept her excuses, her manipulations. He’s broken her down to her core and she’s shaken by it.

She shifts in place, just enough to make the metal of her cuffs clink slightly where they’re chained to the table. Rhodey gets the feeling she would like to sit back, to cross her arms defensively. Instead, she just glares at Tony. “What does it matter? It seems like everything worked out for you.” She looks over to Rhodey at that, trying to glance between the two of them with a sneer. Trying to save face, but after that petulant declaration, Rhodey just arches an eyebrow, knowing that she knows that he’s judging her for her childish retort. She sounds bitter and jealous and Rhodey can hardly believe she let that much emotion slip.

Tony doesn’t respond in kind, no sarcastic remarks or cuttingly delivered insults, even though she’s just given him an easy opportunity. Instead, he sits back and looks at her for a moment, thinking, and then hits even harder.

“You always did resent me. You were determined to see the worst in me, and for a while, I thought that was because you saw yourself in me. We both had pasts we weren’t proud of, and I used to think that you painted me as a monster because you saw the monster in yourself and couldn’t believe it was possible to be anything else. But I was wrong. You were angry, because I made something better of myself, and you didn’t. I changed, down to my core I changed as a person, I became better, and you… didn’t.”

If Romanoff has a comeback to that, she doesn’t get the chance to say it. She’s still sitting there, eyes barely widened with ill-concealed hurt, when Tony pushes his chair back abruptly and stands up, Rhodey quickly following him. Tony moves to the doorway and hits the button.

Just as the door unlocks and Tony reaches for it, there’s a soft sound behind them. “Wait,” Romanoff says.

It’s contrite, soft, vulnerable. Just the right amount to pull at any shred of guilt or pity that might
remain in Tony, or in Rhodey. And it’s completely false.

Tony doesn’t even pause, just pulls open the door and leaves without a word. Rhodey follows him, not glancing back. He has nothing to say to Romanoff, not now that Tony did it for him. Tony stood up for himself and that’s all Rhodey wanted out of a conversation with the ultimate spy. Romanoff had never been close enough to Rhodey to really betray him, except through what she did to Tony.

This time, Tony hesitates in the hallway, halfway to the last door. He said his piece to Barton and Romanoff, but Rhodey knows what this visit is really about, and that’s waiting behind this door.

Rhodey lets Tony have a moment, but when he still doesn’t move, staring at the last door with tension in his shoulders and his jaw, Rhodey steps in. He moves in front of Tony, between him and the door, forcing Tony to look up at him. Thankfully, it’s not as bad as he might imagine. There’s no uncertainty in Tony’s eyes, no fear or real struggle. Just a resigned hesitance.

Still, Rhodey feels the need to say something. “You don’t have to do this.” It’s become familiar to him. He’s said the same words to Tony so many times, since his resurrection and before it too. He’s always tried to be supportive of Tony, to let him know that it’s okay to choose not to do something. He knows Tony’s always struggled with that concept.

“I know,” Tony says, and Rhodey knows from the tone that Tony sees through him, too. Sees Rhodey’s own hesitance. He’d like to think it’s only about the thought of Tony facing Rogers again, but truthfully, it’s personal, too. He’s not sure how he’ll react in there.

He’s seized by a sudden urge to confess that to Tony. “I don’t know if this is the best idea,” he admits. He doesn’t even know if he’s saying it for his own sake or Tony’s.

Tony shakes his head. “It’s fine. I just have a… quick question to ask him.”

Tony doesn’t return Rhodey’s offer, doesn’t bother to tell Rhodey that he doesn’t have to go in too. Rhodey’s glad for it. Whatever his apprehensions, he’ll still follow Tony. He takes a breath and nods to himself when Tony turns to signal to the guard to let them in. This time, when the door unlocks, Rhodey reaches for it first and pulls it open, letting Tony head in first.

Rhodey’s barely entered the room behind Tony when there’s a clattering noise at the table that puts immediately set off all of his internal alarms. He steps to the side to see around Tony, tense and already reaching for his gauntlet watch, ready to activate it, but he forces himself to stop when he catches sight of the table and the man at it.

Rogers has evidently tried to jump to his feet. Rhodey has no idea whether it’s some attempt at a gesture of respect, fear, or just surprise at seeing Tony. The chains on Rogers’s hands don’t give him much leeway, and when he tried to stand up, they yanked him down by the arms none too gracefully. As Rhodey forces himself to calm down and take his hand away from the gauntlet—it was ridiculous, he knows, to have reached for it in the first place, of course this place would have their prisoners effectively contained, but he can hardly blame himself for being on edge—Rogers thumps awkwardly back into his chair, wide eyes fixed on Tony.

The physical differences aren’t as glaring as they were on Romanoff, and he doesn’t have the dead-eyed look that Barton did. Still, the changes are obvious. Rogers has grown a beard, and though it’s not unkempt by any means, it looks out of place on him. A visible sign of his fall from grace. There are lines around his eyes and bags underneath them. He looks… older, Rhodey supposes, more worn down.

And once again, Rhodey can’t feel anything but satisfaction at that. Maybe Rogers, the golden boy
who always got the benefit of the doubt from everyone he met but refused to ever return the favor when it came to Tony, the asshole who betrayed Tony’s trust and friendship, lied to him and used him for years, the bastard who broke apart the Avengers and murdered Tony, maybe he’s finally feeling some tiny fraction of the weariness that’s weighed on Tony for years.

“Tony,” Rogers breathes, and the sound of his voice sets something off in Rhody. Tony doesn’t react, and Rhody loses himself for a moment, focusing every ounce of his energy on forcing himself not to move.

He’s having a hard time letting Tony have what he needs, here. He didn’t know, before now, how he’d react to seeing Rogers in person again. And for the first few seconds, he was doing okay. But hearing his voice, so familiar and dragging up so many horrible feelings, seeing the son of a bitch looking at Tony like Tony could solve all of his problems, like he has any right to even look at the friend he betrayed and killed, it makes Rhody furious.

While Rhody is frozen in place, trying to control himself, Rogers keeps talking. “Tony,” he repeats, “you’re here, you’re…” Rogers pauses, and his eyes travel up and down Tony’s form. The searching look makes Rhody’s skin crawl. “Are you okay?”

Rhody clenches his fists at that and breathes out slowly through his nose. As though the piece of shit has any right to ask that. But when he glances over to Tony, the cold look on Tony’s face calms some of Rhody’s rage. Tony isn’t buying this bullshit any more than Rhody is.

“As though you care,” Tony bites out.

Rogers actually looks taken aback at that. Rhody can’t believe it; how can he really think that Tony would be friendly to him here? But that surprise is replaced by something disgustingly earnest, and Rhody’s lips twist into a silent snarl at the sight. “Of course I care,” Rogers says softly.

“History says otherwise,” Tony says, taking a few steps back and forth. Neither he nor Rhody have moved to sit down, and Rhody is grateful for it a moment later, when the hurt look that blossoms on Rogers’s face spurs Rhody to pace a little as well. It’s that or stride forward and punch the asshole, and he doesn’t want to interrupt Tony.

When Rogers opens his mouth again, Tony interrupts before he has the chance to say anything. “Whatever. That’s not why I’m here. We can skip the small talk.”

Rogers blinks, and the hurt morphs into confusion. “You didn’t… come to talk?”

Tony stops his pacing, letting out a huff. He glances over to Rhody for a beat, less than a second, but then turns his attention back to Rogers. He moves forward until he’s standing in front of the table, just behind one of the chairs. He doesn’t move to sit down, though, just looks down at Rogers for a few seconds, arms crossed over his chest.

“Did you really think,” Tony says, and his voice is quiet, but there’s danger in it, “that I came here to, what, to reconcile? To talk it out?”

Rogers seems to understand that the question is rhetorical, because he doesn’t open his mouth, just watches with wide eyes as Tony turns and walks back toward the door, pacing away from the table before turning back. Tony’s voice remains quiet, calm, when he continues, yet Rhody’s absolutely drawn in by the intensity in it and he knows Rogers is too.

“What happened between us… that wasn’t just a fight. That wasn’t something you just get over or move past. You didn’t just lie to me, or use me, or attack me. You murdered me, Steve. You killed
me in cold blood. You beat me down, and you left me there to die, and I died. I died slowly, and I died in agony. You did that to me, and there’s nothing you could ever say or do to make up for that. I didn’t come here to forgive and forget. I never will."

The words, as much as they hurt to hear, finally settle something in Rhodey. He hates to think of Tony’s death, but all this time, since his resurrection, Tony has been evasive about the subject of the former Avengers. The few times they talked about it, Tony seemed resigned more than anything, accepting of the horrors he’s been through, and he’s insisted more than once that his former teammates aren’t bad people, that the mistakes they made, enormous though they were, were never really made with malicious intent.

And though some of that is true, Rhodey hated hearing it from Tony. Tony has every right to rage against the others, to hate them, to be petty and unfair and everything they ever were to him. An eye for an eye might leave the whole world blind, but Tony would sure as hell deserve to take that shot. Yet he’d defended them, not their actions but their character, and Rhodey constantly hated the thought that Tony was still, even after everything, letting them have some power over him.

But seeing Tony here, now, rejecting Rogers completely, it finally does what Rhodey wasn’t able to do before. It puts something at peace inside him. Had he come here alone, he’d have wanted nothing more than to punch Rogers’s face in, to leave him bloody and hurting. He loves Tony no matter what, and he wouldn’t trade this Tony in for the old one, but before coming here, a part of him still wanted to kill Rogers for what he put them through, for the hurt he caused.

Now, he sees what he didn’t before, and he understands where Tony’s coming from. Tony wasn’t letting the people who betrayed him continue to walk all over him by defending them. He was letting them go. Treating them objectively, removing his emotions from the situation. He was moving on, and now Rhodey can do the same.

He’ll never forgive and forget, as Tony said. But after today, he never has to let Rogers affect him again. Maybe, months or years down the road, he’ll be called to testify in the trials for these people, but they won’t matter to him any more, or to Tony. He can let those emotions go, because they’re only hurting him now. A part of him will always resent Rogers, hate him even, and want the satisfaction of seeing him hurt in the worst way possible. But looking at him now, chained to a table and wearing the dingy gray-blue jumpsuit of a prisoner, it’s easier than Rhodey would have thought to push that little part of himself aside. To be satisfied with just this, and to move on from here.

Rogers looks like he’s on the verge of tears, and to Rhodey’s immense pleasure, it does nothing to him. It doesn’t stir any sort of pity, but that simmering rage doesn’t flare up, either. He knows that this means nothing to Tony, either. “Then why did you come?” Rogers manages.

Tony takes a few seconds to think about that. “Closure,” he finally says. “I could get it without actually seeing you, I don’t need to be here, but I figured this might feel more… final. And there is one thing I want from you.”

There’s actually a spark of something like hope in Rogers’s eyes. No one could ever say he isn’t stubborn. “What?”

“I want to ask you a question,” Tony says, moving forward once more, closer to the table. “And I don’t want anything but an answer. It’s a yes or no question, and that’s all I want. One word. No justifications, no bullshit, just an answer.”

Rogers doesn’t acknowledge that with words, doesn’t make any promises, just frowns. Rhodey can guess what’s coming, and he has a feeling there isn’t a chance in hell that Rogers will actually obey Tony’s demand for nothing but a simple answer.
Tony takes a deep breath, then another. He squares his shoulders and looks Rogers in the eyes, making sure he has his full attention. Not that he’d ever lost it. Rogers hasn’t so much as glanced at Rhodey since they came in, fixated on Tony.

When Tony speaks, once again, his voice is soft. There’s no need to raise it in the small, empty room. Yet he commands attention with his words, his presence. “If it were anyone else, anyone but me, would you have told them?”

He doesn’t need to explain. Rhodey immediately knows what he’s talking about, and judging by the way Rogers recoils, so does he. Tony stands there silently, waiting for an answer.

Rogers swallows; Rhodey sees his throat move. He fidgets in his seat and opens his mouth, but nothing comes out for a moment but a tiny, pained sound.

Finally, he apparently gets himself together enough to say something. “Tony, I’m sorry.” His voice breaks on the word. “You have to know how sorry I am, about… about everything.”

Rhodey doesn’t manage to keep himself from rolling his eyes this time. He never expected Rogers to be able to shut his damn mouth and keep to Tony’s one-word rule, but it’s still annoying.

Rogers plows on. “I know I should have told you, I knew for so long, and you don’t know how hard it was to keep that from you. I thought about it all the time, and I thought I was doing the right thing. I didn’t want to hurt you by telling you, and I’m so sorry, I—”

“Shut up.”

Rogers trails off at Tony’s sharply delivered order. His justifications die out, echoing in the room. Pathetic words, words no one but Rhodey and Tony will ever hear, here in the privacy of this room. Rhodey wonders whether he’s trying to convince himself, because there’s no way he could possibly think that Tony would buy any of this.

Tony’s tone is still neutral, but his voice is harder, sharper, now. “I told you that I just wanted an answer. I’m not here to listen to you try to justify what you did. I don’t give a shit what you have to say about it. Just answer the question.”

It looks like it takes a monumental effort for Rogers not to continue his crappy monologue, but he does manage to rein it in. Give the man a medal, Rhodey thinks uncharitably. Rogers’s twisted facial expression does absolutely nothing for Rhodey, even when he sees a tear finally make its way down one cheek and into the thick beard.

“Tony,” Rogers says once again, voice even more choked now. If there is a Hell, Rhodey thinks to himself, it might consist of listening to Tony’s name on that bastard’s tongue, said in that pleading tone. “I can’t be sure. If it were anyone else… the circumstances would have been different. Everything would have been so different. I can’t possibly tell you that.”

For a long moment, no one moves. Rogers just sits there with his devastated expression, waiting for Tony to react. Rhodey stands still, watching Tony, and Tony doesn’t move, staring at Rogers. Eventually, though, Tony straightens up and steps backward, nodding to himself. Rhodey feels the finality of it. Whatever it was he came here for, he got it.

Tony turns, glancing at Rhodey, this time letting their gazes lock long enough to have a silent conversation. Asking Rhodey with his eyes whether there’s anything more he wants out of this, and seeing the confirmation that no, Rhodey has nothing more to do or say here. With another tiny nod to himself, Tony turns and heads to the door, hitting the button.
There’s a choked noise from behind them as the buzz of the door sounds, and Rhodey turns to look. Rogers is watching them with wide eyes, looking like he’s watching his salvation slip through his fingers. Rhodey’s last spiteful thought is that Rogers about a year too late on that. If he actually wanted any hope of reconciling with Tony, he should have done it before he killed him.

Tony puts his hand on the unlocked door, but before he pulls it open, he turns back to Rogers one last time. This time, there’s no real hope in Rogers’s eyes, even though it’s clear that he hangs on Tony’s every word.

“You know, after everything that happened… I would have thought you’d have at least learned to be honest.”

Tony doesn’t wait to see the reaction to his statement. Neither does Rhodey. Tony pulls the door open and they both leave. Tony doesn’t even pause once they’re out of the room, heading straight to the guard to tell him they’re done, to thank him for his help and ask to be guided out of the prison.

They walk through the hallways and out without a word. Even as they climb back into the car and head out, they still don’t speak. There’s really no need to. Tony throws a wave at the guards at the inner gate as they drive by, and when they stop to wait for the outer gate to open and let them out, Tony finally turns to look at Rhodey.

The smile on his face isn’t the bright, hopeful smile Rhodey saw that first time in the lab, or after Rhodey got back into the War Machine armor. It’s not the small, fond thing that he’s used to seeing on Tony’s face in the day-to-day, when they’re going about their business. This is soft, open, hinting at melancholy but more optimistic than that. This is Tony facing something painful and choosing to put it aside, to move on.

Rhodey returns the look with everything he has as the gate opens for them. Tony keeps his eyes on Rhodey for a long moment, even as the car starts to move, and doesn’t look away until the gate closes behind them. Symbolic, Rhodey thinks as he watches it shut in the mirror. Closing the door on this part of their lives forever, and freeing them to finally move forward unburdened by the past.

They got what they needed out of this visit and more, and now they can put it all behind them. They got exactly what Tony was looking for. Closure.

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